



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

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

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## DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Dé Máirt, 10 Meitheamh 2025*

*Tuesday, 10 June 2025*

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

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

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### **Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions**

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** I extend a céad míle fáilte to Aran and Sophie Byrne who are recently married. They are here with their family - love's young dream in the Dáil. I also welcome the Moylagh Historical Society from the royal county. Fáilte romhaibh ar fad.

The Taoiseach repeatedly tells us that fixing housing is his number one priority so people have waited for the big initiative for some idea that he might bring forward to turn the tide of this emergency. God knows, we have enduring the Government's directionless approach since it has come to office, misleading on housing delivery, beds in sheds and the mad cap housing tsar idea really leaving people wondering would it ever bring forward a substantive proposal. Now, finally we have it. The Government has certainly outdone itself this time because its first major action in housing is to enable big landlords to hike up extortionate rents even further. At a time when Government should be acting to cut rents and to ban rent increases and when people across the State fork out, on average, new rent of €2,000 a month - here in Dublin rent can hit €3,000 per month or even higher - instead it creates a new opportunity for tens of thousands of landlords to jack up their rents.

The Government has made much of the intention to extend the 2% cap to existing tenancies throughout the State. It should go ahead and do that. Let us do that this week. It is clear that this measure is, in fact, to hide the Government's blushes as it provides landlords with the chance to hike up rents in the here and now and as it provides yet another sweetheart deal to investment funds to build expensive rental property and charge extortionate rent. That is the real intention of these measures. The Government claims that landlords will only be allowed to reset rent to the market rate if a tenant leaves voluntarily. Well tens of thousands of renters leave tenancies voluntarily every single year. Under the Government's proposals, as one renter walks out the door they will be replaced by another whose rent will have ballooned. Students will be among the first hit by its actions. Finding affordable rental accommodation has been a constant struggle for students and their families. The Government is now ensuring this will be even harder and that students and their families will be ripped off even more every year. Worse still, the Government explicitly allows all existing landlords to reset rent to full market rate every six years. That is essentially the death knell of rent pressure zones.

The plan is not about protecting or giving stability to renters. It is about allowing corporate landlords, vultures and property funds to hike up rents. These are large landlords that have already got sweetheart tax breaks on their rent roll and on their capital gains tax liability. Fianna Fáil on the side of the big boys: who would have thought it? Tá plean ann chun cíósanna ró-arda a ardú níos airde arís. Ní bhaineann sé seo le cíósóirí a chosaint. Baineann sé le brabús na dtiarnaí talún corparáideach a mhéadú chomh maith le brabús na gcreach-chistí agus na cistí maoiné. When one cuts through the verbiage, this is just a plan to hike up rents; some in the here and now, others at a future date. Rents need to be cut, to come down, not to go up. Rent increases should be banned, not facilitated by the Government. The Taoiseach needs to think again because renters have had enough. They cannot pay any more and the Government should not be forcing them into this position.

**The Taoiseach:** First, I send our deepest sympathies to all affected by the horrific and shocking shooting and killing in Austria. Our thoughts are with all those who have been killed, their families and relatives.

The reforms announced today of the rental sector will strengthen the rights of new and existing tenants in Irish society. That is a central part of the reform. Those reforms have been informed by the Housing Agency review which, of course, stemmed from the Housing Commission report which the Deputy opposite endorsed at the time. All of the parties opposite endorsed the Housing Commission report which pointed to the need for reform of the rent pressure zones. The Deputy opposite and the Sinn Féin party are very disappointed with the announcement today. They condemned it in advance of seeing the detail. Now they have changed tack hurriedly. Last March I was told we were going to get rid of RPZs all together.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** You are.

**The Taoiseach:** Every one of you said it and we are not.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** You are.

**The Taoiseach:** We are not. What we are doing is extending it. It is becoming a national framework now in terms of rent pressure zones.

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** It is being gutted.

**The Taoiseach:** The evidence has pointed to those areas outside rent pressure zones being under pressure because of that very fact so we are correcting that in terms of making it a national protective framework. Existing tenants' rents are capped at 2%.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** What about new tenants?

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy knows that but she says the opposite here. She just tells untruths with abandon-----

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** It is in the press release.

**The Taoiseach:** With abandon---

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** It is in the press release.

**The Taoiseach:** Existing tenants' rents will be capped at 2%.

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**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Department of housing.gov.ie

**The Taoiseach:** That is the reality of it and for those with four tenancies and above, there is an effective end to no-fault eviction.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Effective?

**The Taoiseach:** That is the bottom line and yet Deputy McDonald comes in, all sound and fury. To a certain extent, there is an incredible incoherence in terms of Sinn Féin policy on housing. Deputy Ó Broin, as the Sinn Féin housing spokesperson, will meet all of the property interests. I have a list again of who he has met lately. On 30 April, Property Industry Ireland and IBEC. He meets them. Why?

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** He is doing his job.

**The Taoiseach:** For what purpose?

**Deputy Cathy Bennett:** To do his job.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** That is my job.

**The Taoiseach:** For what purpose? To introduce incentives for investors to capitalise apartment construction. Deputy Mary Lou McDonald comes in today and says the Government is only interested in institutional investors.

*(Interruptions).*

**The Taoiseach:** Her spokesperson has been meeting them on an ongoing basis. Such hypocrisy.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** What about rising rents? Deal with rising rents.

**The Taoiseach:** Such hypocrisy will not cut it with the people. The bottom line is this. This is a balanced set of proposals.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Not for renters, it is not.

**The Taoiseach:** The Housing Agency report as published had four options. The Government has gone with the option of adapting the existing RPZs because they would expire by the end of the year if nothing was done. This is a strong measure in terms of protection but also in terms of new builds. We need to incentivise future investment in new apartment buildings and housing. I put it to the Deputy that the State is the lead investor at the moment, with €7 billion plus. The Department of finance is saying that we need about €20 billion to get to 50,000 houses per annum for a sustained period of time. Where do people think we are going to get the €20 billion from?

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Not by charging renters €3,000 per month.

**The Taoiseach:** Is anybody seriously suggesting that the State will pony up the €20 billion? Sinn Féin says it will triple social housing, triple this and that without telling us how we are going to get the money. This is very fundamental. We need public sector investment-----

*(Interruptions).*

**The Taoiseach:** We also need private sector investment and we need to protect tenants. The Minister, Deputy Browne, has done that today with his package. It is extremely disappointing to Sinn Féin because it is not what the party thought it would be.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** It is disappointing for renters.

**The Taoiseach:** Sinn Féin never anticipated that we would end no-fault evictions by landlords with four tenancies. It never anticipated that we would make it a national protection framework because last March the party declared to all and sundry that the Government was getting rid of it completely.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** That is what you are doing.

*(Interruptions).*

**The Taoiseach:** That is the language they used. It is the language of “exaggerate and exaggerate, tell untruth after untruth and you know what, people might believe us”.

*(Interruptions).*

**The Taoiseach:** “People might believe us”;-----

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** The Taoiseach is misleading the house and renters.

**The Taoiseach:** -----that is what Sinn Féin is about. What I am about is solutions.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** We are about protecting renters.

**The Taoiseach:** I am about solutions.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Taoiseach.

**The Taoiseach:** Sinn Féin is about exploiting the housing problem and crisis to whatever degree possible for its own political advantage.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Taoiseach. Deputy McDonald is on her feet. Please, Deputies.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** What the Taoiseach is about is screwing renters.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** He is about doing it very brazenly and then he wants to try to distract from that fact. He should go ahead and extend the 2% cap across the State. He should do that. We will support him in doing it. I do not think anyone will object to that. However, that does not disguise the actual intent and the effect, in the here and now and in the long term, of what he is about to do.

The rent pressure zone provisions are being gutted. Regarding existing tenancies, let me read the Taoiseach’s own words: “All landlords will have the right to reset rent where the rent is below market value at the end of each six-year tenancy.” There we have it. Those are his own words. I have raised with him the issue of turnover tenancies, where people voluntarily exit a

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tenancy. That happens tens of thousands of times every year. I have told him that among the first to be really hit hard with this will be students.

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Yes, they will.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Your time is up, Deputy. The Taoiseach to respond.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** This is the import of the Government's proposal. The disappointing thing is everybody knows rents are extortionate at this point. The job of a responsible Government is to ensure a cut in rents and to ban rent increases.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy McDonald, your time is up.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Instead, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael want to facilitate the jacking up of rents. It is disgraceful.

**The Taoiseach:** The Government wants to increase the supply of houses to get to 50,000 per annum.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** There is not a chance of that.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputies either want to hear the answer or they do not.

**The Taoiseach:** The proposals of Sinn Féin, via rent bans or whatever the Deputy has said, would actually reduce supply. The Deputies opposite have no ideas and no solutions. That is their problem and the people saw that last time out. They do not have solutions because they do not accept there is any role for the market at all.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** That is not true.

**The Taoiseach:** That is a fundamental problem in terms of their presentation on this issue.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputies, please.

**The Taoiseach:** I stress again that existing tenants' rent will be capped at 2%-----

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** The rent can be reset every six years.

**The Taoiseach:** -----and the rent of new tenants in new supply will be capped at the CPI level. The caps are retained. The framework-----

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Has the Minister told the Taoiseach what he is actually doing?

**The Taoiseach:** I did not interrupt the Deputy but this is standard practice for Sinn Féin-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I absolutely accept that.

**The Taoiseach:** -----because Sinn Féin is interested in just throwing untruth after untruth across the House and is not prepared to listen to the truth.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** It is in the press release.

**The Taoiseach:** You are not the leader yet, Deputy.

*(Interruptions).*

**The Taoiseach:** You are not the leader.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Taoiseach.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputies opposite are into performance; they are not into substance.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I have called Deputy Bacik

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Why not be truthful?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Doherty, please. Deputy Bacik's time has started.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** I join others in expressing sympathies to all those affected by the school shooting in Austria of which we have just heard news.

Back in February, someone in the Government was briefing the media about a proposed end to rent pressure zones. For years, the Government refused to contemplate designating the whole country as a rent pressure zone. Yesterday morning, the future of the entire RPZ scheme was in question. We were hearing it on the airwaves from the Taoiseach's representatives. However, by bedtime last night, in a screeching U-turn, we learned the whole country is now to become subject to rent pressure laws. Perhaps we should start calling him the Grand Old Duke of Cork because he led his men up to the top of the hill before marching them all the way back down again. It is just a mercy, I suppose - a mercy for renters - that they were not sent over the top.

It really seems the Taoiseach is making it up as he goes along. As Deputy Sheehan, our housing spokesperson, said, there are more holes in the policy announced today than there were in the *Titanic*. It is a panicked pronouncement. It may be he is doing this because he is responding to the latest findings that house-building contracted during May and we are seeing a fall in activity by Irish construction firms. None of this is the fault of renters. Rather, we can see an ominous slowdown in construction largely due to the sort of kite-flying we have heard from many in Fianna Fáil, suggesting that developers might get tax breaks if they wait a few months until the next budget. In fact, what we are seeing are policies from the Government that appear to be *ad hoc*, are sowing fear among renters and are sowing uncertainty among investors.

Meanwhile, each month, more and more people, and more and more children, are finding themselves homeless. We know that eviction from the private sector is a key driver of increased homelessness. We are all hearing today from renters in desperate fear. I heard this morning from a constituent in her 40s that she is absolutely devastated by the announcement on RPZ changes. She fears her landlord will terminate her lease and she believes she will have to leave Ireland because she cannot afford €2,500 to €3,000 per month in rent. Her story is not unique. Her fear is reflected across the country because renters in Ireland know renting is like a lottery or, more accurately, a casino. The wins are rare and somebody else is always making a quick buck. The Taoiseach's party and Fine Gael have been in government together for the best part of ten years and things have only got worse for those renting or seeking to buy an affordable home. We all agree that supply is the biggest problem, yet instead of taking urgent steps to address this, we are seeing this extremely vague and opaque policy that the Taoiseach says will strengthen renters' rights but which, as we are hearing from renters and those who work day to day on the front line assisting and supporting renters, will have the opposite effect, while

there is uncertainty among investors as to precisely how they are to be incentivised to build the homes we know are so desperately needed. We all know that when rents go up, people can no longer afford to pay them and will, therefore, face being evicted and homelessness. What safeguards is the Taoiseach going to put in place for those likely to be “constructively evicted” by landlords anxious to hike rents under these new rules?

**The Taoiseach:** There are two things. First, Fianna Fáil has been in government for five years, not ten. That is a fact. Second, Deputy Bacik said people were briefing at the end of February. They were not briefing. What happened was that I went public and said there would be reform and that there would have to be change. I made a general statement saying that we would have to attract private sector investment. All of the Opposition deliberately distorted that and the Deputy declared that it was the end of RPZs, when ending RPZs was never contemplated. The legislation was expiring at the end of this year. All of the Opposition endorsed the Housing Commission’s report. Read it. It said that the Dáil was too reactive and that too many short-term decisions were taken in the last Dáil.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** It said the Government was too reactive.

