



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—*Neamhcheartaithe*

(OFFICIAL REPORT—*Unrevised*)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 22 Bealtaine 2025

Thursday, 22 May 2025

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell) i gceannas ar 8.47 a.m.

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

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Grant Payments

3. **Deputy Donna McGettigan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will reform the Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI, assessment criteria for independent living given that students under 23 years are assessed as dependent on their parents even if they live independently, as are those over 23 years who cannot leave home due to the housing crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26577/25]

Deputy Donna McGettigan: There are issues with the SUSI grant and people being able to access it. Will the Minister reform the SUSI assessment criteria for independent living? Students under 23 are assessed as dependent on their parents, even if they live independently, and those over 23 who are forced to live at home due to the housing crisis are assessed as dependent on their parents. Will the Minister reform SUSI?

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy James Lawless): I thank the Deputy for her question. Was that Question No. 3?

Deputy Donna McGettigan: My apologies, I mixed up the questions.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): We will take Question No. 3 and go back to Question No. 1 afterwards.

Deputy James Lawless: I thank the Deputy for her question and interest in the area. She is her party's spokesperson in this area and I wish her well in that role. I look forward to working with her across the floor in the coming years.

Regarding students who are considered to be dependent at the age of 23, this is part of the wider student grant system and scheme, which is kept under continuous review. Every year, the

Department publishes an options paper that sets out costed reforms and changes to the scheme. I am currently engaged in that process and have had several stakeholder events, including meeting students' unions and other interested parties. I intend to publish a paper later this year before the budget on this which will inform public and political debate on what options should be prioritised. There are many different parameters and moving parts. When you change one, it has a knock-on effect on another. I look forward to a discussion, informed by the options paper, as to what are the appropriate measures and how we make them.

In examining changes to eligibility criteria, which this question is about, I must consider how a change might impact on a particular cohort when compared with the demands of other cohorts and across the rest of the sector. I must also have regard for the availability of resources in the Estimates process.

In general, for student grant purposes, students are categorised according to their circumstances either as students dependent on their parents or legal guardians, or as independent mature students. A student may be assessed as an independent student if they have attained the age of 23 on 1 January of the year of first entry or re-entry to an approved further education course or an approved higher education course and if they have not been ordinarily resident with their parents from the previous 1 October. Otherwise, they are assessed as a dependent student which means they are assessed with reference to parental income.

Applicants who do not meet the criteria to be assessed as an independent student for grant purposes or who cannot supply the necessary documentation to establish independent living for the required period may still apply to the awarding authority, SUSI, to have their grant eligibility assessed as a dependent student.

More than €351 million has been allocated in 2025 to student grants to aid access to education. That student grant scheme has recently been expanded-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Thank you, Minister.

Deputy James Lawless: -----with increasing thresholds. We will come back to that later.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: We all want to work together for fairness, justice and equality in education and one of things we can do to help us is the reform of the SUSI grant. For too long, SUSI has been a barrier rather than a bridge for many of our young people. This is supposed to be a scheme which enables access to education but instead for many it is yet another wall that blocks their future.

Let us speak plainly. The age of 23 - that so-called threshold for being classed as an independent student - is actually a barrier for some. Looking at one family's situation - this family contacted both the Minister and I - they feel that middle-wage earners are being punished because of this. They said when their means test for SUSI was being completed, it did not take into consideration tax, PRSI or USC charges because their child is independent but they cannot prove it so their income is taken into consideration. They have received a minimal amount from SUSI and must now pay €10,000 in rent, student fees, food and travel. This really needs to be looked at.

Deputy James Lawless: I am aware of the issue which has been raised with me by the student unions and I have come across this in my review of the different schemes. It is fair to ask and test this to see what is appropriate.

The Deputy mentioned that one of the families she had been in contact with had stated the difficulty in assessing and establishing that independence. Documentation accepted by SUSI includes: a letter confirming the address is registered with the RTB, if they are renting a property; a local authority lease agreement or a letter to confirm they are renting under the RAS scheme; a letter on headed paper from a rental agency confirming the tenancy - these are all in situations where the individual is living outside the family home; a letter to confirm the receipt of rental allowance; or a utility bill in the applicants name - this could be something like a phone bill, broadband bill, gas bill, utility bill, etc. Those items can be submitted as evidence that a student is living apart. The real difficulty arises in some cases where they are not living apart; they are living at the family home but are estranged and may not have the opportunity to move out, although they may wish to.

I accept this is not straightforward and these are the issues we must examine in the options paper to see what is appropriate. It may not be appropriate to give a blanket exemption because this may not be a good use of resources but it is something on which we need to strike the right balance.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: I am glad to hear the Minister will be looking at this but there are other people who for myriad reasons - some deeply disturbing - have had to leave home and are living with other family members. They are independent but do not have bills, rent or other things in their name and are finding it difficult to get evidence that they are separate from their parents. As there is a breakdown in communication, the parents will not give them this. It is not a simple if-or situation and it must be looked into. It is not fair on those people who are running from home for certain reasons. They are trying to make their lives better but these barriers are being put in their way and they cannot get the bills or the evidence.

If you look at it, it really is not for them and there needs to be a compassionate mechanism for students estranged from their parents - one that puts the student's life experience first and not a bureaucratic checklist.

Deputy James Lawless: The Deputy might call it a bureaucratic checklist but I am sure she would also agree public moneys should be carefully managed. It would not be appropriate to have a free-for-all where we do not need any proof or documentation and anyone who applies can get appropriate payments. I imagine the Deputy would agree this would not be appropriate either. If we accept that neither extreme is a good place to be, then we must find the point in the middle, that is, the level of documentation and support that is required and appropriate. That is the way with every use of public moneys and every type of grant scheme right across the different Departments. That is the way it has always been and should be.

The question is to find a balance that is not overly onerous or unreasonably attainable which safeguards the underlying resources that are ultimately available to other students and families and must be managed in that regard.

There are other funds in addition to SUSI that are available for students who might be in financial difficulty. We have the student assistance fund to support students both full time and part time for different exceptional needs. We have PATH 5 which is a new access pathway into third level education, particularly for Traveller or Roma communities. We also have accommodation and grants for students in disadvantaged areas. There is a number of different funds which can support students in difficulties even beyond the SUSI system.

Third Level Education

2. **Deputy Jen Cummins** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his plans to address the deficit some domestic universities are experiencing. [26519/25]

Deputy Jen Cummins: Some of Ireland's third level institutions are facing a critical shortfall in core funding, something repeatedly highlighted by the OECD, the European Commission and our universities. Despite rising student numbers and growing demands in staff and infrastructure, core funding remains well below the required level to ensure quality, accessibility and efficiency. Can the Minister outline what steps his Department is taking to address this core funding gap, and will he commit to a roadmap towards significantly increasing core investment in our higher education sector?

Deputy James Lawless: To answer the Deputy's second question, yes, I will commit to increasing funding in education. I have announced that already and brought this before Cabinet where I secured approval to do so.

The National Training Fund is a €1.485 billion pot of moneys which is collected through employer levies to support training and educational needs. There is a need for legislation to unlock that fund because the fund, as it is currently construed, has a particular set of categories under which it can be spent. I wish to broaden them to include core funding for the higher education institutions among other things. This requires a minor legislative change but that is a Bill I intend to bring before the Houses this year. I am currently working on drafting heads of Bill with my Department and legal teams. I secured Cabinet approval for that recently. That will mean an additional €150 million per annum will be included in the core funding to universities, which is a really significant move. This, of course, stems from the Funding the Future framework, which was published in May 2022. It followed the Cassells report from a few years earlier, which identified options available to put higher education on a sustainable footing and examining different options for our core funding for the universities. That is now progressing. It is in the programme for Government and is a commitment we have made. It is something I have already advanced in my first few months in office and, as I said, I have Cabinet approval to now progress that further through legislation, which I hope to bring before the Houses at the earliest opportunity.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I acknowledge there is additional funding of €50 million in the budget for 2025 under Funding the Future. It is great to hear there is an additional €150 million. The Irish Universities Association has welcomed the multiannual approach the Minister's Department has outlined.

Investment in education only stands at 2.8% of GDP. It is among the lowest in the OECD, which has an average of 5.7%. I am concerned the financial constraints compromise the quality of education and the well-being of students and staff and it seems contradictory to be attracting foreign talent from abroad when our domestic institutions are in dire need.

I am happy that legislation is going to be progressed with the heads of Bill. I urge the Minister to try to do this as quickly as possible. We will lose talent. The Minister wishes to attract talent from abroad but we cannot lose the talent we have already. Students going abroad is also a difficulty.

Deputy James Lawless: I agree with Deputy Cummins. We are very much on the same page on this. With regard to talent from abroad, I want Ireland to be a welcome place for scholars but that includes supporting our own - the people already here - and attracting more. The best-in-class research and innovation, STEM and humanities studies all work best when people collaborate at every level, including internationally, so that we have a fusion of the best minds. It is not recognising borders, barriers or arbitrary rules that other jurisdictions might be currently raising, which I do not agree with. We must be that safe haven and promote independent thought, academic freedom and integrity. As well as it being the right thing to do, there is a significant economic uplift to that. We see money spent on research and innovation, for example, usually has a 5:1 return.

9 o'clock

I visited the CÚRAM research centre at the University of Galway last week. It has achieved a 12:1 return. For every euro the State is spending, therefore, €12 is being recouped in terms of the wider economic impact of the research and the economic benefits of it. We should do it for its own sake but it also produces demonstrable returns for investment in education and research.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I agree it is really positive when we have those returns, as the Minister outlined. I know that is one element of looking at education. I want to be clear about what I am saying with regard to attracting people from abroad to come here. I am not saying this is not a good idea. However, when the headlines are focusing on how much money is going to be spent on each of those people, it can read as being a little unbalanced. I totally agree that when we have international talent and academics coming here, we are able, with the students in the universities, to see the best that we have internationally. The Minister is right; in this world, which is becoming smaller in a way but is quite divided, we need to try to find ways that we can all work together. The academics coming from abroad and those here need to be welcomed and we need to have the infrastructure in place. I am glad the Minister has clarified that it is not about pitting one against the other, because I was a little bit nervous when I read that. I was thinking that we cannot be attracting others if we have deficits here, but I am glad the Minister clarified that.

Deputy James Lawless: I thank the Deputy. I intend for the funding to support the entire sector. The Deputy mentioned some figures. I would also be a bit concerned by the current level of our research and development spending as a percentage of GDP. We need to increase that. The private sector is spending a lot, so public sector spending needs to increase. That will be reflected in what I am hoping to achieve through the national development plan, in terms of increased infrastructural spending across the research and education ecosystems, further and higher education and the entire tapestry. That is the building block that everything else is based on, if we have those systems right. It is part of the wider base and I will elaborate on that further over the coming months, but I intend to use the national development plan as part of the springboard for those projects.

Mental Health Services

1. **Deputy Donna McGettigan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he is satisfied with the current level of mental health supports available to third level students; and if further investment is planned; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26576/25]

Deputy Donna McGettigan: I want to raise the pressing issue of the mental health crisis among third level students. We are failing our young people in this regard. The mental health services available to students in our colleges and universities are underfunded, understaffed and overwhelmed. Is the Minister satisfied with the current level of mental health supports available to third level students and is further investment planned?

Deputy James Lawless: I appreciate the Deputy raising this important issue, as the mental health and well-being of our third level students is a matter of deep concern and ongoing priority for this Government. The Government and my Department remain committed to enhancing mental health supports across the sector. My Department has allocated a total of €32 million to support higher education institutions in meeting the mental health and well-being needs of students since 2020.

This funding supports institutions in directly meeting the needs of students through counselling services as well as delivering the national student mental health and suicide prevention framework. As autonomous institutions, the exact disbursement of the funding is a matter for each institution depending on its own prioritisation of needs. They are entitled to do this because they are independent from the perspectives of management and governance. They have been advised to distribute the funding in support of specific student-facing areas, such as the recruitment of additional student counsellors and assistant psychologists, head of service posts, training and awareness raising. We can offer advice, but they ultimately retain discretion over how the funding is allocated.

The majority of new posts created through this funding have been counsellors, reflecting the capacity-building phase of the implementation of the framework. Over recent years, there has been a mixture of core funding and once-off Covid support funding, but as of 2020, €5 million annually is being allocated on a recurrent, sustainable basis. I mentioned that over that time, €32 million has been allocated. Institutions can also draw resources from other areas within their overall Exchequer and other funding sources. A number of other funds are available to them, which I might return to later because there is quite a list. I will refer to those when I hear where the Deputy's next question is going.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: I am glad to hear that the Minister is going to put funds into this. It is a very hard issue for students to deal with. Some of the issues they are dealing with include the skyrocketing cost of accommodation or even the type of accommodation they live in. Some students are just leaving home and are stuck in accommodation that is not working for them. Mental health should be treated with the same urgency and importance as physical health. Many are juggling work and study just to keep their heads above water. One of the findings of a survey done by my colleague Deputy Conway-Walsh was that one in four first-year students was not aware of the mental health supports and counselling services available to them. One solution to the problem would be just letting them know that the services are available and can be accessed.

The existing funding framework for mental health services in higher education is insufficient. It is resulting in underfunded and understaffed counselling and healthcare services on campuses. At this time, I am not aware whether the additional funding will be enough to bring services back up to the proper ratio.

Deputy James Lawless: Some examples of the types of projects being supported through that funding include the national student counselling database implementation project. This

facilitates the identification of trends in the mental health needs of students attending student counselling services. It measures and monitors what trends are coming through from access to counselling services and identifies areas for further attention.

There is a platform called Togetherall, which provides 24-7 peer support. Psychological counsellors in Higher Education Ireland are being supported in their work, through the higher education institutions. Research and co-ordination around suicide and self-harm is being performed on an ongoing basis. A screening tool that is being developed selects the most appropriate person-centric interventions for students with mental health presentations. This tracks the well-being outcomes of students who engage with the service. A national health and well-being assessment tool has been developed to enable institutions to implement and progress the healthy campus charter and framework. There is also an ongoing review of the national student mental health and suicide prevention framework. A lot of actions are being taken and a lot of good projects are under way. These are meaningful and impactful for the individual students, as well as for the host institutions. Ultimately, the institutions retain autonomy as to what other projects they may wish to implement.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: The counsellor-student ratio should be 1:1,000 but at the moment I think it we are at 1:1,500. We need to bridge this gap. I am glad to hear about Togetherall and that it is a 24-7 service but is there a waiting list for it? Students struggling with their mental health today should not have to wait weeks for help. They should not have to choose between paying rent or paying for therapy and they definitely should not have to suffer in silence. I believe that the Minister will be willing to work on this and I know I will continue to push until all students have been listened to and their burden in respect of mental health is helped. This is a very serious issue and we all should be working towards a solution.

Deputy James Lawless: If we consider some of the ratios, one counsellor for every 1,000 students was the suggestion from the International Accreditation of Counseling Services, IACS, to which the Deputy referred. There are different views about that report as to whether that is the optimal way to measure ability and whether that is the right metric but I certainly note what the Deputy is saying. The national student mental health and suicide prevention framework, which I mentioned, has identified that in an Irish context, there remains a need to develop a public indicator. The questions are what the correct indicator for us in this system is and how we can manage and ensure that adequate provision is being made for different students. This work is ongoing with the HEA at the moment to see what an appropriate metric in our system is.

Regarding the retention rate, there are many reasons for students dropping out. Mental health may often be one but there is a variety of other reasons. The non-progression rate fell slightly in 2021-22, from 13% to 11%. I do not have the figures for the most recent years but it is beginning to go in the right direction. There can be complex reasons that students do not progress. It is not only to do with mental health.

Student Accommodation

4. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his plans to increase the provision of student accommodation in Galway; when the new national student accommodation strategy will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26176/25]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: My question relates to student accommodation in Galway. Where is the national strategy? I ask this in the context of a city where a recent survey found that almost one fifth of students at the University of Galway are living with family members or are in emergency accommodation. Those surveyed represented 8.5% of the student population. About 12% of respondents reported that they were living with family, while 5% said they were living in temporary or emergency accommodation.

Deputy James Lawless: I had the pleasure of visiting the University of Galway last week. I met the chair, the president and the students' union and we had a good discussion on this and many other matters. I admired the fine quadrangle and had the opportunity to inspect some of the research projects around the campus as well. It was a really worthwhile visit to see the really good work being done there.

Regarding student accommodation provision, access is a central concern. Access and supports are important to ensure that students can avail of higher level education and that they can do so in a way that does not involve long commutes or living in cramped accommodation, which will be an enabler to them. I am very aware that these are barriers for many students. One of the most significant barriers students face today is the cost and availability of accommodation, if they can get it in the first place. My focus is on delivering targeted and effective interventions that promote equitable access to higher education across the country. This means addressing the challenges that may prevent students from progressing to or through third level education because of the difficulties outlined.

Four key tools are being deployed to address student accommodation. The first is the development of a standardised design approach to improve efficiency and reduce costs. That is something my Department is working on and I will publish it this summer. The intention is to have a standard design akin to the second level school programme. The second tool is the use of enhanced supply and demand data to inform planning and investment decisions, so we can see the different patterns in different regions. The third is the technological sector student accommodation programme to support regionally balanced, institution-specific delivery models. That is under way as a separate programme. The fourth tool is a national student accommodation survey, which is designed to capture the lived experiences and needs of students across the country. We might well guess some of the issues and hear from our constituents and from representations made to us by various bodies, but the survey will have an empirical analysis that will better inform demands in this area, where the pressure zones are and what needs to be applied in different areas. We will continue to work with universities and other higher education institutions. I intend to publish the student accommodation strategy later this year.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Will the strategy be published later this year?

Deputy James Lawless: Yes.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I welcome the standardised design. It is very practical. That has been done all over England with great cost savings. Let us go back to Galway. Approximately 19,000 students are in what I still call the NUIG. Then there is the Atlantic Technological University, ATU. There are more than 40,000 students in Galway in just two third level institutions. I know the Minister does not like the term “vulture funds”, so I will use “investment funds”. The Government has given *carte blanche* to investment funds to come in and build student accommodation anywhere they like, with all the tax reliefs. I come from a university city where we built up a relationship between town and gown given the importance of the uni-

versities to Galway. Now people are coming in and building accommodation six, seven and nine storeys high just because there is money to be made, regardless of the area and the feelings of residents. The investment funds have *carte blanche* to build exactly what they want, where they want, while we wait for the standardised design.

Deputy James Lawless: We are probably veering into questions for the Minister for housing rather than me. I am not aware of the seven-storey buildings the Deputy talks about. There are already 1,891 purpose-built student accommodation beds on campus in the University of Galway. The latest figures tell us the university accommodation is oversubscribed, however, as it has received more applications per bed than there are beds available. Additional accommodation beds were provided last year in Dunlin Village. The Deputy may be familiar with it. It provides 674 purpose-built student accommodation beds. In Queen Street, 300 new beds are being developed. The most recent data from last month tells me that 1,739 new purpose-built student accommodation beds have been built in Galway in the recent past. Student accommodation beds are being provided but I want to see more of them, or as many as can be introduced into the system through public and private channels, so that we have a good supply of accommodation to students and a good choice available to meet the very evident demand.

It is worth noting that, as of this week, 71 beds are being advertised on the rent-a-room scheme. Digs accommodation is still a very popular option that many take up. There are currently 71 beds available in Galway.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I am not straying into the housing area. I am putting the issue into the context of a city where we have a massive housing crisis. I do not exaggerate. People have been on a waiting list for 20 years. We jump for joy when someone gets a house after 15 years. That is the context. In addition, we have two universities. A disaster of a decision was taken years ago before the arrival of the ATU. The Corrib Great Southern hotel should have been bought by the Government, as it would have solved half the problems. Of course, it was not bought. It was sold on to a bidder with lots of money and then left vacant. The problems have been created not just by the universities, which I blame, but by Government policy. Now investment funds are coming in. It is unusual that so many residents would stand together. I count at least nine residents' associations that are extremely upset. I do not want to find myself in a position of being against student accommodation. I have cried out for student accommodation on campus, State-provided land, so that the prices come down, rather than having it provided by for-profit investment funds that will use them during the summer for other purposes with little regard for residents in the area.

Deputy James Lawless: It is not unusual for student accommodation to be used for other purposes during the summer months. Most of the higher education institutions do that themselves. It is part of the challenge of finding a solution. I want to see the maximum available beds for student accommodation based on a formula that works, first and foremost, for students. Many of the higher education institutions look to use student accommodation as a revenue-raising tool in the summer months, and I understand they are financing their activities on that basis. Ultimately, the focus should be on the student.

Deputy Connolly mentioned ATU a couple of times. ATU Galway is participating in the technological sector student accommodation programme. The overall standardised design is a work in progress and there is an overall strategy. There is already a stand-alone TU sector student accommodation programme and ATU Galway is part of that. In terms of the submissions that are being made, the HEIs usually drive projects that come to the HEA and my Department

for approval. They are considered and any submissions made will be advanced. I am very keen to address this because I am conscious that it is a real issue for many students.

Further and Higher Education

5. Deputy Gillian Toole asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the timeline for the single-phase delivery of the new campus for Dunboyne College of Further Education and Training, Dunboyne, County Meath, to be funded from as many relevant streams as possible, including but not limited to SOLAS, sports capital and national training funding. [26525/25]

Deputy Gillian Toole: I wish to ask both the Minister and the Minister of State the timeline for the single-phase delivery of the new campus for Dunboyne College of Further Education and Training, Dunboyne, County Meath, to be funded from as many relevant streams as possible, including but not limited to SOLAS, sports capital funding, national training funding and national development plan funding. This college began with 50 students and two courses and it currently has 1,300 students, 70 courses and 45 apprenticeships.

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Marian Harkin): I thank the Deputy for her question. I am pleased to say this is my first opportunity to respond to an oral question. I am also pleased that it relates to Dunboyne College, which I know. I am familiar with the great work that is happening there.

Louth Meath ETB, LMETB, is being supported by SOLAS in developing its preliminary business case, PBC, proposal for Dunboyne under the FET college of the future major projects fund and they have met as recently as this month to progress the application. The proposal put forward by LMETB relates to the development of a new fit-for-purpose facility on a greenfield site in Dunboyne to replace the existing rented accommodation in Dunboyne. It is one of 12 projects being progressed under this fund.

LMETB is refining its business case proposal and once completed, it will submit it to SOLAS for evaluation. The evaluation panel will be available to meet as soon as the updated business case is received. Business cases that meet the evaluation criteria will advance to the next stage of development: pre-tender, project design, planning, and procurement strategy. The development of a robust PBC is fundamental to the requirements of the infrastructure guidelines. The appropriateness or otherwise of a phased development of the proposal, which the Deputy inquired about, is a matter for the evaluation panel to determine.

Funding for all projects under this programme, including the proposal from LMETB for Dunboyne, will come from within the FET college of the future major projects fund envelope. The Department and I are committed to delivering this project as part of 12 key projects that were announced under the FET college of the future major projects fund.

Deputy Gillian Toole: I thank the Minister of State for her updated information. I reiterate that this college is delivering. At various times in this Chamber we have discussed the need for occupational therapists, speech and language therapists and the development of apprenticeship programmes and construction studies. LMETB colleges can deliver that. This process began in 2015 when Dunboyne was added to the building list of the then Department of Education

and Skills. Currently, the rent roll is just short of €100 million a year to 23 landlords. That includes transportation costs. Such costs are unsustainable. Currently, the college is operating from an industrial estate where numerous health and safety issues arise. It is an absolute waste of money. I plead for the single-phase case, because since this process began in 2015 there has been a lot of to'ing and fro'ing with the Department. There has been significant engagement, including by staff members whose core function is the education of the students whom they highly value.

Deputy Gillian Toole: I thank the Minister of State for the updated information. I reiterate that this college is delivering. At various times in this Chamber, we have discussed the need for occupational therapists, speech and language therapists and the development of apprenticeship programmes, as well as construction studies. LMETB colleges can deliver that. This process began in 2015, when Dunboyne was added to the building list of the then Department of Education and Skills. Currently, the rent roll is just short of €100 million a year to 23 landlords. That includes transportation costs. It is unsustainable. The college is operating from an industrial estate where numerous health and safety issues arise. It is an absolute waste of money. I plead for the single-phase case because this process began in 2015 and there has been a lot of toing and froing with the Department. There has been significant engagement, including by staff members whose core function is the education of the students, whom they highly value.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I will begin with a comment. The Deputy spoke about a one-stage process. Whether it is a phased development or a one-stage development is a matter for the evaluation panel. The proposal is to develop fit-for-purpose accommodation on a greenfield site in Dunboyne. As the Deputy said, the college is currently located in poor accommodation in a large number of rental premises in an industrial estate. LMETB submitted its preliminary business case for evaluation in September 2024 and that needed to be refined. It submitted it again in March of this year and further refinement was needed. SOLAS is working with LMETB. Everybody wants to see a successful application from Dunboyne because, in truth, we want to get on with building this new facility.

Deputy Gillian Toole: We are absolutely united in the spirit of getting this project progressed. Again, I would push the case in this instance based on the financial implications and the history of the project. There is no doubt of the intention in the programme for Government, where the intention is to communicate, collaborate and encourage more interdepartmental and intradepartmental collaboration. That is why I make the suggestion for alternative funding streams so it is not just limited to the FET fund.

On 24 February 2022, the Minister's predecessor and now Tánaiste, Deputy Harris, gave a commitment on record and on film, stating that he was delighted to confirm there is ring-fenced funding in place for the delivery of a purpose-built college for Dunboyne College. I am just asking for the honouring of the single-phase delivery of the project.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I hear what the Deputy is saying and I know that what she is talking about is a ring-fenced, purpose-built building. I know the envelope that is available is available to all of the 12 different colleges that are looking for this funding. All have been approved and they just have to get through this preliminary stage. I know Dunboyne is working very hard with LMETB. Without being certain about this, I would be confident that, within the next short period of time, we will get to a point where its application can be successful and progress to the next part of the process. Eight out of the 12 original applicants have got to this point and I have no doubt Dunboyne will get there soon. It is a big piece of work and very important for

the region. Like the Deputy, I recognise the really good work that is carried out by the college. I and my Department stand ready to support it.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Grant Payments

6. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of applicants from Mayo who had their SUSI application refused in the 2024 academic year. [25803/25]

11. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of SUSI applicants from Mayo who had their SUSI revoked in the middle of the academic year. [25802/25]

33. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of applicants from Mayo who had their SUSI application approved in the 2024 academic year. [25804/25]

Deputy Paul Lawless: I thank the Minister and Minister of State for attending to discuss these important matters. The questions concern SUSI applications for County Mayo, in particular the number and the percentage of the refusal rate, the revoked applications and the successful applications, and how this compares with the national situation.

Deputy James Lawless: I propose to take Questions Nos. 6, 11 and 33 together.

As the House will be aware, the main support available to assist students with the cost of attending higher education is the student grant scheme. Under the scheme, grant assistance is awarded to eligible students attending an approved course in an approved institution who meet the prescribed conditions of funding, including those relating to nationality, residency, previous academic attainment and means. In other words, there is a set of rules around the scheme, those rules govern the eligibility for it and, in turn, the students progress. That continues to be applied.

There is also a part-time scheme for specified undergraduate courses that is now available. It commenced for the first time in September 2024 and I recently expanded it to more courses. It provides fee support to eligible part-time students attending specified publicly funded undergraduate courses leading to a major award. This includes specified in-person courses and blended or hybrid courses, and its aim is to provide additional flexibility in respect of course provision to students who may be socioeconomically disadvantaged. Many students find the part-time option far more possible because they are able to continue to work and look after other commitments. The part-time course is a very attractive option for many people for that reason and it is only right that it should be supported through this fees scheme. That was not previously the case but it is now. As I said, I have recently expanded the provision and I will continue to examine the scheme because there may be other courses that fall outside it. I intend to continue to review it to see whether we can expand it to the maximum possible number of students.

I turn now to the specific questions on the Mayo cohort. As of 15 May 2025, for the academic year 2024-25, some 2,655 applicants from Mayo were awarded a grant by SUSI for either a full-time or part-time course; 415 applicants from Mayo were refused a grant by SUSI for either a full-time or part-time course; and 58 applicants from Mayo had their grant revoked for either a full-time or part-time course. Those are the figures as of 15 May, a couple of days ago, and they may change as we come to the end of the academic year because, over the course of an academic year, there can be changes with individual students for different reasons. I do not expect that they will be consequential in terms of the numbers but there may be updates before the end of the academic year.

It is fair to say that the vast majority of students who applied did receive funding. A small number were refused because they were ineligible and were not able to progress their applications, and a much smaller number again, 58, had those grants revoked. I hope that is of interest and assistance to the Deputy. Those are the figures for County Mayo.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I would like to raise some concerns, in particular regarding the revoked applications. In some instances, the money is never actually seen by the applicant and is directly linked to the university. I am aware of one case where the university failed to notify SUSI that the student had left the course and, as a result, the student was penalised the following year – essentially, the student was abandoned in that situation. Of course, we need to have a rules-based system and that is very important. However, this is particularly relevant in the post-Covid landscape, given students lost so much time in their second level education, and that window of opportunity was lost. As a result, students who may not have had the opportunity for career guidance during this time have pursued courses that perhaps they would not have pursued in the normal circumstance of having had career guidance. As a result of choosing a course, they find themselves potentially changing course or changing pathway, and they are penalised for doing so. In many ways, we should be encouraging people to pursue their dreams. Changing a course is not in itself a problem and, in fact, it should sometimes be encouraged. I know people who get to second or third year in college, realise that this career path is not for them and find themselves in a situation where they continue along the pathway because of the financial penalties they would incur if they were to change. That needs to be looked at. Of course, we need a rules-based system, but we need flexibility and perhaps an extension of the timeframe that SUSI currently stipulates.

Another point concerns the distance from college in the context of the adjacent or non-adjacent grant rate. I am aware of one case where SUSI failed an applicant for being 29.65 km away from ATU in Castlebar when Google Maps suggests the person is 31 km away. It is very unfortunate. The system should recognise this, particularly in light of how expensive it is to run a car and the fact that public transport in many parts of Mayo is not a viable option for students. Apart from the cost of running a car, the Government is increasing carbon tax and the cost of insurance is rising. This should be recognised.

Deputy James Lawless: There were a couple of options raised and I will try to come back to the Deputy on each of them.

Career guidance and counselling is something I tend to very much support and I am keen to increase the provision of it. As we know, it is extremely difficult for students, typically at a young age, to make choices that may have implications for their entire life journey after that. There is a bit of a pressure point around how to make that decision at the right time very quickly. However, I intend to support that area in terms of further support for career guidance

and for counselling for the burgeoning schools.

Yesterday, the Minister of State, Deputy Harkin, and I attended the Mount Lucas national construction skills hub. We saw the launching of a new platform, Skillnet MMC Accelerate, which is a website that allows those with an interest in construction careers to consider a breathtaking range of options and follow through on that interest by clicking through different courses, different study options and different apprenticeships to see how they might play out. I credit the organisers and those involved in that platform. I would like to see those type of platforms applied to many other sectors across the board. This is an example of what can be done and what is being done already.

The Deputy spoke about students who may take on a course and find halfway through that it is not the right course for them. In the programme for Government, we have committed to examining second-chance applications. As with all these things, there is a balance because unlimited funding for continuing to change courses might be desirable from a societal point of view but economically unsustainable. There has to be some tipping point. I have some sympathy in this regard because I changed course. I studied maths originally, but I ended up studying law. I did it part-time, by night, while I was working in town. I came across to lectures every evening after work. Therefore, I have sympathy for people who end up pursuing second careers and different course options. It is a good thing to do. The day of the job for life is gone and people now end up pursuing many different paths through life and, indeed, change and retrain. Reskilling, upskilling and lifelong learning is a core objective of my Department to support. We are keen to continue to allow people have those opportunities at any stage in life to find their new path forward.

In terms of the individual cases, the Deputy mentioned two that I noted. The first was around a student who left - maybe dropped out - halfway through the year. Then he mentioned what sounds like a very unfortunate individual who checked Google Maps and found that the other calculations did not seem to accord. If the Deputy wants to bring those cases to my attention after the session or if he wants to write to me on them - I will not get into individual cases on the floor of the House and I do not have the details - I would be quite happy to look into them and see if we can progress anything in the background.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I welcome the Minister's assistance on those cases. As the Minister quite rightly pointed out, people who make second-chance applications and move courses should be supported in a bigger way than is currently the case. The extension of the timeline should be looked at and the acceleration of more online courses, which will reduce the cost to the person, would be of assistance as well.

I also want to raise another case. A constituent of mine, who has two students in college, received a very modest gift as a result of losing their parent. It was a grandparent of the third level students. This was a very small will that was left. The parents used the gift, which was very modest, to part-pay off the mortgage on their property. This family was no better off in terms of their income and day-to-day spending and yet, because of this will, their children were completely struck off from a SUSI grant. The family had to take one of their children out of college. As the inheritance was so small, they will be less well-off than if they never got it in the first place. I know we need a rules-based system but we should look at the anomaly that arises when a modest inheritance is used, as in this case, to pay off the mortgage. This family was no better off. In fact, they are actually less well-off in terms of that. It needs to be looked at. I would greatly appreciate it if the Minister could consider this in his role in the months ahead.

Deputy James Lawless: I have listened to what the Deputy has said and I have taken note. He might want to follow up with me on that case as well. The first thing I would say, before I and my Department get involved, is that the student should consider appealing if they have not done so already. Indeed, I would advise any student who feels they have been wrongly denied a grant, or not had their correct level of grant funding applied, to access the appeals mechanism. I would refer any student who is dissatisfied to the relevant website, *studentgrantappeals.ie*, because there is a whole framework in place there. There is a 30-day window for such cases. I am not sure how far on this particular case is, but it might be of interest to the House in general to be aware of that facility. There is also a support webline, *support@susi.ie*. They have a phone number which can be accessed as well. There are a number of different ways in which SUSI will respond to individual cases. It may be appropriate for the Deputy's constituent who wishes to make a case with regard to mileage to consider an appeal as well. It is up to the individual student and family, but that is something could be looked at.

In terms of the inheritance, the Deputy stated that the amount was modest. I do not know what the figure is - we can look into it in due course - but there are several different disregards in the system, such as holiday income, bursaries and grants from other sources. A number of different disregards are included. It is quite a complex system in terms of how the grants are considered, whether a student is eligible, what other income is there and what other payments they may be in receipt of. I do not know whether the particular case the Deputy mentions would satisfy one of those disregards. It may do; it may not. Certainly, it would with luck. However, every effort is made to ensure that when a student receives financial support towards their educational journey from other sources with the intention of helping them to achieve an educational goal, it is not punitive in terms of their subsequent support. We would not want to have one robbing Peter to pay Paul; they should be combined.

If the Deputy wants to advise his constituent in the first instance to consider appealing if they have not already, he should look at the details of it. Then if the Deputy wants to engage with me on that particular case as well, I would be happy to look into it.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): We will move on to Question No. 8.

Question No. 7 taken with Written Answers.

Third Level Education

8. **Deputy Emer Currie** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will consider expanding third level course places related to therapies in the disability sector, as part of workforce planning; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26303/25]

Deputy Emer Currie: I am asking for an update on the expansion of third level course places for therapies in the disability sector and the Minister's role in the workforce planning of therapists needed in children's disability network teams, CDNTs, primary care teams and schools. There has been much focus this week on assessments of need. The programme for Government and the report of the Joint Committee on Autism are clear in their recommendations.

Deputy James Lawless: On the disability framework and the challenge posed, this Government wants to support people with disabilities in the fullest possible way to allow them to live the most meaningful and impactful lives as possible, and with as much support from the State as possible. This fundamental goal is writ large in the programme for Government and the entire Government is committed to delivering on it. Indeed, the Taoiseach has convened a Cabinet subcommittee, which is meeting regularly and of which I am a member, to address this societal and State goal. I put on record my commitment, as have all my colleagues in government, to the supporting this important issue.

My officials and I are working closely with other Departments to support workforce planning responses by creating additional places in areas of acute skills need, ensuring a pipeline of qualified graduates for our health and social care workforce.

More generally, my Department has a skills matrix and looks to the future to assess what skills are needed at particular times for different economic and societal goals and challenges. We have that skills framework and skills planning ongoing anyway, but we certainly have a renewed focus on the health and social care workforce at present. That work has been ongoing. A recent joint memorandum committed both Departments - the Department of Health and my Department - to funding the expansion of key healthcare disciplines, including therapies.

Last week I announced a new pharmacy course in the University of Galway, which will start this September. There is a new dentistry programme in the Royal College of Surgeons that is also available for this September. Further expansion across medicine, pharmacy and veterinary will come on stream in 2026. We are expanding the number of professional healthcare courses that are out there, and across the country as well. That builds on existing progress, with nearly 1,000 additional places created in health and social care programmes in recent years. Further additional places were provided for this September. These include 15 additional places on the speech and language therapy BSc programme at the University of Galway, 40 additional places for occupational therapy at the same university and 15 additional paediatric medicine places through the Galway BSc programme. I have to acknowledge that Galway is playing its part. There are also ten additional physiotherapy places at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland. It is a work in progress. We continue to examine ways to increase the throughput and output of therapists of all types in the system.

Deputy Emer Currie: While there are issues with how our public services are designed, the greatest barrier disabled people face in accessing appropriate services is resourcing and understaffing across assessment of needs, therapeutic and clinical services, medical services and education services, all of which are necessary if our disabled community are to lead full lives with the experiences and opportunities they deserve. We need a pipeline of therapists for the future based on shared projections across health, disability and education. The programme for Government commits to doubling the number of college places in this area and delivering a workforce plan to meet both immediate and long-term needs. What engagement is taking place with the Department of Health to increase the number of places across OT, SLT, physio, psychology, social work and nursing to ensure these numbers match the numbers of clinical placements? Is engagement taking place with the Department of disability to ensure the number of clinical placements will meet current and future needs? What consultation is there with professional bodies about a long-term workforce planning strategy?

Deputy James Lawless: I mentioned some of the places we have provided and we intend to provide further places in these areas. There are also agreements regarding healthcare provision

with Ulster University and Queen's University Belfast resulting in a further 389 places over the last two years. I visited Queen's University Belfast over the Easter break and met the president, Ian Greer. I also met some of the students from the Republic who are attending courses there. I am told they are excelling in their fields. They were certainly great ambassadors for the scheme. That provision from the Northern universities is welcome.

We are also engaging with stakeholders across the sector to determine the number of additional places for 2025. We have provided multiple additional places already - numbering 1,000 last year - but I want to keep on providing further options. I recently asked the HEA to run an expressions of interest programme. The Higher Education Authority put out a call to the universities to see which universities were placed to offer further provision, increasing the output of therapists across all of the different healthcare disciplines. That is going extremely well. We have had very positive responses to it. I intend to update the Cabinet subcommittee on that. I may return to that in my next supplementary response.

Deputy Emer Currie: I acknowledge the additional places and the work of the Tánaiste and of the former Minister in the Department, Deputy O'Donovan, in this area. However, I am really talking about long-term workforce planning and how it needs to be linked with collaboration and shared data. For instance, the Disability Capacity Review to 2032, published by the HSE, states that 3.5% of the child population require special input from CDNTs. The Joint Committee on Autism's report speaks about the overall need to tackle unmet need. The Department of Education is using figures such as 5%. Does the Minister agree that collaboration across these Departments is essential? Are we using levers used in other models to incentivise people to take up places in this area? I refer to Springboard and the model we use for clinical psychologists, who get 60% of their studies funded and get paid for their placements. Other countries provide forgiveness on student loans.

Deputy John Connolly: My question, Question No. 17, is remarkably similar to Deputy Currie's. I was somewhat surprised that they were not grouped together. The Minister has already answered my question, which was to ask the number of additional places in the area of life sciences provided for next year. I am delighted with the Minister's response and that the number of places in a number of these areas has increased in the school of life sciences at my own local institution, the National University of Ireland, Galway. Like Deputy Currie, I encourage the Minister to look at the many ways in which we can ensure we are producing more occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, psychologists and physiotherapists, particularly given what we have heard about the need in this area throughout the week.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Is the Deputy happy enough that his question has now been dealt with?

Deputy John Connolly: I am.

Deputy James Lawless: I thank Deputy Connolly for his support in my visit to Galway last week. He is a great advocate for the college and works closely with the team. I believe he is a former student. That was a very good engagement.

I agree with both Deputies on the real need to examine all options and all levers at our disposal to increase the number of disability workers. These include Springboard. I believe it could include apprenticeships and I have asked my further education teams to look at options to address this demand within that system along with more traditional higher education provi-

sion. A great deal of work is being done. Just this week, my officials had another official-level group engagement with different Departments. Deputy Currie asked what engagement is happening with other Departments. I have met the Minister for Health on the matter and we have had bilateral meetings on it. I have also met with the Minister for disability, Deputy Foley, and others. We have a Cabinet subcommittee that meets very regularly to progress the matter. It is an all-of-government priority. It is essential. As Deputy Currie has mentioned, placements are a challenge. My Department and my team can provide the courses and the education but the HSE and the different workplace settings need to offer placements to match. One cannot work without the other. That is an ongoing challenge.

Grant Payments

9. **Deputy Joe Neville** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he plans to further increase the SUSI grant application threshold in budget 2026; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26323/25]

Deputy James Lawless: I thank the Deputy for the question. I am committed to increasing the supports available to students and to addressing the costs of education for students and their families progressively over this year and the coming years for as long as I am privileged to serve in this office.