**The Taoiseach:** I did not interrupt the Deputy. He does not own the place. He should have the decency to allow an exchange between me and the Labour Party leader. He has not assumed the status of leader yet and may not for a long time to come.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Thousands of children in homelessness. That is not decency.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Ó Broin cannot continually interrupt.

**The Taoiseach:** The fundamental point is that as a result of these packages, we have a national framework of protection. Existing tenants will keep the RPZ at 2%. If we get new builds, which is what we want to do, new tenancies will be capped at the CPI. The protections from no-fault evictions by landlords with four tenancies or more are very significant, and there are other protections and there will be other safeguards. What is emerging is probably the strongest set of rent protection measures we have ever had in the history of the State.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Come on.

**The Taoiseach:** That is the reality. If we forget all the noise, the sound and fury and go through it detail by detail, this is a well-balanced package. We are talking about all existing tenants staying at 2% as per the existing RPZs, which the Opposition wanted retained. They are being retained for existing tenants. We do need supply.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** What happens every six years?

**The Taoiseach:** Surely Deputy Bacik agrees that we need more supply. We need more apartment building and what is needed for that? Certainty. We need policy certainty for renters and investors. That is what this package provides, because we do need private sector investment in apartment building. The final point I would make is that this is but one of a suite of measures that have been taken and are being taken to significantly change the dial in respect of both private sector investment and public sector investment, which we have already announced since the beginning of the year, at up to €800 million worth. Up to today, 83% of all tenancies are within RPZs. We are extending that to 100%. These are good measures. Surely Deputy Bacik should acknowledge that. I do not think she expected it. That is the problem. She de-

clared that it was going to be the end of the RPZs and that is the problem with the Opposition. It has been caught out.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** The reality is that many of the Taoiseach's own-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Before Deputy Bacik starts, we have a full Public Gallery. I am asking all Deputies in the House to be respectful. This is Leaders' Questions. It means each party gets to ask a question. If Deputies are happy heckling during the answer, I will let them off. I do not see the benefit. We will have a three-and-a-half-hour debate on housing later this afternoon. Could Deputies be respectful of one another and we will get through the work? We have an agenda until midnight. Could everybody please stick to their time?

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** We can all agree that certainty, clarity and consistency are needed for those renting, those looking to buy a home and those looking to build and develop homes. That is precisely what is lacking in the Taoiseach's own Government's policy. He is accusing the Opposition of being caught out but he has caught out his own backbenchers. He has flip-flopped on policy on rent pressure zones, RPZ, and protections for renters. None of us can see how he can say there will be increased protections for renters. Sure, the Government is extending the RPZs but if it is hollowing out what is meant by an RPZ and reducing protections for those within them, then that does not have the desired effect.

Again, renters are desperately fearful. One thing that has not been mentioned is the idea of tying rent caps to inflation which Government is proposing for new builds. This lacks foresight. There is huge uncertainty here, particularly in the face of Trump's threatened tariffs and the impact they are likely to have on inflation. What we are going to see, I think, is that this will gut the net benefit of the Taoiseach's stated objective, which is to increase supply. We all want to see supply increase but we do not believe this is an effective way to do it.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Deputy.

**The Taoiseach:** If the Deputy reads the Housing Agency report - and I invite her to do so in its entirety - and looks at the ESRI analysis of the rental market, in reviewing both the domestic and international literature and so on, she will see there has been a negative impact, particularly in 2021, on measures we took on supply into the residential market. That is in the report. There must be a balance. I take it the Deputy wants investment into the private sector. If one does not tie it or give people certainty about the CPI, why would anyone invest in the future if they could endure a loss? People are not going to do that. We need a bit of practical reality here. That is the point. The balance has to be right and we have got that balance right while protecting tenants to an even greater degree-----

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** Where is the protection?

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** Where is the protection?

**The Taoiseach:** -----than had been the case, on top of protections which we brought in over the past number of years. Over the past number of years stronger and stronger protections have been brought in for tenants and renters. That will continue under this measure and will be even stronger again in return-----

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** There are 15,000 are homeless.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** I also extend my sympathy to those affected by the school

shooting in Austria.

The Taoiseach was right about one thing; I did not expect these proposals. That is because at no stage in recent months, weeks or even today, until the press release was issued earlier, was there any mention by Government in all its spin that what it is actually introducing here - and the Taoiseach has not even acknowledged it himself in his comments as he seems to be ashamed of it, and rightly so - is that every six years, rent regulation as we know will be effectively gone and landlords can fully up the rents.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Cian O’Callaghan:** The Taoiseach can talk about his 2%, inflation and all the rest of it but if people are going to face astronomical rent increases they cannot afford every six years, Government will drive more people into homelessness. In a country where rents are already incredibly high - among the highest in Europe - the Taoiseach will only make things worse. Will he admit that in the last bullet point of his press release issued today, he is allowing full rent increases up to any level - up to market levels - across the board to any landlord and tenancy affecting any renter? That is what these proposals are about.

“Government policy to increase rents” are not my words; they are the words of homeless charity, Focus Ireland, in describing Government proposals. What Government has done - while we have incredibly high rents here already - is brought forward a proposal to make that situation even worse. It is throwing renters under the bus. Incredibly, Government is planning even more favourable treatment for vulture funds than already exist. These funds currently pay almost no tax and charge some of the highest rents in the country. Now, when it comes to rent regulation, Government is rolling over for them yet again. It is allowing investment funds that control the entire rental stock in an area to jack up rents to what they determine is a market rent every six years. These funds have so much control, they will often be able to decide and determine what a market rent is in an area. Who is in charge here? Is it the Government or the vulture funds?

Homelessness is already at record levels. There are 15,580 people living in homeless emergency accommodation. That includes 4,775 children who are growing up without a home. These proposals of incredible rent increases will drive more families and children into homelessness. How could Government contemplate doing this when homelessness is already at record levels?

In terms of this work the Government has done and these proposals it has put forward, has Government assessed the impact of these proposals? If it has assessed it, will it publish that assessment? Does the Taoiseach know, as a result of these changes, how much rent will be increased and how many more people will be driven into homelessness?

**The Taoiseach:** Existing tenancies are capped and will remain capped at 2%.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** That is not what it says in the report.

**The Taoiseach:** Yes, that is what it says.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** No, it does not.

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy Ó Broin will have a chance later. The fundamental objective is twofold: policy certainty and protection for renters and increased supply. I respect Deputy

O’Callaghan’s commitment and interest in this, but he and his party have been very weak on the supply side. All of its proposals over the past three years, cumulatively, would reduce supply and do nothing to increase it. We have a fundamental challenge as a society. We need 50,000 new houses per annum. We are at approximately 30,000. It might be higher this year; we do not know. It is 30,000 plus. Back in 2019, it was 20,000. State investment has largely brought it up to approximately 30,000 houses plus. We need significant private sector investment. The overall investment required is approximately €20 billion to get to 50,000. That will not be provided by the State alone. Institutional and pension funds have a role. The Deputy’s party may say they do not. I do not see how else to get to 50,000 new units. He might call them vultures. That is part of the problem in the political narrative. It has undermined the entire debate on housing. Pension funds invest and the State invests and will invest more. We are investing at an unprecedented level, from a State point of view. If we look at the table, the majority of landlords or people who rent out are not institutional investors. In fact, over the past three or four years, there has been precious little institutional investment of the scale required. The vast majority are tenancies of four, three, two or one in the rental market. We need a more dynamic and sustainable rental market for the future. This package facilitates that and gives certainty to enable more investment in addition to keeping all those in the market at the moment. It cannot all be replaced by 100% State-constructed or State-rented housing. We do a lot on rent through the housing assistance payment, HAP, local authority rents and so on.

**The Taoiseach:** The fundamental objective is twofold - policy certainty for renters and protection and increased supply. I respect Deputy O’Callaghan’s commitment and interest in this matter but his party has been very weak on the supply side. All of its proposals over the past three years cumulatively would reduce supply and do nothing to increase it. We have a fundamental challenge as a society. We need to get to 50,000 new houses per annum. We are at approximately 30,000. It might be higher this year; we do not know. It is more than 30,000. Back in 2019, it was 20,000. This State investment has largely brought it up to approximately 30,000 houses or more. We need significant private sector investment. The overall investment required is approximately €20 billion to get to 50,000. That will not be provided by the State alone. Institutional and pension funds have a role. Your party may say it does not. I do see how you get to 50,000 new units. You might call them vultures - that is part of the problem in the political narrative. It has undermined the entire debate on housing. There are pension funds that invest, the State invests and will invest more. We are investing at an unprecedented level. If one looks at the table, the majority of landlords or people who rent out are not institutional investors. Over the past three or four years, there has been precious little institutional investment of the scale required. The vast majority are four, three, two or single tenancies in the rental market. We need a more dynamic and sustainable rental market for the future. This package facilitates that and gives certainty to enable more investment in addition to keeping all those in the market at the moment. All of it cannot be replaced by 100% State-constructed or State-rented housing. We do a lot on rent through the HAP and local authority rents and so on.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** You are going to have to do more.

**The Taoiseach:** The involvement of the State is enormous. It has to be balanced and supplemented with significant private sector investment. This is just one measure. On its own it will not do it. It will need to be accompanied by other measures. Last week, we took a decision to legislatively roll over planning permissions that might have been delayed by judicial reviews to keep supply going. It has to be about supply. From the Opposition in general, proposals on the supply side have been extraordinarily weak and not forthcoming on how to get from 30,000

a year to 50,000 a year.

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** Your delivery on the supply side has been weak.

**Deputy Cian O’Callaghan:** Time and again, we have put forward proposals to increase supply and financing, most recently with regard to leveraging some of the savings on deposit in Ireland and incentivising how they could be invested in housing. Pension funds in other countries invest in housing that is affordable. The Government is creating a system in which rents just go up and up, beyond people’s reach. That is the difference. The Government’s press release from just over an hour ago states, “All landlords will have the right to reset rent where the rent is below market at the end of each six-year tenancy”. Is the press release wrong? The Taoiseach has not commented on the ability of all landlords to reset rent every six years. He keeps brushing around about 2% and inflation. Will he answer that? Is the press release wrong? Why is he not commenting on it? Is he ashamed of what is in the press release? Why does he keep talking about everything else but that this is a measure to effectively abolish rent regulation as we know it? It will allow astronomical rent increases that people simply will not be able to afford and will push more and more people into homelessness.

**The Taoiseach:** First, the one proposal the Deputy’s party has come forward with is the savings incentive scheme.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** Answer the question.

**The Taoiseach:** I will answer the question.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please.

**The Taoiseach:** The scheme the Social Democrats came forward with would take years to accumulate the funding for investment. It would not produce a single house over the next three to four years.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Answer the question.

**The Taoiseach:** In respect of Finland, the Deputy is correct.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Answer the question.

**The Taoiseach:** I am answering the question.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** It is not your question, Deputy McDonald, please.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputies, I told you, it is not your question; it is Deputy O’Callaghan’s.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** He did not answer our question either.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Taoiseach, continue, please.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** He has been asked three times.

**The Taoiseach:** Three points were made. I am going to deal with them. The second one was on institutional investment. Finland is a good example of where institutional investment had a huge impact on house construction and apartment construction.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** You are skipping the first one.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Your press release, Taoiseach.

**The Taoiseach:** Third, Germany is a bad example-----

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** The press release.

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** The press release.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** The press release. You are not chairing a committee.

**The Taoiseach:** -----of where the rent pressure controls the Deputies are advocating created a huge decline well below the market rate. There are many tenancies at the moment-----

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Well below the market rate.

**The Taoiseach:** -----well below the market rate. If some tenant exits-----

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I asked a question about a Government press release.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you.

**The Taoiseach:** If a tenant exits that-----

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

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** Your time is up. Go on, you are out of ideas.

**The Taoiseach:** Ceann Chomhairle, there has been repeated interruption-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** There has been, Taoiseach.

**The Taoiseach:** If there had not been interruption, I could have dealt with all four points.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Just answer the question.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Answer the question.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Paul Murphy.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** He is ashamed. He is ashamed of his own policies.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputies, if you cannot allow anyone to ask or answer a question-----

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** He is rightly ashamed.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** -----this is where we end up.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** He is not answering them.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Paul Murphy.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Thanks, Ceann Comhairle. This is an incredible, brazen display by

the Taoiseach. It really is.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Three times now the Taoiseach has been asked effectively the same question. I am going to ask it again. It is not clear to me if the Taoiseach does not understand his Government's proposal, he is misleading the House about his Government's proposal or the press statement issued by the Minister, Deputy Browne's Department is inaccurate. The Taoiseach needs to clarify for us which it is, because not just once or twice but about five or six times now he has said existing tenants will be capped at 2%, new tenancies will be capped at CPI and that these are the strongest set of rent protection measures we have ever had. The truth is, if the press statement is accurate, that the Government is absolutely gutting the rent pressure zones. It gets its nice headlines that say rent pressure zones are to be extended to the whole country in a significant expansion of tenants' rights when in reality it is getting rid of the rent pressure zones. I will read it for the third time today and very slowly for the Taoiseach: "All landlords will have the right to reset rent where the rent is below market at the end of each six-year tenancy". It is not just new landlords, not just big landlords, not just small landlords, but every single landlord. That means it affects existing tenants and new tenants. If the Minister could inform the Taoiseach what is going on here and what is in the policy, that would be very helpful.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** Do you want to phone a friend?

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** It is what it says in the press statement. It states: "All landlords". What the Government is therefore saying to existing and new tenants - all of them - is they get the limited protection of the 2% or CPI if it is new, for six years. At six years it is a free for all. Landlords get to reset to market rate. There will be six 2% increases and then 40%, 30% or an unimaginable level that is simply not affordable. That is what the press statement-----

**The Taoiseach:** No it does not.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** It is. I will read it again. It does say that. As part of this master of the spin, it also says "Tenancies of unlimited duration to be enhanced by introduction of rolling-six year tenancies ...". That is some enhancement, Taoiseach. You are getting rid of tenancies of unlimited duration and going back to the old system of rolling six-year tenancies. What you are presenting is Orwellian. The logic of this is the Government wants rents to rise. It is not enough that they have doubled over the past ten years. It is not enough that a third of tenants are now paying more than 50% of their net income on rent. It is not enough that more and landlords are actually coming into the market. The Government wants rents to go up even faster. That is why tenants, renters-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Deputy.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** -----people who are trying to buy a house, people who are locked out and who are going to be locked out even further-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Taoiseach to respond.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** -----are going to be on the streets-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Murphy, thank you.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** -----next Tuesday at 6 p.m. in front of the Dáil as part of-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Taoiseach to respond.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** -----a major Raise the Roof mobilisation to stop this Government and its landlord agenda.

**The Taoiseach:** But the Deputies announced that march before the proposal was even announced.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Yes.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Thank God.

**The Taoiseach:** That sums it up. The Deputies just change the narrative every time it suits.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** The housing crisis is not new, Taoiseach.

**The Taoiseach:** The bottom line is if you are an existing tenant there will be no change.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** Hear, hear.

**The Taoiseach:** It is as simple as that. There will be no change if you are an existing tenant, okay.

*(Interruptions).*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please allow the answer.

**The Taoiseach:** There is no reset at six years for an existing tenant. However, if-----

*(Interruptions).*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please, you ask for clarity. Deputies, please.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** That was a quick U-turn. How long did that take, 35 minutes?

**The Taoiseach:** New tenancies, new builds and new apartments that will come on stream, hopefully, because this is about supply. With the greatest respect in the world, if we had adopted half of what Deputy Murphy proposed we would have no supply at all in the market. That is the fundamental difference. We need more apartments, we need more houses and we need more in the rental market. In many instances, when the RPZs originally came in, many people were still well below market rates. If a tenant exits voluntarily and leaves, the tenancy can then reset to market rate. In my view that is reasonable.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Tens of thousands every year. Watch that now. Watch that bubble.

**The Taoiseach:** When RPZs came in first, many people did not increase their rents. Quite a number did not. To keep momentum in the market and to keep people in the market, that is a balanced response to the current situation. We want to bring more investment in to build-----

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Do you want to keep people in their homes?

**The Taoiseach:** It is capped at 2%. The second cap is CPI. Basically, there is a cap of

whatever the inflation rate is. The inflation rate is forecast to be 2%, on average, for the next number of years. It is also the focus of the ECB to keep inflation at 2%.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** It is 9% at the moment.

**The Taoiseach:** If we do not tie it to CPI and freeze it as the Deputy is saying, why would anyone invest in any new apartment block? Why would anyone build a new house or a new apartment for rent if effectively they would begin to lose money within a couple of years? No one is going to make an investment decision on the basis, as the Deputy is proposing, that we have a rent freeze for three years or longer. No one is going to invest in a market where essentially they invest knowing they will be losing money fairly quickly. The package is about getting a balance to incentivise investment into the rental market, while protecting existing tenants who will not see an increase in their rent. No matter how much the Deputy shouts that, they will not have an increase in their rent above the 2%, which is part of the RPZ and has been for quite a number of years.

That is the position. I think these are balanced measures. No doubt the Deputy thought he would be fighting a different sort of proposal. He announced ages ago that we were getting rid of the RPZ. We are not getting rid of the RPZ.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** What is this? This is extraordinary.

**The Taoiseach:** We are extending it, making it national and giving stronger protections than tenants had before this package, which will be legislated for, was announced.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** It is not me suggesting it. The Government's own press statement refers to a right to reset. It is not just in a written press statement; it is also what the Minister, Deputy Browne, told the media. At the press conference earlier he said what happens is that at the end of the six years, the rate-setting piece - effectively the rent - could be put back to the market in line with what the press statement says.

**Deputy James Browne:** Not for existing tenancies.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Which is it?

**Deputy James Browne:** Not for existing tenancies.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** So new tenancies are going to be every six years.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** He did not say that.

**The Taoiseach:** That is what I said.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** It is not what you said, and it is not what your-----

**The Taoiseach:** You deliberately-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Taoiseach, please. You will have an opportunity.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Deliberately? You are the one-----

**Deputy Cathy Bennett:** It is in black and white.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Taoiseach, you have the press statement.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** It is Deputy Murphy's question.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** The Taoiseach defends the idea that if tenants leave during the six-year period and it is not a no-fault eviction, it can be reset. The Taoiseach is saying he is in favour of that, and it is not a mistake. Any time a tenant leaves, the rent can be reset.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Yes.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** That is a recipe for rocketing rents. How high does he want rents to go?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Taoiseach to respond.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** It is also-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Murphy, your time is up.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Let me finish the point. It is also a recipe for constructive evictions, where the landlord says, "I am not going to fix your heating", "I am not going to fix your toilet" and "I am going to force you out so that I can reset the rent." The final thing I ask is for the Taoiseach to agree-----

**A Deputy:** Performance before policy.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** -----that when it comes to voting on this, landlords in this Dáil-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy, resume your seat. I am not going to allow you to continue to speak. Your time is up.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** -----should not have a vote on this measure, given their interest in it.

**The Taoiseach:** It is interesting that in the exchange the Deputy acknowledged that it is new tenancies.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** No, I did not. I was just pointing this-----

**The Taoiseach:** I have been saying since I came in that existing tenants would not have their rents increased beyond 2% as per the RPZ.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** Until their tenancy ends.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputies are interrupting because they do not like the facts. The bottom line in respect of new tenancies is yes, in respect of tenancies where the tenant has left so the tenant does not get exorbitant increases. The balance here is that we need more investment into the market. I know the Deputy does not really believe in that.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I believe in a State construction company.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy believes it should be the State in its entirety. That is a fundamental difference. I argue that if we were to take the Deputy's policies, we would have no new supply at all. That is a fundamental difference. I acknowledge that. The Deputy does not believe in a market-based economy. That is his position.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** When is a rent too high?

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**The Taoiseach:** I happen to believe in a balanced economic framework where you have public sector investment, and we have unprecedented levels of State investment. However, you will need private sector investment to get the level of investment we require. I do not think the State can sustainably spend €20 billion per annum on housing alone. That will not suffice. I do not think the people want that sort of approach either.

### **An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business**

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

Tuesday's business shall be:

- Motion *re* Referral of Government Bills to Select Committees (*without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately*)
- Statements on Housing (*not to exceed 3 hours and 32 minutes*)

Tuesday's private members' business shall be Motion *re* Urgent action on Vacant Council Housing, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Recommendation for a European Council Decision authorising the opening of negotiations on an agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Kazakhstan (*to conclude within 1 hour and 50 minutes*)
- Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the terms of the Agreement between the European Organization for Nuclear Research and Ireland, and the Protocol on the Privileges and Immunities of the European Organization for Nuclear Research (*to conclude within 1 hour*)
- Mental Health Bill 2024 (Committee Stage) (*to commence no earlier than 5 p.m. and, if not previously concluded, to adjourn either at 9 p.m. or after 4 hours, whichever is the later*)

Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Motion *re* Ending the Central Bank's facilitation of the sale of Israel Bonds, selected by the Social Democrats.

Thursday's business shall be Statements on Fisheries (*not to exceed 2 hrs and 25 mins*).

Thursday evening business shall be the Second Stage of the Criminal Law (Prohibition of the Disclosure of Counselling Records) Bill 2025, sponsored by Deputy Ruth Coppinger.

#### **Proposed Arrangements for this week's business:**

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

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

(a) the Dáil may sit later than 10.48 p.m. and the time allotted for Government Business shall be extended in accordance with the arrangements for that business; and

(b) private members' time may be taken later than 6.12 p.m. and shall in any event be taken on the conclusion of the Statements on Housing, with consequential effect on the commencement times for the items following in the ordinary routine of business, namely, Parliamentary Questions to the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment, and topical issues;

2. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Referral of Government Bills to Select Committees shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately; and

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

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

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

(c) members may share time.

	<i>Gov</i>	<i>SF</i>	<i>Lab</i>	<i>Gov</i>	<i>SF</i>
<i>Mins</i>	<i>35</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>5</i>
	<i>SD</i>	<i>Gov</i>	<i>SF</i>	<i>IPTG</i>	<i>Gov</i>
<i>Mins</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>15</i>
	<i>SF</i>	<i>ITG</i>	<i>Gov</i>	<i>SF</i>	<i>OM</i>
<i>Mins</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>8</i>

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

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

(a) the Dáil may sit later than 9.30 p.m. and the time allotted to Government business shall be extended in accordance with the arrangements for that business;

(b) in the event that the Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the terms of the Agreement between the European Organization for Nuclear Research and Ireland, and the Protocol on the Privileges and Immunities of the European Organization for Nuclear Research concludes before 5 p.m., the sitting shall stand suspended until 5 p.m. when the order of business shall resume with Committee Stage of the Mental Health Bill 2024; and

(c) the weekly division time may be taken later than 8.45 p.m., and shall be taken on the adjournment of proceedings on the Mental Health Bill 2024, save where the proceedings on that Bill conclude within the allotted time, in which case the weekly division time shall be taken on the conclusion thereof, with consequential effect on

the time for the adjournment of the Dáil;

2. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Recommendation for a European Council Decision authorising the opening of negotiations on an agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Kazakhstan shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 1 hour and 50 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

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

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

- speeches by representatives of Sinn Féin, the Labour Party, Social Democrats, Independent and Parties Technical Group, and Independent Technical Group – 15 minutes per party or group;

- speeches by Other Members – 15 minutes in total; and

- a speech in response by the Minister – 10 minutes; and

(b) members may share time;

3. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the terms of the Agreement between the European Organization for Nuclear Research and Ireland, and the Protocol on the Privileges and Immunities of the European Organization for Nuclear Research shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

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

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

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

speeches by Other Members – 7.5 minutes in total; and

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

(b) members may share time; and

4. the proceedings on Committee Stage of the Mental Health Bill 2024 shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted and stand adjourned either at 9 p.m. or after 4 hours, whichever is the later, and shall not be resumed on Wednesday.

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

1. the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders shall be modified to the extent that topical issues may be taken earlier than 7.24 p.m. and shall in any event be taken on the conclusion of the Statements on Fisheries, with consequential effect on the commencement time for Second Stage of the Criminal Law (Prohibition of the Disclosure of Counselling Records) Bill 2025 and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil; and

2. the Statements on Fisheries shall not exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes and the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:

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

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

(c) members may share time.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Are the said arrangements and proposed arrangements for the week's business agreed to?

**Deputies:** Not agreed.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** The Taoiseach will know the international activists on board the aid ship *Madleen* have been kidnapped in international waters and taken to Israel. Some have been deported and others will be deported, but at least they took action. All we hear from the Taoiseach are words. He said in the Dáil the Central Bank is not facilitating the sale of Israeli bonds. Will he correct the record? Will he support the motion coming through the Dáil tomorrow, reverse his position and at last take definable action in support of the Palestinian people?

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** In the programme for Government, there is a commitment to publishing a national policy on adult safeguarding in the health and social care sector. The Taoiseach states a considerable amount of work has been done. Given the revelations in "RTÉ Investigates" about our older and more vulnerable residents in nursing homes, can we please have a debate this Thursday on the issue, when the Taoiseach can outline where he is with this and when we will see legislation? Can we please all acknowledge that the outsourcing of our residential care for older, vulnerable people to international conglomerates has been an absolute failure?