It is important to say that all proposals made regarding education expenditure, including student grants, thresholds, limits, awards and so on, are considered annually in the context of the budget. It is in October that these discussions will take place for real. They are already under way and well advanced but that is the time at which decisions will ultimately be made and communicated.

I have already been engaged very intensively on this and I intend to publish an options paper in the near future that will identify the costs and potential impacts of various policy options. There are multiple different levers within the grants system. There are thresholds, monetary amounts and different types of support that can be made available. There are also different types of grants, including fee grants and maintenance grants, and, as Deputy Paul Lawless mentioned earlier, there are also adjacent and non-adjacent rates. There are a number of moving parts and I have tasked my team with coming up with a matrix of all of those parts so that we can see the impact of moving one lever on another lever. Ultimately, we do not want one cohort of students to be deprived of services and support because we have changed something to benefit another cohort. We need to make sure the approach is consistent, coherent, fair and progressive.

The paper I intend to publish will be based on engagement with the sector and with stakeholders. I held an event in Croke Park earlier this year at which I met with multiple different stakeholders from the educational sphere. I met access officers, student's union representatives, people taking up various different courses, people from disadvantaged sectors and spokespersons for people who traditionally have struggled to attain the education they wished to attain. All of those voices will be heard in the discussion.

On the Deputy's specific question regarding the threshold, the special rate of maintenance threshold will increase from €26,200 to €27,400 this September. All other maintenance and student contribution grant thresholds will increase by 15% so there is already quite a significant increase coming this September. The postgraduate fee threshold will also increase to match the

new 100% student contribution threshold, which will now be €64,315. That means a household with a net income of up to €115,000 will still benefit from grant support.

Deputy Joe Neville: I thank the Minister for his reply. As someone who grew up just after third level education was made free, I benefited, as did many of my peers and our parents and families. That opened up third level education, which might not have been a possibility before. We have seen those benefits. Obviously, that has evolved and changed over the last number of years. It is incumbent on this Government to reduce the cost of third level education. There are various ways in which that policy might be achieved. Some might be of the view that there should be free third level education. There are also other ways, such as through grants. That seems to be the route the Department is going down. If we can increase the rates and the thresholds, it will improve the opportunities for different families. Like the Minister, I know that many people in north Kildare attend Maynooth University. It is really important. With all of the economic difficulties we face, education is at the core of what we do and how we can grow the country in the future.

Deputy James Lawless: I know the Deputy's commitment to North Kildare and to our shared constituency. I agree that education is absolutely a core part of that. Education, talent, skills and investment in people is the core of our success economically as well. That is why we, as a nation, have achieved everything we have. It is because of our investment in education from the early days of the State. It is something I continue to commit to and continue to advance.

As I mentioned, the threshold now for some level of support is up to €115,000 for a household. That is significant progress. It is the largest increase since the creation of SUSI and it underlines the commitment to inclusion. This will ensure students in need of financial assistance are not disadvantaged with the rise in incomes. That is significant and will kick in from September.

There are other supports. There is the new part-time scheme for part-time students that was not previously available. This is now in place and I extended it to other courses recently. I am examining many other levers as well to ensure no student is priced out of education and no student is unable to access education because of financial barriers. The vast majority of students who need support should be getting it and if they are not, I want to hear about it, and change the system so they can get assistance.

Deputy Joe Neville: I thank the Minister for his feedback and his commitment. The two of us have benefitted from the amazing education system we have had in this country. We have both utilised it to the best possible degree in various forms. What we want, and the opportunity we have here, is to ensure that all the young people growing up in this new and growing constituency can access it, and I see Deputy Ó Cearúil is here. Obviously, there is a multitude of other issues around accessing education, maybe transport and housing and places to stay, but often the initial core barrier can be cost. The focus of this Government needs to be on ensuring that everyone has access to education. Third level education is key to driving possibilities. We can talk about AI all we want, and we can talk about all those things, but if we do not have the people in the system to make the best of it, our economy will not grow and develop in the way it should and our people will not develop the way they should.

Deputy James Lawless: I totally agree. I will raise some of the progress we have made in recent years and which is continuing again this year, from this September. On the cost of

education, the threshold is one part of it, and an important one. The SUSI grant system is one part also. There are other factors such as student accommodation, which I am working on. I hope to publish a strategy on student accommodation this summer. This will address student accommodation in a consistent way with a uniform template, or a set of templates, available for student accommodation builds. That has not been there in the past or it has been somewhat *ad hoc*. It is something I have asked the Department to focus on and produce that template, which will then assist with further student accommodation being made available.

The Deputy referred to the cost of transport and travel for students who are commuting, often because student accommodation may not be available to them. On those costs, we have the student Leap card and fare discounts have continued this year. They were part of the budget negotiations by me last year in my previous role. That is very important for students.

There are other issues such as materials, the cost of laptops, books and so on. There are other types of support, whether it is support through fee subsidies, maintenance grants, support for accommodation or the provision of those services directly. It is multifaceted but I am certainly very aware of those challenges.

Further and Higher Education

10. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will outline the capital projects in the further education sector that will be progressed in 2025; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26306/25]

Deputy Brendan Smith: I very much welcome the emphasis placed on the development of the further education sector since the previous Government took office in June 2020. I spoke to the Minister's predecessors on many occasions about the opportunities that exist to develop the further education sector on an all-island basis, and particularly that there be a substantial capital programme. One of the projects of particular interest to me is the proposed development of a state-of-the-art campus in Cavan to provide additional permanent accommodation at Cavan Institute. I would be grateful if the Minister would give me an outline of the progress he expects to make with his capital funding this year.

Deputy James Lawless: I thank the Deputy for his continuing interest in the Cavan project as well as others. More generally, on the Department's capital ceiling over the last period there is a dedicated capital envelope, which the Deputy referred to, that amounted to €300 million for the further education and training sector, FET. Available funding has increased again from a low base of €6 million in 2018 to €107 million in the current year. That is a very significant multiplier of the available funding for the FET colleges and the FET system.

Funding for the FET capital projects is distributed through SOLAS under a number of different funding streams. There are 70 small- to medium-scale projects being progressed at the moment. This includes everything from minor capital works, emergency health and safety works and the strategic infrastructure upgrade fund, as well as devolved funding directly from my Department for minor capital works.

I am aware the Cavan-Monaghan project is of interest to the Deputy. The proposal there is to build centralised accommodation on land owned and currently occupied by the Cavan Institute on Cathedral Road in the town. That building will have modern learning spaces, spe-

cialised areas, and social and recreation spaces, surrounded by open spaces to create a vibrant campus community. It will have a complete range of supports, including guidance counselling. We heard earlier how important counselling is to make sure students make the right choices at the right times. The campus will also include quiet spaces and informal learning spaces. The project received approval in October 2024, it passed through approval gate No. 1, AG-1, of the infrastructure guidelines and is progressing to the next stage, which is pre-tender, project design, planning, and procurement strategy stage. SOLAS is currently working with the Cavan-Monaghan ETB to progress this through the next stage.

As the Deputy has flagged this as an area of interest, I will certainly keep a close eye on it and will update him as it progresses along. It is going well. It is past the first stage and is now at the next stage, which is the pre-tender stage. SOLAS, the Department and I are working to progress it. We will certainly make sure it moves quickly along.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I very warmly welcome the Minister's confirmation that progress is being made with this very important project for our constituency, as the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, Deputy David Maxwell, will know. I hope the Minister will be in a position to visit Cavan Institute at an early date, and to visit Monaghan Institute. Cavan Institute been a very successful institute since its establishment. I was very much involved with the Cavan Institute in its early days. I was the first chair of the board of management of the college. I was also very much involved in getting the original building on Cathedral Road, which is no longer adequate due to increased enrolments over the years. Cavan Institute was the first dedicated post-leaving certificate college in the country. It has developed collaborations with colleges north of the Border too, which is very important.

As the Minister outlined in his reply, the institute needs additional permanent accommodation. I am very glad that there will be such a range of classroom and other ancillary accommodation, plus sports facilities. I hope SOLAS will be able to drive this capital programme forward as urgently as possible. I am delighted the Minister has secured from the Department of public expenditure additional funding to bolster the capital budget. I know the work of the Cavan-Monaghan ETB, which the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach will know also, and this funding would be put to very good use.

Deputy James Lawless: I absolutely know it will be put to very good use. It is a fantastic and very exciting project and it is great to hear the history of that building, and indeed of the project and further education in the Cavan-Monaghan area. I thank the Deputy for the invitation to visit. I will certainly put that in my diary and will get there in due course. I would like to see it for myself. You cannot beat seeing it for real and meeting the teams on the ground to understand how projects are coming on. I thank the Deputy for his interest. He was involved in the original site. I will certainly keep a close eye on that and will get to it in due course.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I thank the Minister. It is very important that we record the importance of the further education sector. It was originally established to respond to the needs of the local community and the local economy. It has been an extremely important gateway for students and pathway to higher education. It has given so many people, who traditionally would not have had the opportunity, the opportunity to get an education beyond post primary. It has been extremely important in ensuring that more people, who may have come from homes where there was not a particularly heavy emphasis on education, see that pathway to forward their education to successful careers. I very much welcome the emphasis the previous Government and this one have placed on this sector. I have no doubt the Minister and the Minister of

State, Deputy Harkin, will lead the sector very well. I again emphasise that the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach and I represent two Border counties. We are always very conscious of our neighbours in Fermanagh, Tyrone and Armagh and the potential there for further and more intense collaboration on a cross-Border basis.

Deputy James Lawless: I agree with the Deputy and I thank him for those points on access to the system for those who maybe would not have had that given they were coming from backgrounds where traditionally education or higher education was not a feature. The further education sector has been so progressive and has led so much in making education accessible to so many more families in a community setting and closer to home. It has made it easier to access education, despite economic reasons, family reasons or caring reasons, and has provided a welcome to, and has embraced, people.

10 o'clock

There is a very exciting new development relating to tertiary degrees, of which the Deputy is probably aware. I recently met many tertiary degree students from around the country at an event in Grangegorman. The option is there for students to start their training or educational journey in a college of further education in a local area closer to home, which makes it easier on many fronts. After one or two years in a college of further education they can then progress to a more traditional higher education institution and go on to degree-level accreditation. That is a wonderful journey.

There are many more opportunities. The Minister of State, Deputy Harkin, and I visited the National Construction Training Centre in Mount Lucas, County Offaly, yesterday. The careers that are opening up in construction are huge. Very exciting new journeys are opening there as well.

Question No. 11 taken with Question No. 6.

Research and Development

12. **Deputy Malcolm Byrne** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the way in which he plans to modernise basic research equipment in universities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26166/25]

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Deputy Ó Cearúil is taking Question No. 12 on behalf of Deputy Byrne.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I congratulate the Minister on his elevation to Cabinet. As a constituency colleague, it is great to see him in that brief. He has hit the ground running, and I have no doubt that the rest of his term will be a success. I wish him well.

We know from the IUA that half of the equipment in third level institutions is more than ten years old and that a third is more than 15 years old. How does the Minister plan to modernise basic research equipment in universities?

Deputy James Lawless: I thank the Deputy for his question and his kind words. I look forward to working with him to deliver for Kildare North and the country as we work together in this House and elsewhere. I know he is spokesperson for a related area as well. I want to

acknowledge that and support him in his work.

The plan to modernise research equipment is a topic close to my heart. It is something that I immediately addressed when I came into this role. I tasked a team within the Department and established a working group comprising academics, people from the industry with experience in the sector, and my own officials to consider how we might embark on a renewal exercise for fundamental research equipment across the sector. That is well under way. It is critical that we have that equipment available because that is the building block on which our experiments and research journeys take place. It is critical for training students as well. In addition to research equipment, it is also teaching equipment. Students need to be able to access the best in class in that form. The working group is making good progress.

I addressed an Irish Universities Association event last week, where I reiterated my commitment to bringing a significant new funding stream to the sector to examine options as regards supporting the renewal and replacement of equipment and talent. One can have all the equipment in the world, but if there are no people to operate it, learn from it and use it, it is futile. I have, along the lines of the previous programme for research in third level institutions, PRTL, a new undertaking that perhaps has not taken place for a decade prior to now. It was a very successful programme in the early part of the century. That is something on which I am engaging with the national development plan in terms of securing significant funding for it. The sector has warmly welcomed my indications in this regard. I am engaging with it intensively, and that progress is significant and substantial. I look forward to seeing the fruit of that when I bring it through the budgetary process later this year, all going well.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: In March 2025, the IUA stated, “increased public investment in research is the best way to protect the Irish economy from external threats such as US tariffs,” and what is happening in an international context. I welcome the Minister’s commitment to not just funding third level institutions but also modernising those institutions.

As a follow-up question, when does the Minister envisage that funding will be available to third level institutions? I appreciate that this will be part of the national development plan. Will it be this year or further down the line?

Deputy James Lawless: I entirely agree with the Deputy regarding the economic headwinds he referred to in his supplementary question. Part of our competitive offering is that we have such a strong talent base, we invest in education and we invest in research and innovation.

Later today, I will travel to Brussels to attend a research council with European Council colleagues and ministers in related briefs across the European Union. We are very keen to support a successor programme in terms of Horizon funding. The Draghi report, which the Deputy will be familiar with, identified that research and innovation must be central to Europe’s competitive advantage because it is a key part of our economic offering. It is the reason we have been so successful in attracting foreign direct investment, as well as in our own indigenous enterprises over many years. I intend to not just continue, but to double down and increase, widen and accelerate support for all of that activity.

The Deputy asked about timing. This is a significant programme. This is not a one-off grant; I intend this to be a significant body of work which will span my term of office over the coming five years. It is envisaged as a multi-annual programme. I will make my case on the national development plan. I will, perhaps, return to the issue in my supplementary answer.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I will give some time back to the Minister in order to allow him to finish his point. I acknowledge the President of Maynooth University, Eeva Leinonen, for her work there and as chair of the IUA. I am keen to hear from the Minister in terms of what his timeline is. I appreciate that any scheme like this cannot be just a once-off; it needs to be continuous because of the rate of change and development in all areas of research. I completely understand that it will take time. It is not just a case of being here once and it being done. It will take a number of years.

Deputy James Lawless: The Deputy mentioned the IUA paper published in March. I actually appointed the IUA to my working group and it is actually actively involved in it already. It is an excellent organisation and it is worthwhile to have it in the room for these discussions. The other thing I will say about the programme as I currently envisage it and through my work with the expert group is that it is intended to be a competitive funding call. It will not necessarily be a case of something for everybody but, rather, will be based upon excellence and submissions being made as part of a competitive process. An independent panel will assess applications. That is how the PRTLTI was done before and it is how best-in-class funding applications in the research sector are done. It will not be automatic or immediate. Funding is the first step. The next step is the framework around the funds, such as what type of projects, equipment and research is being supported. I intend to cast a wide net because we should not be excluding any particular areas, although naturally there are Government strategic priorities.

The IDA strategy was published recently. Things such as digitalisation, healthcare resilience and climate change are all core to its goals. I would put the semiconductor strategy into that mix as well. It is important. Cabinet recently adopted the national semiconductor strategy. The Deputy will be as aware as I am of the importance of Intel in our own constituency in Kildare North and of other organisations such as AMD and others throughout the country. They are all areas in which we have real global competitiveness. We are experts in those areas, have made significant progress in them and will continue to support them.

Question No. 13 taken with Written Answers.

Further and Higher Education

14. **Deputy Maeve O'Connell** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to report on the work of officials within his Department on the new further education and training strategy in collaboration with SOLAS following the conclusion of its public consultation earlier this year. [25568/25]

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: This morning I wish to ask the Minister about the work of the officials in his Department on the new further education and training strategy in collaboration with SOLAS, particularly following the completions of its public consultation earlier this year.

Deputy Marian Harkin: The further education and training system is central to the delivery of skills across the country to boost national competitiveness and support inclusion. The Further Education and Training Act 2013 requires SOLAS to prepare a strategy for the provision of further education and training and submit it to the Minister for approval. SOLAS, in partnership with the Department, is progressing the development of the next strategy under these provisions, ensuring that it fully aligns with departmental and Government priorities.

The process for developing the next strategy, the third national strategy for the sector, began last year. SOLAS held several consultation workshops and meetings with more than 800 individuals and stakeholder representatives across the country to identify emerging themes. Officials from the Department worked closely with SOLAS, attending the sectoral consultation workshops. In addition, SOLAS launched a public consultation in January 2025, which resulted in more than 70 submissions from a diverse group of stakeholders. At the moment, SOLAS is considering the feedback and emerging themes from its stakeholder engagements to inform a draft strategy. That will be submitted for consideration to the Department in the coming weeks. Once agreed, the strategy will be launched, subject to the Minister's approval in line with the legislation.

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: I welcome the clarity that the Minister of State provided regarding the 800 individual meetings and 70 submissions to the public consultation. I look forward to hearing more details about that over the coming weeks as that is progressed. One reason I am raising this issue is the importance of the apprenticeship sector, which this public consultation is dealing with. We have done quite well in raising the numbers from 7,000 registrations to 30,000 registrations. I want to see this momentum continued and hence I am looking forward to the feedback in this consultation.

Deputy Marian Harkin: As background to the strategy, its implementation resulted in significant progress between 2014 and 2019 in the development of the FET sector within the overall education landscape. Of course, we are now looking to the future. The second strategy from 2020-24 set out the role of FET in a more collaborative and cohesive tertiary education system for Ireland. Now, we are looking at the 2025-29 strategy, the third strategy. In developing this strategy, there is an acknowledgement that the FET sector has undergone a significant transformation in the past five years. It is important that we continue with the trajectory in order that FET can be a pivotal driver of sustainable economic growth, workforce development and, particularly, lifelong learning.

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: I welcome the approach of a collaborative strategy. It is worthwhile. All the actors and relevant stakeholders in our third level and further education sector are critical to make this work and create consistencies across the sector. I especially appreciate and welcome the focus on lifelong learning. I also welcome the focus on workforce transformation because we are operating in a transformative world. We have had debates concerning AI and the resources focused on it. This aspect will impact all sectors of our society, even the apprenticeship sector, where something will have to be included in this regard.

Deputy John Connolly: I echo my colleague's sentiments. I look forward to the publication of the new strategy. I compliment the Minister of State and the Department on the work done on the strategy to this point. The Minister, Deputy Lawless, and I last week visited the college of further education in Galway city. We saw the range of skills taught in that institution. Following that, it is very welcome that the college has been given approval to progress to the next stage of the design for its new campus. A high level of tuition is ongoing there and the facilities are of a high standard. It is wonderful to think this would be enhanced for the students attending the institution. The Minister and I met them last week and they come from a wide geographical area. I compliment the Minister of State for her work in this area and I look forward to the progression of this project.

Deputy Marian Harkin: It is very good news that Galway was one of two colleges given approval to proceed to the next step under the FET college of the future major projects fund. A

total of 12 colleges have been earmarked and eight of them are progressing now. The Minister announced earlier this week that Galway was one of those eight colleges. Of course, the other four are on stream.

Returning to the Deputy's contribution, it is important to say when we talk about this new FET strategy that it will endeavour to respond to the OECD skills strategy review. This highlights the need for a more balanced educational and skills system. The Deputy mentioned apprenticeships. The 16 ETBs are uniquely positioned within the tertiary education landscape to address those core immediate skills. As the Minister said, we were down yesterday at the Mount Lucas construction training centre with the modern methods of construction, MMC, accelerator platform. It was really good to see some of the positive things happening.

Questions Nos. 15 to 18, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Further and Higher Education

19. Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the work being carried out to examine how best a person-centred support model for learners with disabilities can be developed across further and higher education; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25306/25]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: What work is being carried out to examine how best a person-centred support model for learners with disabilities can be developed across further and higher education? I do not think the Minister will be particularly shocked at me asking this question. An element of this question relates to personal assistants, a topic I have spoken about many times. I refer particularly to personal assistants working in further education colleges like Drogheda Institute of Further Education, DIFE, and the Ó Fiaich Institute of Further Education and the need for contracts for them. There is also a need to ensure the review of this work is carried out from the perspective of delivering for the students with disabilities.

Deputy James Lawless: I thank the Deputy and acknowledge his continuing interest in this area and in the matter he referred to at the end of his question. More generally, at the outset, supporting the participation and success of learners with disabilities is a critical national priority. It is something I have been very much engaged in since I took up my role, as were my predecessors. The Minister of State, Deputy Harkin, is also very much engaged. We are very keen to make an impact and progress in this area. This progress is being made as part of the national access plan. This aims to increase the number of new entrants with disabilities to higher education institutions and to have more people with disabilities accessing further and higher education across the board.

The latest figures available show participation has increased to 14.7% from 12.4% over the past three years. It is on target to reach 16% over the lifetime of the national access plan. In further education, 14,825 learners enrolled in FET programmes in 2023 reported having at least one type of disability. This figure constitutes 6.8% of all learners enrolled in that year. A range of existing supports and programmes are in place for learners with disabilities. The fund for students with a disability is provided across higher education and post-leaving certificate programmes, with an annual allocation of over €15 million. Many other supports fall within the scope of the fund, including assistive technology, non-medical helpers, ISL interpreters, transport supports, examination supports and many other types of supports made available to

students where they need them.

The programme for access to higher education, PATH, 4 funding stream under the national access plan supports my Department's goals of enabling all learners with disabilities to avail of higher education. Just this week, I was very pleased to bring to Cabinet increased funding for PATH 4 that is particularly targeted at learners with intellectual disabilities. We have had some very successful courses. The Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities has some outstanding learners. I visited An Garraí Beag, a Down Syndrome Ireland centre, in my area of Sallins last week. I also visited other centres around the country, including Field of Dreams in Cork recently. There is good progress. It is heartening to see people with intellectual disabilities who may never have considered that university or higher education was an option for them actually making that journey now, being part of that system and making a valuable contribution to it.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Obviously, we all welcome the likes of PATH 4 funding. I suppose this is the whole idea in relation to course creation. From a capital perspective, too, there is the idea of making those reasonable accommodations that facilitate more people to be able to access further and higher education. Much work needs to be done. I visited several times the likes of some of the courses being funded. We have a specific course in DkIT that does a great deal of work with people with intellectual disabilities. This is about ensuring there are pathways for all our citizens.

I spoke before about Fórsa having a pay claim in now but the WRC was unable to deal with some of the issues. Reference was made to an interdepartmental review that is required in respect of the work personal assistants do with those who need facilitation relating to a training course. We are talking about people who do a great deal of work and we must do whatever we can to facilitate them.

Deputy James Lawless: As acknowledged regarding PATH 4, I did commit almost €3 million in additional funding just this week towards that funding. I also intend to initiate a disability demonstration project, which will inform the development of the new policy framework for more flexible and responsive tailored supports for those students and their educational journey. A great deal of work is being done.

Regarding the Fórsa claim, I know this is of particular interest to the Deputy. To give some brief background, personal assistants are employed in ETBs usually on fixed-term contracts. They are not paid outside term time, and there are different rules that apply. They are not public servants or covered by section 19 of the Education and Training Boards Act 2013 and they are not members of public sector pension schemes. They stand outside some of those provisions. Last year, the Department reviewed the hourly rate of personal assistants in response to discussions with a representative group of personal assistants. The Deputy may very well have been involved in that discussion. This led to a 42% increase in the hourly rate, which was a significant increase. The rate went from an average of €15 per hour to €21 per hour, with 8% holiday pay on top. Fórsa submitted a claim to the WRC subsequently. Several aspects were resolved through the WRC conciliation process, including confirmation that qualified personal assistants should be awarded contracts of indefinite duration and their entitlements to sick leave and holiday pay were raised. There was another meeting in March. Further requests have been referred to the Labour Court. It is important that we respect the industrial relations machinery. I know the Deputy has a very strong interest in this area. That work is ongoing in the WRC and Labour Court.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I appreciate the answer from the Minister. We all did considerable lobbying on the hourly rate and welcome its increase, which was not before time. The only way this can become sustainable to allow these people to offer the absolutely necessary services to those with disabilities is by putting a proper 52-week contract in place. Work needs to be done by the Department along with other Departments. We all fear when we hear about interdepartmental reviews but we need to ensure the part that needs to be done here is done to facilitate this while accepting that a review is an absolute necessity to offer the necessary service to those with disabilities. Following our conversation last week, and not for the first time, I have requested a meeting with the PAs. If Fórsa and everybody else could be there, we could get those workers doing really brilliant work. We could settle that and face in the right direction of providing sustainable employment and delivering for those with disabilities.

Deputy James Lawless: I acknowledge the Deputy's ongoing advocacy for this group and we have talked about it on a number of occasions already. I know he may be a little sceptical of interdepartmental reviews and the rest of it, but the last one made significant progress. Anyone would acknowledge that a 42% pay increase is a pretty substantial one. Certainly progress has been made but I acknowledge that elements of it are still in dispute. That conciliation process is ongoing and the State has engaged the industrial relations machinery with the various referrals. I am keen to engage on it and keen to facilitate that meeting. The Minister of State, Deputy Harkin, may also engage with me, along with the Deputy. I just need to make sure it is appropriate in the context of the industrial relations process that is live. I will take advice on that but if I can do it, I will.

Construction Industry

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): I will allow Deputy McCormack to ask his question but only one reply because we are out of time.

20. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the steps his Department is taking to increase training capacity in modern methods of construction nationwide to meet housing and infrastructure targets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25972/25]

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank the Deputy for raising this important question. My Department is actively progressing measures to expand training capacity in modern methods of construction, MMC, nationwide. We have quantified that using MMC could lead to a reduction of almost 10,000 in the number of additional workers required to meet domestic building and retrofitting targets to 2030, which is highly significant.

Existing training capacity is being expanded through partners including SOLAS, Laois-Offaly Education and Training Board and Skillnet Ireland. New traineeships and micro-credentials are being developed and offsite manufacturing diplomas, short courses in sustainability and digital skills, and an MMC-specific portfolio of programmes are available. Along with the Minister, Deputy Lawless, I was delighted yesterday to launch a new digital platform, Skillnet MMC Accelerate, at Mount Lucas to support career progression and training navigation in this important area. A national demonstration park is under development at Mount Lucas. It will open later this year as a flagship destination for demonstration, specialist training and innovation.

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In parallel, the Department is finalising an MMC action plan. Responding to the expert group on future skills needs recommendations, this sets out 58 targeted actions across areas such as digital construction, certification, early learning engagement and new training provision. It has been developed with Government, industry and education partners. All of this work is supported by funding of €3.5 million in 2025.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Housing Provision

63. Deputy Conor D. McGuinness asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the work he has undertaken to date to address the crisis impacting on rural communities where young families are unable to find a home in the area they were raised in; and if he has met the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to discuss the matter. [26532/25]

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Rural communities are in crisis. Young families who cannot find homes in their communities are being pushed into larger urban centres, which are already under pressure. Rural communities, ár gceantair Ghaeltachta san áireamh, are facing an existential threat. What specific steps are the Minister and his Department taking to support rural and coastal communities facing decline due to the total lack of housing opportunities and availability?

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Dara Calleary): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as ucht a cheist. Our Rural Future is the Government policy for sustainable rural development in Ireland, putting forward a vision for vibrant rural places that are attractive to people, particularly young people, who wish to study, live, work and raise their families in rural Ireland. More than 170 measures are outlined in the policy to support sustainable economic and social development and environmental and cultural well-being. The delivery of these measures is clearly cross-governmental, with a range of Departments contributing in their own areas of responsibility.

In response to Deputy McGuinness's question on housing in rural areas, my colleague the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage holds policy responsibility. As part of my Department's role in overseeing the delivery of Our Rural Future, officials in my Department and I regularly engage with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. I will formally meet the Minister, Deputy Browne, next week on a range of issues, including housing agus tithíocht sa Ghaeltacht freisin.

This activity includes membership of the cross-departmental steering group on the national planning framework, engagement on the development and delivery of the Housing for All strategy and the delivery of initiatives under the town centre first policy, which is delivered jointly by our two Departments. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage is also a key participant in the development of the new Our Rural Future policy, which will take effect from 2026. We have had a number of public and stakeholder consultations on Our Rural Future policy. Of course, the issues of housing and the necessary infrastructure to support housing development for our rural communities have come up in those engagements.

The new Our Rural Future policy will absolutely reflect the importance of rural housing and the many programme for Government commitments in this area. I look forward to continuing to work closely with the Minister, Deputy Browne, and his officials but also with the House to provide maximum housing and, most importantly, sustainable communities in rural areas.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: The Minister mentioned Our Rural Future. While I am glad to hear that the next iteration of the Government's rural development policy will look at housing, the previous one did not do so in any meaningful sense. In fact, it had more to say on rural broadband than on rural housing. I believe that is part of the fundamental problem. This Government and its predecessors have wasted years when housing should have been developed. Rural communities need action on housing. They need delivery of affordable and social homes and provision of affordable serviced sites. Coastal villages like Ardmore are facing a demographic cliff edge. Tá ár gceantair Ghaeltachta, cosúil leis An Rinn i bPort Láirge, ag feitheamh le blianta i gcomhair tithíochta inacmhainne agus sóisialta. Families are crying out for help. While the Minister is right that much of the responsibility lies with the housing Minister, the Department of Rural and Community Development needs to step up. The recently passed national planning framework offers zero ambition. It remains to be seen what Our Rural Future mark 2 will promise and actually deliver when it comes to rural housing.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I agree with the Deputy in many respects that there is a rural housing challenge. However, planning permissions have been granted for almost 6,000 one-off homes on average every year since 2020. Over 90% of those are built in rural settings. Within our Department, we have put in place a large number of policies to support the communities around that. Funding of €164 million for 30 rural regional regeneration development projects was announced in May 2024, an additional €20 million for town and village renewal and also €109 million for community centre investment. They are facilities that encourage and sustain communities. We will be working with the Minister, Deputy Browne. I look forward to engaging with Deputy McGuinness as urlabhraí Shinn Féin but also as a member of the committee with regard to what our rural future should look like. The year 2026 is very different from 2020, and there are huge opportunities we want to maximise as well as addressing the challenges. The opportunities are there, however. We want to take them and run with them.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I look forward to having those discussions with the Minister both at committee and in the Chamber and, indeed, offline because this is an issue that is not going away any time soon. Much time has been wasted over the last five to ten years when we should have been developing housing, but it is never too late to start doing the right thing. It needs to be focused on keeping rural communities alive because the consequences of an action are playing out before our eyes in my constituency, which I am more familiar with, in An Rinn, Bunmahon, Dunmore East and Ardmore, which I mentioned. GAA clubs cannot field teams. Schools are losing pupils and are at risk of closure in some cases. Families are under huge emotional and financial distress and are being taken apart from each other. That social fabric and social support and infrastructure are not where they should be, and they should be the cornerstone of our rural communities.

This is the cost of Government inaction over the last five to ten years. We cannot continue in that same vein. I welcome the Minister's comments today that this will be a major focus of the next rural development policy, but he can understand a little of my cynicism when we passed in this House a number of weeks ago the national planning framework, which had zero ambition. It had so little to say about rural communities, rural development and rural housing.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We get a sense of the national planning framework now as local authorities are being invited to submit new proposals for housing in terms of rezoning land. I would also point to the vacant property refurbishment grant, which has opened up houses. The Deputy is a rural TD as well; he can see that houses that were closed for generations have been opened up. In Waterford City and County Council alone this year, 319 applications have been received to date, with 184 having been approved. That is people moving back into homes in areas that were closed for 20 or 30 years or even more. That shows it is a mix of new and existing stock. All of this is part of the work that is under way from the Department of housing in this space.

Child Poverty

64. **Deputy Mark Wall** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development his Department's role in addressing child poverty under the six priority areas identified by the child poverty and well-being unit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26343/25]

Deputy Mark Wall: Regrettably, child poverty is on the rise in this country. It is particularly challenging in rural areas but in many of our communities as well. What is the Department's role in addressing child poverty under the six priority areas identified by the child poverty and well-being unit?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Within my Department, the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, is the primary social inclusion programme. It aims to reduce poverty and promote social inclusion and equality in Ireland through supporting communities and individuals using community development approaches, engagement and collaboration. I thank and commend our SICAP teams all over the country for their work. Although addressing child poverty is not an explicit target of SICAP, services and supports are typically delivered to children experiencing poverty and disadvantage through other general target groups, including the heads of one-parent families, people experiencing educational disadvantage and those living in jobless households or households where the primary income source is low-paid or precarious. SICAP also features youth as a thematic focus area. It supports development of youth groups, arts and crafts, games, sports, etc. and, in particular, preventative early school leaving initiatives, youth-focused active citizenship and leadership programmes and mental health and well-being programmes. Targeted supports are provided in many SICAP areas for particular groups of young people in specific areas. Collaboration is a critical success factor for services delivered through SICAP.

Local development companies that support the delivery of SICAP locally engage with agencies such as Tusla, children and young people's services committees and school completion officers to ensure that relevant and specifically targeted supports are provided for specific children in each community. In that context, services delivered through SICAP contribute directly and indirectly to addressing the priority areas identified by the Deputy, including income supports and joblessness, early learning and childcare, reducing the cost of education, addressing family homelessness and, in particular, integrating our public health and family support services. We will continue to support SICAP. We also provide support through the scheme to many national organisations providing specific local responses depending on the circumstances of a local area.

Deputy Mark Wall: First, I join the Minister in thanking the staff of the many SICAP groups in the country, across 31 local authority groups. They do tremendous work - there is

absolutely no doubt about that - but the figures we have been presented with from the Central Statistics Office, CSO, show that child poverty in this country has almost doubled, from 4.8% to 8.5%. As I said, it is a particular problem in rural Ireland, notwithstanding the work that SICAP does and the fact that we have a lack of services, particularly around transport whereby people are not able to access hospital appointments, job opportunities, etc. That is having a direct effect on child poverty in rural Ireland.

What we need to see is what is happening in Scotland. I would be interested in the Minister's thoughts on this. They have a child poverty reduction Act, which goes across departments and gets reports from every department of government on what they are doing to tackle child poverty. The Minister might come back and let me know if that is something his Department is looking at along with the other Department he serves and also as a cross-government response to the unacceptable rise in those child poverty figures.

Deputy Dara Calleary: With my other hat on, we are absolutely focused on those child poverty figures. I am not happy with them. We will be bringing forward a number of initiatives in this year's budget. The Deputy touched on something we need to do a lot more work on, namely, rural poverty, in particular, and hidden poverty. The area of transport is one the Deputy has identified. Under the current CLÁR initiative, we are supporting organisations to acquire vehicles. In the CLÁR 2 programme, which has just closed for applications, we will be looking at supporting organisations to get vehicles to provide rural transport, particularly in the education frame. We have done that over a number of iterations of that scheme. For those with special education needs and disabilities, transport in rural areas is particularly challenging for younger people and children. In this year's CLÁR 2 stream of funding, we will be looking at supporting organisations that are addressing that transport issue specifically.

There is also greater flexibility and greater potential for Local Link to provide services in this space. I will work with my colleague the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, to ensure that Local Link is focused in the best way possible, working with the local development companies. Local Link has a very strong working relationship with local development companies in this space. We can fill gaps there using the Local Link provision as well.

Deputy Mark Wall: I will again put on record my thanks to the Local Link service. It has made a difference in rural communities but there is no doubt it can do more, particularly in areas like Ballitore, which is a small village on the outskirts of my hometown. However, there is a lack of services coming from that particular village, which, as the Minister said, is impacting on those who are seeking education and employment or just seeking social interaction. It is having a direct impact, as I know, on children in that area. It is not just there; there are other villages as well.

The Minister mentioned SICAP - as I said, I pay tribute to those who work in the area - and stated that child poverty was not an explicit target. I ask that it become an explicit target for SICAP. That is most important if we are to be serious about tackling an almost doubling of figures of child poverty in this State. SICAP should be entrusted with developing rural communities to set and see child poverty figures. It should become a specific target of what it does day in, day out. That is a necessary step forward for SICAP and what it will do if we are to become serious about tackling that almost doubling of the child poverty figures the CSO has recently given us.

Deputy Dara Calleary: As I said, it is not a specific focus, but it is very much part of SICAP's work through all its engagement with organisations. Many of the SICAP teams give

specific local responses to specific situations and children or family situations in communities, depending on what they work with. They work closely with the Child and Family Agency and the area school completion units. That is one of the strengths of SICAP. It is local and targeted. As part of our overall response to the challenges of child poverty, I will examine how we can engage SICAP. We cannot do that without resourcing it more, and I acknowledge that we have to deliver that. We may ask SICAP to give us more measurement of what it is actually doing. It is doing phenomenal work in this space, a lot of it unseen, as all of us in the House know. It makes specific interventions but does not shout about that. We may have to look at capturing that. I will consider the proposal.

Sports Organisations

65. Deputy Louise O'Reilly asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if he is aware of recent media reports from GAA clubs about their concern regarding the decline in population in rural Ireland; the impacts this has on the clubs; if he plans to address this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26571/25]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I listened very carefully to a recent report on the "This Week" programme from reporter Peter O'Connell. He referenced rural decline and depopulation and linked it specifically to a number of GAA clubs in the west of Ireland. One was St. Senan's in Kilkee. I note the chairperson, Diarmuid Keane, referenced that rural towns need significant Government aid if they are to continue to be viable. I want to hear the plans of the Minister in that regard.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. I heard the report and have seen the work done by many county boards across the country, led by the uachtarán of the GAA. I am very much aware that the GAA works in communities locally and nationally to address this challenge, through its national demographics committee and each county demographic officer. As I said, Our Rural Future contains a wide range of measures that will ensure all rural areas are attractive and viable places for people to study, live, work and raise their families.

Our Rural Future has had a number of significant funding investments in recent years, namely, the rural regeneration and development fund, the town and village renewal scheme and the outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme. The ethos of these schemes is to put facilities into the kinds of small towns and communities the Deputy referenced. Through Our Rural Future, many GAA clubs have become involved in the consultation process that is under way. I will extend an invitation to the national demographics committee of the GAA to meet me with its proposals from clubs across the country. We are currently involved in public consultations and we have just finished an online consultation in that regard.

In recent years, we have invested in the national broadband plan. We have made improvements in rural transport, something I have discussed with Deputy Wall, and we want to continue to do that. Through initiatives under, for example, the community recognition fund, we have made substantial investment in facilities in GAA clubs to make them even more attractive. I am focused on working with clubs and an organisation that has a presence in every parish. It has a contact system that very few other organisations have.

I am aware that in many areas we need a targeted approach. Some areas are doing well, but others are not. There was a 7% increase in population across the country between 2011 and

2022, but other areas show a large decline. I want to focus on that. While Our Rural Future is a broad document, I will also look for focused responses.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: It is the job of the Minister to treat us to the greatest hits of his Government and all of the rest, but in truth the statistics and facts speak for themselves. The situation was laid out very clearly for us in the RTÉ report. St. Senan's in Kilkee last reached a county final in 2009, when it had 52 adult players on its senior and junior teams. In 2025, the club now has access to at most 23 adult players for the junior team, while at underage level it has been amalgamated with two clubs immediately to the west of it, O'Curry's and Naomh Eoin, but it is still struggling.

When an organisation like the GAA is coming together to highlight an issue like this, I am glad the Minister is listening, but we want action and not just listening. The GAA has highlighted issues like access to remote working. We could be here all day. From his previous brief the Minister will know a complete bag was made out of the right to remote working. The legislation has left people without that right. Access to remote working is one way to address this issue. An increase in funding for the LEADER programme and a reversal of the cuts imposed during austerity are required because funding has not caught up. There is work to be done in the here and now, but the Minister also needs to examine the historical damage done and rectify it in order that rural communities will be in a position to survive.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We can all quote facts. There is a challenge, and I know the challenge in my county. Nevertheless, the CSO figures show a 7% increase in population in highly remote areas between 2011 and 2022. The OECD figures show that many rural and remote areas in Ireland showed some of the highest population growths between 2001 and 2021 within the OECD. I accept that within those figures, there are anomalies and we need to focus on the reasons.

We cannot ignore the investment that is happening through the rural regeneration and development fund, the outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme and the town and village renewal scheme. In particular, the town and village renewal scheme has an element for local authorities to involve GAA clubs, which are in many cases the drivers as well as the identity point for many rural communities. I will work with the uachtarán of the GAA and the national demographics committee as we frame a new rural future. I also encourage local clubs to work and participate in the consultation process, in particular those facing challenges.

I look forward to inviting people to the national youth assembly on rural development because it is young people who are at the heart of many of these clubs. That meeting will take place at the end of September 2025 and will be part of the Our Rural Future consultation. I look forward to many GAA clubs sending delegates to that.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I am sure they will because this is an issue about which they have become incredibly exercised, and for good reason. I am using St. Senan's as an example because it was the club that was highlighted in the RTÉ report, but in the immediate surrounding areas 66% of the houses are holiday homes. When a house comes onto the market, young people who might want to stay in the area and are interested in playing GAA or providing a few players for a team in the future are being outbid by people who are coming into the area. I know that in the Minister's county, an innovative suggestion was made regarding holiday homes. I would be interested in knowing what he might have to say about that.

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It seems like rural communities are up against it all the time. As I said, they are still trying to make up the deficit because they were creased during the austerity years and that funding has not been made up. As well as increasing funding to the LEADER programme, there needs to be a real and sustained focus on social and affordable homes for working people to rent and buy. At the moment, it feels like the market is very cruel and very much against young people who might want to buy a home and establish themselves in a rural community.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We had a discussion on this with an Teachta McGuinness in our first question. We will work with the Minister, Deputy James Browne, on a range of initiatives on rural housing and increasing supply through local authorities, which have been asked to supply more land through the vacant homes scheme, which is opening up closed-up communities in many rural areas. In May 2024, my Department announced €164 million in funding for regenerating rural communities the length and breadth of Ireland and €20 million for the town and village renewal scheme. That is investment that is going into communities as we speak, including the smallest communities. Some €100 million through the community recognition fund is supporting many GAA clubs in improving the quality of their facilities.