**Deputy Liam Quaide:** Last week's "RTÉ Investigates" again highlighted the failure of successive Governments to enact safeguarding legislation for vulnerable adults. We were promised this 20 years ago after the Leas Cross scandal, in 2014 after Áras Attracta and more recently after the Grace report, the Brandon report and the Emily report. We urgently need to implement the recommendations of the Law Reform Commission report into safeguarding. The safeguarding Bill on the current legislative programme is too narrow in scope.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** "RTÉ Investigates" made for really harrowing watching. We saw people treated without any shred of human dignity, treated like burdens. We need to debate this in the Dáil this week. We need to implement adult safeguarding legislation and mandatory reporting. We also need to deal with the fact we are the most privatised system in the European Union in terms of nursing home care. That did not happen by accident; it happened through tax incentives from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. That is the root cause of the problem.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** About two weeks ago, the Government announced plans to buy Citywest hotel. That is a huge concern to the constituents in the surrounding area. A debate has to happen in the House. Before the purchase of any hotel, a debate should happen in the House,

regardless of what it is needed for. This is a huge issue and concern for the public.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Under Standing Order 35(3) Aontú proposes we amend the Order of Business to remove the lines referring to the motion regarding the proposed negotiations between the European Union and Kazakhstan and replace them with “Statements on nursing homes, to conclude after 1 hour and 50 minutes”. It is absolutely scandalous what has happened in this country in terms of older people-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** You have made the amendment, Deputy. Resume your seat, please.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** -----and the neglect and abuse they have suffered. We need to have a debate on it.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Deputy. I call the Chief Whip.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Many statements referred to “RTÉ Investigates” last week. I think everybody was horrified and scandalised at what we saw. I am in talks with the Minister to secure time to have this debated. I will revert back to the various whips.

We discussed the Citywest hotel at the Business Committee the week before last. Time will be found for that as well.

In relation to Aontú’s proposal, it is not accepted.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** When will the nursing homes be discussed?

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** Will the Taoiseach correct the record on the Central Bank’s role-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Excuse me, Deputy Mac Lochlainn. The question is whether the proposed arrangements are agreed to.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** The question was not answered.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I cannot compel an answer.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** Okay, fair enough. We will have a vote then.

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

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 85; Níl, 67; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Aird, William.</i>	<i>Ahern, Ciarán.</i>	
<i>Ardagh, Catherine.</i>	<i>Bacik, Ivana.</i>	
<i>Boland, Grace.</i>	<i>Bennett, Cathy.</i>	
<i>Brabazon, Tom.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Brennan, Brian.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Brennan, Shay.</i>	<i>Byrne, Joanna.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	

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

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<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>O'Hara, Louis.</i>	
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>Maxwell, David.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>McCarthy, Noel.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.</i>	
<i>McCormack, Tony.</i>	<i>Quaide, Liam.</i>	
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Séamus.</i>	<i>Rice, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>McGreehan, Erin.</i>	<i>Sheehan, Conor.</i>	
<i>McGuinness, John.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Marie.</i>	
<i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Shane.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Ward, Charles.</i>	
<i>Neville, Joe.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>		
<i>O'Connell, Maeve.</i>		
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>		
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>		
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>		
<i>O'Meara, Ryan.</i>		
<i>O'Shea, John Paul.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cearúil, Naoise.</i>		
<i>Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.</i>		
<i>Ó Muirí, Naoise.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Timmins, Edward.</i>		
<i>Toole, Gillian.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Peadar Tóibín.

Question declared carried.

*3 o'clock*

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We will move to Questions on Policy or Legislation. I call on Deputy McDonald.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** More than 100,000 children are now living in consistent poverty. That number has jumped, astonishingly, by more than 45,000 in just 12 months. These were the alarming figures reported by the Children's Rights Alliance this morning. This is particularly shocking at a time when the economy is performing well and public finances are very, very strong. It comes at a time when the Government refuses to tackle the soaring cost of living. Prices are out of control, from rents, which we have discussed, to groceries, energy bills and essential toiletries such as shampoo and toothpaste. Working families find it harder to keep up with the basics and children are suffering and being hit the hardest. The Government has to bring forward cost-of-living supports urgently. It has the means to help and it is unacceptable to sit back and do nothing.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Hear, hear.

**The Taoiseach:** These figures are serious and of concern but they are from 2023, the year the data was collected. The Government had not yet, at that stage, brought in free school meals for all primary school students or free schoolbooks at second level. I am sure the Deputy would acknowledge these measures have had a significant impact on many families and are making a real difference to children in poverty, but we have to do more. We have had a series of cost-of-living packages but we need something better than cost-of-living packages on an annual basis. Unlike any other government in Europe, we have been in a position to bring in those kinds of cost-of-living packages, but we need a sustained, targeted child poverty initiative, which I am working on with the child poverty unit in my Department to prepare for the forthcoming budget.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** Yesterday's arrest by Israel of those aboard the *Madleen* freedom flotilla ship while in international waters was a flagrant breach of international law. Those taken by Israeli forces are brave activists, bringing symbolic aid to a people who have been abandoned by the world. The activists hold EU citizenship and one is an MEP. I hope the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste will raise this kidnapping of activists at international level.

I also ask that the Government do more at international level to ensure Israel is subject to some consequence and some sanction for its continued brutal and genocidal bombardment of Palestinian civilians. I am really concerned to see reports that representatives of Israel will be in attendance on 23 June at an EU southern neighbourhood ministerial meeting. This is a concern at a time when we should be able to see Israel being isolated by the international community for its actions in Gaza, a genocide before our eyes. I know Ireland has been strong on this at international level, but we must do more.

**The Taoiseach:** At the weekend, I was in Nice for the United Nations Ocean Conference and took the opportunity to meet with a number of people in respect of this issue. The crew of the *Madleen* deserve our recognition. I pay tribute to their bravery and courage for profiling and keeping in the public and international spotlight the shocking situation in Gaza and the deprivation and starvation there. It brings to mind the absolute necessity and imperative

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of substantial aid being allowed in. I spoke to the King of Jordan and the foreign minister of Jordan, who are working flat out to try to get structured aid back into Gaza. I also engaged with the French Government and others on this issue.

I will attend a UN conference next week in New York, chaired by France and Saudi Arabia, in respect of a two-state solution.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** Saudi Arabia?

**The Taoiseach:** I hope we can leverage significant international support for pressure to be put on Israel.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** For sanctions.

**The Taoiseach:** Then there will be the EU Foreign Affairs Council meeting after that and then an European Council meeting-----

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** What about the meeting on 23 June?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** This is not a back and forth, Deputy. Deputy Gibney is next.

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** Fifty-four thousand people have now been killed in Palestine. Eighteen people were shot today while waiting for food and another eight were killed in a bomb explosion in central Gaza. These are bombs and bullets that are partially funded by the sale of Israeli bonds. Two weeks ago, the Government was offered the opportunity to adopt legislation which would enable the Minister for Finance to cease Ireland's approval, and that of the Central Bank, of the prospectus which permits the sale of Israeli bonds here in Europe. Tomorrow we will use our time to bring another cross-party motion to facilitate the same thing. Will the Taoiseach support our motion and will he and the Tánaiste allow their colleagues in Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael a free vote on this to allow them to vote with their conscience and to stop Ireland's complicity in this genocide?

**The Taoiseach:** The reference to complicity in genocide is shocking and wrong. I genuinely mean that.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** It is true.

**Deputy John Lahart:** It is not true.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please.

**The Taoiseach:** I do not in any way underestimate the Deputy's sincerity on this issue. I respect it. She has been very consistent on this, but it is wrong to say others in this House are complicit in genocide when they most certainly are not.

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** Will there be a free vote?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** It is a phrase that is thrown around too cheaply, and violence and criminal acts can emanate from that. Certain people are already engaging in criminal damage of TDs' offices and the Department of foreign affairs because of that handy phrase used to label everybody as complicit in genocide. Ireland is doing everything it possibly can on the key platforms for us to try to put pressure on Israel. What Israel is doing is fundamentally wrong and it is breaking international law. We know that. We condemn it.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** Why is the Central Bank still accommodating warmongering?

**Mary Lou McDonald:** Please, Deputy.

**The Taoiseach:** The legislation last week would have done nothing to change that.

**Deputy Mary Lou McDonald:** That is not true.

**The Taoiseach:** The Central Bank may be in a position over time to do something.

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** There is no time.

**Ruth Coppinger:** There may be a route there, but that in itself is not going to change what is happening now.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy's time is up. I call on Deputy Coppinger.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** The *Madleen* humanitarian flotilla was illegally intercepted by Israel in international waters. This is piracy, it is kidnapping and it is a crime to stop aid being delivered to starving children and people. Four people have been deported, including Greta Thunberg, and eight detained, and we commend their bravery. Three ambulance crew and a journalist were among the murdered last night. The Taoiseach gets annoyed when we say the Irish State is complicit, but he and the Tánaiste have both recognised that there is a genocide, yet they have done nothing active to stop it. For example, did the Taoiseach lodge an objection to what the Israelis did last night? Would he agree to the Naval Service going there to try to deliver humanitarian aid? He is shaking his head. What else should the Naval Service be doing, as part of a neutral country, other than trying to take part in humanitarian endeavours like that? If 12 activists can go on a ship, how can a professional navy not do that? Will the Taoiseach ask the EU?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** Will he commend the march to Gaza taking place-----

**The Taoiseach:** Excuse me, the Deputy's time is up.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** ----- this Thursday by thousands of people, including from Ireland?

**The Taoiseach:** I do not want to be facetious but under the triple lock arrangements at the moment, it would not be possible for the Naval Service to go overseas. In any event, I applaud the crew of the *Madleen*-----

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** It was an humanitarian mission, not a military mission.

**Ruth Coppinger:** -----because they acknowledged themselves that it was a symbolic gesture.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** It was not symbolic; they had aid.

**The Taoiseach:** It is not a back and forth.

**Ruth Coppinger:** As the King of Jordan said to me at the weekend, we need trucks and

trucks of aid, not drops. We need absolute, unimpeded aid going into Gaza at huge scale. On the other hand-----

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** He has done nothing for the Palestinian people.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** He has, actually. In fact, the European Union remains the largest donor to Palestine and the Palestinians. Apart from all that, the international community, particularly the EU-Israeli association agreement, is something we have to focus on. That would have impact. As I mentioned in response to Deputy Bacik before I ran out of time, the Foreign Affairs Council will be meeting the week after the UN conference, and the European Council will meet after that.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Taoiseach.

**Michael Collins:** We will do everything we can to endeavour to get an outcome in respect of the EU-Israeli association agreement. It will be difficult, because a lot of countries in Europe do not have the same mindset that we do.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** On Sunday, in Kinsale, hundreds of people turned up in opposition to the granting of a 62-acre mussel farm licence, equivalent to 36 soccer pitches, off Kinsale Harbour. This was first proposed in 2019, when I raised concerns with the then Taoiseach and the relevant Minister. The new licence granted leaves many unanswered questions on the planning process for this specific licence. First, there was no transparency with regard to the licence awarded. Second, there was no public consultation for local concerns to be raised. Third, there was a lack of information on the risk assessment for Annex IV-protected species. Fourth, there was no social impact assessment. Fifth, no monitoring of the environmental impact assessment is evident. Sixth, there is no information regarding lorries taking away the mussels produced. Seventh, there is no information on the environmental impact assessment of the effect of dredging. Eighth, there is no sign of the terms and conditions of the licence, and so on. Simply put, this planning application, which will destroy marine, leisure and tourism activity in Kinsale, is flawed, and this flawed process is aided and abetted by the Department of agriculture. Will the Taoiseach urgently look into this matter with the Department of agriculture to stop this damaging plan going ahead in Kinsale until proper planning guidelines are adhered to?

**The Taoiseach:** My understanding is that the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine has determined to grant an aquaculture licence to Woodstown Bay Shellfish Limited and that the licensing process involves consultation with a wide range of scientific and technical advisers as well as various statutory consultees. I am informed that the legislation also provides for a period of public consultation, which for this application was apparently held in 2019 and was rerun in 2021. In total, 609 public submissions were received. I am told the decisions in respect of aquaculture licence applications are only taken following the fullest consideration of all consultations and public interest elements of each application, including environmental considerations. A public advertisement outlining the decision was printed in *The Southern Star* newspaper on Saturday, 31 May 2025. The public notice said that an appeal against the aquaculture licence decision may be made in writing within one month of the date of its publication to the Aquaculture Licences Appeals Board in Portlaoise, County Laois.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Taoiseach.

**The Taoiseach:** There is a process here. I do not interfere in every single process. I do not have executive authority to do that. I think the Deputy knows that.

**Deputy Erin McGreehan:** I raise the serious concerns people have in Dundalk and north Louth in particular regarding Uisce Éireann. We have huge deficits when it comes to water infrastructure. Wastewater treatment plants are over capacity and are not working to purpose. We have brown water constantly in Dundalk and all over north Louth, where people cannot wash their clothes. Their clothes are actually dirtier after the wash. After years of engaging with Uisce Éireann in good faith, we are getting nowhere as public representatives in County Louth. Toilet paper and foul waste are being washed onto the shores in County Louth, in Carlingford Lough and Dundalk Bay. It is really a time of crisis at the minute. Toilet paper is present and it is not safe to bathe in Blackrock at the minute. It is not only an environmental and personal risk but a huge blockage to house building in County Louth.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising the issue, which is obviously of huge concern to those in County Louth, in Carlingford and Dundalk. The additional investment in Irish Water, or Uisce Éireann, is a key priority for the next national development plan for clean water but also for housing supply. We will be ring-fencing quite substantial capital allocations for housing supply but also, as is clearly needed judging by the issues the Deputy has instanced, in wastewater treatment. One of the challenges with wastewater treatment is that there are inevitably a series of objections at all levels, right up to appeals and judicial reviews, which significantly slow down the advancement of wastewater treatment plants, even though these plants substantially enhance the environment and clean the water.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I raise the process of approving housing whereby we have to go through voluntary housing agencies, then through the Department of housing and finally through the Department of public expenditure. I am dealing with one project with 217 apartments for which the process started in September last year. It has gone through Clúid, the housing agency, through the Department of housing and is now in the Department of public expenditure. I fully understand Departments have to make sure taxpayers are getting value for money, but can we put a process in place that can expedite approvals for projects like this? This is 217 apartments. It is a project in the Taoiseach's constituency, but a number of other projects in a similar vein have been approved by the Department of housing but then have to go through the Department of public expenditure for final approval. Can we set a process in place that is faster than one that takes from September to June or July? There are challenges as regards meeting timeframes with builders.

**The Taoiseach:** There are challenges. Nonetheless, earlier this year, the new Government allocated up to €700 million additionally over the Estimate for a whole variety of schemes to give them the green light. It allocated about €450 million for new projects and then approximately €300 for the tenant in situ scheme and for further acquisitions of housing and so on by local authorities. Other schemes are coming through all of the time. It was interesting to listen to the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, IFAC, this morning, which is concerned about additionality in public expenditure. Nonetheless, housing remains a priority for us. I hear what the Deputy says and we will see what we can do to deal with these issues.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I appreciate that.

**Deputy John Brady:** Each year in Greystones, children are being left without secondary school places. This year, up to 29 students have no place, including one student who repeated sixth class after missing out last year. This student still has no offer of a school place and that is an absolute disgrace. We need a common enrolment policy, but there is another simple solution and that is building a post-primary school in Newtownmountkennedy. The Minister for

education recently informed me that there are no plans for a school there, citing demographic growth as a key factor. However, Newtownmountkennedy has seen a 32% increase in primary enrolments and is one of the fastest growing towns within the State. Land has been zoned in that town for educational purposes, for a secondary school, as far back as 2002. Will the Government finally take action to deal with the annual battle for school places for students and go ahead with the long-awaited secondary school in Newtownmountkennedy?

**The Taoiseach:** First, the Department makes its assessment in respect of new schools in terms of demographics, existing schools in the area that may be absorbing a lot at second level, and future trends. I am not in a position right here to question the work the Department has done on this. I will raise it with the Minister and indicate that the Deputy has raised this issue in Greystones on the Order of Business. I will particularly ask about the 29 students who are, from what the Deputy is saying, still awaiting places. I would hope progress could be made in respect of those 29 students for next September.

**Deputy John Lahart:** The waiting times for driving tests are increasing at my two local centres in Tallaght and Deansgrange, which serve constituents in Dublin South-West. I had a call to my office this morning from a constituent whose son has been waiting over nine months for a test. He represents Ireland in athletics and his father, who works in a hospital, has to accompany him or drive him around the country to races. All his son wants is his independence to drive himself, but he cannot as he is still waiting for his test.

Second, pass rates are very concerning, at just 40.3% in the Tallaght centre and 53% in Dún Laoghaire-Deansgrange, highlighting the urgent need for better support. We know too that there has been a rise in unaccompanied learner drivers and in vehicles being seized. Most tragically, though, 82% of fatal collisions involving learner drivers between 2019 and 2023 involved unaccompanied drivers.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Deputy Lahart.

**Deputy John Lahart:** Could we institute a learner driver programme to try to address those really-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Lahart, your time is up.

**Deputy John Lahart:** -----appalling figures?

**The Taoiseach:** I accept fully the frustrations as articulated by the Deputy in respect of this issue. As far back as September 2024, the Department of Transport sanctioned an additional 70 permanent positions for driver testers and this increases the total permanent posts sanctioned for testers to 200, which is a doubling of permanent posts since June 2022. A recruitment process is under way, with the first tranche of new testers now being deployed into the service. We hope that as additional testers enter the system, testing capacity will increase and progress should be seen in reducing waiting times in the months ahead.

I would be concerned at those pass rates. There needs to be a review of that. Is it overly strict? I do not know. There are a lot of people driving today who, if they were to sit down and do those tests young people are doing today, might not pass. I do not want to be flippant about it but when we are getting a 40% pass rate, something is wrong somewhere.

**Deputy Joe Neville:** I note that the Minister, Deputy Chambers, who is responsible for

infrastructure, is beside the Taoiseach. The issue I raise today is the need for a second bridge in Celbridge. Celbridge, a town very close to where I live, has required a second bridge for decades. The population was 1,500 when the current infrastructure was put in place. It now has a population of 23,000. When I was a councillor, it was put down on our local area plan in 2017 that a bridge would have to be installed before any further development would take place. A certain element of funding was put in place for that bridge. When will we see a significant level of funding being put in place for infrastructure in counties like Kildare, where there is a bridge ready to go, where there are plans and we are going through the phases with An Bord Pleanála? I want to ensure that the funding is ready to go in that case, which is akin to Maynooth, where LIHAF funding is required for a relief road. I am interested to hear where we are in relation to those situations.

**Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Jack Chambers):** Deputy Neville is correct. We need to see a specific focus on basic, strategic infrastructure in the review of the national development plan. That is why the Government has set out prioritisation around transport, energy, water and housing in particular. I am familiar with Leixlip as it borders my constituency. Clearly the area has grown significantly, with infrastructure that was built some time ago. These are the types of broader infrastructure projects which are needed to manage the increase in population we have seen in areas like Leixlip and elsewhere. They are needed to further unlock additional housing supply in the commuter belt and that will be the strategic focus of the overall national development plan. It is about getting the basic infrastructure needs of the economy right to really deliver housing supply.

**Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh:** An estimated 90% of Travellers report ongoing mental health difficulties while 11% die by suicide, which is over seven times the national average. Four out of five Travellers say they have been directly affected by suicide, with nearly half losing someone in their own family. These are not just shocking statistics; these are families devastated, communities grieving and lives lost far too young. We cannot talk about mental health without talking about discrimination. Discrimination against Travellers is widespread and absolutely normalised in this State, with 36% of people in this State saying they actively avoid Travellers and 97% saying they would not accept a Traveller into their family. This is the reality and it is shameful. When will the Government stop dragging its feet and bring forward a proper national Traveller mental health strategy? Will the Government underpin it with legislation to guarantee that it is not just another plan that gathers dust but one that delivers real change on the ground in services, outcomes and in respect?

**The Taoiseach:** I take this issue very seriously. I have met with Traveller organisations and agree that it is a very serious situation. I will ask the Minister of State with responsibility for mental health to respond.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** I thank the Deputy for her question and for raising the issue of mental health supports for the Travelling community. It is great to hear it being raised on the floor of the Dáil. I have worked very closely with the Travelling community, including visiting Pavee Point on many occasions. We also fund Exchange House in Dublin, specifically in relation to suicide prevention. I am pleased to say that we have seen the suicide numbers trending downwards. The preliminary figures we received for 2023 indicate that the numbers are down 25% on the previous 20 years, to 302. That said, it is still 302 too many. This year I have supported community workers in relation to mental health across the entire Travelling community. We also have suicide bereavement sup-

ports in place across the country. There is a huge amount more to do and I am happy to engage with Deputy Ní Raghallaigh on it.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** Caretakers in our schools are committed, dedicated and very hard working people. Along with school secretaries, they are the engine of any school. My question relates to the delivery of a package for caretakers. I acknowledge that there is a commitment to deliver a package for caretakers similar to the one delivered for school secretaries in the near future but at this point, caretakers need clarity. They need definitive clarity. When will the package be delivered for caretakers?

**The Taoiseach:** I accept the Deputy's point and a lot of progress has been made over the last number of years in respect of caretakers and school secretaries in terms of salaries and so forth. We are committed to ensuring that grant-funded school caretakers will be afforded the opportunity to avail of an agreement similar to that offered to grant-funded school secretaries. There is more work to be done on both fronts but we will work with the trade unions involved, in the context of public expenditure constraints and so forth. I will come back to the Deputy, having spoken to the Minister for Education on the matter.

**Deputy Eoin Hayes:** At a recent residents' association meeting in my constituency in Sandymount, it was reported to me that only one flood insurance provider is left providing coverage in the community. This week research from the University of Galway was reported in *The Irish Times* showing that storm surges during Storm Éowyn were the "highest ever recorded" and would have been twice as high had the storm landed a week earlier during a particularly high tide. Earlier this month the EPA's national climate change risk assessment also noted a "significant risk" of coastal flooding in Dublin. I note with surprise that there is no reference to flood insurance in the programme for Government. Does the Government have a policy for engaging with insurance providers on this issue? What is the Government's policy on addressing gaps in the flood insurance market, particularly in coastal communities like Sandymount, Merrion, Ringsend and Irishtown? Will the Government consider State-backed flood insurance and reinsurance schemes to protect livelihoods and homes in these areas?

**The Taoiseach:** There is a commitment in the programme for Government to draw up a new action plan on insurance. We did a lot of good work in the last government in respect of insurance. Insurance companies have to come to the table as well and respond to the reforms that have occurred, which industry and others sought, in terms of awards and all of that. More crucially, in terms of flood areas, there are issues without question. The State has to be cautious in the sense that the insurance industry has to play its role. Where flood relief schemes come in and are provided for by way of significant infrastructural investment, there is an onus and obligation on insurance companies to then insure again. The State, through compensation schemes, will do everything it can to underpin people who are impacted negatively and destructively by storms and flooding events but, fundamentally, we need a State agreement with the insurance industry. Primarily, where we do invest and create new infrastructure to prevent flooding, those houses or business should then be able to get flood insurance. The Minister of State, Deputy Troy, is dealing with this. I will alert him to Deputy Hayes's interest in the subject.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We are out of time. However, there are two remaining Deputies so I propose to give them both 30 seconds to pose their questions and the Taoiseach will respond to both together.

**Deputy Eoghan Kenny:** Today *The Guardian* newspaper reported on the up to 13,000

survivors of mother and baby homes living in Britain who risk losing access to essential means-tested benefits if they accept compensation. A campaign led by our British Labour Party colleague, Liam Conlon MP, shows that if the compensation is taken up by survivors it is considered to be savings and therefore disqualifies them from the means-tested social welfare supports they receive. I ask the Taoiseach to engage with his UK counterpart to encourage people there to take up the scheme and to ensure that survivors do not lose their benefits.

**Deputy Ken O’Flynn:** I refer to a recent An Bord Pleanála decision to refuse permission for the development of 800 new homes in Cork docklands in the Taoiseach’s constituency. The area has seen substantial investment, including commitments exceeding €600 million for the regeneration project. Would the Taoiseach agree that An Bord Pleanála’s refusal to outline case 313142 undermines these efforts and hampers Cork’s potential to deliver urgently needed houses? Does the Taoiseach accept that this planning rejection not only stalls the housing project but also sends conflicting messages to investors and the community itself?

**The Taoiseach:** I will have to look into the background. An Bord Pleanála is saying that the site is designated for a school. The docklands will have to have a fairly extensive campus for a primary, further, post primary and special education. The city council identified that as the site for the school but perhaps more engagement needs to occur with the owners of the site. I will discuss that further with the council. In my recent interactions, that site did not emerge as a topic for discussion. Broadly speaking, development has been going well in the docklands. The earlier debate on rent pressure zones and trying to get a balanced package is about future investment in the area but I take the Deputy’s point on that specific planning application.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Will the Taoiseach respond to Deputy Kenny?