The Deputy spoke about remote working. We are supporting broadband connection points across the country, a major investment on the part of my Department in addition to the national broadband funding. Through Roinn na Gaeltachta, táimid ag cuidiú leis an údarás chun na haonaid Gteic a bhunú, the specific broadband hubs for Celtic areas, Gteic.

There is a huge range of initiatives to invest in facilities. We have very much turned the corner on what the Deputy called austerity cuts by investing in rural communities. We are making major capital investments and increasing facilities. I am very focused on housing in rural communities as well.

Rural Schemes

66. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the supports available for the acquisition of buildings for community use to help the regeneration of rural towns and villages; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26170/25]

Deputy Liam Quaide: In villages and towns throughout Ireland, there are vacant or derelict properties that represent a blight on their locality. They are like husks of wasted potential, preventing residents from having local community centres or some form of social or commercial hub. Bringing these vacant and derelict properties back into use would support the revitalisation of rural Ireland. Will the Minister outline the supports available from his Department to assist local communities in acquiring such buildings for community purposes?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. The town centre first policy is a major cross-government policy that aims to tackle vacancy, combat dereliction and breathe new life into our town centres. Central to the town centre first approach is a range of capital support funding that includes the rural regeneration and development fund and the town and village renewal scheme. Both schemes facilitate the acquisition of buildings for community use and have already delivered landmark projects which tackle the issues Deputy Quaide referred to, such as vacancy and dereliction.

The rural regeneration and development fund, RRDF, allows for the purchase of land and

buildings, and provides funding for the development and construction of large-scale capital projects in rural areas, villages and towns throughout Ireland. Since 2018, €588 million has been allocated to 243 projects throughout the country.

Under the town and village renewal scheme, there is a specific building acquisition measure, which was introduced to support local authorities to acquire derelict or vacant buildings to allow for town regeneration. More than 50 properties have been purchased to date at a cost of €11 million. The main town and village renewal scheme has introduced a new option, which allows local authorities to acquire land to facilitate town regeneration. In addition, the main scheme has supported projects that bring vacant and derelict buildings back into use as multipurpose spaces through the purchase and renovation of vacant and derelict buildings.

The 2025 town and village renewal scheme is currently open and allows for the discreet purchase of land and buildings under the building and land acquisition measure, as well as wider project plans under the main scheme. In recent weeks I have visited a number of these projects throughout the country and I have seen the difference they are already making in towns and villages. This is only because they have the support of their local authorities and, in particular, the support of the local community within that town or village. They are community driven and community owned. When this community involvement is there, the project will be successful.

Deputy Liam Quaide: I thank the Minister for his response. I want to raise the particular example of Ballynoe in my constituency of Cork East where a former HSE dispensary building, a property owned by the State, has sat empty for several decades at least. Local residents believe it was last in use in the late 1970s or early 1980s but it has remained empty. It now sits boarded up with the gates locked and no access to the site. It is an eyesore for anyone passing it. Over the years the village of Ballynoe has seen its shops close. It has lost its butchers and its local pub and, in recent years, its only post office closed. A similar story has played out, as the Minister knows, in so many of our rural villages. Local residents have come together and set their sights on taking ownership of the derelict former HSE dispensary building. They want the opportunity to turn this property into a community hub, a remote working hub, a library or a space for people with additional needs. They are very open to various possibilities.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I cannot comment on the exact area of Ballynoe but what Deputy Quaide has described sounds exactly like a prime property for the town and village renewal scheme or the RRDF. For instance, in Drumshanbo in County Leitrim I visited a former Garda station that has been acquired and is being developed into a fantastic facility. Throughout Leitrim on a recent visit I saw former State properties that have been developed by groups such as that mentioned by Deputy Quaide, working in conjunction with the local authority.

The first port of call for that group should be Cork County Council, so they can work together. It is exactly the type of scheme we want to see. When the community group works with the local authority they can define the ask and what the new building will look like. It is very important that in developing a project such as this there is a relatively good business plan in place, or, for want of a better word, a development plan, so people are very certain of what will be there and that the building will be sustainable. There are dereliction officers in every local authority who are able to assist with the programme. Through the RRDF and the town and village renewal scheme we have funded old Garda stations, old FCA buildings, old schools and old railway stations that are being refurbished into exactly the type of hub Deputy Quaide has referred to.

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Deputy Liam Quaide: I thank the Minister for his encouraging response. I hope the Department will help the local community when it makes the application. On behalf of the community council in Ballynoe I have already been in touch with the HSE, which has indicated to me that it is its intention to sell the building. In line with the HSE property protocol and Department of public expenditure rules, it will be offered to a State stakeholder before being placed on the open market. The Ballynoe residents are asking for the opportunity to lease the building and repurpose it for community use but they will need particular support to restore the building since it has sat in a derelict state for so long. It will be asking for funding from the Department. I am very pleased to hear the Minister's words today. The community is eager to create an intergenerational space. It is open to various options but it really wants to bring back more life into the village of Ballynoe.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I cannot comment on the HSE plans for the building as I do not have those details. I will say that this year, the building and land acquisition measure under the town and village renewal scheme allows local authorities to purchase up to three vacant buildings. The total fund available is up to €500,000. I would certainly encourage Deputy Quaide to have a discussion with the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, on the HSE element. As I have said, there are numerous projects throughout the country. I am more than happy to give Deputy Quaide details if the local committee wishes to visit them to see how successful they have been in terms of taking the journey. I commend the communities which do this and take this on. It is a big undertaking. The Department is there to support them through the undertaking, not only through funding but also with advice and access to other communities that have undertaken this journey.

Departmental Schemes

67. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the proposals to address the estimated 4,000 roads that remain outstanding under the local improvement scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26586/25]

Deputy Michael Collins: The local improvement scheme, LIS, is very important for rural communities and rural roadways. At this time, the Minister might be able to explain the Department's proposals on how it intends to address the estimated 4,000 roads that remain outstanding under the scheme. I would appreciate if the Minister explained it to us.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank Deputy Collins. The local improvement scheme is a vital support for rural communities to improve non-public rural roads and local laneways. Since 2017 almost €170 million has been provided by the Government to local authorities under the scheme. I will repeat that figure of €170 million. In April 2024 €40 million in funding was announced for the LIS for all local authorities for 2024 and 2025, with €2.87 million allocated to Cork County Council. While the Department provides funding for the scheme, it is administered by the local authorities which have responsibility for selecting and prioritising roads. It is absolutely clear to me, locally and as Minister, that there is strong demand for the scheme. However, progress has been made, with more than 5,500 road improvements being completed under the scheme to date. Significant numbers apply for support, which is why base funding for the LIS has increased year on year since 2021.

The programme for Government commits to supporting rural communities, including a commitment to increase funding under the scheme. I am working with the Minister for public

expenditure, Deputy Chambers, to ensure we have funding in place not only to continue the scheme but also to address the backlog that Deputy Collins has referred to. We are engaging with the ongoing review of the national development plan, and within the Department I am monitoring capital expenditure as the year progresses to ensure any savings arising under our capital budget and in other schemes can be reassigned to the LIS. I absolutely know and understand its value. I appreciate its value. It is very important to local families and local people. It will certainly be a priority scheme for me during my time in the Department.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank the Minister very much. It is a very important scheme. It is a great scheme for anyone who qualifies. The problem, as I have said, is that 4,000 applications remain outstanding and have not qualified. For all the funds that have gone into it, they are not half enough of what needs to go into it. I have spoken to Deputy Danny Healy-Rae on this issue several times. It is a big issue in his area. It is also a big issue in west Cork. The problem is that the moneys coming into west Cork are not enough to go anywhere near what needs to be done. I know of people who have been waiting for seven or eight years. A politician said to me one time that it is not a form that should be filled out because people get very annoyed and frustrated at having to wait seven or eight years to get funding for the roadway to be done. When people fill in the form they expect that it could be done within a year or two, a reasonable amount of time. While the system is successful when people get it, they can be a long time waiting. Some people who fill in the form pass away before they even get to see the roadway being done.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank Deputy Collins. I would point out that since 2017 Cork county has received €12.9 million for the LIS. It is the third highest amount nationally. It is not the Department's role to select individual roads. That is a matter for each local authority. We are looking at local authorities on the waiting list and the individual expenditure by local authorities on the scheme. I want to make sure that we are getting value for the money we are investing in it and that we are getting consistency from local authority to local authority.

11 o'clock

Certainly, I will be looking for additional resources. I am already engaging with the Minister, Deputy Chambers, about the national development plan, NDP, review and budget 2026 on that matter. We have also expanded the eligibility of the scheme in recent years so that is definitely adding to demand for it. That expansion was needed and was important for supporting local families. I assure the Deputy that Deputy Danny Healy-Rae and the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Healy-Rae, are working closely with me to secure additional funding for this.

Deputy Michael Collins: I appreciate that and thank the Minister. We desperately need that extra funding in some areas. The Minister said that County Cork receives the third highest amount of funding. He will be aware that Cork is the biggest county in Ireland, so we are way down the ladder if that is the case. I am not trying to be critical. The Minister is doing his best to get additional funding and we appreciate that, because there is a desperate need. People should not be waiting six or seven years.

I filled in forms for a gentleman in 2017. We have spent the time since then on the phone trying to make sure it gets across the line, perhaps once an month. Ellen in my office never gave up on it. It was only last week that he was told that his road will go ahead in a month's time, which is great and it is a success. However, there is frustration. I find that people are annoyed with the political system. When I knock on the door or talk to them, people say "you never got

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that road done for me”. That is not the way it works. There is not enough funding going into County Cork, unfortunately, and the roads are not being done. We see that there are 4,000 to be done nationally so there is a massive amount of money to be got here for the local improvement scheme.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I have figures that show that at the end of 2024, 175 roads in Cork were awaiting repair, 264 have been completed since 2017 and 23 will be done in 2025. The full allocation will be used. That gives the Deputy a sense of the demand in Cork, but it is replicated across the country. LIS roads are very much part of my daily work. The scheme is very important to communities. That is why the eligibility was expanded in recent years, but in expanding it, demand increased. I assure the Deputy that I am working to secure additional funding for the 2026-27 programme to support local authority members who are at the coalface of this and local families and communities.

Voluntary Sector

68. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if he is aware of the growing difficulties faced by community and voluntary organisations across County Tipperary in maintaining essential services due to the chronic inability to fill vacancies in publicly supported non-profit, voluntary and community organisations; the urgent measures being taken to ensure the sustainability of these vital community services; the measures he can implement to support community organisations who cannot fill vacancies where communities risk losing vital services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26462/25]

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I ask the Minister about community employment, CE, schemes and the fact that it is now almost impossible to retain participants on them. I am chair of a scheme. I know it is not totally the Minister’s remit, but it has a huge impact on rural organisations, rural communities and their viability and sustainability. Will the Minister make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. This question fits across both of my roles.

This Government recognises and values the many contributions made to society by not-for-profit, voluntary and community organisations in Tipperary and I commend the Deputy’s work in this space. The Department of Rural and Community Development supports the community and voluntary sector through a number of schemes, most notably the community services programme, CSP, the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, and the scheme to support volunteering. The CSP supports 428 community based organisations, with a budget of in 2025 of €55.4 million. This provides local services through a social enterprise model. In 2023, the majority of CSP-funded organisations were awarded five-year contracts, which has provided certainty in terms of operations and employment. In addition, and in recognition of the higher costs arising from increases in the statutory minimum wage, the contribution towards employment costs for those organisations with medium or high funding needs has increased. The SICAP, as I previously mentioned, is a national programme delivered in both rural and urban areas by local development companies to help those in the greatest need. It aims to reduce poverty and promote social inclusion and equality by supporting disadvantaged communities and individuals. My Department has contributed more than €47.4 million in 2024 for SICAP and has committed more than €48.9 million for 2025.

Finally, Ireland's volunteering structures are recognised as a model of best practice. More than 1 million people volunteer regularly in Ireland and I am committed to supporting them in this work. Funding from my Department to the volunteering sector has increased from €3.1 million in 2020 to €7.3 million in 2025. We are aware that challenges remain, especially in the schemes referred to by the Deputy. I am working in the Department of Social Protection to make changes to those schemes so that we will be able to attract more participants to them and encourage more people to get involved in their local communities through the fantastic work of the community employment scheme, the rural social scheme and Tús.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I thank the Minister. I know he is hands on. He understands it because he is from a rural community. There is just an impossible strain on the voluntary boards that are trying to fill these positions, trying to get the work done and keeping the whole plethora of areas going. Schemes such as rural transport services, meals on wheels, day care, community centres and Tidy Towns groups are under enormous strain. While many of the groups receive State support, that is no good if they do not have the workers. The scheme needs to be tweaked. Some years ago, people were allowed, if they had done three years and were a certain age, to carry on their work until retirement age. That needs to be looked at again. That was allowed. We are told we nearly have full employment and it is hard to get participants. The people on our CE scheme work with the supervisor Seán Byrne over three villages, Ballymacarbry, Newcastle and Ballybacon, that straddle two counties. It brings things together as well. Tipperary might have been on the hurling field last week against Waterford but we work together with a *ní neart go cur le chéile* attitude and that is the way it is. I compliment all the participants on all the schemes throughout Tipperary and everywhere else. They do a meaningful job and they do not get much reward at times. They get little remuneration, but they do excellent work.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Despite all our GAA talk, we had managed to avoid last weekend until the Deputy's intervention. That suited me anyway.

We have made announcements this week under the growing social enterprise fund. Borisoleigh Community Centre in Tipperary has been awarded €15,000 for solar panel installation. Canon Hayes Recreation Centre, with which the Deputy is familiar, has been awarded €11,559; Cloughjordan has been awarded €15,000; the Newport development association has been awarded €3,800; and €45,000 has been awarded to the Millennium Family Resource Centre, FRC, in Tipperary to assist it in its work. These kinds of specific interventions are assisting local groups in the county to continue the work and grow the expansion of the service. As I said, with my social protection hat on, we are looking at what we can do to enhance the schemes to make them more attractive for participants. Schemes are totally dependent on their supervisors. I acknowledge the amazing work of supervisors on CE schemes, RSS and Tús. I am happy that we secured some pay awards recently in that space and we will continue to grow the impact of the schemes.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I acknowledge the work they do. A man on the volunteer boards went to places in Tipperary like Knockanrawley FRC, Millennium FRC in Glengoole and of course Spafield FRC in Cashel. Recent data have shown there are 106 vacancies now across the schemes in Tipperary. It is difficult at this time of year to cover everything, including Tidy Towns, the GAA, community groups and all the other issues, such as meals on wheels and community centres. We just do not have enough staff. I thank the officials we deal with in the Department who help us out and have given us rollover extensions to keep the schemes alive because we cannot get the participants. The participants are needed so the criteria must

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be made easier to meet. We are especially looking for people on the schemes who are in their late 50s to be allowed to stay on them until they retire, because there is little possibility of them retraining and going back to work. Our scheme has been successful in progression. That is part of our problem because we have put people back to work as self-employed and into jobs. It has been great because it benefits the participants and the community. I appreciate that the Minister is trying to tweak it and that he will do so. I look forward to a positive outcome where our schemes continue to do the valuable work they are doing in Tipperary.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The schemes do superb work. I compliment the Deputy and all the volunteers who run them and are on the boards. I have the report into the future of the rural social scheme, which I am considering at the moment. We will be making some announcements imminently around that.

Again, on making it easier to get participants, I believe, as I have discussed with the Deputy previously, that the schemes have changed. They are no longer entirely labour market activation schemes. They are much more community social support schemes. The changes I am looking to make will reflect the change of that scheme. It is important we give people the chance to support local communities. It is a matter of pride for them and a matter of identity for many people. We must review how we look at the schemes and approach them. That is something I am currently very focused on.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Rural Schemes

69. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the strategies being implemented to combat rural isolation, especially among the elderly population; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25971/25]

Deputy Dara Calleary: The issue of rural isolation, especially among the elderly, is relevant to the work of several Government Departments. It is a complex issue and can undermine the physical and mental well-being of people in both rural and urban settings. Loneliness requires a wide range of responses, including health interventions, community policing, rural transport, which we discussed earlier, tackling social exclusion and addressing disadvantage.

Our Rural Future is my Department's whole-of-government strategy for rural development with actions to support rural communities, including addressing rural isolation. Within my Department, this issue is also addressed by the sustainable, inclusive and empowered communities strategy. Both strategies are underpinned by funding through the rural investment programme and community development programme, the latter of which supports projects and schemes across both rural and urban communities.

My Department provides financial and other supports to organisations throughout the country to address rural and urban isolation, including through the seniors alert scheme, which provides monitored personal alarms for elderly people; the community services programme, which supports a range of services, including meals on wheels; the local enhancement programme, which supports a huge variety of community groups, including social clubs, sports groups and

local choirs; and support for men's and women's sheds, which provide a community setting for men and women to come together to learn, share skills, make friendships and break the cycle of isolation.

These and a range of other supports, including those which help community centres and community facilities with capital investment, are aimed at helping to ensure communities are inclusive places to live in and are equipped to reduce social isolation and loneliness.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I thank the Minister for his response. I acknowledge the valuable progress made through initiatives, such as the Local Link service which has provided vital transport connectivity for rural communities and older people in particular.

Rural ageing, however, must be placed more centrally within the Minister's Department agenda. Rural Ireland is ageing at a faster rate than urban centres and while transport is critical, it is only one part of the picture. We need an integrated strategy that addresses rural housing, access to health services, digital skills and opportunities for social participation.

Will the Minister's Department consider the development of a targeted rural ageing strategy to ensure older people in rural communities can age with dignity, independence and meaningful connection to the places they call home?

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Deputy makes a good suggestion and we will certainly look at it. The potential in the new Our Rural Future document is there to highlight rural isolation and what is happening. I encourage Deputy McCormack to attend the new in-person public consultation event on 17 June in Tullamore for Our Rural Future.

As I said, we have a range of schemes and there are schemes within the Department. For instance, the community centre investment scheme, which is not specifically an isolation or older persons intervention, provides a physical structure communities can use to build programmes and plans to get people into it. Through community centre investment, we were able to allocate €100,000 for Mucklagh community centre and €89,000 for Kilcormac community centre. As I said, the CLÁR programme is currently open. This will target rural areas experiencing decline, including transport provision and funding organisations to acquire buses to bring people into centres or to deliver meals to people.

We will definitely be looking at a specific isolation and elderly strategy because the Deputy is absolutely right that our figures are increasing but there is flexibility within all our programmes.

Deputy Tony McCormack: Following up on this, I wish to highlight the decline of rural services such as shops, post offices and pubs has done more than hurt the local economy. It has deeply affected the social fabric of rural life. These were not just businesses but gathering points and places where older people in particular had a chance to interact, feel valued and maintain a sense of belonging. This role has now largely fallen to local GAA and the church which do commendable work but it is simply not enough.

Rural isolation is real and we must be honest: it is a public health issue that costs lives every day. Will the Department consider incentivising the operation of small rural shops and services that act as social hubs for the community? We need to think creatively and act decisively if we are serious about protecting rural life and supporting our ageing population.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I thank Deputy McCormack for bringing this up because it is an issue very close to my heart and one I have been considering for a while. I had the opportunity to meet with the Irish Postmasters' Union yesterday morning. Speaking to it, a topic that came up was the impact and availability of the post office network, particularly in rural Ireland, to offset some of that exclusion and isolation that happens to all sorts of people living in rural communities but particularly older people.

I know there is a Minister of State with responsibility for older people and this cuts across a number of Departments but is this something the Minister might raise in his discussions with colleagues in government, namely, a concerted strategy which looks at the post office network, the Local Link transport network, the voluntary and community network, including in my area of west Waterford, mental health awareness, the daycare centre networks, meals on wheels and the men's and women's sheds? In my area of Tallow, Cappoquin, Lismore, Dungarvan and Portlaw, this could come together in localised strategies to combat isolation, particularly among older people in rural Ireland.

Deputy Dara Calleary: There is nothing I disagree with in either Deputies approach. I met the postmasters last week and the post office report is a very solid report. It is not only about the post office but about the postmen and postwomen who go out to communities and houses. For many people, this is the only contact they may have, and let us be realistic about it.

As I said, through the community services programme, we are supporting many organisations across the country, including in Waterford and Offaly, that are driving meals on wheels, which is again human interaction. We are working to support our men's sheds and the growing number of women's sheds, but men's sheds in particular because they are focused on older men or men who have retired and getting them into a group gathering. The men's shed movement has done huge work, particularly in targeting rural isolation among older men. Everyone in this Chamber at present is a rural TD and we know that is a challenge. I thank the men's sheds for doing that.

Regarding Local Link, 148 new services have been progressed by the National Transport Authority, NTA, in recent years, connecting 190 towns and villages to the bigger public transport network. That connection was not there previously. As I said, through CLÁR, we are funding specific interventions on transport to allow for meals on wheels, community organisations and medical transport across the country, which are making a big difference.

There is much work under way in different strands. We might need to tidy it all up and look at how it is addressing rural isolation and loneliness.

Community Development Projects

70. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the funding available for community groups seeking to construct capital facilities, such as community centres, pavilions, and so on; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26263/25]

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank Deputy Burke. In his previous role as Minister of State, he did much work on rural isolation and rural loneliness role and I acknowledge that.

Regarding the Deputy's question, the development and enhancement of community facili-

ties is a priority for me and full details of the capital supports available are on my Department's website. The community centre investment fund has provided in excess of €109 million since 2022 for the enhancement and refurbishment of existing community centres and the construction of new centres. Under the 2024 iteration of the fund, more than €33 million has been approved to support refurbishment works on more than 770 projects nationwide.

The community recognition fund, first introduced in 2023, has supported a range of community infrastructure projects, and recognises the huge efforts made by communities in welcoming and supporting people coming to Ireland. A total of €100 million was allocated under the two iterations of the fund. The town and village renewal scheme, which is currently open for applications, is designed to support the revitalisation of rural towns and villages. The scheme enables the provision of funding for projects designed to rejuvenate town centres and includes projects to renovate and refurbish multipurpose community spaces. Since its launch, more than €177 million has been allocated to almost 1,800 projects across Ireland.

The rural regeneration and development fund is a major capital investment programme which seeks to support large-scale ambitious projects to achieve sustainable economic and social development in rural areas. Since 2018, €588 million has been allocated to 243 projects. The development of community facilities can also be funded under the LEADER programme, which is currently up and running across the country until 2027. There is a huge range of supports available and I am committed to further growing this support in line with the commitments made in the programme for Government.

Deputy Colm Burke: As the Minister knows, Ballincollig, which is in my constituency, won the Tidy Towns competition in 2024. It involved a huge contribution from the community over many years. A really strong community spirit has been created. The problem I now have in my constituency in places like Blarney and Glanmire which have had huge population increases is that we have not set aside facilities to be developed for the community. Glanmire, which has a population of more than 20,000, has no real community facility. I know we will work with the local authority on it but this is something that needs to be prioritised in growing areas. In Blarney, the proposal is for 2,500 more houses to be built. Planning was granted for the first tranche of 270 houses in the past two weeks. The planning for community facilities also needs to be put in place. In my home parish of Innishcarra, there are 50 acres of community facilities. The GAA, the camogie club and the rugby club all have their own grounds in the centre of the community, all in one piece. The Minister should visit to see how a community can work. I am concerned that in areas where there is huge growth in population we are not planning for it. The Department needs to look at this issue very carefully.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Planning issues are a matter for the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. I agree that there should be a community element to all planning decisions. As regards Blarney, we allocated €204,000 in 2021 for the development of the Inch Park amenity. In 2023, €324,000 was allocated. This includes upgrades for the community centre. There was also €125,000 allocated to Glanmire in 2021 for enhancing John O'Callaghan Park. I commend the Ballincollig Tidy Towns committee. I was there in March. The Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, presented the national award to them last weekend. It is a wonderful example of volunteerism, ambition and pride, with the community all coming together. We launched the national Tidy Towns 2025 competition in Ballincollig in March. It was wonderful to meet the group and to see the work at first hand, and most important, to see their passion and interest in developing the community. I am looking for extra resources to support the new part of our community centre investment to allow us to build new centres in the areas the Deputy

mentioned.

Deputy Colm Burke: I acknowledge that Department officials work really hard and are getting good value for the money that is allocated. When money is allocated to a community group, it will raise a whole lot more money itself to develop and grow the facilities. My big concerns centres around the areas where there is a huge increase in housing. The Minister talked about the allocation in Blarney, which is very welcome. The money has been well looked after and well spent there in developing the facilities. In the future, 2,500 more houses will be built there. It is about making sure we have clearly marked out where we are going to put additional community facilities. Likewise in Glanmire, 30 acres was given to the FAI more than 12 years ago and it is still lying idle. We need to bring that into use and do major development for the town. The GAA club in Glanmire does not have the capacity to take the huge number of young people who want to join the club. The club is finding it very challenging to cater for everyone because of the growth in the area. The issue of 30 acres lying idle needs to be resolved.

Deputy Dara Calleary: In the overall context of any development such as the housing referred to by the Deputy, first it is a matter for the local authority to put the plans in place. It draws down development levies for all of that construction. It should put the plan in place to have that facility developed. My Department will then be more than happy to work with it to identify potential funding opportunities. Part of the funding for Glanmire was to do a feasibility study for a community centre hub in 2021. I would be very interested to see where that went, where the feasibility study is and if we can work with the Deputy to drive that on. I am very happy to do that. However, in the first instance, the local authority is the prime development and planning agency. When it considers that level of planning the Deputy referred to, it should identify the kind of facilities that are needed. When housing is built, facilities also need to be built. We should have learned over the years, particularly in urban areas, to put the community halls and the sports and recreation facilities in. My Department is more than happy to work with any local authority that has that vision.

Deputy Colm Burke: Another place the Minister should visit the next time he is in Cork is the Glen Resource Centre. I was involved a long time ago in getting funding from Europe to start the centre. There are now more than 80 organisations using it. This is because of the contribution of the local community in developing and growing it. It is an important facility in an area where there was a lot of local authority housing and we would not have been able to raise funding. We got the funding from Europe under a capital programme to develop the centre. We need to look at inner-city areas as well because they do not necessarily have the funding. It is about making sure that they are not left behind. The Minister should visit the Glen Resource Centre to see how a community working with the local authority and the Government can develop a very good facility.

Question No. 71 taken with Written Answers.

Rural Schemes

72. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the steps being taken to address rural depopulation and encourage young people to remain in or return to rural areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25970/25]

Deputy Tony McCormack: What steps are being taken to address rural depopulation by

encouraging young people to remain in, or return to, rural areas?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Our Rural Future is the whole-of-government policy for sustainable rural development. It seeks to ensure that all rural areas are attractive for people to live, work and raise their families in. One of the high-level outcomes set out in Our Rural Future is to increase the number of people living in rural areas. Rural population trends, as we discussed earlier, in line with many of the issues addressed by Our Rural Future, require input from across a range of Government Departments. This can be seen in the range of actions that have been delivered across Government in areas such as broadband and digital connectivity, transport, support for rural enterprises and support for the agrifood sector.

Within my own Department, I am committed to ensuring that schemes and supports in place retain a clear focus on supporting the vibrancy and sustainability of rural areas. In recent years we have seen unprecedented levels of financial support provided under schemes such as the rural and regional development fund, the town and village renewal scheme, the community centre investment fund, the LEADER programme and CLÁR. I will continue to ensure that these schemes are funded and targeted in the coming years to provide vital supports to rural areas and the young people who live there.

We are currently working on a new our rural future policy to run from 2026. We are undertaking a nationwide consultation. This strategy will also be informed by an independent OECD review of rural policy in Ireland, together with the consultation process, which will see us in Tullamore in June. There will also be a national youth assembly on rural policy in September. This will focus on young people in particular, the issues for young people and how to keep them and their families in rural areas. As I said, this has been a major focus in the consultations to date and will continue to shape the development of the new our rural future policy from 2026-30.

Deputy Tony McCormack: The continuing loss of young people from rural areas like Offaly is deeply worrying. The truth is that we are educating our children to live elsewhere. We equip them with the skills, ambition and drive but the jobs, housing and services they need to build a future in the locality are not in place. This trend is affecting everything - from school enrolments to local businesses and the fabric of rural community life. The longer it continues, the harder it becomes to reverse. There is no silver bullet for this: it demands joined-up thinking and a real commitment across the Government. Will the Minister take the lead in his Department to work with the Departments of housing, education, enterprise and Transport to ensure young people have genuine opportunities to live, work and stay rooted in their communities?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Absolutely. We will work with all the Departments on this. There is no point in us making this level of investment in rural communities unless we can encourage younger people to come back. I share the Deputy's frustration and agree with what he said about educating younger people. We must ensure they have the opportunities to bring them back.

I point to the level of investment in Offaly in projects such as the regeneration of the Tesco site in Edenderry, which is a €12.2 million investment under the RRDF. A total of €588,000 has been provided in aid to community centres. Some €8.6 million will be provided under the LEADER programme between now and 2027. A total of €250,000 has been provided for town and village renewal in Ferbane. Those are a mix of projects across the county aimed at improving the vibrancy of the economy of the local areas. Collectively, they represent a very

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significant investment in the county by my Department. We will continue to make those levels of investment.

I look forward to the national rural youth assembly in September to get the views of young people directly on what we can do better to keep them in their areas after they have had their education and travelled, when they are ready to settle. We must let them come back and facilitate them to come home.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I wish to highlight one example which reflects the broader issue. I refer to the sharp decline in the number of young farmers. Farming is still the backbone of rural life, in particular in Offaly, yet fewer young people see it as a viable future. They face high entry costs, housing challenges and limited local supports. This is not just about agriculture, it shows how rural Ireland is becoming less accessible for the next generation. If we do not act, we will not just be losing farmers but community leaders, volunteers and local families that hold rural life together. I urge the Department to recognise that rural regeneration depends on a strong, diverse rural economy, one that includes farming, but also services, trades and small enterprises. Will the Minister ensure these voices and sectors are fully supported as part of his Department's future planning?

Deputy Dara Calleary: As the Deputy says, agriculture is still the core of rural Ireland, not just economically but socially as well in terms of the leadership, skills and supply chain that are provided. I will engage with the farming organisations as we carry out the consultation process on Our Rural Future. We will be looking for their input and support.

There have been various iterations of support from my Department, through social enterprise. This year, for example, there has been very good investment in FoodCloud and trying to reduce food waste. That helps rural businesses as well. We have also supported rural social enterprises.

I assure Deputy McCormack that the involvement of young people in rural Ireland is core to this consultation process, because the process would be much weaker without their involvement and input. I welcome any Deputy or Senator who provides a targeted response on how we can support young people to remain in or to come back to rural Ireland to establish a business. In my previous Ministry, through the regional enterprise plans, we had a number of supports for start-up businesses by younger people.

Questions Nos. 73 and 74 taken with Written Answers.

Rural Schemes

75. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the total amount paid out in CLÁR funding in each of the past five years, by county; the county that received the lowest amount, and which received the highest; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25736/25]

Deputy Paul Lawless: I thank the Minister very much for engaging on this important topic. I ask him to provide a breakdown over the past five years on CLÁR funding per county. How does our county, Mayo, compare?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. As he is aware, CLÁR is a very important

funding stream for remote rural areas. In recent years it has funded a vast array of community amenities such as community centres, sporting facilities, playgrounds, sensory gardens and walking trails. As we already discussed, it is also a growing source of funding for vehicles to transport people with disabilities and to allow people to access vital health services, such as cancer services.

I have provided the Deputy with a table outlining the level of funding under CLÁR for each county between 2020 and 2024. The 2025 scheme is currently open for applications, and I will announce successful projects later this year. Between 2020 and 2024, more than €51 million was approved for almost 1,300 projects nationwide under the CLÁR programme. The level of funding has increased from just under €6 million in 2020 to almost €14 million, covering more than 320 projects, in 2024.

County Mayo has the highest level of CLÁR funding, with €4.1 million being provided. The level of funding must be considered in the context of the size of each county and also the size of the CLÁR area in each county. The scheme only applies in designated rural areas that were selected based on the level of depopulation across the country over a defined period. As such, the proportion of each county designated as being a CLÁR area and the number of people located in CLÁR areas differs across the country.

I look forward to receiving applications for innovative, community-focused projects from across the country, including Mayo, in the coming weeks. We are also beginning a review of CLÁR areas to ensure that we capture within the scheme areas that have experienced depopulation and to ensure that areas that qualify are not excluded.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I look forward to reviewing the breakdown. The Tánaiste stated this morning that the Government has failed and is failing children with disabilities. I propose that funding for playgrounds would require them to have an inclusive element. The State is failing children with disabilities. There is a significant lack of services for children - a lack of space in schools, a lack of CDNTs and significant delays with assessments of need. Perhaps the Government could provide some short-term joy to these children, who are not looking for much. I refer to sensory panels and wheelchair-accessible equipment for swings and other activities that would have a major impact. Funding for playgrounds should have an element of funding ring-fenced for inclusive equipment.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I agree with the Deputy about that kind of funding. We will be looking at that from 2026 onwards. We have already funded sensory parks under CLÁR and we will continue to do that. We have also funded the upgrading and replacement of many facilities across the country, including in Mayo, to make equipment more suitable for children with disabilities and communities with disabilities. When local authorities submit applications I would encourage them to ensure there is a space included for that purpose.

I visited Carlow recently to look at a playground there which has been developed with people with disabilities in mind. It is a fantastic facility. I commend the thought that went into it. I also commend Mayo County Council on the work it is doing on sensory parks across the county. Within the allocations under CLÁR, I will emphasise support for programmes and recreational facilities not just for children but people with disabilities.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I too commend Mayo County Council on the great work it is doing. I also commend Manulla FC for its leading work on supporting children and families with dis-

abilities.

I also wish to raise Ballyhaunis. The purpose of CLÁR is to support rural towns. In recent years, Ballyhaunis has lost three of its banks and the credit union is now reducing its hours. The lack of financial institutions in the town has resulted in a loss of economic activity. We are seeing a hollowing out of the town in regard to economic enterprise. While the issue is not directly under the Minister's remit, it is very much linked to rural development. We cannot afford to lose the credit union from the town. The question is what will be next after the reduction in opening hours. People wonder what is down the line. Enough is enough. I ask the Minister to intervene and to work with First Choice Credit Union, not just in Ballyhaunis but also in Balla, Swinford and Kiltimagh.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I would point out that, as the Deputy is aware, there is substantial current investment by my Department in Ballyhaunis through RRDF projects, the regeneration of a number of properties and the town centre management. I am very aware of the issues raised by the Deputy and I do not want any diminution of services in any part of the county. There is substantial investment under way in the fabric to increase the attractiveness of the town centre and to improve it as a place to do business. I will continue to support that level of facility.

We are also looking to expand the range of CLÁR activities. Mayo is very well covered but there are areas across the country that we are beginning to examine in terms of expanding CLÁR funding and increasing the number of areas that are in it. Obviously, it excludes towns and cities. As mentioned earlier, we also have to focus on urban poverty and urban areas. We previously had the RAPID programme, which was the big brother of CLÁR, and we are looking at reintroducing that to give the level of support to our towns and cities that is given to other areas.

Regeneration Projects

77. **Deputy Joe Neville** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development his plans to resource town centre first and establish a dedicated town regeneration team in every local authority focused on tackling vacancy and dereliction in town and villages as committed in the programme for Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26324/25]

Deputy Joe Neville: I ask the Minister if the Department plans to resource town centre first and establish a dedicated town regeneration team in every local authority focused on tackling vacancy and dereliction in town and villages, as committed in the programme for Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. I am looking over at Deputy Wall, who is from Athy in County Kildare, while I am from Leixlip. We know first-hand in County Kildare the opportunity that this would give us.

Deputy Dara Calleary: It is great to see such cross-party co-operation across the two different constituencies.

Launched in 2022, the town centre first policy is a major cross-government policy that aims to tackle vacancy, combat dereliction and breathe new life into our town centres. TCF supports the Our Rural Future vision for a thriving rural Ireland by setting out the scaffolding and framework to facilitate and resource the regeneration of Irish towns to ensure they are vibrant and viable places to live, work, invest in and visit.

Important developments to date include the establishment of a dedicated national town centre first office which drives the actions under the policy, the establishment of town teams nationally and the appointment of 26 town regeneration officers. These officers act as a key link between the local authority, towns and villages and their communities. More broadly, they also currently work closely across the multidisciplinary technical teams in local authorities, such as capital delivery teams, which are also funded by my Department, vacant homes officers, broadband officers and night-time economy officers, and build linkages with town teams and other stakeholders.

The new programme for Government commits to the continuing resourcing of the town centre first model and to establish a town centre regeneration team in every local authority. My Department will continue to work closely with colleagues in the national TCF office, local authorities and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to ensure the ongoing implementation of the policy and to deliver on the goal of revitalising rural towns and villages. Importantly, the town centre first approach is also underpinned by a range of capital funding streams that have been aligned with the policy aims of town centre first. These include the rural regeneration and development fund, the town and village renewal scheme, the THRIVE scheme and the urban regeneration and development fund.

Deputy Joe Neville: I thank the Minister for his response. He referenced the rural but I am also conscious of Kildare, which has the unique issue that it has a number of large towns, like Athy and Newbridge in the south, and Monasterevin, Clane, Celbridge, Leixlip, Naas, Maynooth and Kilcock in the north. We can see where dereliction has impacted those towns and where there is a need for regeneration. We have a great team in Kildare County Council but it is small, with just one or two individuals who are actually going out to try to tackle that dereliction. We know that through the laws and even through the courts, some of the issues can be blocked.

My mother is from outside Boyle, County Roscommon, and I have seen how Boyle has been rejuvenated. We can see the benefit of town centre first and how it comes together. A lot of that has been done through Government funding and the purchase of a local hotel. I have seen how it can work and how we can have positive solutions in some areas. What I want is to have that rolled out across the country, starting with County Kildare at Leixlip, Celbridge, Kilcock and down to Athy, where Deputy Wall is from.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Does Deputy Wall wish to come in?

Deputy Mark Wall: I do. I cannot let the occasion go without putting on the white jersey as well, which is what we do regularly in County Kildare across the parties. Deputy Neville is right that there is a huge issue in the major towns of County Kildare. The population of Kildare is very urban-based and town regeneration is needed. I welcome the fact there are town regeneration officers in County Kildare. As Deputy Neville said, they are doing great work but they need to be properly resourced and need additional resources. My home town of Athy has started a scheme where we are trying to put money together to regenerate the town and give it a lick of paint for the summer and all the festivals that may come there. I believe more resources should be put into this by the Government, as Deputy Neville said. Every town needs a facelift and needs regeneration. I acknowledge the start by the Government but we need to do more. We need to put in extra resources, as Deputy Neville has said.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank both Deputies. As they acknowledged, there is a town cen-

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tre first officer in Kildare. The town centre first town plan under phase 1, which was announced in December 2021 for Kildare, includes Clane, and phase 2 includes Castledermot. Through the town centre first town team support funds, we are funding teams in Monasterevin, Kilcullen and Ballymore Eustace to do their work locally. I will be visiting Athy later in the year and look forward to seeing all the work that is about to be done.

I agree with the Deputies. Deputy Neville touched on Boyle, which is a fantastic example of a town that has been regenerated through State investment and, more importantly - this applies to all of these projects - through community ownership. There is no point in multimillion State investment unless the community owns it. Boyle and Athy are good examples of where the community is driving that investment and taking ownership of the investment but, more importantly, taking ownership of the results of the investment to ensure it is protected and that it delivers the overall regeneration of the town.

Deputy Joe Neville: I thank Deputy Wall for his contribution. We did not organise this but, at the same time, we are speaking with one voice because we know the issues at hand. I am sure that other counties could do the same. I thank the Minister for his depth of knowledge and his interest in the topic. We need to ensure this gets rolled out.

Ferry Services

76. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development when a new ferry service will be provided for Tory Island; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26287/25]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Tógaim an cheist fá dtaobh de bád farantóireachta Thoraigh. Seo bád a bhí gealta do Oileán Thoraí agus an pobal in 2018 agus é le bheith tógtha taobh istigh de thrí bliana. Go fóill, níl bád ar bith ar fáil.

I want to raise the issue of the Tory Island ferry. It was a commitment given by the Government in 2018 that a ferry would be provided and there was a vote on the island to deal with an issue that had arisen. It was supposed to be delivered within three years but there is no boat, no ferry and no plans for a ferry anytime soon. Now, there is a condition saying this is attached to a pier, although that had never been the case. There are ferries going in and out of Magheraroarty pier all the time. The Government needs to deliver on the commitment.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta. Tá mé chun freagra a thabhairt as Béarla, tá brón orm.

My Department makes a significant annual investment in subsidised transport services to ensure our island communities can avail of reliable, affordable year-round ferry and heavy cargo services. In the case of Oileáin Thoraí, there are four separate subsidised transport services provided for the island at an annual cost of approximately €750,000. Comharchumann Thoraí now plays a more central role in monitoring services to ensure they are delivered in line with contracts and that the issues that may arise are addressed promptly. This approach has resulted in a significant improvement in the delivery of all subsidised services to the island.