**The Taoiseach:** Apologies. The Department of foreign affairs, along with the Department of Health and others, provides financial support for centres in London, in particular, where there is a service to engage with survivors of mother and baby homes, advising them, counselling them and giving them the wherewithal to apply for the schemes. We will engage with our UK counterparts in respect of trying to ring fence that and avoid any loss of benefits.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That concludes questions on policy or legislation.

### **Revised Estimates for Public Services 2025: Message from Select Committee**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure, Public Services Reform and Digitalisation, and Taoiseach has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimates for Public Services for the service of the year ending 31 December 2025: Votes 7 to 10, inclusive.

## **Taxes Consolidation (Rights of Performers and Film Workers) (Amendment) Bill 2025: First Stage**

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 to ensure the certificate required for Section 481 tax relief is only issued to qualifying companies which afford equal terms to Irish performers, comply with copyright legislation, and do not engage in the practice of so-called ‘buy-out’ contracts.

Yesterday, we celebrated Lá Fhéile Cholm Cille in honour of the great Irish patron saint, born more than 1,500 years ago, who sparked a war over copyright. It is fitting, therefore, that the first Bill discussed by the Dáil this week concerns intellectual property. Mar a dúirt an Rí Diarmuid fadó ina bhreithiúnas, “Le gach boin a boinín; le gach lebhur a leabrán”. This means, “To every cow her calf; to every book its copy”, from which it logically follows, “To every actor, his performance”.

The budgetary oversight committee made three recommendations on intellectual property rights of performance in its May 2023 report on the section 481 tax relief. Recommendation No. 7, regarding films funded by the relief, stated that “assurance must be given that Irish performers will not be subject to lesser terms and conditions relating to their intellectual property rights than international performers in similar roles”. That assurance is provided for in subparagraph (5) to be inserted by this Bill.

Under recommendation No. 8, “compliance with the Copyright and Related Rights Act 2000, as well as the EU Copyright Directive should be a specific requirement” to obtain the section 481 relief. That compliance is provided for in subparagraph (6) to be inserted by the Bill.

Under recommendation No. 9, the committee requested an EU examination of the use of buy-out contracts in Irish film production to address the prevalence of such contracts, which witnesses said had become the norm rather than the exception, whereby performers “must either sign a buy-out contract where there is no variability allowed in what actors get for the exploitation of their work or lose that employment opportunity”. I asked representatives of RTÉ at the media committee only a few weeks ago to confirm that their organisation does not force that Sophie’s choice on actors. To their shame, they had no answer. Under subparagraph (7), to be inserted by the Bill, this practice would no longer be supported by way of tax relief.

In October 2023, TDs and Senators were presented with a petition by Irish Equity that was signed by more than 3,700 people, including well-known actors Cillian Murphy, Ruth Negga, Colin Farrell, Siobhán McSweeney, David Morrissey, Jonathan Frakes, Jeri Ryan and Adrian Dunbar, to name but a few, and supported by British Equity, the International Federation of Actors and the US Screen Actors Guild - American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, SAG-AFTRA. This Bill is the culmination of their work. I warmly welcome the members of Irish Equity who join us in the Gallery for First Stage. Sinn Féin has heard their demands. We in Ireland take great pride in the success of our acting talent but we neglect the same talent when they need us to stand up for their rights.

The EU copyright directive sets out that performers tend to be in the weaker contractual position when they grant a licence or transfer their rights and specifies a requirement for fair remuneration and transparency to remedy this weakness. This is the law of the land. My Bill aims to

ensure film productions that receive lucrative tax relief will, at the very least, comply with the law and will not treat Irish workers worse than their colleagues from elsewhere doing the same work on the same job. Equal pay for equal work is a principle everyone in this House should get behind. The Revenue Commissioners valued the payments issued to qualifying productions under section 481 in the region of €130 million per year, which is more than a quarter of the total film production spend. That investment is vital and we welcome its extension, with EU approval last week, to the unscripted sector. However, we need to know funding is supporting Irish performers, not facilitating the denial of their rights. My Bill aims to ensure those rights. It seeks to ensure Irish performers enjoy their full intellectual property rights as laid down in the report of the budgetary oversight committee and as set out in the EU copyright directive.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Is the Bill opposed?

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

Question put and agreed to.

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

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

### **Government Bills: Referral to Select Committee**

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

That, where appropriate, the Order that each Bill listed in column 1 of the Schedule here-to be considered in Committee of the whole Dáil is hereby discharged, and that each Bill listed in column 1 is respectively referred to the Committee listed in column 3, established to consider such matters pursuant to Standing Order 103(2)(b) and 188(1).

#### **SCHEDULE**

<i><b>(1) Bill</b></i>	<i><b>(2) Ordered to be taken in Committee of the whole Dáil on</b></i>	<i><b>(3) Committee</b></i>
<i><b>1. Credit Review Bill 2024</b></i>	<i><b>5th February, 2025</b></i>	<i><b>Select Committee on Fi- nance, Public Expenditure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, and Taoise- ach</b></i>
<i><b>2. Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill 2019 [Seanad]</b></i>	<i><b>5th February, 2025</b></i>	<i><b>Select Committee on Educa- tion and Youth</b></i>

<b>3. <i>Employment (Contractual Retirement Ages) Bill 2025</i></b>		<b><i>Select Committee on Enterprise, Tourism and Employment</i></b>
<b>4. <i>Health Information Bill 2024</i></b>	<b><i>5th February, 2025</i></b>	<b><i>Select Committee on Health</i></b>
<b>5. <i>Social Welfare (Bereaved Partner's Pension) Bill 2025</i></b>		<b><i>Select Committee on Social Protection, Rural and Community Development</i></b>
<b>6. <i>Statute Law Revision Bill 2024 [Seanad]</i></b>		<b><i>Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, and Taoiseach</i></b>

Question put and agreed to.

### **Ceisteanna - Questions**

#### **European Council**

1. **Deputy Malcolm Byrne** asked the Taoiseach to report on his attendance at the European Council on 20 and 21 March. [16780/25]

2. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach to report on his attendance at the recent European Council. [22206/25]

3. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach to report on his attendance at the European Council on 20 and 21 March. [15145/25]

4. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach to report on his attendance at the recent European Council. [25527/25]

5. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach to report on his attendance at the recent European Council. [26851/25]

6. **Deputy Shane Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach to report on his attendance at the recent European Council. [27215/25]

7. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Taoiseach to report on his attendance at the recent European Council. [27219/25]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 7, inclusive, together.

I attended the European Council meeting on Thursday, 20 March where leaders continued discussions on Ukraine and European defence and security. Other topics discussed were the Middle East, competitiveness, the next multi-annual financial framework, MFF, new own re-

sources, migration, oceans, multilateralism and the western Balkans. Leaders were joined by the UN Secretary General, António Guterres, for a working lunch and a euro summit took place on the margins of the meeting.

We were also joined via video conference call by President Zelenskyy for an exchange of views on Ukraine. Leaders recalled the principles to be adhered to in negotiations for a comprehensive, just and lasting peace set out at the 6 March special European Council. We welcomed the joint statement by Ukraine and the US on a ceasefire proposal, humanitarian efforts and the resumption of US intelligence sharing and security assistance. The European Council called on Russia to show real political will to end the war and stated that a credible pathway to peace must include humanitarian relief efforts, including prisoner exchange, release of civilians and the return of Ukrainian children unlawfully deported to Russia and Belarus.

Continuing our discussion on European defence and security from the 6 March special European Council, and in light of the publication of the Commission's White Paper on the future of European defence, leaders called for the ramping up of member states' defence readiness within the next five years. The need to invest in defence is important for the security and preparedness of member states.

On the Middle East, leaders took stock of the latest developments and deplored the breakdown of the ceasefire in Gaza and the refusal of Hamas to hand over the remaining hostages. We called for the immediate return to full implementation of the ceasefire and hostage agreement. On Syria, leaders condemned the widespread violence against civilians, stressing the importance of a peaceful and inclusive transition. We welcomed the end of the political impasse in Lebanon.

The discussion on competitiveness focused on simplification, reducing the administrative burden, reducing energy prices and increasing private investment through the savings and investments union. The European Council welcomed the competitiveness compass, the clean industrial deal and the omnibus simplification packages presented by the Commission.

On the multi-annual financial framework, leaders had a first exchange of views on the next iteration of the European Union's long-term budget. The Commission is expected to publish its proposal for the next MFF in July.

On migration, leaders took stock of developments and called for progress on areas such as the Commission's proposals on returns.

The European Council also welcomed the proposal for a European oceans pact, highlighting the importance of oceans and the blue economy. The pact was a focus of the European Maritime Day event held in Cork on 21 to 23 May and was formally launched yesterday in Nice by the President of the Commission, the President of the Council and European Ministers, including me.

On multilateralism, the European Council underlined our commitment to upholding the UN charter and remaining a predictable and credible partner in driving forward the UN80 initiative aimed at reform of the United Nations to reflect a changing world.

**Deputy Malcolm Byrne:** I thank the Taoiseach for his comprehensive outline of what happened at the European Council. He indicated we will have initial sight of the next multi-annual financial framework this month. It is critical that we see a fully funded EU budget. From

Ireland's point of view, it is critical that the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, is fully funded and is not just there to meet current requirements. While it is essential and correct that we support Ukraine's path to membership, CAP must be sufficient to meet the needs of an enlarged European Union, particularly in terms of Ukraine being a sufficient beneficiary under Pillar 2. Perhaps the Taoiseach could outline some further detail on that.

Regarding European competitiveness, and I know the Taoiseach has been very supportive, it is critical that we see movement on the capital markets union to ensure greater availability of capital throughout Europe. This does not just benefit business; it also benefits consumers because consumers in Ireland could see better value in terms of financial and insurance products. I would be grateful if the Taoiseach could provide detail on those.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** On Ukraine, I condemn outright Russia's increasingly heavy and brutal bombardment of civilian infrastructure. We have seen more civilian casualties in Kharkiv and Kyiv in recent days. It is appalling to see that and I join with Deputy Malcolm Byrne in looking for an update on a timeline for possible accession. Ireland has been at the forefront of supporting Ukraine's proposed accession to the EU.

I raised earlier the plight of the crew of the *Madleen* and asked the Taoiseach to take steps at EU level to address the concern that many of us feel at reports that Israel is to be in attendance on 23 June at an EU southern neighbourhood ministerial meeting. I understand that there is considerable disquiet in many member states, including Ireland, at the prospect that the Israeli foreign minister might even participate in this meeting, the purpose of which we are told is to deepen EU co-operation with Israel and other southern partners, including Palestine, Egypt and Jordan. I would like an update on that. I know the Taoiseach did not have time to address that point when I raised it earlier with him.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** The Taoiseach referenced the galloping militarisation happening at EU level. It underlines the importance of Ireland's neutrality in that context and the importance of the struggle to defend that neutrality. Significant numbers will be on the streets this Saturday at 2 p.m. at the Garden of Remembrance to do so. What we have heard about the triple lock has confirmed the basic point the Taoiseach made in 2013, which was that it is at the core of our neutrality. What we have seen in the heads of Bill and what we heard in the Oireachtas committee from the Department of Defence two weeks ago has underlined our fears and the fact that what is proposed is a total abolition of the triple lock and the effective end of what is left of neutrality. Would the Taoiseach agree with the Department of Defence in committee that the heads of Bill would allow Irish troops, more than 50, to be sent abroad without UN approval as part of US-led coalitions or as part of NATO or EU-led missions? Does the Taoiseach agree with it that it would have meant that troops could have been sent to participate in the invasion of Iraq?

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** One of the most brutal things I have seen is the picking up by ICE of children and people off the streets of the US yet how far away from it are we given what happened here last week where 35 people, including five people, were deported to Nigeria? The report from the children's school principal and those who knew them said that they had been fully integrated in the school for three years and that so many of the schoolchildren were upset. They came to the Red Cow IPAS centre and it told them they were going to be deported and other children were listening to this. It is a high price to pay for a bit of virtue signalling to the far right - €325,000 or thereabouts to deport 35 people so that the Minister for justice can look like the strong man and this Government looks like it is doing something against racists because that it is exactly what it is.

**Deputy Malcolm Byrne:** Shame.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** It is a shame. The Minister was asked what the alternative to deporting children was. Maybe listen to what Simon Harris said when children were deported a few years back and he rallied behind them but the Taoiseach has just decided that this is popular.

**Deputy Shane Moynihan:** I thank the Taoiseach for the report. I note that in the conclusion of the European Council meeting in March competitiveness featured largely. I would like to hear more about what discussions were had about keeping the Commission honest in terms of following the simplification agenda. We know from the Draghi and Letta reports that there is a need for an impetus towards the simplification agenda that is not just the deferral of regulation but involves looking at how we ease the burden on businesses in the EU to allow them to not only compete with counterparts in the US but those in Asia and to make sure Europe is at the forefront of the technological innovations that are coming down the track.