The main daily ferry service provides, at a minimum, two return sailings per day and can carry eight tonnes of light cargo per sailing. It is an important service that supports all aspects

of island life, from tourism to indigenous island businesses. Last year, a new fast ferry service that provides two daily return sailings was launched for Oileáin Thoraí. This is an important addition to the existing suite of services as it originates from the island each morning. Residents can now be on the mainland before 9 a.m. each morning without having to travel the night before and, therefore, do not have to incur the extra expense and inconvenience of staying overnight. The heavy cargo service has also seen vast improvements in recent times. Scheduled sailings are now planned in conjunction with Comharchumann Thoraí and the Department. Multiple mainland ports are used to deliver the service depending on the type of cargo being carried. This new flexibility has greatly enhanced the service and has had a beneficial impact on the community.

The winter helicopter service, provided in conjunction with the HSE, has been extended to start in October and end the following April. The scheduling of the service is far more flexible and, in particular, can serve residents returning home during busy periods.

The current subsidised range of services is meeting a community need. However, I am aware of the situation in respect of Magheraroarty Pier. I intend to visit it over the summer to envisage it. My understanding is that we allocated funding to Donegal County Council to complete a report and we are waiting on that. The Deputy has raised it with me previously, as has Deputy Pat The Cope Gallagher. I intend to visit Magheraroarty during the summer and I am happy to meet the Deputy there.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I thank the Minister for his response in regard to the existing services for Tory. Obviously, a tender will issue for those services supported by the Department later in the year.

The key point I want to raise is that in 2018, before Deputy Calleary's time as Minister, there was a serious issue with the ferry in and out of Tory. As a result, the Government brought in a mediator and made Government proposals. One of those proposals is that a brand-new ferry that would be suitable for Tory Island would be built. Whoever operated the ferry was a matter for tender, but it would be built at a cost of €4 million and it would be delivered within three years. It is seven years on and that ferry is nowhere to be seen. It is nowhere in the planning stages. It is nowhere in the design stages. What we heard last year from the Minister's predecessor was that the Government is not actually moving ahead with that at the minute, that it is still committed to it but that the reason it is not moving ahead is it has to do works at Magheraroarty. The point I am making to the Minister is Magheraroarty is completely separate. The ferry service that the Minister outlined to the Dáil operates from Magheraroarty. A brand-new, state-of-the-art ferry can also operate from there. Is the Department committed to the proposal it put to the island community in 2018 to deliver that and will the Minister uncouple it from Magheraroarty and deliver on this project?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I can assure the Deputy that what we have done is prioritise services into Oileán Thoraí to make sure that they are being delivered, that there is the traditional ferry service and that there is a fast ferry service. They are new services and they are providing a strong service.

I have been told there is an issue with Magheraroarty Pier. Donegal County Council was awarded funding to come back with a report on that issue. As I said, I intend to go there to see it for myself but as of now, we are focused on delivering services we have the capacity to deliver, namely, those fast sailings and the more traditional sailings, and I will continue to support those

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services. I have far greater belief in getting to see something for myself and engaging with the community on the ground when we do that, as I will do over the summer.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I appreciate the fact the Minister is coming to Magheraroarty over the summer. At that opportunity, we might meet Comharchumann Thoraí as well to see how this commitment can be progressed. I would welcome that.

As I said, this is really about a brand-new boat that was promised. When the Government has made a promise, it needs to be delivered. This is what I would like to tease out with the Minister. Whoever operates the service will operate the service, but they will operate a brand-new ferry.

There are possibilities here to cut the travel time as well. With a brand-new, bespoke boat that is built and suitable for that journey, which is a difficult one, we could reduce the travel time. This would increase the benefit for the islanders but also for tourism. We see a huge uptick in tourism.

I welcome the fact the Minister has committed to visit. During that visit, we might arrange a meeting specifically in respect of the new ferry as well in order that we could discuss how to move that forward.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I certainly look forward to the visit but want to be straight with the Deputy that as of now, the intention is to examine those existing services. I will sit down with the Deputy, Deputy Gallagher and the comharchumann to look at it because I want to get a full understanding of it and see for myself how the service works. I will not just go to Magheraroarty; I will go on to the oileán freisin.

Regeneration Projects

78. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if an rural regeneration and development fund, RRDF, application (details supplied) can be expedited given the declining condition of the building; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25392/25]

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Can the RRDF application submitted by Galway County Council in regard to the redevelopment of Gort convent be expedited? It is an urgent project, given the declining condition of the building. It is important to the local community and I urge the Government to approve it as soon as possible.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank Deputy O'Hara for his question on this project. As he will be aware, the RRDF is a major capital investment programme seeking to support large-scale, ambitious projects that can achieve sustainable economic and social development in rural areas. To date, the RRDF has allocated €588 million for 243 projects across the country.

A fourth call for category 2 applications was launched in October 2024. Typically, projects deemed successful under category 2 can access funding of up to €1 million per project to cover the initial costs of planning, design and technical work which will enable later large-scale development. The closing date for applications under this call was 14 March last.

I can confirm that an application in respect of the project referenced by the Deputy has been

received. The selection of projects for funding under the RRDF is subject to an assessment process, which is under way.

The type of projects supported by the fund, and the level of investment likely to be considered, is large scale and ambitious and each application received must be given the appropriate time for consideration and appraisal in line with the requirements of the Department's programmes, but also with the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform's infrastructure guidelines.

As this assessment is under way, I hope to be in a position to make an announcement later this year. I remain committed to ensuring that the RRDF can continue to support high-quality and ambitious projects across rural Ireland.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: This application is about progressing plans to transform the convent into a remote working and cultural and community hub. I acknowledge the work of the Gort Town Team and other local groups on this project. There are many active groups in the area that would like to make use of such facilities, including the resource centre, the forge and many more that do fantastic work in the area.

This is an iconic building in the town. It has had many uses over the years but has been vacant for some time. It is on the path to decline. There is urgency around this to secure the building and prevent it from falling into disrepair. It is a very important application for the town of Gort.

I would ask that the application be expedited, if at all possible, and approved to allow these important plans to proceed. The Minister mentioned "later this year" as a timeline. Is it possible to give a more specific timeframe than that?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I have heard the Deputy's case and I note the project from his question. We have to ensure these projects are done properly. The documents have only been with us since 14 March and there will be engagement on the viability of the project. The core aspect about this specific measure is that it opens up potential funding again. There will be engagement with Galway County Council, which is the promoter, and ultimately with the town team, around aspects of it. It is a competitive process.

However, we also have significant investment through the RRDF across Galway and that will continue. There is €3.3 million in Athenry, €1.7 million in Tully Cross, Connemara, €1.19 million in Portumna Vision 2030 and €4.2 million in Loughrea. There is considerable commitment to projects in County Galway and that commitment will continue.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I welcome the Minister's engagement with the council and the town team. I emphasise the declining condition of this building and its historical significance. It cannot be lost. There is much urgency around this. The plans the council and the local community have would be transformational for the local area. It is an exciting project but, obviously, funding is needed to progress it. I ask that the need to protect the building be taken on board.

12 o'clock

Is it possible to get any further clarity on the timeline as to when a decision is expected to be made in this regard?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I completely hear the Deputy. Many of the projects we have in-

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volve older buildings that people are seeking to repurpose. The process is designed to protect those buildings but also to protect the investment and to ensure that the investment we make at this stage will unlock potential future investment. There is no point in us opening up an expectation in respect of investment that we may not be able to reach, particularly for older buildings. I will engage with the Deputy and his office on the project and the timelines under the current assessment phase. We have our own demands and standards within the Department. We have to ensure they are in line with the standards of the Department of public expenditure. I will come back to the Deputy with an update on it.

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

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: On foot of yesterday's order of the Dáil, I wish to announce for the information of the House that the following Members have been appointed to serve on the Committee on Parliamentary Privileges and Oversight: Deputies Mary Butler, Paula Buttery, Joanna Byrne, John Clendennen, Ruth Coppinger, Jen Cummins, Emer Currie, Frank Feighan, Pádraig Mac Lochlainn, Paul McAuliffe, Mattie McGrath, John McGuinness, Denise Mitchell, Ged Nash, Ken O'Flynn, Naoise Ó Cearúil, Aengus Ó Snodaigh, Pádraig O'Sullivan and Barry Ward.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I welcome Cara Darmody and her father, Mark, to the Visitors Gallery. Cara, as we all know, has just finished her 50-hour protest outside the Dáil. You are an incredible young woman and we are all so proud of you. We know we have a fight on our hands to stop Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael from watering down or removing children's right to access an assessment of need in a timely manner. I believe I can speak for all of the combined Opposition when I say that we will be with you every step of the way in this fight. We will keep going until every child has an assessment of need and the services and supports he or she needs to flourish and thrive. No child will be left behind. Cara, you are an absolute inspiration to all of us and we are so proud of you.

Tá scannal an ospidéal náisiúnta ag dul ar aghaidh agus ar aghaidh. Tá costas an togra anois tar éis pléasctha ó €650 milliún go €2.2 billiún agus níl sé déanta fós. Inniu, tuigimid go bhfuil moill eile ar an togra seo leis an 15ú dáta críochnaithe nua le cúig bliana anuas.

The scandal of the national children's hospital has now become an epic saga. A project that was supposed to cost the State €650 million has now ballooned into a project costing €2.2 billion and we do not even know if it will finish at that. The Tánaiste's Minister for Health visited the project last February and said that it was 99% complete. She said we were within touching distance. However, today we have learned that we are far from within touching distance and that it is going to be pushed back again. Not for the first or second time but for the 15th time in the last five years, the Government has missed its target. We are told today that this hospital will open in June 2026 at the very earliest. The CEO of the hospital board does not even have

confidence in that date. The Tánaiste has broken his election promise when he said it would be delivered in June. Does he really expect the public to have any greater faith in this date than in any one of the other 15 dates that he and his Government Ministers have announced?

The Tánaiste personally signed the contract for the national children's hospital without even having a finalised plan in place. It was a case of build as you go. That is why BAM has had the State over a barrel for the last eight years. The Government is now blaming the construction company. It is no surprise to anybody on this side that developers are going to squeeze out as much profit as they can, but competent Ministers are supposed to protect the public purse. When the Tánaiste signed that contract, he declared open season on the public finances, showing complete incompetence. Anybody who has signed a contract, whether to build a house or just to replace a kitchen, will know that you need a plan in place. Even when this was getting out of control and costs were ballooning, the Tánaiste had the chance to change course. BAM offered to withdraw from this contract. The Tánaiste had the chance to change but he did not take it. He had the chance to put a proper plan in place but he did not take it. He signed on the dotted line, despite having no obligation to do so, leaving us with a contract that is totally skewed in favour of the construction company.

We have heard before from the Tánaiste, and I am sure he might say it again, that lessons will be learned. Lessons cannot be learned unless people take responsibility. As the Minister who signed off on that contract, does the Tánaiste take responsibility? Does he admit that it was the wrong contract to sign? It is why BAM has had us over a barrel for eight years. Does he accept that he got it wrong? Will he tell us now when children will be treated in that hospital and how we can have any confidence in that date? Why have we missed this deadline 15 times? Will the Tánaiste also inform the Dáil how much this hospital will cost the public purse at the end of the day?

The Tánaiste: I will begin today by condemning the senseless antisemitic murder of Yaron and Sarah overnight. These were two young diplomats in Washington DC who were killed in the prime of their lives. They were a young couple, soon to be engaged. I think of them and their families, to whom I send our sympathies. I also think of all those present at the Jewish museum in Washington DC last night, who include one of our own young diplomats. Antisemitism is a disgusting, despicable and vile scourge and we should condemn it at each and every opportunity.

I join with Deputy Doherty in welcoming Cara back to the Gallery of the Dáil. I look forward to working with her. I assure her that there is no tribal division here between the Opposition and the Government. Everybody in this House wants to make progress on children's disability services, assessments of need and access to therapies. My colleagues the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, and the Minister, Deputy Foley, have the full support of the Government. I hope we can all work in a cross-party way to make the progress we really need to make in respect of children's disability services.

I thank Deputy Doherty for raising the issue of the national children's hospital. The reality is that the hospital is now almost complete from a construction point of view. It is well over 95% complete and the technical commissioning is now under way. We are moving towards a twin track, where Children's Health Ireland has early access to the hospital. It is not a question of waiting for every single last bit of construction to be completed. The commissioning work is able to start alongside it. That is a practical and appropriate thing to do so that we can get this hospital open and so that access can be granted on a phased basis as parts are fully completed.

That is good. It is urgent. Children and parents need it. I am assured that the National Paediatric Hospital Development Board, CHI and BAM are engaged on achieving this.

Let us not lose sight of the facts. Within the overall budget for this hospital, a budget that has not changed from the €2.2 billion the Deputy asked about earlier, two satellite centres are already open. These centres, at Tallaght hospital and Connolly Hospital, are part of that overall budget, the overall envelope for the children's hospital project. They are complete and open. The facility at Connolly Hospital has now hit a milestone with 100,000 children having been treated there. Sometimes when people speak of this project, you would swear nothing has happened. However, 100,000 children have already benefited from having the Connolly Hospital element alone open.

It is a world-class project of massive scale with an internal street the length of Grafton Street, 4 acres of open space and a massive increase in theatre capacity. It involves many of the things we discuss in this House with a view to making more progress on children's waiting times. It will have 22 operating theatres and procedure rooms and will provide every child and parent with a single en suite room. The days of parents having to sleep on hard floors at night as their children spend weeks, if not months, in hospital are coming to an end. The hospital will have 6,150 rooms and is located on 12 acres. This will be state of the art. I am pleased to say the hospital's elevated helipad is complete. This will be shared with St. James's Hospital and will offer rapid, safe access to key areas including critical care, theatres and the emergency department.

Everything the Deputy raises in this House, and that all of us in this House raise, demonstrates the necessity for this hospital. We know it cost more than originally intended. That is true. However, the Deputy has been covering finance for his party for a hell of a long time, so he will know that we have significantly changed the approach we take to the delivery of infrastructure. He will know of changes we have made only in recent weeks as to the role of the Department of public expenditure and reform. I guarantee the Deputy that when this hospital is open - the Committee of Public Accounts was told today that it is due to be completed by September and to start treating patients in 2026 - it will transform children's lives. When we live in a country that is spending around €110 billion in an annual budget each and every year, investing just over €2 billion over a number of years for a hospital that will serve children well into the next century is a good and an appropriate thing to do. It will make a very significant difference to children's health services in this country.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Sure we all know that. That is why we have been waiting years for the hospital to open. The Tánaiste was the Taoiseach for some of the last five years but before that he was the Minister for Health. The deadline for opening this hospital has been missed 15 times. That is crazy. The Tánaiste is right that children are waiting for this hospital. We know it is state-of-the-art. Not only has the deadline been missed 15 times, but this project has gone from €650 million up to €2.2 billion and we are not sure that this will be the final cost. I put it to the Tánaiste that he personally signed off on this contract. Accountability starts when the Tánaiste starts accepting responsibility. On the day that we have been told the project is delayed again, that it will not see patients until June 2026 at the earliest and that the CEO is saying he is not confident in that date, can the Tánaiste not at least acknowledge that he got this wrong, that he should not have signed this contract, and that the contract he signed, which was build-as-you-go, was a contract with no plan and that it was wrong? This is why we are in a situation where over the last five years the Government has missed its targets 15 times and this project has ballooned out of control.

The Tánaiste: The sheer hypocrisy of the Deputy. It was only in March of this year that the First Minister of Northern Ireland, who is the Deputy's party's vice president, said that she was delighted that £671 million would be spent on a state-of-the-art children's hospital at Belfast's Royal Victoria Hospital. Ladies and gentlemen, who was that contract with? Does anyone know? It was BAM: the same developer building the hospital in this jurisdiction.

Deputy Martin Kenny: It is a different contract.

Deputy Máire Devine: That is pathetic-----

(Interruptions).

The Tánaiste: Not only that-----

(Interruptions).

The Tánaiste: I have more to say, please. The contract was announced and it was welcomed.

Deputy Máire Devine: That is pathetic-----

The Tánaiste: Not only was the contract signed with BAM, do you know what happened then? It pulled out. As a result, Sinn Féin has further compounded the delays to the delivery of the project. Not only that but the children's hospital that it is delivering in Northern Ireland and that Sinn Féin's First Minister and vice president welcomed is more expensive per square metre than the children's hospital we are delivering in this jurisdiction.

(Interruptions).

The Tánaiste: They are not my words; they are the words of the Parliamentary Budget Office in the Oireachtas. That office has looked at the hospital Sinn Féin is presiding over in the North and the hospital we are presiding over here and it found that Sinn Féin's is more expensive than the one we are delivering.

Deputy Máire Devine: Fair play to you.

Deputy Martin Kenny: You are very lucky you are not out of a job.

The Tánaiste: Get over yourselves with the absolute hypocrisy.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Pearse Doherty: You will not even acknowledge that you made a balls of it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please. I call Deputy Ivana Bacik.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I join in welcoming Cara Darmody and her father Mark to the Public Gallery. I commend them and their family on their tireless and fierce advocacy for children who so desperately require additional services and supports. We will continue to work with them.

Ten years ago today, we the people of Ireland used our votes to make marriage equality a reality and to make grá the law. I had intended to raise this happy anniversary with the Tánaiste today and to speak about the policies we still need to implement to realise the equal rights of all LGBTQ+ people in Ireland but breaking news has overtaken us. Instead I must raise with

the Tánaiste some shocking international news that has broken since we stood in this Chamber yesterday, recalling of course that as we face into the weekend there is still no sign of any international aid coming through for those children and infants in Gaza. Many thousands of them are facing starvation with dire warnings that 14,000 infants will die by the weekend without this aid.

Then overnight two young Israeli diplomats were murdered in cold blood outside the Jewish museum in Washington DC. I want to join in condemning outright their brutal murders. We know that an Irish diplomat was present and we are glad to hear they were unharmed. That news was accompanied by word that the Israel Defense Forces, IDF, had fired shots near an international delegation that included two Irish diplomats in Jenin. This must be condemned.

Then we come to the shocking revelation that Donald Trump's deportation flights are refuelling in Ireland at Shannon Airport. These are deportation flights that are illegal and taking place in violation of a US court order. In other words, an Irish airport is being used as an instrument to violate human rights. On Tuesday, a judge in Massachusetts ruled that the Trump Administration's attempt to deport migrants from a number of countries to South Sudan unquestionably violated an earlier court order. We understand that lawyers for seven of the men being deported were given little more than 24-hour's notice of their clients' expulsion. We understand that one of the planes in question, flight JNY588A, is due to refuel at Shannon Airport on its return journey from Sudan later today at about 9.30 p.m., according to flight logs. This is just the latest controversy about the use of Shannon Airport by the US Administration. We know the planes are landing at Shannon Airport en route to deliver bombs to Israel for use in that brutal bombardment of Gaza that has caused so much death and so much devastation and is the cause of many children's lives being ended. Yes, Irish Government Ministers have shown an astounding lack of curiosity about how our airspace and airports are being used by the US at any given time. The Tánaiste will be aware of the barrage of revelations about US flights refuelling at Shannon Airport in the past two years, but the State's exact position on this remains something of a mystery.

I have some very specific questions. Why is Ireland allowing US flights to land here en route to deliver destruction to Gaza? On the deportation point, was the Tánaiste aware that flights involving illegal deportation and disappearance of people from America are also landing here? How many of these flights have refuelled at Shannon Airport? Will Ireland continue to allow deportation flights to land where they are in violation of court orders? Will flight JNY588A be allowed to land this evening at Shannon Airport?

The Tánaiste: I very much appreciate that events have overtaken us. First, I join with the Deputy in acknowledging that it is the tenth anniversary of marriage equality today. I acknowledge the pretty significant role the Deputy's party played in this. I enjoyed being in government with the Labour Party during that period when we put this referendum to the people of Ireland and became the first country in the world where, by popular democratic vote, we voted overwhelmingly to recognise that love is love. I recognise, as Deputy Bacik does, that on this day there is still more work to do. In fact, as we have seen in recent times progress can go backwards. It is very important in 2025 that we continue to speak up for our values and the values of the Irish people on equality and inclusion. I just wanted to acknowledge that too.

I thank the Deputy for her comments about our people, our diplomats, in Ramallah in our Palestinian mission. I was pleased to speak with the head of the Irish mission to Palestine yesterday, Feilim McLaughlin. He and his deputy were present in Jenin outside the refugee camp

when the Israel Defense Forces appallingly fired what it described as warning shots in their direction, or over their heads specifically. This is the latest in a long line of intimidatory action by the Israel Defense Forces directed at diplomats or at our peacekeepers in Lebanon. We have conveyed our views in the strongest possible terms to Israel, as has the European Union, through the ambassador to Ireland.

Deputy Bacik raised a specific issue on the deportation flight landing in Shannon Airport. I am conscious that this is the Dáil and I want to provide accurate information as I have it. It is very much an evolving situation because I am aware of media reports that suggest a US flight on 21 May landed in Shannon. This was a civil aircraft and as such no diplomatic clearance would have been sought or would have been required. The regulation of civil aircraft and flights is a matter for the Department of Transport. This morning I spoke to the Minister for Transport in relation to this. I have also spoken to my Department. As the Deputy and the House will be aware, diplomatic clearance to overfly or land in the State is required from my Department for any military and state aircraft but not for civil aircraft. What is most important is that we now have full clarity on what may or may not have taken place. Officials from my Department are liaising with the Department of Transport, the Department of Justice, and the US authorities.

I am concerned about some of the aggressive migration policy we see being pursued in the United States of America. In the first instance, it is not for us to determine the legality of the US Administration's actions in relation to its courts. It is for the US Administration to answer. In the same way, if we had a deportation flight landing in another country, there would be a presumption that those on the flight were lawfully detained. I am trying to piece together here information that is coming at us, in the first instance through US media, and the decision of the US courts. I am very happy to keep in close contact with the Deputy and with this House because I recognise there is significant public interest and public concern in relation to this.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank the Tánaiste for providing a little more clarity. I appreciate it is an evolving situation. There is, however, a very specific question here about the particular flight I raised with the Tánaiste. We have seen that court order from the US. I appreciate that the Tánaiste will keep opposition parties updated as the situation evolves. We certainly require much greater clarity on the broader picture of US airplanes refuelling at Shannon Airport where they are en route to drop bombs or to provide bombs to Israel to drop in Gaza. That is where we need clarity, which has been sadly lacking from the Government. We need that.

I also welcome the Tánaiste's positive comments this morning on the radio about our proposal, led by my colleague, Deputy Duncan Smith, that we will be bringing before the Dáil next week, calling on the Government to bring a resolution to the UN General Assembly to try to move things on, to ensure Israel can no longer act with impunity, to ensure the international community can seek to address the situation and to ensure that humanitarian aid reaches the desperate, starving people of Gaza. I welcome the Tánaiste's positive comments, which, by the way, were rather different from the Taoiseach's comments in this House yesterday, where he fell very far short of even agreeing to consider the proposal that the Labour Party is bringing forward. We are looking for support on a cross-party basis for this. We believe that the genocide in Gaza is an issue of such enormity that we have to ensure that we speak with one voice on this and that Ireland is leading on an international stage to ensure an end to the suffering of the people of Gaza.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy is right; this is genocidal activity. There are no two ways about it. The Israeli Government is rather upfront and blunt in outlining its military and political

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objectives for Gaza, which are abhorrent and clear breaches of international law. As I have been saying, and as I want to continue to say, the Irish people have, through their taxes, sent a significant amount of aid to the people of Palestine. That aid has been effectively, not to be flip-pant, parked in Jordan for the last four months. It is enough food for 6,000 Palestinian people. That is only a number of trucks out of the overall international contribution to this - all sitting there. There is only one reason and one reason alone that food cannot get in today, namely, the decision of the Israeli Government. We need to take more action. What I did say, and I mean it sincerely, is that I will engage constructively with the Labour Party on the proposals it is bringing forward - the earlier the better - as I know it will. I will also meet today with Senator Frances Black in terms of our own proposals to bring forward legislation regarding the occupied Palestinian territory. I hope to be in a position to update the Government and this House on that next week.

Deputy Charles Ward: Multiple community playgroups in County Donegal face closure because they have been affected by defective concrete. The cracks in the walls of these buildings have been growing at a concerning rate. Like many buildings in the county, there is only one option, which is full demolition. Unfortunately, however, under the current redress scheme for buildings affected by defective concrete blocks, these childcare facilities do not qualify for any funding for demolition and rebuild because they are not a home. Early childhood educators and parents of these playgroups are understandably very frustrated about the decision not to consider these buildings for the defective concrete remediation funding, especially given that Donegal County Council previously advised that the criteria for funding were being rewritten to include the likes of Raphoe and Letterkenny Community Playgroups, and that the housing authority would ensure the applications would fit within the framework. Despite these assurances, funding has not been made available to either of these playgroups.

I know playgroups have explored alternative funding options, including from Pobal and the Department of education, but no viable solution has been identified. Raphoe Community Playgroup has already committed to providing places for 56 children from September 2025 to July 2026, but without adequate support this facility will be forced to close. The loss of this vital community resource will have serious consequences for families, working parents and the wider community of Raphoe. Furthermore, its closure becomes unavoidable, which should not be the case. Funding for redundancy packages for the staff will need to be addressed. How are community playgroups such as that in Raphoe expected to navigate this situation? The current position it is in is an enormous strain on the playgroup, its staff and the families who depend on it. We are already dealing with a shortage of childcare facilities in County Donegal. This issue has not been addressed. It will be even harder for the people to access childcare in the future.

I am seeking clarity on this matter and a constructive discussion on the next step to ensure these essential services remain available. The Government has a responsibility with regard to childcare and needs to step in to help to maintain a fantastic service which has been an integral part of the Raphoe community for more than 40 years. Will the Government ensure that funding is allocated to community playgroups in County Donegal that are affected by defective concrete in order that they are not forced to close?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Ward for raising this matter. I had the pleasure of meeting the Raphoe Community Playgroup during a relatively recent visit to Donegal. It keeps in touch with me directly, as I know it does with Oireachtas Members from Donegal. I see the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, in the Chamber as well. I know it also keeps in contact with the Taoiseach, the Minister for children and the children's ombudsman.

I appreciate the Deputy referred to more than the Raphoe Community Playgroup, but I may use it as an example of the broader issue because it is one with which I am a little bit more familiar. A building inspection was carried out in Raphoe in autumn 2023 which revealed that mica was present in the foundations of the building. Initially it was felt that the building would need underpinning rather than demolition, but by the end of February 2024 there had been significant further deterioration. There was a follow-up visit in March 2024, and the architect advised that the building would be unsafe to use past June, as the Deputy knows, and should be demolished. I commend the playgroup, by the way, because it has been extraordinarily proactive. I really have to acknowledge that because I have had quite a few dealings with it. It went on and identified a local building - I think it is called Volt House - to use temporarily for service provision, together with an existing prefab on its own site that is, thankfully, unaffected by mica. Renovations took place at both locations. I am pleased to say that we provided some sustainability funding from strand 1 to try to help with the rental costs up to May 2025. I believe Raphoe Community Playgroup is currently providing service to approximately 22 children from this site and to 14 children in the prefab. I know, it knows and it tells me that the Volt House site is suboptimal as a permanent solution because the service has to operate as a pack-away service. I can only imagine the huge challenge in putting the equipment into storage at the end of every day and back out again the next day.

The Deputy is right. In early 2025, Raphoe Community Playgroup did apply for building blocks capital funding. On 25 March, Pobal, which administers that, was included on an email from the Raphoe Community Playgroup seeking further support, further sustainability funding and a written strategy of options on a plan of support going forward. It also raised the fear that the playgroup could need to close. A meeting was set up on 9 April between that service, Donegal County Childcare Committee and Pobal. At the end of the meeting, Pobal clarified that no decisions had been made on the building grants capital grant application, although it clarified the eligibility. Following on from that meeting, a steering group, comprising Pobal, Donegal County Childcare Committee and the service is to be convened. Pobal is now looking at further sustainability support options, and will bring forward proposals. I believe Donegal County Childcare Committee is also exploring the potential cost of securing another building on behalf of the service. I am told that Pobal and the Donegal County Childcare Committee will support the board to decide on the strategy for the next 12 months. I know everybody in the Government wants to find a way forward. I am conscious that I have mentioned Raphoe, but it is not the only playgroup affected. The Minister, Deputy Foley, and all of us across government will work constructively with the Deputy to try to find a pathway forward.

Deputy Charles Ward: I thank the Tánaiste for engaging on this matter.

The reality is that the defective concrete crisis still leaves many behind. Many community buildings throughout Donegal have been excluded from the scheme and classed as commercial buildings, despite the fact that they are not-for-profit. The scheme must be extended to include these buildings. We are faced with losing community centres, childcare centres, leisure centres and adult further education centres. If we do not address these issues, our community centres in Donegal will tumble to the ground around us within the next five years. I ask the Tánaiste to look into extending this scheme to include these important community buildings in Donegal.

The Tánaiste: I take the Deputy's point and his position with regard to the broader mica scheme and whether it can be changed. The Deputy knows the programme for Government includes a commitment to review it. The Deputy may correct me if I am wrong, but my sense of it when I meet playgroups and others affected is that they just want a solution. They are

understandably less fussed on how that solution comes about, but want to know that there is a way for them to continue to provide the very excellent service that they do. What I want to echo and repeat in this House today is that the Government is committed to working constructively with them and others to try to find that way forward, through the childcare committee and Pobal in the first instance. I assure the Deputy of my ongoing personal interest, that of the Minister, Deputy Foley, and that of the Government more widely.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I listened to the Tánaiste give Pearse Doherty an answer with regard to the national children's hospital. He was like an under-pressure estate agent furiously trying to sell an overpriced, extortionate and exorbitant hospital to an increasingly angry population at the moment. Nobody is arguing about the quality of the hospital; we are arguing about the price and the length of time it has taken to deliver. Leo Varadkar promised that it would be delivered by 2020 for €700 million, save for "an asteroid hitting the planet", yet it has ballooned to €2.2 billion. Today, five years after that initial opening date, there is still no confirmation about when it will open. The opening date has been postponed 15 times and I and many people do not believe it will be open by 2027 at this rate. The national children's hospital is a monument to Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael waste and blame-shifting. Their figures are all over this extra spending of €1.5 billion. This money did not appear from nowhere. It has come from the pockets of hard-working Irish citizens and taxpayers. It is also not a victimless crime. In terms of opportunity costs, that €1.5 billion would have paid for more than 4,500 homes. It would have housed up to 18,000 people, which is more than the number of people currently homeless.

The Tánaiste, though, is the blame-shifting expert in this country. Simon "it wasn't me" Harris is what we have in front of us at the moment. When he had a debate with me on national television during the election regarding this issue, he stated clearly he did not sign this contract. In a statement to millions of people across the country, he said he was not responsible for the signature on that contract. Will the Tánaiste say whether he was lying to the people of Ireland on that day? Was he lying to the people watching that programme about whether he is responsible for this contract? This contract lacks an enormous amount of detail and this has allowed it to become a blank cheque for the contractor. It was designed to fail from the start. It has been acknowledged that the design was not actually complete when instructions were issued to BAM to begin phase B of the construction works in January 2019. This is an incredible situation on a project that is so large and expensive.

The Tánaiste said the buck stops with him. What does that sentence actually mean? If he were the senior executive of a company where a project overran its schedule by five years and cost €1.5 billion more than it should have, he simply would not be working there anymore. Yet he is the Tánaiste of this State. I believe he is in his job because he is insulated by Fianna Fáil and Independent TDs.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Tóibín.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The problem is that he cannot enforce a culture of accountability to any other elements of the Civil Service at the moment because accountability and the Tánaiste are like oil and water.

The Tánaiste: Does Deputy Tóibín know why I am in my job? It is because we had an election and I got elected. Some 458,000 people gave their first preference votes to my party. An overwhelming majority of people gave votes to the parties and Independent Deputies who make up this Government. It is called a democracy. Aontú ran and got two seats. Congratula-

tions. The Deputy does not lecture me and does not hire me, thank you very much. I answer to the people of Wicklow. They elected me with one of the highest votes in the country, so do not give me any of that sanctimonious nonsense. We all have a mandate in this House. We had a general election. The Deputy rehearsed his lines that he must practise in front of the mirror every morning. People went out and gave their verdict, and we are in the Government. We are getting on with the business, and yes-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Did you lie to the people?

The Tánaiste: -----of course the buck stops with me. Does the Deputy know what else-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: What does that mean?

The Tánaiste: I am going to tell the Deputy what it means. Calm down. He asked his question and I get an opportunity to answer it. It is how this place works. The Deputy asked a question about the children's hospital. I am responsible, of course. I am responsible for bringing the proposal to the Cabinet and for recommending that we proceed. The easiest thing to do in politics if you do not want to ever get into any challenging situation is to never make a decision. Does the Deputy know what else I am going to be responsible for, along with my colleagues in Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Independents, as well as those who served in government in the intervening period? We are going to be responsible for a world-class facility. We are going to be responsible for transforming children's healthcare. We are going to be responsible for making sure that parents who slept on cold, hard floors in Crumlin hospital last night can have bed facilities. We are going to be responsible for children having single ensuite rooms. We are going to be responsible for providing a health service that will have more theatres than ever before, will have open spaces for our children, will have improved medical outcomes and will tackle waiting lists. Nobody gets everything right in politics. Many lessons have been learned. Before the Deputy asks me what that means, I will tell him. We did the PwC report. It looked at all the options and recommended that continuing and proceeding was the best option. We have brought in several changes in how we deal with capital projects since then. We have also set up an infrastructure division in the Department of public expenditure and reform. It is very easy to sit over there and just have to stand up and correct everybody else's homework. It is much harder to come to work, roll up your sleeves and actually deliver for the people of this country.

Deputy Emer Currie: Hear, hear.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Calling it correcting homework is an understatement. I think the Tánaiste knows that, given that we could literally spend a full day with a litany of examples of overspending and waste across the whole range of the delivery of public services. Inertia, waste and blame-shifting are the characteristics of this Government. These are serious issues. Why? It is not only because it is incinerating taxpayers' money, but because these are really important public services and infrastructure that are simply not materialising for the people who need them. The Committee of Public Accounts heard this morning that BAM is only 60% through the progress it had promised to be even at this late stage. The committee heard that all the levers were being pushed to make the contractor deliver on this project, but what levers are there? What mechanisms are in the contract the Tánaiste signed off on to force the contractor to deliver these projects within the timescale and the price? There are none. The fact that there are none is because the Tánaiste, as a very well-paid Minister for Health, did not ensure they were there.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy to conclude.

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Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Tánaiste is directly responsible for the costs and for the fact that this infrastructure is not operating for the children who need it today.

The Tánaiste: I will just point out first of all that the Deputy is very well paid himself. This country spends roughly €110 billion on its annual budget. We made a decision to invest €2.2 billion over several years in a project that will transform children's health and deliver a world-class children's hospital that will not just serve people for the lifetime of this Dáil, the next Dáil and the one after that. Long after we are all dead and buried and gone from this Earth, children will still be being served in that hospital. This is a major transformational investment decision. Yes, we all know it costs more than expected. We all know that. It is absolutely crystal clear. We have been through that not just in this election but in the one before that as well. Now it is about getting on with the job of actually transforming children's healthcare. Words like "incinerating money" and the like are inflammatory language that misses the point.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Literally inflammatory.

The Tánaiste: Pardon the pun. Not only is this children's hospital not the most expensive in the world, as the Deputy has said in the past, but it is not even the most expensive children's hospital being built on the island of Ireland per square metre according to the budget office of this Parliament.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Your excuse is they are worse. That is hardly an answer.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Tánaiste without interruption please.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy can shout me down if he wants, but we are going to transform children's healthcare. The Deputy can keep correcting the homework and we will get on with doing the business.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Tánaiste. We now move to a question under Standing Order 38(a) from Deputy Gillian Toole.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is grand that Fine Gael laughs so much about this. People are sleeping on cold floors today because the Government has failed to deliver.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please. Have respect for the Deputy about to speak-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am glad they find it funny.

(Interruptions).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please, Deputies.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Gillian Toole: Go raibh maith agat. The Irish people have endured an incredible amount in the last five years. Every virtue has been tested in some extremely positive ways and, sadly, some negative ways. Lives have been changed irrevocably. To advance, we must reflect, review and learn. We must rethink our duty to future generations.

First, we had two intense years of SARS-CoV-2, Covid-19. It is worrying that the Covid

evaluation committee has not yet met to carry out a most important and urgent review of practices to inform all our Ministers. WHO delegates voted to accept the WHA pandemic treaty on Monday last, giving, in my opinion, worrying powers to the organisation over and above individual EU member states. We have extreme healthcare waiting lists impacting children's developmental checks, assessments of needs, anxiety in teenagers, absenteeism from schools and anxiety, loneliness and isolation in older people. All these factors are known contributors to chronic disease now and in later life. There are elevated presentations of cardiac and oncology issues. What will the impact of long Covid be on future healthcare policies and costs?

The second crisis was the energy and cost-of-living crisis. The damage to the pipeline caused energy costs to skyrocket and exposed our energy deficiencies. While renewable sources of energy are welcome, they are charging ahead in the absence of clear guidelines and balanced regional distribution. This is impacting our tillage farmers and calling into question our future food security.

The third area of change has been migration. Travel broadens the mind and the emigration of our talented young people has always been encouraged through mixed circumstances and emotions. We know we have serious shortages in areas of critical skills and active recruitment is ongoing. We are now at a point, though, where waiting lists for healthcare, schools and housing are causing tensions to run high. Let us be honest. Local authorities, for example in County Meath, are only now carrying out settlement capacity audits for social infrastructure and the other areas. Immigration, therefore, must be a fair and just system, taking account of a community's capacity to cope. The programme for Government states clearly that the Government will address these areas and will consult with communities, which is to be welcomed. We have that old Irish seanfhocal, *doras feasa fiafraí*, the door to knowledge is questions, but asking questions has been a negative in recent times. I have been branded far right on occasion for asking questions. I am "far fairness", just for the record.

I put the question that I submitted in advance. What plans are being compiled, have been worked out, in accordance with the programme for Government to improve the intra-departmental communication, inter-departmental communication, collaboration, cost-benefit analysis and planning of all Departments for the benefit of citizens, present and future?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for her question. Her taking us through that is a reminder of the scale of challenge and crises that not just Ireland but the world has gone through. If any one of these things had happened in somebody's lifetime in the past, it would have been viewed as extraordinary. We have had financial crises, the global pandemic, the impact of Brexit on our country, very significant migration flows and, of course, war on the Continent of Europe again. We are living through truly extraordinary times which, of course, brings challenge. I also welcome that we have an independent Covid evaluation which is very important. Even though I can point to the fact that I am proud of a lot of the work this country did - I do not mean the Government, but the people of Ireland, including clinicians - of course we always have to better prepare, evaluate and be best prepared for the next pandemic. That can only be a good thing.

On the Deputy's comments on migration, I always say and I believe that we need a fair and firm system. The Irish people are fair and want to be compassionate. We know the benefits of migration. This country is better as a result of immigration. The Deputy referenced hospital waiting lists. I shudder to think how high they would be if we did not have so many people coming from abroad, working in our health service, including in our hospitals. The same is true right across the economy and I know the Deputy knows that too. At the same time, we have to

know that there are rules, that the rules are applied and that systems are efficient. Deportation is a part of any system. If somebody does not have a right to be here, they need to be asked to leave in the first instance and they have to leave. That is an important part of the integrity of any migration system.

The Deputy's broader point is a good one. With so many crises and challenges that face our world, including our country today, not working in silos is really important. Not just this Government, but governments in general are designed with the department of this and the department of that and everybody works in their own way. We have been working very hard to try to breakdown those silos and see how Government can collaborate more across important thematic areas. I give the one example of infrastructure delivery, which I know is an important issue in Meath and across the country. Setting up a new unit in the Department of public expenditure and reform to drive infrastructure delivery will be really important. For similar reasons the housing activation office is also important. As I said earlier, we cannot get into "pen pals international" where State agencies just keep writing letters to each other. We need to second people from the ESB, Irish Water and the local authorities, and get them around the table together in a housing activation unit and ask, "How can we get that site over there which could have homes for young people who want to get out of the boxroom?" How can we get those homes built and build them more quickly? Government is making a number of efforts in line with the programme for Government to try to accelerate delivery particularly in the area of infrastructure. That new infrastructure delivery unit along with the new housing activation office are two practical examples of how we move forward.

In the brief time available to me, I want to reference the child poverty unit, a crosscutting unit that enables us to look at the issue of child poverty and recognise it does not fall into any one Department but many Departments and many State agencies pulling together.

Deputy Gillian Toole: I welcome the infrastructure cross-departmental committee, the housing activation office and the child poverty unit - *tús maith leath na hoibre*. I think we can do better and can aim higher. We owe that to the people of this country after their endurance and forbearance over the last five years. Several times at the Business Committee, I have raised the topic of migration, something that merits urgent positioning on the agenda. We can take County Meath, for example and crosscheck what has been happening versus what is in the programme for Government. That programme commits to "Give greater lead-in time to the opening of new facilities, allowing for enhanced and effective local communication... meaningful consultation with local communities and plan more effectively." A simple let-down in that process, which is what is playing out, is causing tensions in the area. I would see that as a priority area for inter- and intra-departmental communication.