In addition and related to that is a need for a co-ordinated approach to a European research and lifelong learning agenda. What steps are we taking to ensure that Irish universities can be centres of excellence and that across the piece, we encourage European universities to be at the forefront of innovation, skills development and lifelong learning we need? Could the Taoiseach provide me with an update on the free trade agreement negotiations between the EU and India?

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputies for raising a variety of issues. Deputy Malcolm Byrne focused on the multi-annual financial framework. This will be a very challenging debate, which we commenced last March. I met the President of the Commission about six weeks ago for a substantive meeting on a range of issues. I emphasised the importance of the Common Agricultural Policy retaining its core ring-fenced funding framework. One of the issues will be around how we can increase it. The significant pressure on the multi-annual financial framework will be more and more pressures to spend more in different areas but no concrete proposals in terms of additional revenues. I also emphasised the importance of the Horizon research programme. Speaking about competitiveness, investment and research is crucial for the future of Europe and Ireland.

I agree with the Deputy on the capital markets union. I have been pushing strongly to try to reach an accommodation on a savings and investment union, which is the new name for the capital markets union. We would have had concerns about some aspects of it but I think we can get agreement. The Commission will be making its proposals soon in respect of that.

The major pressure will be defence in that some member states fear an existential threat from Russia. I note that Deputy Paul Murphy used the phrase “galloping militarisation”. That would probably be a phrase that the Baltic states would use about Russia. They feel a significant imperative to have some defensive capability and they will not have the wherewithal to do that within their own capital resources so they feel they should be able to avail of some funding but this is to be discussed. There are pressures and that is the origin of the pressure - the Russian threat and the fear of Russian militarisation, aggrandisement and attacks on other countries. Deputy Bacik is right in condemning Russia’s attack on Ukraine, the continuing focus on civilian infrastructure, the killing of children and civilians and the foot dragging about the return of children who have been abducted by Russia from Ukraine and taken to Russia or Belarus.

The crew of the *Madleen* deserve credit for their bravery in highlighting the issues. I do not have the background regarding the southern neighbourhood meeting and I need to get it. I will

get the Department of foreign affairs to revert to the Deputy about that.

Deputy Paul Murphy raised what he called the galloping militarisation EU agenda and the triple lock. I sanctioned this legislation because I believe it is no longer tenable that Russia or any of the permanent five should have a veto on Ireland's participation in peacekeeping. The Bill will make it clear that any peacekeeping initiatives in which Ireland will engage will be in accordance with UN principles and the UN charter and over 50 makes sense. It makes logistical sense that it would be over 50. We have participated in NATO peacekeeping missions and African Union and EU missions before. They are all UN-designated organisations that are under the UN framework.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** NATO.

**The Taoiseach:** There can be NATO peacekeeping that is accordance with UN principles and the UN charter and the UN acknowledges that such as in the Balkans and so forth. It is not the end of neutrality. Neutrality is defined by membership of a military alliance. We are not members of a military alliance and we have no intention of becoming members of a military alliance. The idea that Russia would have a veto over Ireland's-----

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** It does not.

**The Taoiseach:** A Security Council resolution can be vetoed by Russia.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Yes but the General Assembly-----

**The Taoiseach:** The General Assembly was used decades ago. It is not a feasible option for sanctioning peace initiatives and the Deputy well knows it. It is not a viable or feasible approach. Every peacekeeping mission in which we have participated have been sanctioned by the Security Council and it is increasingly becoming more problematic to even get agreement on humanitarian corridors in places of conflict as we have experienced in Syria, Ethiopia and other areas. The issue of deportations involving families is very traumatic and stressful for children but every country in the world has rules, passports, visas and routes of legal migration. No country in the world has an open border. Ireland does not have open borders and we have always had rules and frameworks. There must be a pathway to legal migration and if people do not qualify, we must take action. That is the context for what the Minister for Justice, Deputy O'Callaghan, has been doing. It is not about trying to look strong or anything like that but there must be a clear policy framework that is well articulated and understood.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** It is like what Trump is doing, is it?

**The Taoiseach:** We have had increased migration in the context of the numbers now applying which went from an average of 3,500 in 2019 to approximately 14,000 to 15,000 in the past two years. This has a serious impact on services and our system. We need to accelerate it and make it faster for both the application and appeals processes but the message must be there that there are rules in Ireland and they must be seen to be applied. That is the bottom line.

Deputy Moynihan raised the issue of the competitiveness agenda. The omnibus legislation has been significant, particularly for the car industry. The vast majority of small companies and industries have now been exempt from much of EU legislation to try to give greater flexibility and freedom and to make it more competitive. The savings and investments union has been progressed by the Commission and has taken soundings. We have a strong financial services

sector in Ireland and we would have a clear interest in this. Luxembourg would be another example, with Germany, France and a few others but those would be the key countries in this respect. I will unleash a lot of capital for venture capital and the new start-up and entrepreneurial sectors. There is much to be gained from trying to bring that over the line in the coming year and I will be positive about that at EU Council level.

The issue of research is the other key part of the competitiveness agenda and is something I am very much focused on. The president of the Commission is hopeful and has made progress on the European Union trade negotiations. There will be a significant agreement. It is interesting to counter forces of protectionism in trade and tariffs on trade. There are other agreements being worked on energetically by the Commission that are counterintuitive to other pressures. The committee is very focused on that.

**Deputy Malcolm Byrne:** On Ukrainian accession-----

**The Taoiseach:** On Ukrainian accession, Ireland has been one of the leaders in pushing for an acceleration of accession and the Commission is working away on it. Hungary is against it and its negativity has slowed down the process by indicating its opposition to the various processes involved in the Ukrainian accession to the European Union. This is a pity as I believe the people of Ukraine see their future in a European Union. They see protection in it with regard to freedom of expression, freedom of movement, free speech and better opportunities to develop a quality life in economic activity. Ukraine sees Russia and looks at the European Union and is very clear on where it wants to be.

### **Disability Services**

8. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Disability will next meet. [16741/25]

9. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Disability will next meet. [23471/25]

10. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Disability will next meet. [26852/25]

11. **Deputy Martin Daly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Disability will next meet. [27569/25]

12. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Disability will next meet. [27570/25]

13. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Disability will next meet. [27571/25]

14. **Deputy Catherine Ardagh** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Disability will next meet. [27572/25]

15. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Disability will next meet. [29326/25]

16. **Deputy Aisling Dempsey** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Dis-

ability will next meet. [29816/25]

17. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Disability will next meet. [30139/25]

18. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Disability will next meet. [30180/25]

19. **Deputy James Geoghegan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Disability will next meet. [30254/25]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 8 to 19, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on disabilities has been established to oversee the implementation of programme for Government commitments in the area of disability, with a specific focus on children's disability services and disability services more generally under the forthcoming new national disability strategy. The Cabinet committee on disability last met on 5 June – a few days ago - and is due to meet again on 7 July.

Under the programme for Government, we are committed to delivering a step change in disability services. To deliver on this, I have established a stand-alone Cabinet committee on disability. This Government is committed to advancing the rights and improving the lives of people with disabilities. We will prioritise the publication of and fund a new national disability strategy, setting out a vision to 2030. We will adopt a whole-of-government approach and advance the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the optional protocol to the Convention of Persons with Disabilities.

I am also establishing a disability unit in my Department. The unit supports the work of the Cabinet committee on disability. It also supports the work of the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Deputy Foley, and other Ministers in driving cross-government work and collaboration to improve the lives of people with disabilities and to enable them to achieve their potential. A work programme for the unit is currently being finalised which will inform the overall resources and staffing required for the unit. A ministerial meeting and three Cabinet committee meetings have been held to date, in addition to broader cross-government engagement on the finalisation of the next disability strategy.

It is important to ensure the work of my Department does not duplicate others. Rather, it should further drive innovation via troubleshooting getting things done, give momentum to policy implementation and improve delivery of services. In recent times, we have focused on the provision of a national in-school therapy service. We have made very good progress on that and we hope to be in a position to start this in the forthcoming academic year. We are also working on a whole range of other transport and mobility issues. I have spoken to the Minister for Transport, Deputy O'Brien, about these matters and I am working with the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, to bring them to a conclusion.

The Department of Social Protection recently announced enhancements to the wage subsidy scheme to increase participation rates. Our last Cabinet subcommittee meeting focused on the issue of assessment of need and the national school in-therapy service as well as respite and residential care.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** I welcome the proposals we have seen, which I believe went to the

Cabinet today, to create nearly 500 new third level places in key health and social professions, including physiotherapy, occupational therapy and more. As I said, this is welcome because we all recognise the enormous shortfall in services. The concern remains that it will take years for these new places to generate more qualified people.

As my colleague, Deputy Sherlock, documented last week, children are currently waiting far too long to see a therapist. The number of children waiting more than a year to see a psychologist had risen to almost 11,000 at the end of last year, from just under 4,000 four years ago, while the number on speech and language therapy waiting lists have soared by 200%. There is a crisis in services and concerns regarding how long it takes CORU to recognise and register graduates with qualifications from abroad.

What can be done now to bridge this current urgent gap in services to ensure there will be enough therapists to see children who are on these waiting lists, languishing and awaiting crucial services?

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** There was a march on Saturday through the streets of Dublin in horrendous weather. It was organised by parents, especially mothers, in a group called FUSS and Equality in Education Ireland. They are ordinary women who have had to spend their whole lives organising to get rights for their children. Many of them still do not have school places and many parents have contacted me who are in the same position.

Danu Community Special School is a school I have raised before.

**The Taoiseach:** What is it called?

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** The Taoiseach's Government promised 12 families that they would have places in the school last September. All those children are sitting at home or doing another year in preschool because Government failed to deliver. All that is needed are modular buildings but we have to be honest here: this is linked to chronic underinvestment in the public sector and to the housing crisis. We cannot get therapists. It is great that the Government has increased the places but most of these people are leaving the public sector or emigrating. We cannot get teachers either - I know teachers failed to live up to the Government's expectations by rejecting the latest plan for the leaving certificate - and especially not in special education, where people are not trained or resourced. Will the Taoiseach guarantee that there will be a school place for every child who needs one in September?

**Deputy Catherine Ardagh:** I rise again to discuss therapeutic supports for children. As the Taoiseach said, the in-school therapy programme has been a huge success.

*4 o'clock*

Even people in the Department were blown away by how many applied for the positions. Therapists like working in the school environment. It is the best place for therapies to be delivered to children and for their parents, the majority of whom work. In CHO 7, more than 2,700 people in Dublin South-Central are waiting for first contract. Some 2,100 of them have been waiting for more than 12 months. They do not even have a diagnosis yet. The dogs on the street know the CDNT model does not work. There was an intimation it would be scrapped before the general election. It is not working. I have never spoken to a parent who is happy with it. There is huge haemorrhaging of staff from CDNTs. I do not know where the bottleneck is. Why keep this model of care going when it is broken? Therapies need to be delivered in the school

environment. It is the best place. Clinicians and therapists want to work in a school environment. The Taoiseach came from a school environment himself. It is a nice place to work. The staffroom is a friendly place. Teachers are good people. People like a nice work-life balance.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Two weeks ago, I raised with the Taoiseach the issue of unnecessary surgeries on children said to have hip dysplasia and unnecessary osteotomies. I questioned why the surgeons responsible had not been suspended or at the very least suspended from carrying out osteotomies. Since then, I have learned it is even worse than I feared. There was a meeting last Tuesday to decide on surgical indicators into the future for which children should get these operations. The two surgeons representing Temple Street were involved in doing unnecessary surgeries, according to the audit. The people responsible for the crisis are now writing the rules for who will get these operations in the future. It is mind-blowing. I do not know if the Government is aware of that. Does the Taoiseach think it is appropriate that the two surgeons representing Temple Street in these meetings conducted a significant number of unnecessary operations, according to the audit? Instead of driving it, they should be nowhere near this process.

**Deputy Aisling Dempsey:** I thank the Taoiseach for his comments and continued focus and priority on disability matters. A cross-departmental approach is the only way we will improve disability services and the lives of those affected by disability. I am heartened to hear of progress on the work programme being worked on currently and that a new strategy document will be prepared. However, I have a question about progress in workstream 15 in the current action plan for disability services. It focuses on a strength and drive to support people with disabilities to live a life of their choosing. I recently met a mother representative of many other mothers and carers in Meath West and the nation who want their children to live as independently as possible so that when the parents are no longer around, their disabled children can fend for themselves as much as possible.