The Tánaiste: I accept the challenge that Government must always do more on communication and talking to communities because if we do not, misinformation and disinformation spreads mostly by elements of the far right who come to our communities, spread their lies, spread their fear and sow division. We have all seen that happen. I, as a centrist politician, have always believed that the centre must get involved in the migration debate because otherwise we leave a vacuum that is filled often by the far right with misinformation.

We have been dealing with an emergency situation with a war on the Continent of Europe in Ukraine. We have been trying to provide assistance to more than 100,000 people from Ukraine who have come here at various stages and have been welcome as they are fleeing war and fighting for democracy and freedom back in Ukraine. On top of that, we have broader migra-

tion trends. Having said that, in this Government with its renewed mandate, we need to try to move beyond that emergency, build on the good positive pillars of work put in by the Minister, Deputy McEntee, working at a European level, using chartered planes for deportation where appropriate and giving people faster decisions on the right to be here, now having a Minister of State, my colleague, Deputy Brophy, in the Department of Justice, working with the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan. This will be an important area of priority for the Government in trying to show a way forward with a greater reliance on State facilities rather than taking facilities like hotels that may have been commercial or valuable to a community.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I think the Tánaiste has been at the Cabinet table for nearly a decade, nine years or so. In that period, the average house price has increased by €200,000 which is a huge sum of money for any family. That is just the increase for a new home since the Tánaiste took up office around the Cabinet table. Indeed in the last five years, the average house price increased by €100,000. Every five years the price of housing has gone up by €100,000 under his Government. Is it any wonder that there are now 100,000 Irish-born people in Australia? Is it any wonder that so many people do not feel their future is in this country when they cannot afford a house anymore? Young people are struggling to put a roof over their heads and finding that prices are just running out of control. They then see that the Government delivered fewer houses last year than in the previous year. Does the Minister accept that the Government's housing plan has failed young people and those who want to get a roof over their head, in terms of affordability? Does he accept that it is actually going in reverse in delivering houses as testified by the numbers from the CSO which show the Government delivered fewer houses last year and is on course to do the same again this year?

The Tánaiste: The Deputy is right to highlight housing, which is the biggest domestic challenge we face. There are many young people, both here in Ireland and Irish young people abroad, who want to see and need to see more progress made on housing. I would point out some progress has been made. The Deputy quotes headline figures which are perfectly acceptable to quote. However, of course we have put in place a number of schemes like help to buy and the first home scheme that make a real meaningful difference in the amount of money that somebody actually has to come up with versus the headline price. However, let me be clear, we have to do a lot more. Between now and July we will deliver a new housing action plan. I say the word "action" because we do not need to big, long, wishy-washy document. We need clear actions outlining who will be responsible and when they will be delivered. We also have a chance, through the national development plan review, to invest a lot more in the enablers to scale up housing particularly regarding water, wastewater and energy.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I utterly condemn the actions of Hamas and Hezbollah. However, yesterday a member of the rap group Kneecap was charged with terrorism offences in the UK. They were charged under legislation that the British Government has been rather selective in its application of. The British Government has sent over 14 shipments of arms to Gaza. Last year it sent £127 million in military equipment to the Middle East. These charges are political. They are designed to censor and silence those who are calling out this genocide. It amounts to a carnival of distraction. Will the Tánaiste commit to raising this with his counterpart the UK Foreign Secretary and with the UK Prime Minister?

The Tánaiste: I join the Deputy in absolutely condemning Hamas and Hezbollah, which offer no future positivity to the people of Palestine. That is not just my view on that; the President of the Palestinian Authority has been clear that the future of Gaza needs to be a Hamas-free future. I am also Minister for Defence. I have seen the utter destruction and death Hezbollah can bring to members of the Irish Defence Forces, and I think of Private Seán Rooney. I am conscious with regard to the British Government, recognising the separation that exists between governments and criminal justice systems and not wanting to say anything that cuts across a criminal justice system in another country, but I am very clear that the absolute focus of the entire world in the here and now needs to be on the depravation and starvation and war crimes being committed in Gaza.

Deputy Jen Cummins: The Tánaiste said he will bring a memo on the occupied territories Bill to Cabinet next week. This is a long overdue but welcome step in aligning Ireland's trade policies with our values on human rights and international law. Not a grain of rice, drop of water or vial of medicine has entered Gaza for months. A trickle of aid has now been allowed in, but the Israeli Government is preventing it from being distributed. We all see the distressing images of emaciated children and their desperate parents every day. Gaza is a hellscape and the relentless slaughter and suffering is just incomprehensible and unbearable. All this is happening while we are waiting for the Government to publish the occupied territories Bill, which does not ban the trade of services. Why is the Government diluting the occupied territories Bill in this way? Why is it taking so long?

The Tánaiste: I agree with the Deputy in many ways on the description she has given of the horrific situation in Gaza, but the reason that is happening is not because we have not passed the occupied territories Bill; it is because Benjamin Netanyahu's Government is engaging in war crimes, and it needs to stop. It needs to stop right now; it needs to stop today. The aid, including aid funded by Irish taxpayers, needs to get into Gaza. I am meeting Senator Black today for a follow-up meeting on the occupied territories Bill. I find her to be a very sincere person who just wants to get progress here and is not precious, for want of a better word, with regard to who brings the Bill forward. I do want a Bill that is legally robust. I do not want a Bill that makes us think we are doing something but falls at the first challenge. I do not have a policy difference, by the way, with anybody in this House who wants to include services and goods. I do have a legal difference, but I am happy to tease that out with people. I am also happy to be proven wrong on it, but I do need to tease that through as well.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The issue I am again raising with the Tánaiste is the bar on over-70s being allowed to drive under the school bus scheme. Drivers should be able to continue working within the scheme until they are 75 provided they pass a strict medical test and a strict eyesight test annually. The situation whereby they are arbitrarily forced to retire at 70 is wrong. We already have a shortage of school bus drivers, and more will be forced out. We are losing drivers every week. More will be forced out between now and the end of August as they reach 70 years of age. Bus Éireann representatives were in the Oireachtas yesterday telling us they are trying to recruit drivers and are going to expand the scheme, but they will be able to do it. I do not mean that in any smart way; I am saying that it is not mission impossible. There is a difficulty as the positions are only part-time positions of three or four hours per day. It suits retired people who are on a State pension. It does not suit young people or men or women who have a family. The wages are not there for it because it is only part-time by its nature. Younger workers simply cannot take that on.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Both the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach have agreed with me on the floor of the Dáil that we need to change this. A review has been carried out by the Department of Transport. That is now complete. The Government is now talking about an independent assessment according to a parliamentary question reply I received this week.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Stanley.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The Government has the review done.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call on the Minister to answer.

Deputy Brian Stanley: That should be enough. We need to fix this and sort it out because we have only 13 weeks left to do it. We have 13 weeks until 25 August.

Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Helen McEntee): I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. More children than ever are accessing the transport scheme, at 173,000. There is a very clear commitment to make sure we expand that further and that as many children as possible can access it. Of course, that means more buses and more drivers. There are clear reasons as to why the 70 year age limit was set, but we have given a clear commitment in the programme for Government to review that to see if any changes can be made, be it in the size of the buses or the number of children. That is happening at the moment, and it is something on which my Department will be working closely with the Department of Transport.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Earlier this month, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Keir Starmer, outlined significant changes in UK immigration policies, including tightening of visa controls, reduced post-study work rights and a longer route to citizenship, going from five years to ten years. While these are UK domestic decisions, they have a serious impact on us here in the Republic of Ireland, particularly because the UK still occupies part of this island for the moment.

This is what I am asking the Tánaiste. We are hearing reports of asylum seekers crossing into the Republic from Northern Ireland, as stated by the British Government. The British Government has now said that it will not accept returns. This puts a strain on the immigration system here and the challenges of integrating a common travel area, which to my mind risks and undermines North-South co-operation and Border security issues. I ask the Tánaiste to outline the discussions the Government or his Department have had with their counterparts in the United Kingdom on this matter. What practical steps are being taken to protect the common travel area?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy O'Flynn for raising this matter. I assure him that there are structures in place between our Department of Justice and the Home Office in the United Kingdom in terms of the monitoring of the integrity of the common travel area. Obviously, we do not overly discuss all of those matters publicly for obvious reasons, but I can assure the Deputy that there are very good links at official level. I would also say more broadly that the decision taken this week by the UK Government and the EU to have closer co-operation can only be a positive in terms of working together on issues that clearly are global and bigger than any country's borders. We do, therefore, work very closely in this regard. We also have an obligation in terms of our own rules, making sure there is more efficient administration so that, regardless of how people enter our country or seek to enter the country, they get a quicker "Yes" or "No" answer as to whether they have a legal right to be here. That is a very important part of the integrity of our migration system.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I welcome the Government's plans to make it easier and quicker for new teachers to become permanent - that is a positive step - but I ask the Government to also look at bringing in a rule that new permanent teachers must wait five years before taking a career break. Principals and teachers I have spoken to in County Offaly are very clear on this. Early career breaks are causing problems with staffing and making it harder to plan ahead. It is also upsetting for students who need stability in the classroom. Will the Government review the career break policy as part of these changes?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for acknowledging the changes being proposed around the permanent posts. The reason I am proposing that is to make sure our young teachers have that permanent position so that they can access mortgages more quickly and that it gives them that sense of belonging within their schools. It is very much a decision for the individual schools as to whether they allow career breaks. We have said very clearly, and the Department has set out clear rules, that if schools cannot fill the position, they should not be allowing teachers to take career breaks. I know that is not always the case. We do have positions that are not filled, in particular in some of our larger cities, but overall, we need to make sure we do everything possible to allow more teachers to come through the system and ensure that we keep those who are here and encourage more back. That is something I am working on at the moment, and I hope to bring forward further proposals in the weeks and months ahead.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: In this Chamber on Tuesday night, I asked the Minister for agriculture a question and he confirmed that farmers cannot put excess solar energy back onto the grid. These are the farmers who access the solar capital investment scheme. The Tánaiste or I can put panels on our roofs and we can feed excess energy back into the grid. Farmers cannot do that. It is fundamentally unfair. There are 130,000-plus farms in the country. Many of those buildings can take solar panels. Why can we not encourage farmers to do that and put energy back onto the national grid? I understand from the Minister that it is a question of EU state aid, which sound ludicrous to me. I do not even see the angle for state aid. I ask the Tánaiste to use his good offices in trade and foreign affairs to progress that at European level.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Ó Muirí very much for raising this issue. He is right; the rationale, for better or worse, is around state aid rules. They are intended to ensure that subsidies provided by member states operate in accordance with the same basic rule book and, in the context, grants provided under the Common Agricultural Policy are intended to support farming activity. There is a view as to whether this ends up being a double investment. If we come up from the weeds, though, the broader point the Deputy is making is right. There is a climate emergency - of that there is no doubt - and we need to be coming forward with practical ways to help people, particularly farmers, who are well up for this by the way, to make a positive difference. I will certainly engage with my colleague, the Minister for agriculture, and more broadly with European colleagues on this issue.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: We are facing a shortage of GPs. People in County Clare have contacted me to state that when their doctor or GP retired, they were left with no GP as they did not have a medical card and they are now reliant on walk-in clinics. People with a medical card have been assigned to already overburdened GPs when their GP retired. People cannot get appointments to see their doctors, leaving them with no choice but to head to accident and emergency departments. Some have to go to walk-in clinics and pay a fee as the walk-in clinics do not accept medical cards.

1 o'clock

Some have to borrow money to go to walk-in clinics and others have to make the awful choice to hope for the best and wish for their issues to go away, but usually end up in accident and emergency departments. What can be done to increase the number of doctors working in underserved areas? What is being done to attract, recruit and retain doctors, especially those who are trained here, and make them feel they are welcome and do not need to emigrate due to a lack of housing or the cost of living?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising an issue that is very real and comes up quite a lot across the country. I will ask the Minister for Health to respond to her on her plans, if the Deputy wants to provide her with examples of some of the issues she referenced in her constituency.

We are very committed to increasing the number of training places for GPs. We have already begun that work and the trajectory will continue and accelerate. We have engaged with GPs on a number of occasions in recent years on their contract in order to make the services they are providing more viable. We are continuing with that work.

The Deputy referred to deprived or underresourced areas in terms of GPs. The HSE has the ability to hire salaried GPs in that case. There are some examples of that already in this city. We are keen to provide that more. There is often an inverse relationship between where the health need is most required and where the number of GPs are populated. I will ask the Minister for Health to come back to the Deputy with more information on that.

Deputy John Connolly: The NTA advised me of its decision to defer the development of a new transport strategy for Galway. The original strategy was developed in 2016. This puts us at odds with other cities such as Cork, Limerick and Waterford, all of which had their strategies reviewed in the process of the development of a new strategy.

The NTA also informed us it has delayed or deferred the introduction of the new bus network in Galway. All of this seems to be pending the outcome of the assessment of An Bord Pleanála of the N6 project, for which we have no timeline and do not know when a decision will be made. In 2022, the NTA tendered for a company to undertake a review of the Galway transport strategy. My understanding was that its remit was to develop a strategy that would cater for either outcome, that is, with or without the new N6 project. It is, therefore, deeply disappointing that it has made this decision.

The strategy for Galway should be multifaceted and consider the all-island rail review recommendations to double the railtrack to Athenry and develop the western rail corridor. There are bus priority infrastructure measures in the original strategy that have never been developed. We should have some update on the current position. There is uncertainty about our park and ride strategy. One bugbear of mine has been that the park and ride strategy was developed by the park and ride office in Dublin, not in Galway. I ask the Tánaiste to ask the NTA to reignite the development strategy.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Connolly, who makes a very compelling case. Any transport strategy will have to be multifaceted, as the Deputy correctly said. I will not cut across the decisions pending in An Bord Pleanála on the N6 and I know the importance of that in Galway. Regardless of what decision is made, there will still be a requirement to do more on the public transport network. We are very proud of the all-island rail review and we want to make progress on that, as well as other areas, over the lifetime of the Government. In light of the Deputy's

representation today, I will speak to the Minister for Transport and ask that he convey his views to the NTA and come back to him directly.

Deputy Noel McCarthy: I once again wish to raise the issue of the disruption to the water supply in Ballyhooly in my constituency of Cork East. Last month, I spoke about the urgent need to repair the water network servicing Ballyhooly as local properties continue to experience daily disruptions, with limited or no water services. This, unfortunately, means that daily chores cannot be completed, with the situation only worsening as the weather gets better. While Uisce Éireann has conducted some remedial repairs and water has been tankered to the area, residents continue to raise legitimate concerns as their issues persist and they are unable to go about their daily lives. I ask the Tánaiste to use his good offices to liaise directly with Uisce Éireann and keep the pressure on. I ask in the hope of finding a necessary solution to a problem that has continued for far too long and only seems to be deteriorating further.

The Tánaiste: I thank my colleague, Deputy Noel McCarthy, for raising this important issue. I can only imagine the degree of frustration being felt by his constituents in Ballyhooly, which he is giving voice to today. I am due to meet Uisce Éireann tomorrow and I will raise this issue with its representatives and come back to Deputy McCarthy directly.

Deputy Pa Daly: The boat operators who bring visitors to land at Sceilg Mhichíl usually have a short season of about 100 days once the season opens, which this year happened on 10 May. These local people from Portmagee, Valencia and Baile an Sceilg have now lost 10% of these days in the best May weather in years. This is affecting their livelihoods and those of local businesses and is disappointing tourists from all over the world. It relates to a High Court case, but the people there are in limbo. They say there has been a lack of communication from the OPW and silence from the Government and Ministers. Will the Tánaiste break the logjam, provide clarity for the boatmen and make a decision to allow trips to return to the Skelligs before the season gets even busier?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Daly. I have known the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, to be described in many ways, but “silent” is a new one on me. I will ask him to engage directly with the Deputy. I have heard about the challenge this has created, the impact it is having on the livelihoods of people and the vacuum or lack of clarity on the position. On foot of the Deputy raising this issue today, I will ask the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, to contact him directly to discuss the matter.

Deputy Seamus Healy: There has been no public eye care service in south Tipperary since last September. There have been no consultant ophthalmology clinics, optometry clinics or nurse-led eye clinics. Dr. Hillery, the previous consultant, retired last September, having given years of wonderful professional and personal service to the population of south Tipperary, including children and the elderly. She gave more than adequate notice of her retirement, yet the HSE has failed in its duty to fill the vacancy and provide this vital service. There is now, of course, a huge backlog and real concern that the HSE may be attempting to transfer the service out of the county. I ask the Tánaiste to intervene with the HSE to ensure that this post is filled urgently and the service restored to the county.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Healy for raising this matter. I know from what he said the stressful impact the situation is having on people who require eye care services in south Tipperary. I have been assured of two things. One is that the HSE is actively trying to fill the post. I take the point the Deputy made about the gap between someone who gives due notice of retire-

ment and filling a vacancy. I understand the HSE is actively trying to fill the vacancy. I have also been informed that there are no plans to withdraw the service from the Deputy's area. I will ask the Minister for Health to come back to him directly. I am assured the HSE is eager to fill the vacancy and get the service back up and running.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I am finding it hard to see how we are still here when thousands of babies died in Gaza last night while food trucks with baby formula and baby food were sitting nearby. Netanyahu has issued evacuation orders to annihilate Gaza, and his finance minister has said, "the world still hasn't stopped us". He is right. I do not want to hear about how the Government is the best in the class, because all of the others are so terrible. The EU and the West have allowed this genocide to happen and they are not lifting a finger.

I want to ask the Tánaiste about Ireland's action, not statements or words. Can he identify one serious sanction taken by Ireland to stop Israel? No action has been taken at Shannon Airport, which is used by the US, which is backing the genocide, to refuel. The Central Bank is processing war bonds. The occupied territories Bill will be delayed and watered down by the Government.

Let us contrast this with what the Government did against Russia. Will the Tánaiste agree, for example, to do what it did in respect of Russia when it invaded Ukraine and freeze all Israeli assets in Ireland now? Will the Government issue travel bans against Israeli people, soldiers and business people who have businesses here and are supporting the genocide? Would the Tánaiste agree to do that? That is the type of action we need, not more words.

The Tánaiste: We do not just provide words; we provide a significant amount of money, including through UNRWA, to the Palestinian Authority and in aid. We do not just say words. We have joined with South Africa on a case in the International Court of Justice on the genocide convention. We have worked to try to build a majority at the European Union, which now exists, in terms of the association agreement.

The Deputy is correct regarding sanctions taken against Russia which have not been taken against Israel. I would point out that those sanctions have been taken at an EU level.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Hypocrisy, in other words.

The Tánaiste: We are working at an EU level because that is how sanctions are introduced. I do not disagree with the Deputy's analysis of the situation, but Ireland is taking practical actions and doing everything we possibly can.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: We are 19 months on and there is nothing.

The Tánaiste (Deputy Simon Harris): We are doing everything we can do.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I want to ask the Tánaiste about the policy of first-time passport applicants requiring gardaí to verify their identity. Every Deputy in the House will have been frustrated by cases where a passport could not be issued because a name could not be found in a book in a Garda station or a contact not made. One can imagine the frustration of my constituent, Sinead, who has had her application rejected twice because a name could not be found in the book. In six counties on the island it is not the police service alone that is required for identity verification, as other trusted local office holders can do it. Will the Tánaiste consider reviewing the mechanism and the process to free up Garda time, to improve what is otherwise

a very good public service and to strengthen identity verification by involving other office holders?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy McAuliffe. He raises an interesting and fair point, and it is one that comes up quite a lot. I will certainly commit to engaging with the Minister for Justice on this. We are going through a period of reform in the passport service. Many challenges that used to exist, including delays in getting passports, are, thankfully, gone. Many people are pleasantly shocked at how quickly their passport arrives. I accept that as we move through reform this is an interesting point. Integrity and child protection are issues that Deputy McAuliffe and I value but is there a better or more efficient way to do this? Not all Garda stations are open at every time of the day. I accept there are real challenges. I will talk to the Minister for Justice and the Passport Office and I am happy to meet Deputy McAuliffe on this to see what we can do.

Deputy Joe Neville: I want to speak about a key issue impacting many people in north Kildare. Most likely it is impacting people throughout the country. This is the provision of childcare facilities. I have spoken to parents in Kilcock, Leixlip, Celbridge and Maynooth who are really struggling. It is a key issue in the programme for Government. We also know from speaking to providers that they are struggling to get the correct facilities. I want to focus on three specific areas. These are the expansion of afterschool care in school buildings and campuses owned by the State, the plan to change the guidelines to ensure we have the right properties built in new housing estates because it does not seem to be happening, and encouraging State-backed investment to deliver facilities as the initial cost of building these facilities seems to be a big barrier to entry for new providers.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Neville for raising this matter. He is right that it is a major priority for us in government. In the programme for Government we have outlined 21 specific commitments on childcare. My constituency in Wicklow it is not too dissimilar to Deputy Neville's constituency in Kildare in terms of a very fast-growing population of people. They are pleased to see the reduction we have made in childcare fees but they want a place. The reduction in the fees only matters if they can get a place. We do need to look at what more we can do. Each of the three areas referenced by Deputy Neville are areas to which the Minister is giving consideration. The Minister for Education and Youth and I discussed at the most recent Cabinet committee how we can use education campuses more broadly in terms of utilising State buildings and State land, and what we can do on the guidelines to make it easier when housing estates are built. Many housing estates are built with a crèche or childcare facility but many childcare providers find the upfront costs they need to pay far too high. We are very clear in the programme for Government that there are parts of the country where we need to have State-backed public provision. The Minister, Deputy Foley, is working on an action plan on childcare, which I expect to be published in the coming months.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The deposit return scheme is the scheme through which people pay extra for their drinks in bottles and cans, to be reclaimed afterwards from machines that are usually in supermarkets. It is described as a circular economy initiative. We are told it is about helping the environment. Why then is so much of the plastic that is collected needlessly shipped out of Ireland? There is a company in this State that can recycle the plastic. It is Shabra Plastics and Packaging, which is based in my constituency. It creates local employment, contributes to the Irish economy and provides an environmentally sound point to recycle the plastic collected in Ireland. Here is the scandal. By June this year 17,000 tonnes of plastic will have been collected under the scheme but only 3,400 tonnes of it will have been recycled in the State.

This means that 88% of the plastic collected under what is called an environmental scheme is actually being shipped to locations throughout the world. Does the Tánaiste accept this is environmentally ludicrous and goes against the principle of the scheme? Will he, as Tánaiste, along with the Taoiseach knock whatever heads need to be knocked together to sort out this scandal?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Carthy for raising this matter, and for providing me with the figures, which do seem quite extraordinary in terms of the amount of plastic being collected under the scheme that then has to be shipped out of the country. I do not profess to be an expert on the detail of this but I will ask the Minister for the environment to look at the specific issue raised by Deputy Carthy to see whether we can do more to build up capacity in this country.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The capacity is there.

The Tánaiste: I know but I will ask the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, to come back to Deputy Carthy on it.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I want to raise a very important issue on HHC, a semisynthetic cannabinoid. It is being sold legally in the State. It is being purchased and consumed by teenagers. Recently in my constituency of Mayo I heard of a harrowing case of a young teenager who consumed the drug not realising how dangerous it was because it was so freely and readily available. It ruined his life. He had to withdraw from school to try to get himself off HHC. The fact is that it is sold in vape shops throughout the country. It is sold with sweets. Very often these shops smell like bubblegum and cotton candy. It is a fact that these companies are purposely targeting children with vapes and HHC. We need action to address this. We need to ensure HHC is regulated.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Paul Lawless: We also need to ensure that companies can no longer target children with vape shops and lovely beautiful colours-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Paul Lawless: -----and beautiful scents and smells. It is absolutely wrong. We need cross-party support. We need to address this.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call the Tánaiste.

Deputy Paul Lawless: There are children who are walking the streets and teenagers purchasing vapes and HHC.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy to conclude.

Deputy Paul Lawless: It is a major issue and I hope the Tánaiste will address it and we will bring legislation-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call the Tánaiste.

Deputy Paul Lawless: -----to ensure this is provided for.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Lawless for raising what is clearly is a very important issue. I am pleased to tell him there is a proposed public health nicotine inhaling products Bill which will contain a range of measures to reduce youth use of nicotine inhaling products such

as vapes, a ban on point-of-sale displays and advertising, a ban on devices resembling toys and games, restrictions on flavours for sale, requirements for only basic flavour names to be used, and a complete ban on disposable vapes. Specifically on the HHC element raised by Deputy Lawless, I may ask in the context of the points he has made that the Minister and the Chief Medical Officer give us a view on it, and Deputy Lawless will have a chance as the legislation progresses to pursue it.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The shocking treatment of the community and people of Dundrum in County Tipperary is ongoing by the Government, as it was by the previous Government. The Tánaiste met Mrs. O'Dwyer and Andrea Crowe in Clonmel during the election and he listened to them. He also assured me here after the election, when he was appointed as Tánaiste, that a pause was being put on the use of hotels. Now we find a contract has been signed, by some faceless and nameless official, with a Spanish company with a book value of €120 while there are three serious court cases going on at the High Court on ownership and the carry on in the premises. The Government has signed a €20 million contract for 277 IPAS people to be placed in a village where there were 220 people according to the most recent census. The Government's own guidelines state it cannot change the demographics by more than 5%. This is a shocking vista and it is continuing. What happened to the pause the Tánaiste told me was on it? Why was the contract signed before the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, and the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, took charge of this situation from the Department of integration? This is shocking. One doctor has written to the Tánaiste.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank Deputy McGrath.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Everybody has been talking about it. The people of Dundrum have a peaceful protest there. They are good decent people who looked after the Ukrainian refugees very well. This continuing blackguarding of a community is shameful.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy McGrath. I did indeed meet Mrs. O'Dwyer and others in Clonmel and I share Deputy McGrath's view of meeting good decent people. I do not have the information available to me here but I will ask either the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, or the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, to come back to Deputy McGrath directly on this issue in Dundrum.

Wind Turbine Regulation Bill 2025: First Stage

Deputy Brian Stanley: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to regulate wind turbines to provide limits on the exportation of product generated from wind turbines, to protect nearby dwellings from noise and shadow flicker by providing minimum set back distances, to allow access to public consultative processes; and to provide for related matters.

I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for the opportunity to introduce this important Bill. It provides for the regulation of large wind turbines and large wind farms. As someone who is in favour of developing wind energy and supports it, I believe we also need regulations on it. We need to do it in a practical, sensible and planned way. Wind energy has an important part to play among our renewable energy sources, along with biogas, solar and multiple other sources. They all have to be used. There has been a failure by the Government to put regulations in

place, or even to update the 2006 guidelines put in place when wind turbines were less than one quarter of the height they are now.

That is the key point. They are multiples of what they were in 2006.

I brought forward legislation on this in 2014, 2016 and 2021. Four years ago, there was due to be a two-hour debate in the Dáil on the Bill I was bringing forward, but it was derailed at the time by the leader of the largest Opposition party, who had been taken in, probably, by the large companies and spooked by sections of the media. Therefore, here we are again, in an effort to ensure we have a proper planning framework that will protect local communities and at the same time allow for badly needed provision of green and renewable energy.

Section 1 sets out the interpretation of the Bill and explains the references made in it.

Section 2 deals with electricity supply to meet national needs across the Thirty-two Counties of Ireland, North and South. That is why we need the North-South interconnector. Some people disagree with that. That is up to them. The excess could be exported to our neighbours in Britain, France and so on.

Section 3 restores some level of local democracy to councils in that large wind turbines can only be located in areas designated by county councillors in county development plans. The Leas-Cheann Comhairle is familiar with what is going on on the Kilkenny-Laois border at the moment. He is involved in it. There will be a meeting about it next Wednesday evening.

Section 4 sets out a number of conditions that wind farm developers must meet to ensure there is effective consultation with local communities.

Section 5 stipulates that noise from wind farms must not exceed the limits set out by the World Health Organization Guidelines for Community Noise 1999. Importantly, they state that shadow flicker from the rotation of the blades must not pass over the windows of nearby dwellings.

Sections 6 and 7 put in place a clear requirement that no wind turbine more than 30 m in height shall be located at less than the distance of 7.5 times the height of the turbine from any dwelling and deal with that requirement in good detail. That allows for the development of wind farms. It does not stop it. It just means a sensible measurement will be put in place.

Section 8 deals with compliance by developers and provides that penalties will be levied on those who do not comply.

Section 9 provides that a sufficient bond has to be lodged with the local authority to repair any damage to local infrastructure such as roads, bridges, buildings, water services, etc. during the period of construction.

Section 10 puts responsibility on wind farm owners to ensure proper decommissioning is done in an environmentally sustainable way. They will need to be decommissioned in 20 or 25 years.

Section 11 provides an opportunity for local communities that live within 4 km of a wind farm to purchase up to a 10% stake in the wind farm, should they wish to do so. That provision is common in other countries.

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This Bill puts some order on an industry in which large corporations have held sway and held all the cards. The Government and Dáil have failed, including Opposition parties. Some Members of the Dáil may wish to amend parts of this Bill, as may the Government. I accept that. I am not saying this is the be all and end all, but there is a lot of detail in it and a lot of work went into it. I ask that the Bill get a fair chance. I appeal to the Government to allow it to go to Second Stage and I appeal to Members of the Dáil on all sides to do what we have failed to do for almost 20 years, since 2006, and put in place proper regulations and guidelines for this important industry, which we must have as part of our solution to our renewable energy needs.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): No.

Question put and agreed to.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Will the Deputy move that Second Stage be taken in Private Members' time?

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

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 12.24 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.04 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 12.24 p.m. and resumed at 2.04 p.m.

Delivering a World-Class Education System: Statements

Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Helen McEntee): I am grateful for the opportunity to set out some of my priorities as Minister for Education and Youth and to share time with my colleagues. My objective is to deliver a world-class education system that breaks down barriers and ensures every child is supported to achieve their full potential. An education system that wraps around all children and young people in every community is essential if we are to achieve that. I want the outcome of my time as Minister to be greater equity and excellence in education for all children and young people in Ireland. We cannot have one without the other.

Today I will focus on specific ambitions that break down barriers and support children and young people. As I said, I want to ensure we have a world-class education system that is inclusive, equitable and empowering for all. Every learner deserves the opportunity to thrive. Our focus is on high standards, inclusive practices and strong supports to ensure no one is left behind. Breaking down those barriers, whether social, economic or educational, is essential to helping all learners succeed. Education should open doors, build confidence and prepare every learner for life, not just for exams. I want to prioritise actions to tackle educational disadvantage. This means ensuring the necessary resources are in place to support and retain children and young people in school and to ensure they complete their leaving certificate and can be supported to achieve their full potential.

The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, DEIS, programme, which aims to ad-

dress concentrated educational disadvantage, has seen the gap in retention rates between DEIS and non-DEIS schools halved, from 16.8% to 8.4%, since the programme began. Shortly after becoming Minister, I announced I would develop and publish a new DEIS plan in 2025 to try to close that gap further. A key part of the plan will be to close the performance gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools and introduce more innovative solutions to tackle disadvantage while supporting and expanding the positive work being done.

I will also develop a new DEIS Plus scheme to put greater focus on those schools with the highest levels of educational disadvantage where we know there are children with huge levels of trauma who need additional support. I have established a design advisory group with principals, home school community liaison and school completion programme co-ordinators who work with children from areas of high intergenerational disadvantage every day. This student-centred design approach will identify the resources needed to ensure the DEIS Plus scheme meets the needs of children and young people at acute risk of educational disadvantage. I have met principals in particular, and it is clear that what we need in some primary schools might be different from that in post-primary, but it is about the lived experience and about speaking to those at the heart of this who understand what children need.

The transfer of youth into the Department of education is a really positive step. It gives us a chance, particularly when we are talking about supporting children who are at risk of educational disadvantage, to better align what we call the formal education system with the informal, such as youth groups and organisations that are doing fantastic work, so that they are working with our schools to support children during schools hours, in the evenings, at weekends, during summer time and at other times of break.

This Government has recognised that the cost of preparing children for school can also be a barrier to the participation of children and young people in education. I am delighted to say that from the start of the 2025-26 school year, for the first time ever, all children and young people enrolled in primary, special and post-primary schools under the free education scheme will be provided with schoolbooks and core classroom resources. I acknowledge my colleague and the former Minister, Deputy Foley, in this regard.

School transport is a much-valued scheme to families. It ensures children living in rural and remote areas but also in built-up areas and those disadvantaged by distance are provided with a safe and reliable service to their nearest school of eligibility. More than 173,000 pupils benefit from the scheme each day, making it a core component of equitable school access nationwide. The programme for Government commits to expanding the scheme, and this is something on which I will be working closely with Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, in the years ahead.

We know from data that Traveller and Roma children have poorer educational outcomes than those of the general population. Additional funding was secured to increase the number of community link workers and as part of the Traveller and Roma strategy, we will work in several schools and focus on fostering greater engagement with Traveller and Roma families to improve communication, promote positive relationships and support the learning of Traveller and Roma children. Again, we have a focus group and working group that comes together to look at the strategy, how it is working or not working and what else we need to do. This brings together my Department, the Departments of children and social protection and many others as well.

In my first Dáil contribution as Minister for education, I highlighted the significant increase

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in absenteeism in our schools, particularly post Covid. The recent Tusla attendance report shows that in the 2022-23 school year, more than 110,000 primary and 65,000 post-primary students missed 20 or more days of school. This data is hugely alarming. Regular attendance in school is essential, not just for academic achievement but also for well-being, social development and life-long outcomes. This week, I announced a comprehensive suite of targeted but universal actions to improve school attendance.

Among these is a revision of the Education (Welfare) Act to strengthen statutory supports for children but in particular, to bring children under six attending primary school within its scope to ensure earlier intervention. I am hearing back very clearly from principals and teachers in the school completion programme that children in junior infants are missing significant numbers of days at school. This pattern often continues with them, so we must ensure these interventions take place for children in school who are four or five years old. There must also be continued investment in the educational welfare service, including an expansion of educational welfare officer, EWO, capacity and acknowledging the fantastic work they do in working with other teams.

There also has to be continued investment in the school completion programme and we have to make sure we have better planning between this and the range of other supports available through the non-formal education sector in youth. Recently, I met students who told me that the only reason they are still in school and doing their leaving certificate is the work of the school completion officers and the support they have received. It is important that they are supported.

We will roll out Anseo, a new evidence-based framework piloted in four schools, to 60 additional schools to help schools analyse and respond to attendance data. This will help schools to access and identify their own information and to see if there are changes that could be made. I was given an example the other day of a school that is not in the pilot programme but that took on board the approach being taken there. The school instructed all the teachers to call children by their first names three times in the first hour. This acknowledgement, letting the children know they knew they were present, resulted in school attendance going up. It is about looking at the simple things that can be done in schools, looking at the demographic and the children in the school and everything around them and seeing what can be done. I am excited to see how this can be rolled out in order that more schools can take part. We want to work across government and, more broadly, bring it back to basics. In September, there will be a multimedia campaign to promote school attendance. This will make it clear to parents, in particular, but to everybody involved why it is important to attend school.

As Deputies may know, the vast majority of children with special educational needs are supported in mainstream schools. In fact, about 97% of our students attend in mainstream schools. I thank all the school principals and teachers, special education teachers and SNAs, who work so hard every day to support all of our students. Nevertheless, there continues to be a strong and growing need to provide further special classes and special school places for children with more complex needs.

In mainstream schools by September 2025, there will be more than 3,700 special classes supporting more than 21,000 children. This is a doubling of the classes in the last five years and we intend, at post-primary level in particular, that large schools will grow to four special classes each. In 2025, we focused on those primary schools with eight classrooms or more with no special class and we have secured agreement from many of those to open classes this year - in fact, 399 of the 400 to date. I acknowledge and thank those schools that have worked with

us and are now going through the enrolment process. We hope that this can be concluded as quickly as possible. Above all, the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and I are working to ensure that everything we are doing now can be brought forward in order that we can identify at the earliest stage possible in the preceding year who the children are, what their needs are, how that need should be met, how we can engage with the schools and ensure that the enrolment process opens at the same time as that for everybody else. This will ensure that when students are applying, if they are applying at the same time as their siblings or if there is a junior or post-primary application going in, early in the year in January, when everybody else learns where they are going to school, children with additional needs will find that out as well. Working with the NCSE we are making good progress on this.

We also need to ensure that children who need access to therapies get them. I have brought a memo to Cabinet setting out how we are going to provide speech and language therapists and occupational therapists, initially in our special schools before expanding that to special education classrooms and, ultimately, our wider school community. Of course, we are starting with the special schools. I hope we are in a position to start this later this academic year.

We also need to continue to support teachers, considering that we are facing a more complex and challenging environment. It is essential that all future graduates have a mandatory special education placement as part of their initial teacher education. I have asked the Teaching Council to begin work on taking the necessary steps on that immediately, with a view to the change coming into effect from September 2026. I will also ensure that the design of high-quality modules in special education to support teachers on their professional learning journey is also prioritised. While we need to look to the future, almost 79,000 teachers have registered with the Teaching Council. We need to make sure that every teacher and person working with our students is supported and can receive that level of training.

Ensuring we have a curriculum that fully supports children and young people to achieve their potential and that equips our students to thrive and succeed must be our north star. The curriculum at all levels is designed to reflect and support all learners regardless of background, ability, or gender. The primary curriculum framework places a strong focus on inclusion and diversity. It aims to ensure every child feels they belong and are respected and safe so they can engage fully in learning and thrive. It recognises each child's unique background, identity and strengths and is designed to support what is best for every individual child. Under this framework, foreign languages will be introduced at primary level on a phased basis from September 2025.

Following on from the successful changes introduced to the junior cycle, at post-primary level there has been considerable progress across the senior cycle redevelopment programme. Some examples, lest there be a perception that the changes are only happening in September, include the numbers enrolled in the leaving certificate vocational programme link modules across fifth and sixth year in the current school year having increased from 30,000 to 50,000. The numbers of students participating in transition year has passed 60,000 for the first time, which is 14,000 more than was the case five to six years ago. This expansion is a testament to efforts by schools to make more places available. It is important that we try to ensure every child has access to transition year, in particular those who have special or additional needs or those who are at risk of educational disadvantage.

In 2024, for the first time, the State Examinations Commission provided an integrated set of results to leaving certificate applied students who also took leaving certificate established

mathematics or a modern foreign language. This school year has also seen the first modules from the new senior cycle level 1 and level 2 learning programmes introduced in schools. This is to support children with additional needs. Importantly, the State Examinations Commission will certify these programmes in 2026, meaning that when students taking them are expected to graduate, they will do so with their peers in leaving certificate programmes.

These measures illustrate how the senior cycle redevelopment programme is playing a positive role in students reaching their full potential. My Department, working with teachers, staff and students, will build on this annually over the next five years as we implement the various tranches and strands of the programme. In a world being transformed by AI and the digital revolution and where jobs and roles are changing, we need to equip children with the skills they need to succeed and thrive in a changing world. That is exactly what the leaving certificate reform is intended to do.

We cannot do this without our wonderful teachers. Approximately 78,000 qualified teachers are now employed in Ireland, with more than 35,000 in post-primary schools. This is the largest number of teachers ever in the history of the State. The number of allocated teaching posts and the number of registered teachers have increased year on year, as has the number of student teachers graduating, and more and more people are applying through the CAO. It is really positive to see that this is continuing to increase.

On my appointment, I committed to taking further action to address teacher supply issues because we know that in certain parts of the country and also for certain subjects, there are still significant challenges, notwithstanding the fact that we have more teachers than ever before. I recently announced that I would put in place an agreement to ensure that teachers will receive a permanent contract much sooner than is the case under the current arrangements. Following the Droichead process, new teachers who have taught for one year and successfully interviewed for a vacant post the following year will immediately be offered a permanent contract at the start of that year. This will come into effect from next year. While I say “new teachers”, it will apply to anyone who has completed that one year. I hope that being able to gain a permanent contract a year earlier will help teachers in applying for mortgages and placing their careers on a more stable footing much sooner than before. I have heard strong support for this from teachers.

I was also happy to introduce a proposal from the Teaching Council to enable eligible teachers who have qualified outside of Ireland to apply for registration and complete their induction requirement here. This is a commonsense solution and an important step in encouraging more teachers to work and start their careers here in Ireland. I am looking at further measures to improve teacher supply and will announce them in the coming months.

We have a number of different strategies, including the literacy, numeracy and digital literacy strategy. The objective of the STEM education policy statement is to ensure all learners, regardless of gender or background, have access to high-quality STEM learning. There is a particular focus on encouraging female participation in STEM. The Department is developing a suitable approach of policy and practice for students who are exceptionally able or gifted. It is important that we support all students. This is just a snapshot of strategies that demonstrate how inclusive education is at the core of the Department’s mission.

We cannot talk about education without talking about students’ well being, their health and making sure they are supported in school. The programme for Government outlines a commitment to ensure that children are safer and healthier and that our schools are safe places. We will

continue to implement the Cineáltas action plan on bullying and the first action plan to support that. Schools have a role to play in supporting their students to develop key skills and knowledge to enable them to make informed choices in different aspects of their lives. This is why the reformed social, personal and health education, SPHE, curriculum is so important. It has been introduced at junior cycle, will be introduced permanently at senior cycle and will be revised for primary schools as well. It is important that our students are engaged with, spoken to and listened to about the issues that are affecting their lives, that it is done in an age-appropriate way and that this is embedded in the curriculum.

In the programme for Government, we have given a clear commitment to hold a convention on education bringing together all the education stakeholders. This was done 30 years ago and many of the actions that came from that laid the foundations for the agencies and structures in the school system, and they have stood the test of time. As Minister for education, I want to make sure that by bringing together all of our partners, I can set out a vision for our education system in the years ahead.

I am very aware that in order for schools to function, it is not just about teachers and the buildings. We also need to make sure they have the resources. While we have increased the capitation funding in recent years, we want to go further and do more to make sure the day-to-day running of schools is not such a chore for school principals. We will continue to invest in ICT and make sure we provide the annual grants, as per the commitment, for minor works, summer works and works focused on climate targets, while also assisting with the day-to-day running of schools. I welcome the opportunity to speak to everybody here today and look forward to hearing their comments.

Deputy Emer Currie: I welcome the opportunity to share time with the Minister, Deputy McEntee, to discuss how the Government is tackling educational disadvantage. I also welcome her openness about challenges that remain to be tackled as we work to ensure no child is left behind on their educational journey.

Last month, the Minister and I visited St. Philip the Apostle Junior National School in Mountview, to mark the extension of the hot school meals programme to another 713 schools, meaning more than 550,000 children across the country now benefit. Nearly 1 million students now have access to free schoolbooks. These universal supports are invaluable. However, there are many schools where more targeted supports are needed, including in areas such as Tyrrelstown and Powerstown where schools are not currently included in the DEIS programme. I hope revisions to DEIS will consider eligibility criteria. I welcome the Minister's intention to establish a new DEIS Plus scheme to support schools with the highest concentration of educational disadvantage to improve educational outcomes, particularly in literacy and numeracy.

The teaching of English as an additional language, EAL, is of significant value in communities I represent. I appreciate the investment and pressure on demand in recent years, particularly supporting Ukrainian children in schools. Future allocation policy must continue to evolve to reflect actual need. It is currently based on pupils who have arrived in Ireland in the last two years, those with less than three years EAL support, or who register less than a B1 in an English proficiency test. The experience of schools is that we could better recognise the number of children born in Ireland who may not have English as their first language, and children who require ongoing support. Expanding EAL support will help more children access education fully and confidently. Some 90% of students in St Luke's National School in Tyrrelstown speak a language other than English but they have received just one EAL teacher for every 146

children. Powerstown Educate Together National School has children from 64 countries speaking 57 languages, yet this school has no allocated EAL teacher.

It is important to commend the work of the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, in working with me and parents to establish a task force for children with additional needs in Dublin 15, and supporting local principals through the common applications trial. These actions will make a difference. Nationally, 399 special classes have been sanctioned for the 2025 school year. This level of investment is welcome, but we know that every year brings a deeply stressful period for families trying to secure an appropriate school place. That uncertainty must be avoided. The only way to break this annual cycle is through forward planning and systemic change in that regard. We need a five-year strategic approach to ensure special school and class places are delivered on time and aligned with the projected 5% of students requiring special education supports.

I firmly believe that if we have a policy of opening special classes it should include reading classes for children with severe dyslexia. I welcome the Minister of State's acknowledgement that expanding reading classes would be a positive step. While 15,000 special education teachers are supporting students in mainstream schools, children with dyslexia still need more targeted interventions.

I acknowledge the amazing work of teachers. We face a national challenge in recruiting and retaining teachers in special education settings. I believe teachers deserve an allowance that recognises both the choice they make to work in a rewarding but demanding environment, and the additional training required, particularly in special schools where they need to deliver three curricula - primary, junior cycle and senior cycle. Supporting teachers also means supporting principals. There are principals and deputy principals in special schools all over the country whose salary is based on the NCSE allocation of eight teachers, not the full team they manage. At Danu Community Special School the actual staffing team includes 60 people - teachers, SNAs, bus escorts, a caretaker, a secretary and a part-time cleaner. Every member of staff in a special school is the responsibility of the leadership team, and these leaders deserve more support.

Much progress has been made. Naming the outstanding challenges is the first step to tackling those challenges and achieving even more progress.

Deputy Peter Roche: I thank the Minister very much for the statement she has just read, which is very comprehensive and sets out an ambitious programme of work. I deeply appreciated her coming to visit my constituency of Galway East. She did a great honour to the teaching staff, parents and organisers of the €16,000 fundraiser that developed the sensory room in Barnaderg National School. The fact that the Minister arranged to visit the school and officially open the facility demonstrates her empathy and compassion. She did not just visit Barnaderg, she also visited Briarfield National School. A visit by the Minister, the person who is managing the Department of education, has a compelling impact on a school.

That is a lovely story, but then we get calls from other schools. I refer to Dunmore National School, which I and others visited. A total of 232 pupils attend the school. In many ways it is a large school. The school is very challenged in that it has overcrowded classrooms, and a lack of basic infrastructure such as internal toilets and the absence of proper facilities for special educational needs. We must do better in 2025. The situation there must be addressed. The effort to create a positive learning environment in such circumstances is commendable but it

should not be necessary.

The next school I will mention is down the road from Dunmore in the town of Tuam, Trinity Primary School. The Minister might be familiar with it because we have engaged with her to a considerable extent in recent weeks. It is a DEIS band 1 school with 800 pupils. The school is an amalgamation of three campuses with the promise that a new school would be developed in the future. The project is being advanced but it can be deeply frustrating financially for the principal and staff to try to manage the three campuses from a staffing point of view and with all the associated bills that go with managing a school. Teaching is stressful enough without having to be worried also about finances. I accept that is all part of it.

Those issues are not isolated ones, as they reflect the broader need to ensure that our ambitions for excellence in education are matched by investment urgency and a follow-through on commitments. I know the Minister shares the goal of equity of opportunity in education. I raise these examples today in that shared spirit. The Minister has my support for her work going forward. No child, teacher or school should be left behind. I commend the Minister on her relentless energy, commitment and dedication to the education sector in the early months of her ministerial tenure and the visits she has made to schools, which is hugely appreciated.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the statements on education. Education is the great equaliser: it has the power to break down barriers, lift communities and, most importantly, to give every child the opportunity to reach their full potential. However, for too long, our education system has been held back by chronic underfunding, inequality and a lack of ambition or vision for schools.

Sinn Féin believes in a world class education system that leaves no child behind. That means investing properly in schools, teachers and, most importantly, in the future of children. The first step in delivering real change in our education system is proper and adequate funding. For years, schools have been forced to fundraise for the most basic things. Now, their capitation grant does not even cover heating, electricity and insurance costs. The current school capitation grant stands at €200 per pupil at primary school, the same rate that was paid to schools in 2009. The Government planned to increase this to €224 this September but the INTO has called on the Government to increase the capitation fund by 20%. The Government's failure to do so shows its lack of concern for the many schools that are struggling to literally keep their doors open.

Within the past two years, there has been a huge increase in the number of schools referred to the FSSU due to financial struggles. Schools need stability and certainty. I am conscious the Minister spoke for 16 minutes and only referred to the issue of school funding in the last 20 seconds. As an essential first step, the Minister must increase funding for schools and introduce a grant calendar so schools can budget. Grants should be paid early in the year. The ICT and minor works grants are inexplicably delayed. The Minister should please tell us when they will be paid and that it will be soon. Schools are at breaking point. The latest response to me on this issue yesterday used the phrase "in due course". That is simply not good enough.

Regarding special education, every child has the right to an education that meets their values and their needs. In special education, children are locked out of education based solely on the fact they have special educational needs. That is shameful. The Ministers say they have sanctioned enough places for children for September; in fact, they say they have sanctioned more than enough. The question, of course, is whether these places actually exist and are appropriate. Parents faced with scores of rejection letters and forced to sleep outside the Department and

outside this building would beg to differ, I am sure. Recent figures released to me show there are 1,275 children on short school days, an increase of 20%, and 821 of those children have special educational needs. Many of those are on short school days because of the lack of supports at school. It is no fault of the teachers or the school communities. A further 177 children are getting home tuition while awaiting an appropriate placement. I urge the Minister to heed the concerns raised by the INTO, among others. She should ensure that full funding for the equipping of special classrooms and ancillary sensory and play spaces is made available early.

It is not just about physical space and equipment. Special classes across the State are significantly understaffed. Teachers, in many cases unqualified, are stretched thin and there are not enough SNAs. The Minister will deny it but there has been a policy change in relation to SNA allocations. SNAs are being rationed - there is no other word for it - in a way they have not been before. It is not enough to have primary care needs but children must have “significant” primary care needs. That is a change. I can give numerous examples in my constituency, such as St. Patrick’s National School in Stamullen and Scoil Náisiúnta Cholmcille in Skryne. The list goes on. Arbitrary caps must be immediately abandoned. The Minister must invest in SNAs, increase their number and support them in their role. There is a commitment to amend the circular on leave of absence following assault. This must happen as a matter of priority.

On the issue of educational disadvantage, the DEIS programme has been a lifeline for schools in disadvantaged areas but it needs expansion, not stagnation. A 2024 OECD report on DEIS schools highlights a number of issues relating to the educational disadvantage schemes. Findings from research conducted by the TUI and TASC found that 10% of school teachers in DEIS schools rated classroom facilities as very poor, compared with 2.8% of teachers in non-DEIS schools. To provide any sort of decent education to our children, the Minister must provide decent funding and resources. Funding for DEIS schools must urgently be increased to ensure schools have staff, proper resources and the programmes needed to close the inequality gap. We will see the new DEIS plan soon and, hopefully, it will be welcome. We have heard welcome commitments with regard to DEIS plus but targeted supports to children most in need are vital. There are clear indications that significant problems need to be addressed.

Of 154 educational welfare officer posts, 23 are currently vacant, according to figures released to me in recent days. In the interest of time, my colleagues will cover the issue of Gaeloi-deachas. Tá siad in ann níos mó a dhéanamh ansin freisin.

On the issue of class sizes, Ireland has some of the largest class sizes in Europe. Over 51,000 primary school pupils were in classes of 30 children or more last year. Meanwhile, the INTO is calling for the pupil-teacher ratio to be reduced to 19:1, a call that we fully support. Successive Governments, a number of which the Minister has been a part of, have failed to deliver not on the INTO’s commitments but on their own commitments to reduce the pupil-teacher ratio.

With regard to teacher recruitment and retention, teachers are the backbone of schools. The strain on teacher supply is heavily related to the housing crisis that this Government has created. Housing prices are out of reach and unaffordable to many people in need. There are a number of key measures that the Minister needs to take to support and address the recruitment and retention crisis. We need to look at the time-bound provision, for example, to allow people to conduct their Droichead year after training abroad. That has been delayed, inexplicably. Pay parity is an issue. The cost and duration of the PME is an issue. I welcome the commitment with regard to permanent contracts but will they be full-hour contracts? We need a guarantee in this regard. In excess of 13,500 unqualified teachers were needed, because of the recruitment

and retention crisis, to stand before children in classes across the State. The teacher recruitment and retention crisis is such that, at secondary level, schools are forced to drop subjects, and the TUI had significant information in this regard. It is a very significant issue that needs to be addressed.

While we all recognise that the leaving certificate is changing, I fundamentally disagree with the Minister's approach to leaving certificate reform. I believe the Minister has made a mistake in ramming through the reforms without the proper resources. It is shameful that we are using potential pay increases as a bargaining chip in this regard. We need to manage the process of leaving certificate reform and there is a major risk with the approach this Minister is taking. Students and teachers need support, not more pressure. I firmly believe the approach the Minister is taking is the wrong one. Let the teachers decide in their own ballot. I have real concerns that the approach being taken will heap advantage on advantage and disadvantage on disadvantage, undermine the strength of the leaving certificate and cause harm to our graduates. There is a lot of work to be done.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: As a teacher for 20 years and an SET múinteoir for ten, I have seen at first hand the power of education to break down barriers for children. From my own experience of growing up in Ireland's education system, I know how one good teacher can change a child's life, nurturing confidence, curiosity and a sense of belonging. This is especially true for those without much support at home. I thank the teachers of Ireland, many of whom go above and beyond, often at a significant personal cost, to ensure that every child has a chance to realise their potential.

It is thanks to their dedication that there is any truth to the idea that education is a great leveller. Nonetheless, our teachers are woefully undervalued. Too many are stuck in part-time or temporary roles, with job insecurity and a two-tier pay scale still in place. It is unsustainable and, as a result, many of our talented teachers are leaving the profession and going abroad. There are roughly 8,000 of our best and brightest young teachers in the Gulf countries, no doubt because of the cost of living crisis, which has evidently not gone away despite Government claims to the contrary.

We also know the right environment is crucial to a child's learning and development. Right now, schools across the State are chronically underfunded, capitation grants have not kept pace with inflation and schools are struggling to cover basics, such as heating and electricity. That is not a world-class system. Ba mhaith liom a lua freisin go bhfuil sé de cheart ag gach páiste oideachas a fháil trí mheán na Gaeilge, ceart nach bhfuil á chomhlíonadh faoi láthair. I mo Dháilcheantar féin, i gCill Dara Theas, tá an baol ann go mbeidh ar Naíonra Uí Shionnaigh dúnadh an bhliain seo chugainn de bharr easpa maoinithe. Tá an t-éileamh do luathoidéachas lánGhaeilge ag fás ach níl an naíonra incháilithe don scéim rialtais. Éilím go dtabharfaí aird ar an gcás faoi leith seo agus go gcinnteofar go bhfuil an tseirbhís ríthábhachtach seo in ann leanúint ar aghaidh. I have brought up Naíonra Uí Shionnaigh here before. I have written to Minister, Deputy Foley's Department. I am really pleading with the Minister for help in saving Naíonra Uí Shionnaigh. That is 33 places Kildare South cannot afford to lose but the right to an education trí mheán na Gaeilge is also so important.

As I stand here, it is ironic that we are speaking about a world-class education system when the truth is that, come September, children still will not have a school place or will be placed in an inappropriate school setting that does not meet their needs.

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Yesterday, I spoke with a principal in a primary school in Newbridge. He has been pleading with the Department for years to sanction a special class but he is rightfully insisting on a grant for a properly furnished appropriate space and he has been refused time and time again. They need future-proof facilities, not a quick-fix solution which will drain resources down the line.

Thousands more are waiting for therapies that are essential to their learning. Just today, the Ombudsman for Children published a report confirming cases of children still being subjected to repressive and traumatic practices of seclusion in our schools. I welcome the move to ban this and I urge the Government to ensure the ban is properly enforced.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Gealladh sa Chéad Dáil in 1919 san fhorógra daonlathach gur “cóir agus gleus is gádh dhóibh chun teagaisc agus taithighe ceart do thabhairt dóibh i gcóir na hoibre a bheidh le deunamh aca mar chomhaltaí den tSaorstát Gaedhealach”. An gheallúint a bhí tugtha ná go mbeadh teagasc agus cur chuige ceart maidir leis an oideachas agus traenáil ar fáil do chuile saoránach. Sinn Féin’s vision is for those words to be treated like they matter. The reality, though, is that they do not seem to matter and the Government even breaks its own laws in relation to children in this State.

Frankly, it is insulting that we have these type of statements without legislation. We need legislation to give effect to the demands, the desire and the right of students and children to have a proper education. In my own area, in Dublin South-Central, St. Ultan’s Primary School is way above some of the other schools in the area and needs to be set as an example, but that is the yardstick. Every other school should be a St. Ultan’s. There are no ifs or buts about it. When you look at the fact that the Department had to be brought kicking and screaming to develop Our Lady of Hope School and Scoil Eoin across the road, which is struggling, and given that nearly every other school in the constituency lacks resources, you can see why we need resources. When any child has an additional need, there should be additional resources. It should be a given. We should not have a system which facilitates students not taking Irish in secondary school. That is an absolute scandal that is growing, day in and day out.

We should have already a Gaelscoil in Dublin 10. We should have a Gaelscoil in Dublin 12, and yet there is prevarication or no engagement with the Department. Hopefully, when the submission is made for the new site in Ballyfermot, the Minister will embrace it. Hopefully, we will see shortly a Gaelscoil in Dublin 10.

In relation to the secondary school where there is a primary school in Dublin 2, 4, 6 and 8, the demand is that the Minister will meet and engage with that community as quickly as possible to ensure that the school, when it opens next year, has all the facilities and the wherewithal to become a proper Gaelcholáiste.

There is a lot more that needs to be done. I welcome the debate but it is no good unless there is action and legislation to give effect to that.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: First, I welcome to the Gallery today Diarmaid Duloherly from Blarney, Louise Ahern, Pat Egan and my brother, Mark Kenny. This is the first time most of them have been in Leinster House and I wish them a fantastic day. I welcome this debate. It is seriously important but with this debate, I would appreciate that we would take these issues on board and work with them.

I will begin in relation to leaving certificate reform. As the Minister will be aware, this is something that I have a great passion about because I taught in two secondary schools and my

subject of business is part of tranche 1, which will be part of the reform come this September. I appreciate that this is an enormous change in the senior cycle curriculum. However, I have my reservations about it. They have to be appreciated because I share these reservations with the majority of secondary school teachers and parents across the country. I genuinely believe it is a rushed reform. It has been thought out for a number of years but what we are doing right now is almost providing incentives for teachers to take it on board, with this 5% pay increase and getting a contract after one year in the school. It will favour children from more affluent families as well.

I have stated on the floor of the House previously that, as we are all well aware, we have vocational schools across the country that have 100-year-old infrastructure in place. I know there has been funding allocated towards science laboratories, in particular, but it is not covering the cost. That is what I am hearing from science teachers. The Irish Science Teachers Association requested a meeting with the Minister and that has not taken place. I would appreciate if that would take place because they have serious concerns and they are the ones on the ground in our laboratories teaching in our schools. I would appreciate if that contact could be made. It is also important to recognise that in the majority of the private schools across the country we have employed laboratory technicians and we do not have them in the public schools. As I said, the infrastructure that is in place is not adequate to deal with these changes.

The last time health and safety guidelines were introduced for leaving certificate science was 1996. We are proceeding with the redevelopment of science, biology, chemistry and physics without any updated health and safety guidelines in the science laboratories. The last ones were before I was even born.

We have serious issues in relation to special educational needs. I do not doubt the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan's bona fides on this. The Minister of State is a man of integrity. I recognise the work both he and the Minister have done. I recognise that 399 new special classes have been opened but I fear that we are still almost trying to catch up with the disaster that has been in the education system for the past ten to 15 years. I still am dealing with parents on a daily basis who cannot get access to what they would consider an appropriate school place. I welcome that school places are opening but we need to talk about appropriate school places. They are essential. If we do not open appropriate school places, we will have children travelling long distances throughout their county to get to school.

I will focus, in particular, on my own constituency of Cork North-Central. I absolutely welcome that a special school will be opening in Carrignavar but we need to work on the logistics of it far quicker than we are working on them right now because we cannot allow children who have special educational needs to be travelling to Fermoy to go to school. We need to get the ball rolling now, get this over the line and get Carrignavar opened again. Of particular relevance in this regard - it spans across the Ministry for housing as well - is the wastewater treatment plant there. If we are opening a school there, the wastewater treatment plant will play a significant role. I appreciate that Carrignavar is being sanctioned a special school.

DEIS plus was recognised in the Minister's contribution today but I still do not see any budget or concrete timeframe on the introduction of DEIS plus. I was privileged to teach in a poor socioeconomic area in Cork city where there are serious barriers to education for a lot of children who are brought up in families which might not value education as much as other families throughout the country. I was privileged to get the opportunity to teach those students and to play an important role in their lives. However, there are still serious barriers to education

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for many people. We still have voluntary contributions in most of our voluntary schools across the country. Paying for uniforms is still an enormous cost for parents. I welcome the roll-out of the hot meals school programme. I have seen it at first hand. It operated in the school I taught in. I welcome that. It is appropriate and fitting. However, we need to look at the further costs imposed on parents. I ask for a concrete timeframe for DEIS plus and a concrete budget in respect of the public expenditure that is going to be involved.

I spoke about access to third level in a committee meeting yesterday and I spoke to the Minister, Deputy Lawless, about it on the floor of the Dáil the other day. This needs to be focused on. I appreciate the fact that the leaving certificate applied programme and the LCVP are being taken up by far more students. That is absolutely to be welcomed. I did the LCVP myself. It is a fantastic subject and really does set you up. The preparation of your CV and other parts of that curriculum are absolutely essential. We should also try to get students into apprenticeships. We must provide them with those opportunities.

I will also specifically focus on the staff within our schools. I have brought up the role of the special educational needs co-ordinator with the Minister in the Dáil previously. This role is an assistant principal 1 post. As I have seen throughout all of my time both as a student and as a teacher, the role of special educational needs co-ordinator must be a stand-alone position. We are putting people who have been promoted to an AP1 post into this position despite the fact that they may have had no training in the role. The role of special educational needs co-ordinator must be a stand-alone position.

I will also speak about special needs assistants, SNAs. I previously asked about an SNA freeze. I was told this did not happen and that no directive was sent out. The principal of a school in Mallow who contacted me was told over the phone that this was what had happened. A school principal has also told my colleague, Deputy Ahern, who represents Dublin South-West, over the phone that this was what they had been told by the SENO. There was obviously nothing in writing. I am not saying anything. Perhaps it is not true but I ask the Minister to once again clarify the role of special needs assistants and to provide sanction for more of them. We have the highest number of them in our system ever. That is absolutely true but the modern classroom is changing so significantly that we need far more. Sanctioning such posts is an absolute priority.

I will speak about secretaries. My grandmother has been a secretary in a primary school for the last 30 years. She is 70 years old and will retire without a pension. That is a fact. We need to take a serious look at pension parity for all staff, including caretakers, secretaries and all ancillary staff throughout the country.

We also need to look at incentives to undertake the professional master of education programme. I was lucky enough to have done a bachelor's degree in education and so did not have to pay the €6,000 or €7,000 each year for the two years of a professional master of education programme. We need incentives. We must also look at how to attract teachers who have left Ireland back to our country. Perhaps we should look at their place on our incremental scale. As I have asked previously, would it be possible to put people who have spent four years teaching in England on point 4 of the incremental scale when they come back?

To mention a personal point of view that we have also raised in a Private Members' motion, it is absolutely necessary that teachers have the opportunity to upskill in seizure first aid in school. That is a personal thing for me. I would appreciate it if the Minister's Department

could look at providing free seizure first aid training for all staff, including SNAs, caretakers, teachers and school management.

The issue of the capitation grant per student is constantly being raised with me. Schools are being referred to the FSSU. They just do not have enough money. The Minister has assisted me with particular cases and I really appreciate that but it is absolutely necessary to look at the capitation grant per student.

We called for a national assembly on education in our 2024 manifesto. I would appreciate it if all stakeholders could be involved once the Department calls a national assembly. I appreciate that the Minister's is a very extensive role. I will continue to work with her but we have serious challenges to outcome.

Deputy Joe Neville: We have been asked to deliver statements on delivering a world-class education system that breaks down barriers and ensures every child can achieve his or her full potential. Since the foundation of the State, we have seen improvements in our education system. Opportunities that may not have been available to our grandparents in the twenties and thirties were available to our parents. Certain opportunities may not have been available to our grandfathers or grandmothers. As a State, we have improved the system through different steps along the way. My dad has never spoken too fondly of Fianna Fáil but one person he has always spoken fondly of is Donogh O'Malley, who introduced free education at second level. Steps like that in the late sixties brought us to the point we are continuing on from today.

In the last 30 years, since I went to school, I have seen significant changes. I may have been fortunate in having been unaware of some of them as an individual. I went to school in a classroom where all my friends could kick a ball, read easily and learn Irish. There were no difficulties. That is because there was separation in our schools. The kids who were a bit different and who had a different level of needs were not in the same classroom as me. That has changed for my children. There are mixed and diverse abilities in their schools. The most important thing is that those children who used to be separated are now in combined classes. Their families and parents get to see them mix in the way they always should have. Those are the changes we have seen in our State over the last 20 or 30 years. That has been a great thing for us.

It is obvious that improvements are consistently needed. I have raised these with the Minister and she and the previous Minister have made significant changes but there is plenty more work to do. This is consistently brought up. It was brought up during the week with Cara. Many other issues align with that. We spoke about how the numbers keep increasing. From an education perspective, we need more spaces.

Deputy Ó Snodaigh spoke about the importance of having more Gaelscoileanna. That is a facility the State should deliver. We have been really positive about Gaelscoileanna. We have seen improvements as regards Irish being spoken but we need to deliver those facilities. It would be very difficult for the State to deliver all of those facilities in one go but we can endeavour to do it piece by piece.

I will come back to my county of Kildare. I see Deputy Ní Raghallaigh across the way. We know the burdens we have in Kildare. We know the burdens presented by a rapidly growing population and the depth of difficulties they impose on the population. Access to the schools people want to go to might not always be available. People might not be able to go to school in their communities. Our Government should be endeavouring to ensure that children can attend

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classes in their own communities and it is doing so. That is what the Minister is doing and that is what we continue to impress upon her. In individual cases, we may not be able to figure out a solution straight away but it is incumbent on us to resolve those issues.

I have worked with individual schools in my area that want to deliver those first-class facilities. Schools like Scoil Mochua in Celbridge are looking for extra space for special education classes. That school is willing. The principal and the board of management are keen and we are looking to find a solution but there is a difficulty with land authorities. It is those sorts of blockages that are stopping us from getting that first-class facility in that specific area.

With regard to Maynooth, a Gaelscoil is required for north-east Kildare. We have had difficulties. We need extra hours for the school and teachers to get the kids to come in to ensure the school grows in the way it should and that a facility will ultimately be delivered.

These are items on which I wish to represent the people of north Kildare. I could go on about a multitude of other issues we come across in individual situations. We all have our own stories to tell. My wife is a primary school teacher so I hear about the difficulties and challenges teachers face and about the bureaucracy they sometimes face. However, what all of them, including my wife, ultimately talk about is the work the teachers themselves do, their commitment, their work and the care they show for the children. We even see it here in Leinster House every day. We see the kids coming in. They visit this place because they look up to it and see on the news that this is where important decisions are made. It is great that I have the opportunity to speak on behalf of those children and those who educate them because, without the world-class education system we are referencing today, we will not be able to deliver what they need.

3 o'clock

We can talk all we want about economics and about being best in class but it starts in the schools and starts at home. We as the Government will continue to work to ensure that we can be best in class worldwide in any education system and be proud of it.

Deputy John McGuinness: First let me recognise all of the good work that has been undertaken by the Department of education and various Ministers, and the huge changes that have taken place in the delivery of school projects and school courses, in accommodating students, and the developments in the third level sector. Today we are talking about a world-class education system. I will focus on a few things that are relevant to my constituency but they feed into the title of this debate. The Jonah Special School, Roll No. 20380B in Slieverue, which caters for students with autism and ADHD, was promised a new building. It was told it was getting it and that the money was allocated and yet it is still in the same building waiting for delivery of a state-of-the-art school. It is accommodating the most vulnerable students in our society. I want to know why that is not going ahead now.

I want to ask about a teaching post in Ballyragget National School Roll No. 20506U. It went through the system. The fact that it was denied a teacher will result in it having at least 30-plus pupils in a classroom, causing serious accommodation issues. Yet, because it did not fit into the pigeon hole it did not get through the appeals system and it will now be denied that extra teacher.

I turn to the Presentation Secondary School, which is a magnificent building that was constructed alongside the original school, which is now almost complete. I want to see an Astro-Turf pitch provided for it because it gave up its sporting facility. It would be wrong to allow

the construction to be completed without that provision. This again goes back to the title of this debate today, which is for a world-class education system. We have to give our students the very best.

St. John's senior and junior national schools in Kilkenny will amalgamate. This will cause a lot of difficulties because it is two different sites and a new school will have to be constructed. I want to see the principal position being retained in the junior school. The principal is retiring and a recruitment process is in place but there is an absolute need to have a principal in the senior school, which is a distance away from what is known as "the lake school". I would like the principal to be sanctioned in that lake school and be appointed. Then let us get to the various phases of the amalgamation, including the physical amalgamation in one building.

The St. John of God National School in Windgap applied in late December 2023 for repairs to the roof. It is still waiting for approval to carry out those works. These are issues that need to be dealt with.

The Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, arranged for the school bus operator to come in. I have always said, and I am going to say it again, that it is time we put this contract out to tender. It has told us it is now €90 million in deficit. I would like to know what is happening in that company. Why, within EU procurement rules, is the Department not being forced to go out to tender on that service? Students are being left at bus stops and at their schools. There are issues around the provision of a transport system from Gowran, Mullinavat, Ballyhale and Kilmacow. This has gone on for years and it has not been resolved to the satisfaction of the parents whose children attend those schools.

The last issue I will refer to is the fact that parents who have a child with autism or ADHD cannot get a place in the system. They are as important as any other student in the system. There are kids in Kilkenny who cannot get a place. Their parents are out hunting for a place. I ask that the Minister and the Minister of State would address this issue. It is not good enough. We had it on Tuesday when discussing the assessment situation. It is time to address the issue and have officials on the ground proactively working with the families.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Ensuring that every child can achieve their full potential is the ethos that should drive everything we do in terms of education. Economic background, social class, or financial resources should not be impediments to the success of any child in our education system. They say it takes a village to raise a child but it is also true that it takes the full community to educate a child. In mid-April I attended a research report launch for The Sky is the Limit at Corpus Christi National School in the north side of Limerick city. Those who spoke at the launch included teachers, past pupils and support workers from the community. It is a fantastic school. The report shows just how important it is for every school and for every child to have the full support of the wider community. Those engaged with the school embrace the quote, "It is easier to build strong children than repair broken men". This line stuck with me. It encapsulates for me the importance of education and of allowing children to reach their full potential. I would suggest that if possible The Sky is the Limit project could be rolled out in other areas.

Across the city to the south side of Limerick, we have the Le Chéile National School. I appeal to the Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy McEntee, to reach out to the Le Chéile National School. I have raised this in the Dáil on a number of occasions. For a variety of reasons, it has been missed out on all the supports, services and everything. This is a school

in the second most deprived area in the State and it probably has the highest number of people with diagnosed and undiagnosed diagnoses.

I want to move on to the issue of school secretaries. These are often the first person a child or a parent will meet on a school day. School caretakers keep the school buildings ready for use. Both roles are crucial to the smooth running of schools. We in Sinn Féin stand with these workers and their union Fórsa in their parity campaign. Their demands are fair and just.

Giving every child the opportunity to reach their full potential must begin with ensuring that we have enough teachers. The National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals and the Teachers' Union of Ireland found that 64% of schools have unfilled vacancies, with 20% of schools forced to drop subjects due to the lack of teachers. Last year, an INTO survey of primary and secondary schools revealed almost 1,000 teaching vacancies across the State. With these shortages we had 13,500 unqualified teachers teaching in schools to backfill our teacher shortage. Why do we have such a shortage of educators? The salaries, especially for new teachers, have led many to emigrate as they cannot see how they can build a life in this State with the ongoing and unmanaged housing crisis coupled with the cost-of-living crisis. There are steps the Minister could take to manage the shortfall in educators.

One of most exciting and daunting times in a child's life and educational journey is the transition for primary to secondary school. In Limerick, we have a unique common application system. The system requires sixth class students to list their schools in order of preference. The system is in place for the correct reasons: to avoid the class-based system and selection systems that can arise within the city and has done for generations but which unfortunately does not work for all students. In recent years multitudes of children have received 11 rejection letters from schools. In 2023 there were 20 students in this situation. Can you imagine how deflating it is and how much it would dent a child's confidence to receive 11 rejection letters from the only 11 schools that are available? It is a challenge for parents how to explain to their child why he or she does not have a place yet all their friends do.

I encourage the Minister to review the system and adjust it as necessary so that other Limerick children and their families do not have this stress. There is work to be done in delivering the world-class education system we aspire to.

Deputy Jen Cummins: We do have a world-class education system, broadly speaking, in Ireland but our system is failing many of our young children and young people, and particularly those facing disadvantage and trauma. I have so much to say but I want to be very specific in my speech today. It is about those young people, the ones we do not capture all the time. When I am talking about education disadvantage and young people facing trauma, I want to be very clear that this failure does not lie with the child, the young person or their families and communities. We, as legislators, and policymakers need to ensure that every single one of them is supported in the best way we can. I urge the Government to take this on board. There are deep inequalities in our schools. The best way to see that is to visit any school in a disadvantaged area and then go to a private school and see the differences in resources, supports, outcomes and expectations. It is staggering. That is not equality; it is systematic injustice.

I spent almost three decades working in youth work and education, as well as in teacher education and the school completion programme. I thank the Minister for mentioning school completion so many times in her speech today. I know that my colleagues will be absolutely delighted about that. I have seen first-hand the failures for these young people. I have also

listened to those young people. In my doctoral research, I sat with young people who had left mainstream school early, before the leaving certificate. They had gone back to alternative education, which I will come to in a while. Those young people are not statistics; they are teenagers who are traumatised. They are navigating poverty, bereavement, the loss of a parent to prison or death and perhaps they grew up in care or homelessness and with violence and systemic neglect. This system that we have does not fit, and is not built for, those students. We have to do something about that.

We need to protect these young people and provide for them in our education system. A young person who is experiencing adverse childhood experience, ACE, does not drop out - that desperate phrase - but is pushed out, not always by intention but certainly by design. They are labelled disruptive, difficult or lazy when they are, in fact, surviving unthinkable adversity. A young person once told me, "Nobody asked me why I was angry. They just gave me detentions." This is the Ireland we are responsible for, an Ireland in which a child in trauma is more likely to be punished than supported. We talk often in this Chamber about the importance of education, but education that ignores trauma is not education; it is endurance. It asks children to carry grief, fear and instability on their backs as well as their bags, to sit in school - through double maths, perhaps - and perform as if nothing has happened. That is not resilience. I hate saying that children are resilient. It is not that. That is survival and it is morally indefensible.

The science and evidence are there. Adverse childhood experiences directly impact the child's cognitive, emotional and physical development and increase the risk of early school-leaving, mental illness, substance misuse and chronic disease later in life. The more trauma a child experiences, the more his or her ability to learn and participate in school is compromised. We must approach education in a policy that operates to support and protect them. What I find frustrating is the fact that we see pilot projects here and there, some of which are brilliant, but they are underfunded, under-resourced and often cut short. I get frustrated when I see the Department rolling out strategy documents with well-meaning language and everything, but when it comes to implementation and real system-wide change, the strategies are often found wanting because there are no resources behind them. The other point I wish to make is that there is no coherent strategy for trauma-informed education. Teachers are not being systematically trained in how to understand or support children in distress.

The school completion programme, a programme that really works, is forced to scrape together resources each year. It is never sure of funding and does not have enough to reach things. The DEIS schools provide vital support. The Minister and Minister of State know this; I am preaching to the converted. I am delighted to see that there will be a roll-out of how DEIS can be improved, as it really needs to be. There are young people outside the DEIS model, however, who are just lost. We need to bring them in and make sure that they are protected.

Alternative education is still treated as a last resort or dumping ground by some people but, for the young people with whom I worked, when they returned to education in an alternative education setting such as Youthreach, a community training centre or iScoil, they were seen for the first time. They were heard and understood. That is when they started to believe in themselves and think that they might have a future. That should not be the exception; it should be standard. What is the plan for any child who loses a parent and is expected to sit through a history test, for example? What can we say to a teenager who is suspended for lashing out, when what they really need is a trauma-informed space and appropriate supports to help him or her? What can we do about the invisible system that only sees behaviour, not the person? Inaction is not neutral; it is a choice. It is a political choice that leaves children behind, entrenches

inequality and prioritises budgets over lives. We in the Social Democrats choose that no child should be left behind. We must be brave enough to imagine what the education system Ireland can be for young people most at risk to ensure that they have an equal start, constant support and a bright future.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I thank my colleague for sharing her time with me, especially when she has such valuable insight to give and so much to say on the issue.

I wish to raise the issue of the school transport scheme. A key part of the education system that we provide is the ability for our children to get there, particularly those who are living in rural communities. This facilitates parents who might need to work and children living distant from the public bus route. It is a very important component of the service that the Department provides. I know the Minister is new in this role but, unfortunately, what we have seen to date is a year-on-year failure to provide a sufficient bus service for children who need it under the school transport scheme. There are issues across the country, but my county of Wicklow seems to be one of the worst impacted every year when there are difficulties. Oftentimes, literally the night before the students are due to go back to school at the end of August, parents are told there is no bus for them. Two years ago there was a situation whereby some of those students did not get their bus for six, seven or eight months after that point, despite having paid and having secured their tickets. One parent actually had to give up her job because she had to drive her child to school. The impact this had on families was enormous. Will the Minister make sure for the upcoming term that there is sufficient capacity in the system and that we have enough bus drivers and contractors on board? I know there was a review and recommendations were made, but we have not seen them rolled out yet. At the very basic level, we need to make sure there are enough buses, because it causes untold difficulties for students and families when those buses do not show up on time.

There needs to be a speedy resolution to the next-nearest school issue. There are an awful lot of issues with that, whether just by virtue of the fact that a child cannot get a place in their next school, but parental choice also needs to be reflected in that. Indeed, the distances will be reviewed as well, but primarily we need to make sure that there are enough buses.

I wish to raise a few specific issues relating to Wicklow, the first of which I raised yesterday with the Taoiseach. I do not know whether he has had a chance to mention it to the Minister yet, but there is a number of students in Greystones in sixth class who still do not have a place for the end of August. One of these children actually had to stay back last year. The child repeated sixth class because there was no secondary school place for last year. This is the child's second time getting caught up in the demand issue in Greystones. There are also problems in Newtownmountkennedy and around Wicklow town. What I asked yesterday was whether the Minister would send a liaison to talk to the parents. I have a number of names I can provide. The liaison should also be sent to the schools because they are caught in the enrolment process. The child may be No. 100 on the list. There is no way a school will be able to get through that and that administrative issue is the problem. We also need to look at a new school for Newtownmountkennedy because this is playing into part of this issue.

I want to talk very briefly about a fantastic school called New Court School in Bray. It is a special needs school. I was at the launch of its sensory garden a couple of weeks ago. The school had to fundraise for the sensory garden. It has no money and is now going on to another fundraising campaign to fundraise for swings. It is a special school and it has nothing there. The parents and the community do not have the energy to be fundraising for this. I will contact

the Minister about this. I would love it if the Minister could give the school and schools like it additional funding to help with those kinds of measures because they are so fundamental to the children who are there. Additionally, the school communities are not the same as many other school communities; they are much smaller and do not have the capacity to raise money in the same manner. I will raise that with the Minister separately.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I thank the Minister and the Minister of State for being in the House today. I am hugely proud of the education system in Ireland, partly due to the fact that there are a lot of educators in my extended family and there is a lot of experience with the educational system. I welcome that there seems to be a move in the education system away from a pure focus on class sizes towards investing in specialist resources, therapies and teams and concentrating these resources on those students and pupils who need them most. This is greatly welcome from my perspective.

I wish to touch on a few points. The first is DEIS plus. It was good to see the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, out on the northside today. He was very welcome. As he said himself, you cannot beat boots on the ground and going out and seeing what is happening rather than necessarily being in here. This is certainly applicable from my perspective. We visited three schools. I could make those three but I missed the fourth. It was great to have the Minister of State out with us. We touched on DEIS plus in one school. St. Joseph's National School in Bonnybrook in Coolock is one where the teachers work extremely hard with students and parents in what are sometimes very challenging circumstances. DEIS plus is a real opportunity for change and for upping the dial for those schools. It is in the programme for Government and I am delighted to see it there. It will likely have to be piloted. Coolock has had a lot of bad press recently and has featured in the media a lot. Coolock is a great location. There are great families and communities there. I ask that we look at piloting the DEIS plus scheme for those four or five schools that work together in Coolock and Darndale to see if we can make a real difference in the long term for them.

I also wish to mention Marino Institute of Education, MIE, down the other end of the constituency. It is a fantastic institution that has been turning out world-class teachers for a long time. They are teaching not just in Ireland but abroad as well. It is a bit of a hidden and quiet success story in the Irish education system because the institution does not toot its own trumpet the whole time. It just gets on with the job and does its work. MIE needs a long-term home within the Higher Education Authority. I encourage the Minister and the Minister of State to consider that over time we could work together to develop a long-term strategy for where that home for MIE would be so it will be possible for that fantastic institute to continue to turn out those great teachers who educate our young.

The last item I am going to raise is Gaelcholáiste Reachrann. It is located between Stapolin and St. Joseph's National School where we were this morning. It is a fantastic Gaelscoil delivering great education to students as Gaeilge. It has been seeking and waiting for year upon year - some 25 years plus now - for the buildings it really needs and deserves. I know it is a priority because we have discussed it several times. When the time comes, I ask again that the Minister of State will come out and visit the school. I hope we will finally be able to make a decision and give that school the priority it needs so those buildings are built and we can get on with it. Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: The running of a school community is no easy task. We are fortunate in Ireland to have incredibly talented, committed and highly educated teaching and man-

agement staff who are passionate in their roles as educators. They do so too often in challenging circumstances not of their own making. These are challenging circumstances of the Government's making because successive Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil Governments have chronically underfunded our schools. The INTO has called for a 20% increase in schools funding and a review of school finances. I recently reviewed the finances with one local school principal. It was apparent that there is a dire need. I was asked to pose the question as to why the ICT grant has not been paid yet this year and where that school's minor works grant is. Once ring-fenced funding is taken into account, each school is left on a shoestring budget of perhaps €20,000 to €30,000 to run the school for the year. How are schools to function on this level of funding? I ask the new Minister of State to examine and seriously consider progressing legislation co-sponsored by my constituency colleague, Deputy Matt Carthy, during the last Dáil that would mandate adequate funding for our schools. We must invest in reducing our class sizes. Over 51,000 primary school children were in classes of more than 30 last year. Overcrowding in classrooms reduces the quality of education, places an undue burden on educators and is, of course, a contributing factor in the recruitment and retention crisis.

The shortage in special schools and special classes is shameful. I acknowledge and welcome the pending opening of the interim special school in Monaghan and that we have 18 additional places we did not have before, but we need to see rapid progression on the opening of a permanent school. We also need rapid progression on the delivery of additional special classes. I hear too often from school principals that they feel they have done the work at their end. They have the space and have done the administration, and view the reason for the delays in getting classes up and running as lying within the Department of the Minister of State.

I also acknowledge the work of our school secretaries, school caretakers, SNAs, bus escorts and bus drivers. They are essential to the functioning of our schools. I appeal to the Minister of State specifically in terms of the secretaries and caretakers. This has been going on too long. Please deliver pay parity to them.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The title of this session is statements on a world-class education system. We must begin by saying we do get very good outcomes in many ways given Ireland is near the end or in the lower part of the OECD in terms of education spending, which is about 8% below the average. However, we would be wrong to think we have a world-class education system. We have an education system that is quite ableist, driven by results and focused on serving the needs of industry. There are, for example, the extra points introduced for maths, the whole points race and so on. We must put these provisos on the record.

We have a major crisis in what is called "special education". I do not particularly like that term because this is about education for every person, including anyone who is neurodivergent, autistic or disabled. It is really about inclusive education rather than about something special. We all know, though, that in the past anybody who fitted into those categories and did not conform was just omitted from the system at an early age as an early school leaver. I am sure the Minister of State has been at all the debates that have taken place here all week, so I will not rehash them. We need investment so we can recruit the staff, build the required buildings and, obviously, provide training. From having taught myself, I know it is a very particular area in which those working need specialist training.

In my area, we have the Danu 12. These 12 children were promised a place in the Danu special school but are now either sitting at home, staying in preschool or staying in unsuitable schools because the Minister of State's Department has not provided the modular building the

school was promised. I know the Minister of State visited last week and listened to the issues in this regard. That is great and is appreciated. One of the issues, to which I will return later, is teacher recruitment and retention, which is a key problem. It is even more problematic for special education because it is just much more difficult. Is the Minister of State going to take any measures at all to address this issue? An example would be special allowances. There is a special allowance to teach in the Gaeltacht and one to teach on an island. There used to be loads of special allowances, even for comprehensive schools. The Government is not willing to look at this aspect and this is a real problem. I will come back to this point later.

We also have a situation in Ireland where parents have to campaign for schools. This does not happen in most other developed countries. I represent a very multicultural area. I regularly go to meetings and people from other countries just cannot get over the fact it is necessary to launch a campaign to get a school in Ireland. Obviously, it is even more necessary for special schools. We have this whole issue of temporary buildings. Schools should be planned properly and tied in with development. We also have a problem with demographics with the Department of education continually in denial that when we build houses we will need schools and it just seems to be a real problem.

For example, the previous Minister said Ériu Community College did not need its own school and it is proposed to move that school 9 km away. It is a vast growing area. Tyrrelstown is also a fast-growing area. I will send details of 11 affected families to the Minister and she may be able to sort it out. There is no bus from Tyrrelstown to Onger where they have to go to school because they could not get into the local school. Bus Éireann has denied them school transport. Go Ahead has a bus but it does not operate in that area. What are they to do? Should they get one of the drones that plague the area?

We also have the ongoing saga of Castleknock Community College which will soon have 1,500 students. It is not the norm in Ireland to have a kind of high-school set-up. It does not have the pitches, facilities, etc., to deal with that. We also have ageing schools such as Coolmine Community School which was one of the first community schools in the country I believe. It has appealed to the Minister to access the emergency fund to repair the school roof. It has buckets on the floor. What sort of a system is that for about 1,000 students in the area? I ask the Minister to look into that. We need proper schools. We had a budget surplus for many years. Many students in St. Dominic's Community College cannot get into the transition year apparently because the funding for the school decreased which another real problem.

I also want to mention school type. We have seen many reports lately from TDs in the background saying it is nearly woke now to not want your child forcibly immersed into a religion. We need non-segregated schools, particularly in younger urban areas. In Ashtown on the Navan Road there is a massive demand from parents to have a multi-gendered multid denominational school; there is none in that area at all.

I want to discuss staff. Obviously, the education system thrives when it has committed staff. School secretaries balloted yesterday for strike action because of improper pensions and basically being treated very badly, as many women workers in this country are. It always seems to be women workers who are denied pension parity and are given precarity. We need to end precarity in education for SNAs and also for teachers.

I know the Minister has announced something recently. The teacher shortage is not really mentioned in the programme for Government at all. I am beginning to wonder if the Govern-

ment is denying that there is such a thing. I can absolutely guarantee that there is, particularly in urban areas where rents are very high. In January the INTO estimated that there would be 2,767 primary school teacher posts unfilled, a third of all posts. In March *The Irish Times* referred to an unpublished Department of Education and Youth report which showed 400 unfilled second level posts and also an additional 800 posts where teachers were not qualified in those subjects. We all know we can turn our hand to a lot of things but teachers are just not as good if they do have not the love and the interest in that subject.

The Minister should look to Australia and the UK where they are taking massive measures to recruit teachers and to keep them. I know of Irish students who have gone to do their teacher training in the UK because they are getting paid the equivalent of the average industrial wage. They get paid even more if they are teaching a subject where teachers are in short supply. They are attracting young people to go and why would young people not go if they are getting paid the equivalent of a wage? Australia has introduced hard-to-fill allowances so if a school cannot fill a position, it can allocate an extra \$20,000, for example. Those are the kinds of initiatives other governments are taking and there has not been a jot out of the Government here. We all know that unless it does that, it will not be able to solve the special schools crisis.

I will finish on leaving certificate reform. As an English teacher, I know it is wrong to make the leaving certificate 40% non-exam and allow students use AI. I know people can use AI but facilitating that is absolutely unbelievable. It will lower the standards in education completely. The Minister needs to listen to teachers on this. She needs to engage and not just set her face against that. Most of academia around the world is grappling with AI and trying to find ways to deal with it. We are in the very early stages. The Government seems to be saying, “Ah, sure look. We’re done with that. Leave them off.” However, many colleges and universities are coming back to exams rather than facilitating non-exam assessment because of AI.

An Ceann Comhairle: I hope Members might indulge me before I call Deputy Ward. I welcome in the Gallery a group of golf ladies from Cushenstown, New Ross, County Wexford.

Deputy Mark Ward: I take the opportunity to wish the best to both Ministers in their roles. There is not a TD on any side the House who does not wish them success because education is hugely important to our children. I want to raise a few local issues. Rathcoole Educate Together National School is currently in a temporary location in Citywest while it waits for a permanent building. It was told this would be a two-year temporary arrangement, but it has now been there for four years. It has now been told it will have to move to a new temporary location in the Newcastle area for the start of the new school term. This location will increase travel time for parents. A school bus has been provided by Department of education from Rathcoole to the current site in Citywest. The Department has indicated it will no longer provide school transport to the new temporary location. The reason for this is that there is another Educate Together school of the same denomination closer to it. In theory this is correct but the reality is that this is a temporary location in Newcastle and the school should be located in Rathcoole. This is a direct consequence of the delay in building a new Educate Together school in Rathcoole. Parents and pupils are paying the price for Fianna Fáil’s and Fine Gael’s ineptitude in school provision. I ask the Minister to get the Department to continue to provide a bus for the pupils as a temporary arrangement until the new Rathcoole Educate Together school is built. I will send her a note after this debate.

I also want to talk about my old school, St. Kevin’s Community College in Clondalkin. When I first attended the school 37 years ago, it was in temporary accommodation in Lucan.

We were using prefabs then which were 15 years old. Now, 37 years later, the school is in a new location on the Fonthill Road. Despite the provision of some accommodation over the years, the school is still using same prefabs that I first used 37 years ago. I know I have aged over the last 37 years, but imagine how much the prefabs have aged in those 37 years. They are over 50 years of age now. It is not fair on pupils or staff. The prefabs are damp and floors are literally unsafe. I walked across them and I could feel the floors moving underneath my feet.

Both the school and I are getting the runaround from the Department. We are getting contradictory responses back from the Department on why these have not been replaced. I was so concerned that I contacted the Health and Safety Authority in March about the floors after I walked across them and I have yet to receive a substantive response.

In 2025 we have a school still using prefabs that are 50 years of age. These prefabs are not the modern build temporary accommodation. These are prefabs that probably had a ten-year shelf life. They were probably five years past their use when I first used them 37 years ago. I ask the Minister to do everything in her power to try to get these prefabs replaced. I will send her a note after this debate.

Deputy Gillian Toole: As the very proud daughter, niece, granddaughter and friend of primary, secondary and tertiary educators, I very much welcome this opportunity for statements today. I will not repeat what I have heard from other contributors. The book *Poor* by Dr. Kathriona O'Sullivan of Maynooth University points to the importance of education as a freedom, as a gateway and as being life changing. The importance of the one special teacher and the influence they can have on a young child or even a teenager and the later path in life that they may take is never to be underestimated. It was most welcome to hear from the Minister, Deputy McEntee, about the engagement with the different teaching unions over recent weeks and the spirit of collegiality. The support of the teaching professionals is absolutely essential to ensure our young people will have that person of significance and that encouragement.

One area that overlaps with my background in health is emotional and sensory well-being as well as the academic side of our endeavour to be world leaders in education. On that emotional and sensory well-being piece - the Minister of State has heard me mention this at the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Autism - it is so important to support and enable every child to learn. Fantastic pilot projects and local initiatives are being played out and implemented, and I am aware of data having been gathered over the last five years and possibly even as far back as eight years. There is the process of story massage, drama therapy and art therapy that we are aware of, and there are the important nurture rooms in the school environment for any child who feels a little out of sorts, maybe even including a child who is classified as dysregulated from time to time. Those resources are as important as the members of the teaching community and the bricks and mortar that huge efforts are being made to deliver. One school that is within the city boundary, which might be a useful reference for a visit as an example of best practice, is St. James's in Dublin 8, both the primary and secondary. Melissa - whose surname escapes me but I can get the details for the Minister of State's office - and her colleagues are actually walking the walk and gathering the data. The children are benefiting immensely and that progression of the child from primary school to junior to senior cycle is self-evident. The school is only a short journey from this House. That might provide some food for thought for an expanded education journey.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: On Sunday, I was with students, staff and parents of Danu Community Special School in the Millennium Park because we have an annual walk, and I got chatting to them about some of the issues that are happening. Today, I was in St. Michael's special

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school in Chapelizod and there was more of a grilling from the students than any journalist would be proud of. It was a really important opportunity to hear from the students and parents.

I want to bring the Minister of State's attention to the anomalies and inequities for students and staff in special schools. We have 113 special schools and this is going to be relevant to pretty much every single one of those. They are faced with the challenge of staff recruitment. I will give the example of Danu Community Special School, which opened in September 2019. Only one SNA, one secretary and one principal remain. Staff turnover has been more than 95% since 2019. With the current teacher crisis, this is twofold for the school due to it being a Dublin school and a special school. The recruitment and retention of teachers who teach in special schools and special settings is in significant crisis. The school needs seven teachers for September 2025 out of an allocation of nine. That is what they are looking for for September, and that is along with all the other schools that are looking for teachers. There are a number of recommendations. They have sent or are planning to send this letter to the Minister of State, so I urge him to please get back to them in that regard.

The school is seeking a number of things, a couple of which Deputy Coppinger mentioned, such as an allowance and Montessori being allowed onto the teaching councils. They have a couple of solutions. The other issue they are talking about is a wraparound service with the Blanchardstown children's disability network team, CDNT, which they have at the moment. As was mentioned earlier, however, they are getting 12 new students. Thirty-eight of the students have a wraparound service with the CDNT. The school has not been given an assurance that the 12 new students who are hoping to start when these new Portakabins are provided in September will be included in that. They have been told they will not be included. It is inconceivable that 38 students would have a wraparound service and 12 new students would not. That absolutely needs to be addressed and those supports need to be given to them.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: The principal has 60 staff members-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: -----and yet the school is paid for only eight teachers. They do not get paid for all those other staff they are looking after.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I am going to send this email on to the Minister of State because there are really important solutions related to this as well. I really hope he considers them.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. I now call on the Minister of State to make his concluding remarks. He has ten minutes.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I thank colleagues right across the House for their contributions, not just during the discussion this afternoon on making Ireland's education system a world-class system and making sure every child can reach his or her full potential. I welcome the opportunity to speak on this issue and I thank Deputies for their contributions on it. I also thank the Minister, Deputy McEntee, for the huge amount of work and co-operation over recent months with regard to the many issues we face in the Department of education. I am delighted to be working with the

Minister on these issues.

As Minister of State with responsibility for special education and inclusion, my priority is to support all children with additional educational needs to reach their full potential. I have been working with families, children, schools and school communities in this regard over many years. I understand only too well the challenges that are faced by many families throughout the country. Since my appointment to this role in January, I have travelled almost the length and breadth of the country. I have been in many counties visiting a range of schools, whether mainstream schools with special classes or special schools. I thank the school communities for the work they do. I thank them sincerely for welcoming us but as well as that, for putting the issues they face daily out for us, as some Members have said. I see the work the school leadership, teachers, SNAs and all in the school community do to make sure we have a vibrant education system. There is no doubt about it that the school communities are working extremely hard. The commitment that they have to education within their school and within the wider community is evident in every classroom we go into or when we meet them. Much discussion has been had regarding disadvantaged education and how important education is for those who are disadvantaged. The education system is the great enabler. Tributes were paid to the enormous initiatives in education going back over the decades, nearly since the foundation of the State, as being one of the great enablers.

We have been talking to representatives from some of the schools over the last while. Some of the schools are in really disadvantaged communities, and the kids have such a love of their school communities. One of the presentations that was made on the wall in one of the schools we visited today was that the kids would love to see longer school days and would like to spend longer in school. That is completely unusual. It is certainly alien to me from when I was in school; the faster I could get out the door, the better. That is the point we have to take from that. One person from the school leadership spoke to us about how children will come up to them for a hug. We really have to go under that. We have to understand the importance of our days in school and what school communities are providing for in really disadvantaged areas. In any discussion we have on education, it is important to remember that we have many challenges but we have great participants. We have great people in the school leadership and teaching staff including the SNAs, caretakers, secretaries and all in the school communities. The work they are doing is second to none. A number of issues that still need to be resolved were raised across the floor. In many debates since my appointment, I have told the Dáil that I will work with might and main to ensure long-term improvements are made to special education provision over the coming years. I am as committed as the ink is in the programme for Government to making sure those changes take place.

The majority of children and young people with special educational needs are supported in mainstream education with their peers thanks to the substantial investment in special education over recent years. Over 20 years ago, I chaired the education committee in the Houses of the Oireachtas. At that time, we discussed provision in mainstream education. We have embraced that over the past two decades. A large number of students are in mainstream education.

However, we have to make sure that those children for whom mainstream education is not suitable have proper resources in terms of special classes. In the coming school year, there will be over 400 extra special classes. They are being worked through at the moment and sanction has been given to 399. One comes under section 37A. At the moment, it appears that we will have capacity within those 400 classes, but if necessary we will exceed that. We will have to work through to make sure there are teachers, SNAs and school buildings. There is huge en-

gement with the Department of education and the NCSE nationwide on this provision.

The numbers show we will have to open further classes in the 2026-27 school year. A number of special schools have opened and will open across the country. Some are in temporary locations, in Monaghan, Cork and elsewhere. I visited Belmayne today for the opening of a special school. The facilities are fantastic in the Educate Together school. Those classes are opening to make sure we have places for children with additional needs and children who need support in a special school.

Deputy Kenny referred to Carrignavar. We are working extremely hard and are very confident that we will be able to address any matters arising there. We are very satisfied that we will be able to deal with them and that the facility will open in temporary accommodation this September. It will move to permanent accommodation during the school year. We need to work to ensure that happens.

The NCSE workforce has increased by over 50% since 2020, with the recruitment of 160 additional staff. This has allowed the NCSE to complete over 1,700 school visits this year, which will be vital in establishing special school provisions. That is important because, as we have more SENOs in the field who are out among communities liaising with families and school authorities, we need to build trust between them. That will be a vital piece of the infrastructure as we go forward.

The Government recently took a decision on the development of a national therapy service to ensure that the therapists are employed by the NCSE and work in special schools, in the first instance, and special classes. Therapists are hugely important. For children with complex needs special schools, families are struggling to do the best they can for those children and to meet their needs not just during the school day but 24-7. We are putting the burden on parents to go to therapists after school, but it is important that we have therapists in schools and we are working to make sure that happens. That is an important ingredient. Where we have therapists in schools, the whole school community learns from them and the work feeds into best practice and what can be done to de-escalate issues.

In a number of schools we have visited over recent months, there are anomalies in that excellent teachers who have trained in a different jurisdiction have difficulty being recognised by the Teaching Council. We are committed to rectifying that. We need to make sure that the people who are providing a massive service in school communities can be retained in the roles they have. That is an issue that has arisen frequently because many people have qualifications from outside of the State.

Education is important for everybody. People talk about ableism and everything else. We have to make sure that we have the best system in place because we understand the importance of early intervention for children. We need to make sure we have the best possible education system integrated into existing services.

I thank all of those in the House for their contributions and look forward to working with Deputies, along with my colleague the Minister, Deputy McEntee, to ensure we can improve the system of education and that we have timely places for children. We do not want families going into May, June or July not being sure of a school place. Next year, we will bring back the dates to ensure we have consistency and information for families earlier in the school year.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Ceann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 39 and the name of the Member in each case: Deputy George Lawlor - To discuss the urgent need for a school gymnasium at a secondary school in County Wexford (details supplied). Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss the provision of emergency funding for the N70 Ring of Kerry road. Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - To discuss resources needed by the Garda to address organised crime in Limerick city. Deputy Aidan Farrelly - To discuss ongoing matters in respect of the reopening of Castletown House and public access to same. Deputy Donna McGettigan - To discuss necessary legislative amendments to increase the cap for the defective block grant scheme.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss the continued operation of, and current challenges with, the tenant in situ scheme. Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the need for disability services for people living in Lusk. Deputy Eoin Hayes - To discuss the level of exposure in the public finances to changes in the intellectual property, IP, holdings of large multinational companies. Deputy Claire Kerrane - To discuss the need for a new town school for Ballinasloe. Deputies Catherine Connolly, Mairéad Farrell and John Connolly - To discuss safety issues arising for a number of schools on the R336 (details supplied).

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - To discuss the impact of delays in funding for charities under the immigrant investor programme. Deputy John Lahart - To discuss the resourcing needs of a school in Templeogue (details supplied). Deputies Paul Murphy and Natasha Newsome Drennan - To discuss a public inquiry for conduct in care facilities during Covid. The matters raised by Deputies Jennifer Whitmore, Eoin Hayes, Claire Kerrane, George Lawlor and Pádraig O'Sullivan have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Charitable and Voluntary Organisations

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I want to raise with the Minister of State today the issue of the immigrant investor fund and the difficulties faced by a number of charities as a result of delays in funding. I thank him for coming to the House today. All too often, we do not get the responsible Minister in the House. It is very welcome that he is here today to answer questions.

A charity in my home constituency of Wicklow, St. Catherine's Association, does incredible work. It is a voluntary association and has worked with children and young adults with intellectual disabilities for many years. It is an invaluable service for hundreds of families across and outside the county. It ensures that each child and young adult can meet their full potential and are fully included in and feel part of their community. The work the association does is so important.

It is trying to expand its functions. It has planned and has approval for building an adult day centre, an administrative and training unit and four respite homes. This will increase the valuable services it provides. It applied for immigrant investor programme, IIP, funding in April 2022 and, three years later, still has not received it. As the Minister of State can imagine,

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that is causing huge difficulties for the charity. It has done all of the work and has the plans and designs in place. Planning permission has been granted. The diggers are ready, the land is available but the association has still not received any information from the Department on when the funding will be provided.

In July last year, the association was told it could finally access the donor funds, which is quite a significant sum, in the hundreds of thousands. Despite being told that, there is still no sign of the money. The association is becoming very worried at this point. Can the Minister of State provide any clarity on the project or the entire scheme?

4 o'clock

The scheme was closed but my understanding is that the process would happen as normal for all applications submitted prior to the scheme closing down. It seems to be a very long and protracted process. I understand the need for robust scrutiny but at some point it becomes a barrier and a stressful situation for these charities. There could be 100 charities in this situation. I know of another one in Kildare, as my colleague Deputy Aidan Farrelly has spoken to me about it. It is Sensational Kids and it is in dire straits waiting for the funding. It has proposed various business plans and it is waiting for this to happen. I hope the Minister of State can give us some clear indication of what will happen to the funds for St. Catherine's and whether they will be available soon. There are 250 children and their families relying on St. Catherine's for services. It provides a function that in most countries would be provided by the government. Because of this we should absolutely pull out all the stops to make sure it can provide the best service that it can, with all the support it requires from the State.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Colm Brophy): I thank Deputy Whitmore for raising this matter today. It is important to note that as Minister of State with responsibility for migration, I do not comment on individual immigrant investor programme applications. In general terms, I can inform Deputy Whitmore that my Department does not receive or hold funds at any stage in the IIP process, nor does it have any role in the administration of an approved project or investment fund. This is a private matter between a potential investor, or investors, and a potential project concerned.

Approval of an application under the IIP is not an endorsement of a particular project. What it means is that the investor has been approved and the investment meets the objectives of the IIP. The applicant in the IIP process is the investor and not the project owner. The State has no responsibility for the performance of an investment under the programme. This is a matter for the project owner to ensure delivery of an approved project within the timeframe set out in its business plan.

The immigrant investor programme was first introduced by the Irish Government in 2012, when the struggling Irish economy needed investment, to create business and employment opportunities in the State. The programme fulfilled its purpose, and changed circumstances means that such investment routes are no longer a good fit for Ireland, or the needs of a thriving economy and society.

In recent years, I am aware that concerns have been generally expressed about the immigrant investment programme by the EU Commission, the Council of Europe and the OECD in a number of studies on border security, money laundering, tax evasion and circumvention of EU law, and that such programmes gave rise to issues of a broader public policy concern.

While I am satisfied that the IIP was operated to the highest professional standards, the combination of these factors made it timely to close off the programme. The Government agreed to close the IIP to further applications from 15 February 2023. Only the project proposals currently on hand and, by default, the individual investor applications associated with them will be processed to completion. Appropriate arrangements have been put in place for the orderly winding down of the programme. Further information on this process is included in a detailed frequently asked questions document, which is available on the Department's immigration service website.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: That is an incredibly disappointing response. It is also very confusing. In one part the Minister of State said it is a private matter between a potential investor and the project concerned and that, essentially, he has nothing to do with the administration of it. In another part, he said the immigrant investor programme was first introduced by the Government and directed us to the Department's immigration service website for information on it. Clearly there is a role here for the Government. Clearly the Government set it up and facilitated it. The Government has a responsibility to those charities which, as I said, are providing a service that the Government is unable to, or will not, provide to ensure those charities, which applied in good faith for this programme under the auspices of the Government, get the money they are due.

I understand the Minister of State cannot speak about specific charities or applicants and that is fine. This response indicates to me that the Minister of State is completely washing his hands of it. Am I to go back to this charity and tell it this has nothing to do with the Government anymore, that it is on its own, and that the programme which the Government and Fine Gael set up has been closed and there are no guarantees about the funding? This charity has made plans on the basis it was approved for this funding. It has been waiting for three years. It is still in discussions or consultations. There is still information going backwards and forwards between it and the organising entity. What am I to tell these charities? Has this absolutely nothing to do with the Government now? I can tell the Minister of State that the charities will be very disappointed if they are told the respite centre for children will not go ahead, the day care centre for adults will not go ahead, and the training centre will not go ahead. It will cause great disappointment in Wicklow if I go back and tell people a Fine Gael Minister of State has told me it has nothing to do with the Government.

Deputy Colm Brophy: If Deputy Whitmore is quoting Fine Gael Ministers it is very important that she does so correctly.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: It is all written here.

Deputy Colm Brophy: To continue to answer Deputy Whitmore, I am aware that applicants and projects are anxious to receive a decision on their applications. I assure her that the IIP unit in the Department is committed to ensuring that all applications are examined on their own merits and endeavours to conclude decisions in a timely manner. The IIP unit continues to communicate with projects seeking to benefit from investments made in connection with IIP applications, and more specifically with regard to how the terms of the programme apply to their particular projects, while also monitoring all of the projects for delivery and compliance with the IIP.

In the event there are serious issues of concern arising about the delivery of a project, necessary action will be taken, which may include reporting the matter to the relevant authorities,

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pausing the process for further investor applications associated with the project or withdrawing the approval given. Since the closure of the programme, project applications have continued to be submitted to the evaluation committee for consideration. The committee makes its determination as to whether a project is suitable for IIP investment. If deemed suitable, the project application will be submitted to the Minister for final approval. At present, there are approximately 100 IIP project proposals and 1,600 investor applications undergoing or awaiting consideration. Given the volume of applications on hand, therefore, it is expected it will take a number of years to process all of the remaining categories of application for final decision. I assure Deputy Whitmore the IIP unit in the Department is doing everything possible to progress the applications as quickly as possible.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I would like the script for the follow-up response.

Deputy Colm Brophy: We will get it to Deputy Whitmore.

Tax Code

Deputy Eoin Hayes: As this is my first time speaking in the House, I want to start by thanking the Minister of State and the many Members of the House from all parties and none who have been so welcoming to me since the start of the Dáil term. While friendships may be tested through the course of political life, I hope I can earn and keep the respect of my colleagues, as I promise respect for them and for the mandate entrusted to me by the Irish people and by Bunreacht na hÉireann. It would be remiss of me not to thank also the more than 100 ardent campaigners and supporters who helped to get me elected, many of whom are here today. In particular I thank my campaign manager Kieran Clarke, and the two campaigners, constituents and members of my party, Amy and Paul, who have joined my staff. I was and am so lucky to be surrounded by such great friends and family. In particular I thank my mom and dad, Morina and Eamon, who have been the most loving and dedicated parents I could have asked for, and my partner Triona, who has been the greatest joy and most solid rock I have ever had. Lastly, but most importantly, I owe a profound gratitude to the thousands of constituents in south Dublin city who honoured me with their vote and the great privilege of representing them here. It has been deeply humbling to receive a mandate from my peers in the pursuit of a better country, guided by the principles of social justice and progressive politics. I take up the mantle with deep reverence for the trust they have placed in me and the encouragement they have given me since I have been elected.

Earlier this month, the *Business Post* published the work of a research team in UCD led by Professor Aidan Regan revealing what they called a \$1 trillion tax mirage, which they said was a conservative estimate by the way, in the domiciling of intellectual property assets by multinationals in Ireland to seek to exploit preferential tax rates on their global profits. To put this in context, it is altogether likely that the value of this multinational intellectual property exceeds the entire net wealth of Irish households, most recently estimated at approximately €1.23 trillion, including approximately €900 billion in housing assets. The authors of the report called it a paper-based prosperity which was fundamentally distortive to the Irish economy. I do not think anyone who has looked seriously at the tax mirage identified in this investigation can feel anything other than a horrifying sense of *déjà vu*. It appears that the accusation of Nobel laureate Professor Paul Krugman of “leprechaun economics” with regard to Fine Gael in the 2010s still applies. For the person sitting at home and perhaps watching these proceedings,

what does this fundamental distortion mean? What is the actual danger to the Irish economy and society? The same report identified this tax mirage as the main driving force in the rise in corporate tax receipts in the post-crash period. It was a rise from approximately €4 billion in 2013 to €21.4 billion in 2022 or from 4% of the State's budget to approximately one fifth. To put that in further context, given that Revenue has estimated that half of our corporate taxes are attributable to about ten companies, at the stroke of a pen in one foreign boardroom the State's coffers could lose approximately €1 billion. Such a loss of income to the State would be serious. One billion euro is about the size of our entire climate action budget or the annual capital expenditure of the HSE. That is just one boardroom. If all the multinational companies, say at the instigation of a US Administration, were to restructure their IP holdings, the damage could be in the tens of billions of euro. To put that in context, the total reduction in real voted Government expenditure in the middle of the financial crisis from peak to trough over multiple years was €10 billion, and I have not even spoken about tariffs.

Will the Minister of State recognise this existential threat to our financial viability and economy? Will he tell the House what the Government is planning to do to mitigate or manage this incredible concentration of risk in the public finances?

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I congratulate Deputy Hayes on making his maiden speech in the Dáil. I did not expect to be saying that at this stage. However, I congratulate him and his supporters who join him today.

As a small open globalised economy that is home to substantial levels of foreign direct investment, elevated levels of intellectual property, and by extension capital allowances associated with that intellectual property, are inevitable. The development, enhancement and exploitation of this intellectual property in Ireland forms a key part of the activities of multinational enterprises in Ireland and especially so in the IT and pharmaceutical sectors. Capital allowances associated with such activity are an ordinary part of any corporation tax system.

The OECD Base Erosion and Profit Shifting, BEPS, project introduced rules to better align substance and intellectual property. As a result, Ireland has seen a significant increase in onshoring of intellectual property in recent years, as multinational enterprises aligned intellectual property previously held offshore with the substantive economic activities that take place here, including the hundreds of thousands of jobs in these sectors in Ireland. Ireland was not the only country to benefit from intellectual property onshoring since the BEPS actions were agreed in 2015. Groups also onshored intellectual property to the US and to other jurisdictions worldwide where they have located substantial operations.

Recent articles highlight the exposure for the Irish economy of the recent onshorings, not least the vulnerabilities and concentration of risks associated with our corporate tax receipts. This Government and successive Ministers for Finance have been cognisant of these risks. While these revenues are welcome, they may well be transitory and cannot be relied on to fund ongoing spending commitments, which the Government has recognised through the establishment of two long-term funds, the Future Ireland Fund and the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund. It is important that we continue to support the establishment and growth of domestic businesses to improve the resilience of our corporate tax revenues.

Ireland's corporate tax policy, and broader industrial strategy, has consistently focused on attracting real and substantive investment that brings jobs and real activity to Ireland. The elevated level of intellectual property in Ireland is a natural outcome of having the substantial

operations of many of the world's leading multinational companies with investments here. This investment creates real and substantive employment and economic activity in the State. The IDA has indicated that employment by its client companies is in excess of 300,000 people, with more than 110,000 people employed in the information and communications services sector and more than 109,000 in modern manufacturing alone. This demonstrates the real economic activity taking place which is underpinned by the elevated levels of intellectual property which is exploited, developed and enhanced through those Irish entities. Ireland has fully implemented agreed new international tax standards, including transposition of the anti-tax avoidance directives, implementation of the BEPS action plan measures, and implementation of the OECD Pillar Two minimum tax agreement. Ireland's tax rules are in line with international norms.

We have been, and continue to be, an attractive location for foreign direct investment as evidenced by the good jobs provided by multinational enterprises in the State. Tax is only one element of this story, with other factors such as: a young, educated workforce; political stability; a common law legal system; access to the EU market; ease of doing business; tax certainty; and pro-business regulation also being key features.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: The Minister of State referenced a lot about substance and substantive positions and I am quite disappointed with that reply. I am not talking about BEPS agreements or Pillar Two or the OECD agreements. I am talking about intellectual property and the legal architecture that underpins it.

As far as I can tell, on the record of this House, this is the first time this report and the risks it highlighted - a potentially catastrophic decline in the State's resources - are being discussed. There is something deeply problematic about that. A few weeks ago Pat Leahy in *The Irish Times* quoted a Government official saying that there is no sense that the political system understands the danger we are in. If we need any proof of that, look no further. I am quite confused by the Government's position. On one hand, it projects an image of a prudent steward of the State's coffers, saying that corporate tax receipts will come down, but in the next breath, it dismisses concerns, regarding the change in exposure in IP holdings, saying the substantial operations, as the Minister of State just said, are located here. Which is it? Does the Minister of State actually know? In the Apple case, the Government argued the opposite. GNI* was instituted because GDP does not reflect reality.

We are not the only country, but we are perhaps the most significant country to be taking advantage of these kinds of legal structures. Notably, the Government's Central Statistics Office underestimated corporate tangible assets by one third less than this report. Can the Minister of State now give the public assurances the Government is taking this seriously and that it will act expeditiously, even if he does not have the full information?

That brings me to a broader point and question on the Irish economy. It is not simply a matter of rainy day funds. As a political system and as a country, we need to recognise that the tariff threats from the Trump Administration are an emergent feature of a shifting global trend in trade relations and the world economy. We need to reinvent industrial policy, making strategic investments that will allow for a less turbulent outlook. We need to invest in indigenous businesses and see a step change in State capacity and economic interventions. Only then, will we have the stable public finances and resilient economy and society the citizens of this Republic deserve.

Deputy Robert Troy: I find it somewhat bizarre that the Deputy is critical that this is the

first time this is being raised in the Dáil when he has been here six months himself and this is the first time he spoke.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: That is low, Minister of State.

Deputy Gary Gannon: He made more sense than the Minister of State after six months.

Deputy Robert Troy: Regardless, as I mentioned in my opening statement, capital allowances for intellectual property are a normal part of any tax system. The tax system provides relief in the form of capital allowances against trading income for capital expenditure incurred on the provision of intangible assets for the purposes of trade, both acquired and internally developed. IP allowances may only be deducted from income generated by those assets and a cap applies. A maximum of 80% of relevant profits may be offset by capital allowances in any year, which is below the EU average of almost 82%. Intellectual property is an important aspect of any modern multinational enterprise, but especially in the IT and pharmaceutical sectors, as the Deputy is no doubt aware.

Recent years have seen a substantial period of reform through the OECD BEPS programme which has resulted in real changes to global multinational activities, with firms moving away from locations with little substance to key centres in their value chains including Ireland, as activity in tax havens is wound down. Ireland has continued to implement many reforms to our tax systems in recent years, including the introduction of the EU anti-tax avoidance directive and defensive measures on outbound payments and we are fully compliant with the OECD standards of transparency and exchange of information about tax measures. Ireland has been to the forefront in implementing the OECD international tax agreement which seeks to address the tax challenges arising from the digitisation of the economy. Ireland has implemented the agreed OECD Pillar Two minimum effective taxation rate of 15% and we remain deeply engaged in the ongoing work to finalise Pillar One of the agreement. Our long-standing position remains that the international tax system needs to keep pace with how business is now conducted globally.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I move to the next Topical Issue, I welcome members of the Garda Síochána Retired Members Association from Donegal who are here in abundance at the behest of our former Minister, Deputy McConalogue. I welcome everybody here today.

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for allowing this debate to proceed this evening.

In 1996, the Department of Education amalgamated two schools in my constituency in Balinasloe, County Galway, to become Scoil Chroí Naofa. This was done with the understanding of the Department of Education that a new school building would be provided. That was 29 years ago.

There have been design teams appointed at several stages, planning permissions have been received and extended, and stage 2(b) submissions have been made - the latest submission to the Department is the third one to date. In 2016, the Department of Education informed the school's board of management that the new school would be going to construction that year, almost a decade ago. There has been false dawn after false dawn for this project and we are

no further on. I met with the principal of the school earlier this year and at that point, the stage 2(b) submission was being prepared and was later submitted in March of this year. The latest update I have from the Department is that it is being reviewed.

There are currently 300 children enrolled in the school with a growing waiting list that cannot be touched without additional capacity being made available. The school is unique in that it has been designated a DEIS band 2 school and has been since the status commenced in 2006. The school has three special classes; two for children with developmental language delay and one for children with autism. There would and will be capacity for two autism classes in the new school building. We know, of course, about the demand for special classes and the number of children and families who are left seeking special classes all the time. It is no different in Ballinasloe, where this school's catchment area feeds into Counties Galway, Roscommon and Westmeath. It is a very large catchment area.

The school is located across two buildings on opposite sides of a very busy road. It is on Society Street with traffic coming in and out of Ballinasloe and is one of the main entrances and exits out of the county town. This is really dangerous. Frankly, it is incredible in this day and age that one school is spread across two locations across the road from each other on a very busy road. One building dates back to the 1930s while the second was built in the 1970s. It is a single block with no insulation and single-pane windows. Due to the school being in limbo for the past 20 plus years, it has limited itself in carrying out remedial works because the understanding was that the new school was coming.

Energy bills account for the entire capitation grant every single year. According to Pobal, the Ballinasloe urban area - which is spread across several areas - is categorised as extremely disadvantaged. This is a community and town that is long overdue a new school. The length of time this has gone on is totally unacceptable. I want to see movement on this as a local representative for the area. I want to see this project moved to tender and into construction.

Almost 30 years after the commitment and promise was first made, the Government should look to move on the stage 2(b) submission which has been with the Department since March. The school needs to know when this is happening and have some kind of timeline so it knows this new build is coming. It has gone on for far too long.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter as it gives me an opportunity, on behalf of the Department of Education and Youth, to outline to the Dáil its current position on Scoil Chroí Naofa in Ballinasloe, County Galway. This project is included in the Department of Education and Youth's construction programme which will be delivered under the national development plan, NDP, as part of the Project Ireland 2040 framework. The major building project for the school referred to by the Deputy is currently at an advanced stage of architectural planning — stage 2(b) detailed design - where the design team has secured all statutory applications and is preparing the suite of tender documents. The brief for the project is to provide a new 16-classroom primary school with additional classrooms for pupils with special educational needs. The stage 2(b) submission has been received in the Department for review by the multidisciplinary team, and this review is currently under way. On completion of stage 2(b) design, a meeting of all stakeholders will be organised. On completion of the review, the Department will advise the school authorities and their design team of the progression of the project, including comments for the design team's attention regarding the stage 2 (b) submission report.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I thank the Minister of State for his response. It is welcome that the stage 2(b) submission made by the school is getting attention from the Department but what is important here is that we move things along as quickly as possible. After 29 years, the school and the entire school community have waited long enough. At this point, they have been through five principals while waiting for this school. It is a difficult position to put a school principal and board of management in, with some 300 children enrolled in the school and a growing waiting list. It is also difficult for a school that very much wants to do more for special education by opening special classes and being proactive in making that happen for children in the community.

I am constantly contacted by parents who are struggling to receive and access a special class place for their child. In this case, I was told about some children last year in south Roscommon whose siblings were in the school in Ballinasloe but their brothers and sisters could not attend because the school is at capacity. The real reason - I emphasise the need for progress on this - is the position the school is in across two sides of a busy road.

I again press upon the Minister of State that while I appreciate there has been movement relating to the stage 2(b) submission, this is the third 2(b) submission to go in and this really needs to be the last one. We need to see progress. We need a timeline for when we will see this project go to tender. We need to see the sod turned and construction begin. This has gone on far too long. Many of the children of Ballinasloe should have seen this school and of course, many of them will have gone on to secondary school and far beyond that by the time we get to this point. Again, there is a safety concern. I would appreciate if the Minister of State would bring this back to the Minister.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I will bring that back to the Minister on the Deputy's behalf. I know there were delays with this relating to a change to increase the number of classrooms, as well as proposals by the local authority to alter the road layout and access. This necessitated a new planning application, as I am sure the Deputy is well aware. The final grant of that planning permission for the project, as currently designed, was received from the local authority in September 2023.

Under Project 2040, the Department of Education and Youth is investing well in excess of €5 billion during this period to add capacity and develop and upgrade school facilities. The Department of Education and Youth has a strong track record of delivery of school building projects and this was again seen in 2023, notwithstanding the wider construction sector environment. Since 2020, the Department has invested in the region of €5.9 billion in our schools throughout the country, involving the completion of more than 1,350 school building projects. The Department continues to support the delivery of extensive schools infrastructure programme which incorporates best practice.

I again thank Deputy Kerrane for raising the question and for giving me the opportunity on behalf of the Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy McEntee, to reassure her that the Department is conscious of the need to continue to support the operation of the school system and intends to provide clarity for individual schools mentioned by the Deputy and its school building project as quickly as possible.

School Facilities

Deputy George Lawlor: CBS Secondary School in New Ross currently has an enrolment of 413 students. It is a coeducational DEIS school and remains the only secondary school in County Wexford without a sports hall. This is a significant disparity which leaves the students and teachers at the school at a significant disadvantage. It is my understanding that the Department of education has already approved, in principle, the construction of a full-sized sports hall internally to comprise of 594 sq. m with an overall scale of 1,048 sq. m if you include all the storage and ancillary services. An action plan is now urgently needed for the funding to turn the approval into reality. The absence of such a facility in this school not only impacts on the ability to deliver a comprehensive physical education curriculum but also contradicts previous Government strategies for encouraging youth participation in sports and physical activity. We all know these are crucial for student well-being. Investing in a sports hall aligns with national priorities to promote health, fitness and inclusion in education.

The current PE facilities in the school are grossly inadequate and present numerous challenges, particularly in terms of health and safety. There are only two outdoor basketball courts, which are covered in tarmac. This surface is deteriorating, with large cracks appearing in several areas. The outdoor grass area is very uneven and sloped and unsuitable for safe sporting activities. While the school does have an indoor sports area, it is essentially a large classroom. I was in it for the Darkness Into Light event a couple of weeks ago and it really is just a large classroom. The school is expected to carry on its PE activities there. All ball sports or energetic activities are ruled out due to the size of the room. The equipment for PE is stored in a cargo container with no electricity. This creates its own safety risks, particularly during the winter months when light is poor.

The inadequacies in the current set-up extend to health and safety concerns. The outdoor yard is hazardous, especially during wet conditions. The school is also unable to offer students proper changing and shower facilities after their PE classes. Beyond the immediate concerns of health and safety and practicalities, the ability to deliver a comprehensive and varied PE curriculum is significantly hampered. Unfortunately, planning is often dictated by weather and facility limitations, rather than the students' needs. This should not be the case for students in a DEIS school.

Believe it or not, the school celebrates its 175th anniversary this year, yet the sports and PE facilities in the school have seen little progress since 1849. A sports hall would also serve a broader purpose in the school community. It would provide essential space for whole-school events such as assemblies and celebrations. At present the only option for gathering the entire student body together is the local parish church in New Ross. The school has had to hire outdoor stages for school awards and other events. Obviously, these pose logistical challenges when weather conditions are unfavourable.

A sports hall would also provide suitable space for hosting exams, which the school currently struggles with, given the limited indoor facilities. The school is a central part of New Ross town. It offers facilities, albeit limited, to the New Ross Musical Society, St. Michael's Theatre Musical Society, New Ross Drama Workshop and the Polish school. The school also offers its limited outdoor facilities to New Ross Town FC and to United Striders AC. They make use of the off-site fields, which are approximately 1 km from the school. Given the constraints, the school really does need this facility. It should be an urgent addition to this school

after 175 years.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter as it provides me with an opportunity to clarify the position in relation to the Department of Education and Youth's plans for upgrading school buildings, including CBS, New Ross, County Wexford. As the Deputy is aware, the school had an enrolment in 2024 of 413 pupils. This represents an increase of 4% in the past five years. The Department approved significant capital funding for the school under the additional school accommodation scheme in 2019. The approved project was for the provision of four general classrooms, one special education tuition room, one DCG room and one home economics room. This project was devolved to the school authorities for delivery and the project is currently at tender stage.

The Department's planning and building unit also received an application, in June 2017, from the school seeking capital funding for the provision of a PE hall. The school authority was informed in writing that it was not possible to consider the application at that time. However, approval was given to the school authorities in 2022 to include funding for master-planning the future build of a PE hall in conjunction with the 2019 project.

Since 2020, the Department has invested more than €6 billion in schools throughout the country, involving the completion of more than 1,375 school building projects. Between projects currently under construction and projects moving to construction in the coming months, investments by the Department of Education and Youth are adding more than 610,000 sq. m of new and modernised capacity to our school estate. This is a record level of investment in school buildings. It will expand the number of school places, significantly increase provision for special education and upgrade and modernise our school infrastructure. The impact of this will be felt in communities across the country.

The programme for Government recognises the importance of strong capital investment in the school building programme and supporting this with enhanced allocations through the NDP process. A future strengthened focus on refurbishment of existing school stock will have different strands and will include a PE build and modernisation programme which will enable students in post-primary schools to have access to appropriate facilities to support PE provision, particularly in the context of the roll-out of PE as a leaving certificate subject. Enhanced and modernised PE facilities will also provide important amenities for local communities. However, the main focus of the Department's capital funding over the past decade and for the coming period is on the provision of critical additional capacity to cater for changing demographics and children with special educational needs. The Department manages the overall school building programme, ensuring that areas under the greatest pressure for additional school places are prioritised. This reflects the Department's fundamental objective of ensuring the availability of a school place for every child.

Deputy George Lawlor: I thank the Minister of State for his response. However it is quite disappointing to discover that in this day and age, considering issues of mental health, well-being and the importance of physical activity, a PE hall does not appear to be on the agenda for this school. This is the only secondary school in County Wexford that does not have a PE hall or a gymnasium. The school is expected to operate with below substandard facilities, yet the response is that it is not a priority. We hear talk day in, day out that the provision of facilities for physical activity to improve the well-being and mental health of people is to the forefront. Here we have a situation where a DEIS school which has an enrolment of 413 students is expected to operate in what is, in effect, a large classroom. It is expected to operate in substandard

conditions at a time when we are talking about making PE a central component of the leaving certificate. It makes no sense whatsoever.

I appreciate that the Minister of State is here today on behalf of the Minister for Education and Youth. I ask him to bring this back to the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and emphasise the importance of this issue for the students, parents and teachers of this school. They are battling and running up a hill trying to provide facilities that are available tenfold in other schools in the immediate area. This school deserves recognition and support from the Government and the Department of Education and Youth. The Department is not known for being hasty, as the Minister of State well knows, when it comes to the provision of facilities. This is an urgent request from the pupils, teachers and families of those who attend CBS New Ross. I ask that this be brought to the Minister for her urgent attention.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I take the Deputy's remarks on board and will bring the issue to the attention of the Minister. As I outlined in my earlier contribution, a range of projects are being delivered across the school area. The priority is for the Department to ensure that there are places available for every student for the next school year. In the context of that and the points the Deputy has made, I will bring his views back to the Minister and make sure she is aware of them.

Housing Schemes

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: This has been an issue for many of us across the House over the past couple of months. It has been flagged repeatedly by Government TDs as well as Opposition TDs. I would like to specifically talk about Cork city and county. Some 33 families in Cork city and around the same number in Cork county are currently in limbo. They are unsure what is happening with their applications for the tenant in situ scheme. I have seen the various pieces of correspondence between Departments and the local authorities over the past eight months. Having read that correspondence it was quite clear to me that there was permission for the local authorities to exceed their initial allocations by up to 50%. Both Cork City Council and Cork County Council have taken advantage of that and tried to progress additional applications for the tenant in situ scheme. I understand why the Department of housing and the Department of public expenditure might have concerns about the way the scheme is being utilised by some local authorities, which were perhaps covering up for their own shortcomings in other areas of housing delivery and used the scheme to get out of the fix in which they found themselves. However, I can safely say that was not the case in either Cork City Council or Cork County Council where the scheme was utilised in the spirit in which it was intended, such as cases of families in danger of becoming homeless and going into emergency accommodation. Cork City Council and Cork County Council are, unfortunately, being punished because every local authority in the country has been tarred with the one brush. If the scheme is to be tightened up I would prefer that to be focused on the local authorities that are not doing their job and that are letting the side down, rather than punishing local authorities like Cork City Council and Cork County Council. By any metric – be it social housing delivery, affordable housing delivery or the delivery of private homes – both Cork City Council and Cork County Council have delivered. That is patently clear from the available figures.

I am deeply disappointed because, like all Deputies here, I am dealing with people in clinics weekly, many of whom are on the tenant in situ scheme and waiting for it to be unpaused, which

is essentially what has happened in both Cork City Council and Cork County Council. The sale of approximately 30 properties is currently paused in both local authorities. It is only a matter of time before the landlords get fed up and enforce the eviction notices. More than likely, the properties will be sold privately and the tenants will have to enter emergency accommodation. We must get our act together in the coming weeks. I have spoken to the Taoiseach, the Minister for housing and the Minister for public expenditure about this and I believe a resolution is on the way, but while we wait for it to be introduced I fear that more families will not avail of the scheme and more local authorities will not be able to draw down funds for the scheme, which is unfortunately likely to lead to more families going into emergency accommodation. I would appreciate it if the Minister of State could give me an update on the resumption of the scheme, which has effectively been paused in both Cork City Council and Cork County Council.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I thank Deputy O’Sullivan for giving me the opportunity to reply to him on this issue. The Government is providing €325 million in 2025 for local authorities to buy second-hand properties, with a particular focus on the tenant in situ scheme, where tenants in receipt of HAP or RAS receive a notice of termination. While the clear focus of the Government must remain on increasing the supply of new-build social and affordable homes, a targeted social housing acquisition programme has been, and will continue to be, an important part of the policy response.

The social housing acquisitions circular that issued to local authorities recently sets out the revised arrangements for second-hand social housing acquisitions in 2025. Under the revised arrangements for second-hand acquisitions in 2025 local authorities will receive a capital funding allocation for the acquisition of homes for the following priority categories: the tenant in situ scheme; elderly and disabled persons; exits from homelessness; and buy and renew acquisitions that tackle vacancy. The provision of a capital funding allocation will help to promote best practice in obtaining value for money and provide local authorities with the flexibility to respond to needs and priorities locally within the categories of need being prioritised.

Despite coverage to the contrary, the eligibility criteria for the tenant in situ acquisitions in 2025 are not overly restrictive. The guidance is largely the same as what issued in June 2024 and is not substantially different to what was required in 2023. The Department asked local authorities, as it did in previous years, to ensure that they are responding to a valid notice of termination where there is a real risk of homelessness and to examine all options for the ongoing accommodation of the household before progressing as a last resort with an acquisition. The Department also asked that local authorities give priority to families with children, older persons or people with a disability who are at serious risk of homelessness. However, prioritising households should not be interpreted as excluding any household and the final decision on each individual acquisition rests, as it should, with the local authority.

Since the introduction of the tenant in situ scheme in 2023, a significant number of homes have been acquired. In the period 2023 to 2024, more than 3,300 second-hand acquisitions have been completed, of which more than 2,100 have been tenant in situ acquisitions where tenants in receipt of HAP or RAS had received a notice of termination.

The tenant in situ acquisitions programme was introduced by way of Government decision in 2023. The programme for Government commits to the continuation of tenant in situ acquisitions as an option for local authorities. Currently, there is a strong pipeline for second-hand social housing acquisitions, with more than 700 acquisitions in the pipeline. We have assured all local authorities of our continued support for their acquisitions activity.

22 May 2025

To the end of April, local authorities have only drawn down €65 million or 20% of the €325 million which has been allocated for second-hand acquisitions in 2025. I again thank Deputy O'Sullivan for raising this issue.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I thank the Minister of State. I might pick up on the last point. It is interesting to hear that only 20% of the fund has been drawn down. I know that in the case of both Cork City Council and Cork County Council they have drawn down the full allocation for 2025, or committed to it. If only 20% of the funding has been drawn down, could the reallocation of the funding from other local authorities not be considered if they have not drawn it down? Does the Minister of State have figures for 2024 which show whether the full allocation was drawn down? I am interested in hearing about that.

The Minister of State referred to the merits of the scheme. I do not need to be convinced of how good the scheme is; we all know the scheme works. As he outlined, it has delivered 3,300 second-hand acquisitions. It is a great scheme. I just do not understand why we are barring people from availing of it, which is effectively what we are doing. Whether we like to admit it here or not, we are doing that because a commitment was given to local authorities to go beyond the 2024 allocation and proactive local authorities such as Cork City Council and Cork County Council did exactly that. They used the scheme to its fullest extent and then they went beyond it, as per the circular, and exceeded their targets by 50%. They were permitted to do that. At that time, nobody flagged with either local authority in Cork or elsewhere that the money would affect their budget in 2025, which is what has happened. The logical step is to increase the budget for 2025 to allow people to engage with the scheme and to allow local authorities to start acquiring more properties. To be fair to her, the director of services in Cork City Council very rarely makes a public comment about Government decisions like this, but she said this would have a significant effect on the prevention of homelessness in Cork. That is the reality of what we are doing.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I again thank Deputy O'Sullivan for his contribution. I appreciate the sincerity with which he has raised this issue. We are committed to responding positively to it. My understanding is that Cork City Council's allocation for second-hand acquisitions in 2025 is €20 million. At the end of April, it had drawn down €6.9 million or 34% of its allocation. The Cork County Council allocation for second-hand acquisitions in 2025 is €15 million and at the end of April it had drawn down €0.5 million or 3% of its allocation.

The Government decision of 4 March 2025 decided on a total of €325 million for second-hand social housing acquisitions in 2025. The approach to funding allocations was a change from the approach taken in 2023 and 2024, when local authorities were issued with a guide number of acquisitions. The intent is to allow local authorities negotiate the acquisition costs with vendors and landlords and to achieve the best value for money. Each local authority has now received its individual allocation, with a total allocation of €35 million for Cork City Council and Cork County Council for 2025.

For acquisitions where there is a tenant in situ, local authorities will assess the options available in each case and decide on the appropriate action. Prioritising vulnerable households for support under the scheme is important, but it does not mean excluding others. It will be a matter for local authorities to respond to local needs. I assure the Deputy that the Department of housing will continue to engage with local authorities on any challenges that have emerged, so as to ensure the tenant in situ acquisitions remain an option in 2025 where other solutions cannot be found.

Broadcasting (Oversight of RTÉ Accounts) (Amendment) Bill 2024: Second Stage [Private Members]

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

I hope the Minister will withdraw his amendment killing this Bill and support it as it stands. We ask those on the Government benches to also support this Bill as it would do what all parties agree needs to be done and bring RTÉ under the remit of the Comptroller and Auditor General. I have read the media reports that the media Minister, Deputy Patrick O’Donovan, has outlined to his Government colleagues that it is his opinion that this Bill does not go as far as the Government’s proposed legislation and, therefore, the Private Members’ Bill will be opposed. I have read the media reports that his view is that our proposal differs from the approach by the Government in two substantive ways. First, he believes it does not provide for the accountability of the director general of RTÉ to the Committee of Public Accounts for RTÉ’s financial statements or value-for-money matters. If that were proposed as an amendment, we would support it.

His other objection is that it does not allow the RTÉ board the discretion to appoint a regulated private sector auditor in addition to the Comptroller and Auditor General. I would ask whether this matters. The external auditors that RTÉ had for decades did not expose or uncover any of the financial scandals or irregularities that we now know were common in RTÉ. Their ineptitude was exposed at the Committee of Public Accounts and the media committee in 2023 and 2024. RTÉ spent a whole lot of public money on these external audits for a whole lot of box-ticking and nothing else. We then had auditors’ reports on the previous auditors’ reports, or special examinations done to see why so many things were missed. This is simply throwing good money after bad. TG4 was audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General during this time and did not have the financial irregularities that RTÉ had. Again, I am not sure why the Minister would insist on a duplication of work.

This is a simple Bill that does one thing we all agree needs to happen: bring RTÉ under the remit of the Comptroller and Auditor General. I do not understand why the Minister wants to delay that. I hope that his response gives a detailed reasoning as to why he would purposely delay RTÉ coming under the remit of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

The Minister’s alternate Bill is 93 pages long and includes 31 heads of Bill. I am not here to dig into the technicalities of it or nit-pick at the minutia of the proposed Government Bill. I am not here to oppose it, tear it down or have a go at the Minister on its content. I am not here to rubbish it because it was not my idea. I am sure there are many aspects of it that we in the Sinn Féin Party would happily support. I know we would positively contribute to its passage through the various Stages. However, the reality is that that would be a long time from now and possibly anything up to two years.

The Bill we are putting forward today passed First Stage on Tuesday, 27 February 2024. The Bill was not opposed by the Government and there was no debate. We all agreed that this needed to be done. We moved to introduce this Bill in the face of Government inaction on the RTÉ debacle. Even the former RTÉ chairwoman, Siún Ní Raghallaigh, stated that the then media Minister, Catherine Martin, had a “hands-off” approach in relation to the national broadcaster. She also stated that she would like to see RTÉ under the remit of the Comptroller and Auditor General. The Government had a year of evidence that RTÉ needed to be brought under the remit of the Comptroller and Auditor General but it did not act.

22 May 2025

In 2023 and 2024, the media committee and the Committee of Public Accounts examined the running of RTÉ. The flip-flops may have generated the headlines but the under-the-table payments to RTÉ's top star at the time, misleadingly labelled as consultancy fees, and the non-sense reasons given, exposed the misuse of the barter account. RTÉ used this separate account outside of its main financial statements to record transactions that involved goods and services exchanged for advertising. Cash payments from the barter account resulted in a punishing 35% additional cost yet the Government did not move to change anything. The complete dereliction of duty and responsibility from RTÉ executives was laid bare for months, for the nation to see, yet the Government did not move to change anything.

After reading back on the debates when this Bill was introduced last year, I was reminded of the contribution by my party colleague, Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh, that in the midst of the hearings, Deputy Paschal Donohoe, in the Minister's seat, categorically ruled out the Comptroller and Auditor General taking control of RTÉ in light of the events happening at the time. In March 2024, the Committee of Public Accounts recommended that the Government bring RTÉ back under the statutory remit of the Comptroller and Auditor General so RTÉ would become accountable to the committee, which can examine and report to Dail Éireann on the annual accounts of designated public bodies following audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General. Based on the evidence before it, the committee believed that decisions taken by RTÉ demonstrated a lack of rigorous financial controls, poor communication and little transparency, and amounted to a failure of governance which, combined, had damaged public trust in an organisation for which trust should be paramount. Yet again, the Government did not move to change anything.

We in Sinn Féin knew that something had to be done. In the face of Government inaction, and with more and more mismanagement of public moneys at RTÉ being exposed, we wrote this Bill and submitted it to the Bills Office. Then, in October 2024, that Government, which is essentially the same as this Government, with the Green Party then instead of the Lowry group now, announced its intention to introduce its own Bill. That was eight months after this Bill passed First Stage in the Dáil. This week, the Minister sent his general scheme of the Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill to the joint committee on communications, culture, arts, sport and media for pre-legislative scrutiny, which will conclude in September. It could be two years after we introduced this Bill before his Bill will get to the same stage. I do not think this House has the time to see a duplication of work on bringing RTÉ under the remit of the Comptroller and Auditor General, particularly when we all agree on what needs to happen.

There are 1,000 things the committee on sport, arts, media and communication could be working on instead of examining that particular aspect of the Government Bill, which will do what this Bill already does. We could use those hours to examine the RTÉ €3.6 million write-down on a failed IT system. We could be digging into RTÉ's history of bogus self-employment and what resolving that will mean for the national broadcaster's finances. We could use those hours to examine the Arts Council's accounts and look at the €6.7 million spent on an abandoned IT system project, or the National Gallery's purchase of an unused scanner costing almost €125,000, or whatever is the next financial scandal that will arise under this Government. If there is one thing we have learned recently, it is that there probably will be another financial scandal.

Anyone who knows me knows I want to work in collaboration with people around me for the greater good. If we did not have this Bill already before the House and ready to move to Second Stage, I would be happy to wait for the Government's Bill. The 1990 Broadcasting

Act, introduced by the Fianna Fáil Minister, Ray Burke, allowed RTÉ to appoint its own auditors instead of the Comptroller and Auditor General having oversight. We can undo that wrong today. Let us not drag our feet. Let us not duplicate our work and waste this House's time and the committee's time going over old ground. Let us work collaboratively and move this Bill forward now.

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "That" and substitute the following:

"Dáil Éireann declines to give a second reading to the Broadcasting (Oversight of RTÉ Accounts) (Amendment) Bill 2024, on the grounds that a general scheme achieving the same policy objective has been referred to the relevant Oireachtas Committee for pre-legislative scrutiny."

Cuirim fáilte roimh an deis seo labhairt le Dáil Éireann ar an mBille seo. I dtosach báire ba mhaith liom aitheantas a thabhairt don méid oibre atá déanta ag an Teachta Ó Snodaigh ar an mBille. I acknowledge the work of Deputy Ó Snodaigh in preparing this Bill and of Deputy Byrne in proposing it today.

The reassignment of the Comptroller and Auditor General as auditor of RTÉ is something that has broad support across the House. It was one of the key recommendations made in the review of governance and culture in RTÉ prepared by the expert advisory committee chaired by Professor Niamh Brennan. In May last year, the Government decided to accept in principle all of the recommendations of that review. In October last year, the general scheme of the broadcasting (amendment) Bill was published so it is not the case that nothing was done. The general scheme gives effect to all of the legislative recommendations of the expert advisory committee, including the assignment of the Comptroller and Auditor General as auditor of RTÉ.

The programme for Government commits to enacting new legislation to ensure that the corporate governance model in RTÉ is open, transparent and appropriate to its public service mandate. In line with this commitment, last month, the Government approved the publication of a revised general scheme, which retains the totality of the initial general scheme while also providing for additional measures to ensure that the responsibilities of RTÉ as a public service media provider reflect the level of public funding provided to it. The general scheme represents the most comprehensive set of reforms to the governance and regulation of public service media since the Broadcasting Act 2009. It will enhance accountability, transparency and value for money not just in RTÉ but also in TG4, as our public service media providers, and establish a new statutory framework to support the provision of public service content by the wider media sector.

The assignment of the Comptroller and Auditor General is a key, but not the only, provision in reforming the legislative underpinning for corporate governance in RTÉ. In line with the recommendations of the expert advisory committee on governance and culture, the general scheme also strengthens the functions and duties of the boards of both RTÉ and TG4 and expands the functions, duties and accountability of both directors general. In particular, the boards of both public service media providers will be required to hold their respective directors general to account for their management of the organisations. This reflects the recommendations and findings of the expert committee on governance and culture in respect of the relationship between

the board and executive in the lead-up to the payments scandal.

Earlier this month, I referred the general scheme for pre-legislative scrutiny to the Oireachtas committee with responsibility for media policy.

5 o'clock

I understand that the matter was considered at the first meeting of the Oireachtas committee on 14 May and that officials from my Department briefed the committee yesterday on the general scheme. It will be entirely at the discretion of the committee to decide how long it spends on that. If there is any great sense of urgency, there is no reason it should take two years. It is entirely in the hands of the committee to deal with this. The committee can sit as many times a week as it wants. If it wants to discuss any issue, however many meetings it wants to hold, there will be no hindrance. It is unfair to my officials to suggest my Department will somehow hamper other investigations. That is not the case, as was spelled out to the committee yesterday.

Given that the general scheme, including the provisions relating to the Comptroller and Auditor General, is currently before the Oireachtas committee, I propose that this Private Members' Bill be declined a Second Reading by the House. I do not see the merit in bringing forward separate elements of the reforms contained in the general scheme in stand-alone Bills. Were this Private Members' Bill to pass Second Stage, it would be referred to the same Oireachtas committee now considering the general scheme for scrutiny before it could progress to Committee Stage. This would appear to be duplicative in the extreme.

There are two substantive differences between the Bill being considered today and the general scheme undergoing pre-legislative scrutiny. First, the Bill does not provide for the accountability of the director general of RTÉ to the Committee of Public Accounts for RTE's accounts, value-for-money matters or any other matters that may be addressed in a special report prepared by the Comptroller and Auditor General. This is a standard but nonetheless necessary provision in legislation governing State bodies, as it identifies the officer in the body accountable to the Committee of Public Accounts and the nature of that accountability.

The general scheme also provides expressly for the accountability of the directors general of both RTÉ and TG4 to the Committee of Public Accounts. In doing so, it is extending that accountability to the director general of RTÉ and expanding the current provisions relating to the accountability of the director general of TG4.

Let us recall that the Committee of Public Accounts required a specific motion of Dáil Éireann in July 2023 to enable it to examine the presenter payment issues and related governance failings that arose in RTÉ. It is absolutely necessary that the director general of RTÉ be directly accountable to the Committee of Public Accounts. That is not part of the Deputy's Bill, however. While an audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General has significant teeth, accountability to the Committee of Public Accounts adds a further level of transparency and ensures that the people's elected representatives can scrutinise the chief executive officers of public bodies which are, after all, ultimately owned by the people.

The second substantive difference between the general scheme and this Bill is that the Bill will remove the discretion of RTÉ's board to appoint a regulated private sector auditor. In contrast, the general scheme provides the RTÉ board with the authority to appoint a regulated private sector audit firm to carry out an annual audit, in addition to the mandatory annual audit to be carried out by the Comptroller and Auditor General. This practice has been adopted in the

university sector and in respect of the only other commercial State body subject to a Comptroller and Auditor General audit, Uisce Éireann. In this context, it is also important to note that, under the Companies Act 2014, at least one of RTÉ's active trading subsidiaries will continue to require an audit by a regulated private sector audit firm. In particular, it is highly likely that RTÉ's subsidiary which manages the transmission network, 2RN, will continue to require a regulated private sector auditor in the coming years given its size. The Bill throws up a clear anomaly in that this would not be allowed and there would be effectively no audit of 2RN.

The key similarity between the general scheme and the proposed Bill is that both appoint the Comptroller and Auditor General as auditor of RTÉ. This will have two effects. First, the Comptroller and Auditor General will carry out an audit of RTÉ's annual accounts and, second, the Comptroller and Auditor General will have the discretion to carry out value-for-money examinations of RTÉ.

The expert advisory committee on governance and culture in RTÉ emphasised that the Comptroller and Auditor General has a more expansive role than a regulated private sector auditor. In particular, the expert advisory committee referred to value-for-money considerations. The special reports of the Comptroller and Auditor General have been vital in recent years in focusing on issues ranging from individual property transactions and procurement to financial governance and reporting standards. The reports continue to drive change and reform across in a number of public bodies.

The national counter-disinformation strategy, published last month, emphasised the importance of a trustworthy information environment in the context of growing disinformation, both in Ireland and internationally. In this context, trust in public service media as a reliable source of information is more important than ever. Trust, as we know, must be earned and maintained. While the assignment of the Comptroller and Auditor General is certainly one mechanism that will build trust, it will not in itself build and restore public trust in RTÉ. That is why I have brought forward a general scheme which contains a comprehensive set of reforms to improve transparency, accountability and value for money in the public service media providers.

I have already mentioned the changes to the legislative basis for corporate governance in RTÉ and TG4, including the strengthened role and duties of the board and accountability of the directors general to the board. These changes are not happening in a vacuum; they are designed to copper-fasten and underpin the reforms being implemented by the new leadership in RTÉ, both at board and executive level.

In terms of value for money, the assessment of the Comptroller and Auditor General is, as set out in law, *ex post* and focused primarily on financial procedures and the economy and efficiency of processes and procedures. That is why the general scheme also significantly strengthens the role of Coimisiún na Meán as the independent regulator of our public service media providers, something the Bill before the House does not do.

Currently, RTÉ and TG4 set their own performance commitments on an annual basis. To enhance accountability and ensure value for money can be assessed, the general scheme provides that Coimisiún na Meán will ultimately identify the performance commitments of RTÉ and TG4. This will augment and strengthen public trust in our public service media providers. This also is not covered by the Bill.

Coimisiún na Meán will also continue to assess the funding needs of RTÉ and TG4, but

will do this every three years instead of every five. To enhance the transparency of this process, it will carry out its work in accordance with a published methodology. As part of this, the regulator will identify performance commitments and outputs and associated financial inputs. It will also ensure that state aid rules are observed to prevent overcompensation of our public service media providers. This means that any funding recommendation sent to Government by Coimisiún na Meán will set out the net cost to RTÉ and TG4 of fulfilling their public service remit but not more than this. As I said in the media, this is more far-reaching than the Bill before the House.

Ultimately, the objective of the general scheme is to create a public service media that is trusted and trustworthy, holds power to account and is accountable. The Bill features one important component of the measures necessary to achieve this. However, as I have set out, we must approach the reform of our public service media in a far more comprehensive and cohesive manner, not through piecemeal reform measures. The general scheme currently undergoing pre-legislative scrutiny in an Oireachtas committee will achieve that. I see no reason the Oireachtas committee would have to delay it. If the Deputy wishes to progress it further through pre-legislative scrutiny, we would welcome that. I look forward to working with the committee and the Deputies to bring the general scheme through that pre-legislative scrutiny.

For these reasons, I consider that this Private Members' Bill should be declined a Second Reading.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I thank the Minister. I also thank Deputies Ó Snodaigh and Byrne for doing so much work on the Bill beforehand.

I have come to the House to offer a welcome and support. I have not yet had the opportunity to see the details of the general scheme but, taking the Government at its word, it certainly seems like what the Minister has done in the first number of months in his role is positive in terms of steps towards accountability and transparency.

From where I sit, I see both sides, and ultimately all sides, of the House trying to get to the same destination but maybe looking at the issue in different ways in terms of the pathway to reach that destination. I see merits in both pathways. If the Minister could provide Members with details of the general scheme, that would be very relevant. We want to avoid a situation similar to the one that came to pass last year arising again.

Like Deputy Byrne, I sit on the Committee of Public Accounts. We see the importance of that committee as the mechanism for achieving real accountability for the expenditure of public funds.

I understand the merits of what the Minister said about not giving the Bill a Second Reading and maybe with more detail, we could support that position. I commend the Deputies and Sinn Féin.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I dtús báire, gabhaim buíochas le mo chomhghleacaí, an Teachta Joanna Byrne, as an mBille seo agamsa a chur chun cinn. Is í a shínigh é agus atá ag tógáil ceisteanna chun tosaigh maidir leis na meáin chumarsáide thar cheann an pháirtí.

The Committee of Public Accounts stated it believed “decisions taken by RTÉ demonstrate a lack of rigorous financial controls, poor communication, little transparency and amount to a failure of governance which combined have damaged public trust in an organisation for which

trust should be paramount.” Some of that statement was reflected by the Minister earlier. The statement was made by the Committee of Public Accounts following its investigation into RTÉ which exposed the use of a secret barter account outside its regular financial control; the understatement of published earnings and underwriting of additional payments to presenters: scandal surrounding obscene salaries, allowances, junkets, resignations, exit packages, the use of contractors and bogus self-employment; significant financial losses; and a lack of scrutiny revolving around the shambles that was *Toy Show The Musical*. Everyone in the Government was wringing their hands over these scandals but my colleagues in Sinn Féin and I got to work straight away, submitting the Broadcasting (Oversight of RTÉ Accounts) (Amendment) Bill to the Bills Office way back in July 2023, almost two years ago. If all that waste of money was not bad enough, things got worse. In the two years since, the Government has not produced its own legislation. RTÉ’s director general, Kevin Bakhurst, is reported as telling people in private as far back as February of last year that the broadcaster would be bankrupt overnight if it fully compensated wronged workers for their bogus self-employment. This is a serious and incredible assertion that was not made known during the reviews, committee hearings and investigations at the time.

Only this month, we have learned about the €3.6 million write-off of a failed IT scheme which aimed to deliver a new HR system for RTÉ. This multimillion euro waste was not made known during the reviews or committee investigations either. In fact, RTÉ told the expert advisory committee review into contractors’ fees, HR and other matters that a modern and fit-for-purpose HR system would begin to be rolled out from 2024. The board had already discussed the failed HR system in 2023. We now know that RTÉ did not ultimately proceed with the HR modules. I do not know whether RTÉ lied to the review. What else has been hidden?

In the midst of all this cloak and dagger stuff, these smokescreens and drip-feeding of information, there was no indication that the culture at RTÉ had changed. The Government then agreed to use €725 million of taxpayers’ money to bail out RTÉ. The least the public could expect from us is that we would regulate for independent oversight of how that money is being spent and how money was spent in the past. The Comptroller and Auditor General’s mission is “to provide independent assurance that public funds and resources are used in accordance with the law, managed to good effect and properly accounted for”. The Comptroller and Auditor General used to have this role in respect of RTÉ but the former Fianna Fáil Minister, Ray Burke, who was convicted of tax fraud, removed that oversight power with the Broadcasting Act 1990, leaving RTÉ free to arrange its own auditing through private contractors, who have consistently failed to spot the unjustifiable waste of public moneys. Ahead of the changes he made through the Broadcasting Act, Ray Burke is reported to have said “I’m going to fucking screw RTÉ”. That was at a time when he felt aggrieved by RTÉ election coverage as it related to him. This shows why politicians should not have control over the funding of a national broadcaster. He continued on and RTÉ was screwed over but the Act also forced habits to form within RTÉ that were probably reflected in recent years because of a cap on the funding that could be raised through advertising. When RTÉ breached that advertising cap, it put the money into an escrow account, hiding it away from the Minister of the time. I believe this led to people setting about some of the scandals we have seen since.

This Bill aims to correct all that by making it so that RTÉ is not in charge of its own auditing. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have opposed the Bill. We know that from today. The then Minister for public expenditure, Deputy Donohoe, said in 2024 that the Comptroller and Auditor General should not have power to audit RTÉ. We introduced this Bill on First Stage. The Committee of

Public Accounts recommended on a cross-party basis that RTÉ should come under the remit of the Comptroller and Auditor General. The chairperson of the RTÉ board, Siún Ní Raghallaigh, also recommended that RTÉ be audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General before she was effectively and unceremoniously sacked on live television by the Minister for media during the term of the previous Dáil, Catherine Martin. The expert advisory committee review into governance and culture at RTÉ then recommended that RTÉ should come under the remit of the Comptroller and Auditor General. The Minister for media, Catherine Martin, then announced that RTÉ would come under the remit of the Comptroller and Auditor General. With all of this flip-flopping, the Government must have got some free flip-flops from RTÉ.

Two weeks ago, the new Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, who was here earlier, said in respect of this legislation "We have beaten the Deputy to it because RTÉ has been put under the remit of the Comptroller and Auditor General". He obviously did not understand that producing the heads of a Bill is not the same thing as enacting law. I do not know whether he meant to mislead or if he just does not understand how this works. The Government's excuse is that there is no point in passing this Bill because the Bill whose general scheme has been produced will achieve the same objective and go further. As others have mentioned, this general scheme is 93 pages long. I have read it. I dealt with it yesterday. I thank the officials who came before the committee yesterday to explain some of the details. It is quite wide-ranging.

I do not expect it to be passed as quickly as the Minister seems to think it will be. It has already taken six months to get to this point because it is so wide-ranging. This is the second general scheme and we do not know whether there will be a third. The committee has been given an extension of time up to the first week in September to scrutinise the general scheme. The Minister seems to be indicating that the committee should have all the time in the world. Although we do not want to act according to the timetable he has set out, we would like an additional fortnight to get through the work and to liaise and consult those who will be affected by the general scheme. That is an ask of the Minister. Even that would delay the production of the legislation until October. That does not include passage on Second, Third, Fourth and Fifth Stages in this Chamber and in the Seanad. Deputy Byrne mentioned earlier that this could be a long time coming and that RTÉ would not fall under the remit of the Comptroller and Auditor General for a number of years. That is a possibility. I looked over at the Minister when Deputy Byrne said that and he smirked, but it is a possibility. That is what happens when you have an omnibus Bill - timetables move.

We want to make sure that, come next year, RTÉ will be under the remit of the Comptroller and Auditor General. The other points the Government has flagged in its general scheme are welcome. We do not oppose those changes. We are saying we should pass this simple legislation to make sure that, from its enactment, RTÉ will come under the remit of the Comptroller and Auditor General. This Bill, as presented, is simple and we should pass it as quickly as possible. As I have said, we can address this in a simple way and quickly.

Faoin mBille seo, beidh na rialacha céanna i gceist do RTÉ agus atá ann cheana féin do TG4. D'fhéadfadh RTÉ a lán rudaí a fhoghlaim ó TG4, a dhéanann cláir d'ardchaighdeán a chraoladh go rialta in ainneoin nach bhfuil ach pingíní caite ina threo i gcomparáid le RTÉ agus in ainneoin go ndéanann sé ár dteanga náisiúnta mionlaigh a chur chun tosaigh i gcónaí. Ní raibh aon fhadhb riamh ag TG4 i dtaobh airgeadais toisc go dtagann sé faoin Comptroller and Auditor General cheana féin. Bhí an tuiscint sin ann nuair a bunaíodh é ag an tús. Tá gá leis an reachtaíocht seo a réachtáil chomh tapa agus is féidir chun a dhéanamh cinnte de go bhfuil na fadhbanna atá ann faoi láthair, agus a bheidh ann amach anseo mura tarlaíonn sé seo go tapa,

leigheasta. Tá an deis ag an Rialtas bogadh de réir seo agus an leasú atá aige a tharraingt siar ag an staid seo.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask Deputies to be mindful of mentioning people who are not in the Chamber in their speeches.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I acknowledge the work of Deputy Ó Snodaigh in preparing this Bill and Deputy Byrne for proposing it today. Those in RTÉ have wantonly squandered the public moneys with which they have been entrusted. They have spent money lavishly entertaining themselves. They have spent the money of ordinary people on flip-flops for themselves. RTÉ has paid so-called stars obscene salaries based on the tall tale that broadcasters abroad were knocking the door down to secure the talent in RTÉ. When rocked by scandal, which seems to be a quarterly occurrence these days, RTÉ pays lip service to accountability. Lessons need to be learned as soon as possible. It is the same sorry mantra all the time, the one near certainty being that the organisation will be knocked by scandal anew in the period ahead.

What I find particularly galling about the station's practices is that while spending recklessly on itself, it was operating as a rogue employer and taking money out of the pockets of its workers through the practice of bogus self-employment. This is something we want to investigate at the Committee of Public Accounts. As a new member of that committee, I want to ensure this happens. Bogus self-employment should not happen anywhere in our country. RTÉ misspent taxpayers' money, on the one hand, and denied payments due under the Social Insurance Fund, on the other. It also denied staff their holiday pay and pensions and then had the gall to drag out the fight against those who were simply seeking what it had immorally denied them.

It is right that this Bill should proceed as soon as possible. It is wrong that the Government will oppose it, particularly as RTÉ receives significant public money and has displayed woe-ful stewardship of that money. I again ask that RTÉ should be accountable to the Comptroller and Auditor General. It should be brought before the Committee of Public Accounts. The Oireachtas has mandated this responsibility to ensure that we have efficiency as regards our public expenditure. I ask the Minister of State to do this as soon as possible to ensure we have no more scandals.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. That concludes the list of speakers. We come back to the Minister of State.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Colm Brophy): I thank the Deputies for their contributions. As the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, stated at the beginning of the debate, the assignment of the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General as auditor of RTÉ has broad support across the House. It is one of the key recommendations of the expert advisory committee on governance and culture in RTÉ chaired by Professor Niamh Brennan. The programme for Government is clear that legislation is required to ensure the corporate governance model in RTÉ is open, transparent and appropriate to its public service mandate. As the Minister outlined, this goes further than the assignment of the Comptroller and Auditor General. The general scheme of the broadcasting (amendment) Bill, which was published last month, sets out a range of corporate governance and regulatory reforms, including strengthening the role and the duties of the boards of RTÉ and TG4, and the accountability of both directors general to their boards.

With regard to the role of the Comptroller and Auditor General, there are two substan-

tive differences between the general scheme and the Bill before the House. First, the general scheme provides for the express accountability of the director general to the Committee of Public Accounts. We can all attest to the value of the work done by the committee to hold RTÉ to account in the summer of 2023. It is important there is no doubt about the responsibility of the directors general as persons accountable to appear before the Committee of Public Accounts to discuss both the annual financial statements of the public service media providers and, crucially, the value-for-money matters.

The second key difference between this proposed Bill and the general scheme is that the latter provides the RTÉ board with the authority to appoint a regulated private sector audit to carry out an annual audit in addition to that of the Comptroller and Auditor General. Given RTÉ's still large percentage of commercial income, this is an important consideration. More broadly, the general scheme is wider in scope than the Bill, addressing not only corporate governance but also the way in which the independent regulator, Coimisiún na Meán, assesses the performance of the public service media providers and makes funding recommendations to the Government. For example, under the proposed reforms RTÉ and TG4 will no longer set their own performance commitments. Instead they will be identified by Coimisiún na Meán. This is an important measure to promote accountability.

The national counter-disinformation strategy published last month clearly sets out the challenges to our democracy posed by disinformation. In light of these challenges, trusted public service media producing independent factual and impartial journalism is more important than ever. As we saw in July 2023, that trust can easily be lost. One of the key objectives of the general scheme is to create a public service media that is trusted and transparent. It is intended to copper-fasten and to underpin many of the reforms already under way in RTÉ, which have been led by a new team at board and executive level.

The best approach to reforming public service media is in as comprehensive and cohesive a manner as possible. The general scheme achieves that. Therefore, while agreeing with the Deputies' intentions, I am of the view that the Bill should be declined a Second Reading and that we should instead work together to pass comprehensive reforming legislation.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister of State and call on the proposer of the Bill, Deputy Joanna Byrne.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachtaí who contributed. I thank the Minister and Minister of State for their responses.

While I appreciate everything we received from the Minister and Minister of State this evening, there is a simple thing being lost with regard to the Bill that has been presented. The Bill simply puts RTÉ accounts under the oversight of the Comptroller and Auditor General. There is no need to lump this one simple change in with an omnibus Bill that includes the transposition of the European Media Freedom Act, the implementation of the Future of Media Commission recommendations and the one-man crusade of the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, against allowing Coimisiún na Meán impose a levy on Netflix and other multinational streaming corporations that would benefit Ireland's film-making sector. We can address all of those proposals as part of the broadcasting (amendment) Bill. We can address this one simple proposal right now if there is the political will to do it. If we all agree that RTÉ should be under the oversight of the Comptroller and Auditor General, and I have heard nobody disagree, then we can pass this Bill into law without delay in order that the Comptroller and Auditor General can get to work

right away in making sure RTÉ's accounts are in order.

I questioned the Comptroller and Auditor General on this matter at last week's meeting of the Committee of Public Accounts in response to some comments made here on the floor of the House to the effect that he had beaten me to it and that this was a revenue train. I got clarity from both the clerk to the Committee of Public Accounts and the Comptroller and Auditor General that this is not the case and might not be for some time. I am not entirely sure if the Minister understands his own timelines. He said earlier that it was May of last year when he initiated legislation and brought it forward slightly in announcements made in October. However, it was actually only this week that general scheme of his amendment Bill has brought forward.

Despite all the goodwill in the world, these things inevitably take time. The Government's opposition to the Bill before the House and its efforts to delay the move to place RTÉ under the aegis of the Comptroller and Auditor General only enable further bad governance, another free for all and more squandering of money. If we are all singing from the same hymn sheet, I do not understand why there would be any reluctance to progress the Bill. We all want the same thing. This represents step one when it comes to the bigger picture, and the rest could be done by means of the Bill the Minister is going to introduce.

Question put.

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time next week.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 5.28 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 27 Bealtaine 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 5.28 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 27 May 2025.