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** September is just around the corner. Despite a flurry of announcements earlier this year, there is still no sign of delivery on special education. I say that because Knockmahon National School in Bunmahon in my county, Waterford, received approval from the NCSE in 2023 to provide an autism class but was refused funding this April. St. Mary's national school in Grange also in County Waterford was given no answer as to why the Department has ignored a SENO report asking for an increased SNA allocation. Scoil Gharbháin in Dún na Mainistreach, Dún Garbhán, was granted funding by the Department in December 2024 for space needed this September. Contact from the design team which was promised in February has not come. Garranbane National School just outside Dungarvan needs a second autism class immediately. A modular option would take two years at the minimum and would push back the prospect of a permanent building with additional mainstream classrooms and the school is forced into an unenviable choice. Extra space was sanctioned in St. John's Special School in Dungarvan by the Minister earlier this year. There is no sign of delivery or impetus from the Government to get those spaces. Ballycurrane National School in west Waterford is still waiting for a reply from the Department to a letter sent in January asking for its views on provision of a special class.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Thank you, Deputy.

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** Sustained political will is needed. It will not happen by itself. The announcements are great but on their own they are nothing. I mentioned seven schools in west Waterford which have written to me in the past two months. We need to see

concerted political action from the Government to ensure those spaces are available in September.

**Deputy Mark Ward:** At the weekend, I attended the Equality in Education protest in Dublin. The parents I met had a simple message. They want fairness and equality for their children with disabilities in education. No child should be left behind. Every child should get the support they need so they can grow, learn and flourish. Every child should be given every opportunity to reach their full potential. Not to do so is criminal. Denying any child an appropriate education is morally reprehensible. Parents should not have to fight for such a basic right for their child but fight they must. There are several families in my area in Dublin Mid-West who have not secured an appropriate place for their child for this September. I can send the details to the Taoiseach. Will the Taoiseach guarantee that every child with special educational needs will have an appropriate school place in September?

**The Taoiseach:** I thank all the Deputies for the issues raised. Deputy Bacik asked the initial question about therapists. Approximately 461 were approved by the Cabinet today. That was sweating the existing asset, if you like, within our third level system, seeing how many additional places we can provide in addition to those already in place across a range of therapies. The Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science was asked by the Cabinet subcommittee that met two months ago to come back in a month and tell it what can be done with third-level colleges. In fairness, the Minister, Deputy Lawless, came back and secured an additional 461 places. That is just an initial step. There will be a more comprehensive programme to get additional investment in the universities with higher numbers again and additional capacities for therapists for next year. That will be crucial. The idea of an assistant therapist grade will also be explored, which could be very effective and useful in supporting therapists in schools or in CDNTs. I think that was the core issue the Deputy raised.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** It was about recognition of qualifications by CORU.

**The Taoiseach:** There will be engagement between the Department of Health, the Minister for Health, the HSE and CORU because there is an issue around recognition of qualifications for those who travel from overseas, even from the United Kingdom and within the European Union. It takes too long, given therapists are crucial. In other professions such as medicine it happens much more quickly in terms of mutual qualifications. There seems to be an issue in the therapy grades. I am concerned about that. We need to engage with CORU to get a proper understanding of that and see if the approval process can be accelerated.

Deputy Coppinger raised the issue of school places, along with a number of other Deputies. Huge efforts are being made. There has been a huge expansion of special education. Before the year is out, I think more than 11 special schools will have been established in the past three or four years. Five are being established this year. There are a lot more special classes - close to 400 special classes have been sanctioned. There are some issues. It should not take two years for a modular build. I do not understand that. The whole idea of modular is to do it faster. I was at the company recently that did the new Lucan Educate Together school, which is all modular. It is completed and it is a fine building. It involved modern methods of construction. The timeline could be late autumn for some of the sanctioned buildings to be provided. If Deputy McGuinness sends me the list of schools in Waterford, I will follow through with answers in respect of each case. He said some were at design stage. I cannot follow every individual process but we, including the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, and the Minister, Deputy McEntee, are sparing no effort on the special education front. We have a record number of spe-

cial needs assistants - there are more than 22,000 SNAs in our system. We will work with other countries in the European Union such as Finland to look at best practice across Europe in respect of disability and to examine whether more can be done with behavioural therapists. There may be better deployment of different disciplines that would be more impactful and effective. The Minister brought proposals to Cabinet today on the common enrolment idea. There will be some trials next September. Can we bring forward the date by which parents signal their need for a place so the whole process starts much earlier in the school year and by the end of December, say, everyone will be in a much clearer position? That will not happen overnight, but we will make progress on it next autumn. That is absolutely crucial so parents have a degree of certainty and are not fighting all the time with different schools.

We still have some challenges in the Dublin area and I want to acknowledge that. We are working flat-out to see can we close that gap. We have made significant progress in the rest of the country. We have more places provided for now than people looking for places. The issue is to ensure there are not geographical gaps. That could happen. It is being worked on intensively.

On Deputy Ardagh's question about the in-school therapy service, there was a time prior to Progressing Disability Services or the CDNT issue when special schools had therapists. The Progressing Disability Services model was launched around 2013 and probably got substantial resources in 2017-18, so it has had faltering progress resource-wise. It has had huge difficulty in recruiting and retaining, notwithstanding the allocation of resources in the past few years. Before the election, we put it as part of our manifesto and it is part of the programme for Government that we would have a national in-school therapy service. That is now commencing but it will take time to bed down. We are going to start in special schools then expand it out to special classes and into mainstream. It is not designed as an alternative to the CDNT. We will need CDNTs across the country. In some parts of the country, apparently, they work. I am trying to be objective about this. My views are well-known. I am told it works in Donegal. However, we need to have proper alignment between the school teams and the CDNTs within the HSE. A multidisciplinary approach within the school setting is an optimal way to help children with additional needs. That is the aim and we are absolutely determined to achieve this in the first phase with all special schools. We will do the first half of special schools and then the next and then special classes and then mainstream. It will have a huge impact on schools as well. That will enable the CDNTs to focus on particular cases and can ease the work of therapy.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The time is up on this particular set of questions.

**The Taoiseach:** I apologise. On dysplasia, I did not know that and was not aware of it. I will relay it to the Minister for Health. To Deputy Dempsey, I say independent living is important. She is correct a lot of parents have real anxiety about later life and if anything happens. That is something we are focused on. I spoke about Waterford, I think. To Deputy Ward, we are working to do everything we can to get places for children in schools. That is ongoing, focused, relentless work.

## **Departmental Programmes**

**20. Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher** asked the Taoiseach for a report on new shared island projects. [16782/25]

21. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Taoiseach for a report on new shared island projects. [22202/25]

22. **Deputy Shane Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work being carried out by the shared island unit with sport's governing bodies in promoting its objectives through grassroots engagement. [22408/25]

23. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Taoiseach to report on the recent work of the Economic and Social Research Institute as part of the shared island initiative. [22483/25]

24. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach to provide an update on the shared island initiative. [23472/25]

25. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Taoiseach if he will provide details of the new projects that will be delivered under the shared island scheme in the next five years. [25742/25]

26. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Taoiseach for a report on new shared island projects. [25991/25]

27. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach if he will provide an update on the shared island initiative. [26916/25]

28. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach for a report on new shared island projects. [29327/25]

29. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach to provide an update on the shared island initiative. [29590/25]

30. **Deputy Erin McGreehan** asked the Taoiseach for a report on new shared island projects. [29727/25]

31. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Taoiseach for a report on new shared island projects. [30140/25]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 20 to 31, inclusive, together.

On 10 April, I announced the new phase of the Government's shared island initiative in a keynote address to the fourth shared island forum. Our programme for Government sets out an ambitious agenda for building a shared island, backed by a further €1 billion commitment to the shared island fund out to 2035. Already on 25 February, the Government announced over €50 million from the shared island fund for new programmes to run from 2025-30 on sustainable tourism, arts and cultural heritage, civic society co-operation and community-led nature restoration. Government Departments have been tasked to bring forward further new shared island projects proposals this year that will implement our commitments to more strategic all-island investment and co-operation across virtually all sectors over the next five years.

At the shared island forum I also announced a new dimension the initiative to commence later this year called the shared home place programme. This will be open to the people from every corner of the island to build new connections through our place-based heritage. It will engage also with Irish communities in Britain and further afield and with the contributions of Irish, Anglo-Irish and Ulster-Scots traditions across the island of Ireland, recognising how these are an integral part of the heritage of every county today and crucial to how we approach and

build our future.

On sport, our programme for Government affirms we will promote an all-island approach to hosting major international sporting events. Sports governing bodies and clubs have successfully applied to the shared island civic society fund and reconciliation fund of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade for support for cross-Border grassroots engagements and tournaments.

On 28 April I launched an overarching report of the Economic and Social Research Institute's joint research programme with my Department as part of the shared island initiative, which has produced 16 reports to date. All reports are publicly available on *gov.ie*. Research is an essential part of the initiative and on 28 April I also announced a new phase of further joint research with the ESRI commencing this year. We need data to inform all-island investment and co-operation priorities as we build a shared future together on this island. The huge untapped further potential of all-island co-operation is a major takeaway from the ESRI's overarching report. This reflects the Government's commitments to expand and progress our shared island initiative so that we bring co-operation and relationships across the island of Ireland to a new level.

**Deputy Shane Moynihan:** Without doubt the shared island initiative is one of the signature achievements in taking forward the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement and ensuring there is reconciliation and also that we see this shared island as our common home place. I am struck also by the Taoiseach's mention that sports governing bodies have been engaged by applying to the various funds for activation across the island. I wonder whether he could say more about how his Department and the Department of foreign affairs are pro-actively engaging with the sports governing bodies to see what initiatives are working well for them in terms of achieving the objectives set out by the shared island fund. I met representatives of Basketball Ireland recently. They told me about a number of initiatives they are seeking to explore in Northern Ireland. As we know, the vast majority of governing bodies on the island operate on an all-island basis. There is potential here for us to encourage that integration and the objectives of the shared island initiative by pro-actively engaging with the likes of Basketball Ireland, Cricket Ireland, the IRFU, the GAA and so on. I would love to hear the Taoiseach's thoughts on that matter.

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** Like Deputy Moynihan I very much welcome the measures in the shared island initiative. It has gained support from all political traditions on this island. The Taoiseach may remember that when he launched the initiative I raised with him the need to have an enterprise initiative within the shared island programme. Subsequently, local authorities on both sides of the Border were enabled to put in joint submissions in regard to the development of work space enterprise centres, innovation centres and research centres. I am very anxious that initiative is given impetus because, as the Taoiseach has often heard me say in the House, those of us who live in the central Border area – I have the privilege of representing two of the southern Ulster counties, namely, Cavan and Monaghan – along with our neighbours in Fermanagh, Tyrone and Armagh are very conscious we need to support local enterprise. Fortunately, over the years local authorities and voluntary organisations developed enterprise centres. Some of the small companies that commenced their operations in enterprise centres in my constituency subsequently became international corporations, to their great credit. From speaking to local statutory agencies I know there is a need for more work space and enterprise centres. The local authorities do not have the resources to do these particular developments. It would be a great investment in the central Border area to advance that proposal the Taoiseach

gave the go-ahead to some time ago.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** The Taoiseach has outlined some of the work of the shared island initiative. Dealing with legacy is an important part of the work being done. The British Labour Government has committed to changes but no agreement has been reached yet, and there are a number of areas where families have been seeking answers and where the Government here has a role to play. I ask in particular about the issue of Denis Donaldson. His family have been seeking answers and the case has of course been highlighted recently. He was murdered in 2006 in Donegal. His inquest has been adjourned 27 times over 19 years. The Minister for justice recently pointed out there is a Garda investigation under way, but his family are seeking an inquiry. I understand they have written to the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Minister for justice. What is the position of the Government on this matter and does it have any plans to meet the family? I think the family's solicitor has pointed out they do not qualify as victims under the legacy Act so they are in a very particular position. What is the Taoiseach's position on their request to meet him?

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** A shared island should not have an invisible hard border for non-EU migrants, but that is the case currently. I have raised this multiple times. In the past a somewhat sympathetic hearing was given to the likes of the North West Migrants Forum. In this atmosphere of performative cruelty by the Government on migration, I fear it will not make any moves on this. I would be interested to hear it.

I follow up on the question raised by Deputy Coppinger. We are talking about primary school kids being taken out of their home, other children who go to school with them being traumatised, the principal talking about the impact this is having, and then the Minister, let us be clear, goes onto social media and boasts about it. It is Trump-like. That is who Jim O'Callaghan is aping, trying to look hard on migration and trying to problematise migration to distract from the failures of the Government. I have one question. It has been reported in some places that at least some of the children being deported were born in Ireland. Is that the case?

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** There were worrying and horrific scenes in Ballymena last night of hundreds, potentially thousands, of people gathering. It would appear some racist attacks were committed on homes. It follows an alleged serious sexual assault on a teenage girl, and I extend my solidarity to that girl and her family. Two teens have been accused, and as soon as it became potentially the case that they were non-nationals or were from another country, these crowds gathered in what is becoming a familiar pattern in the North, the South, in the UK, etc. First, I condemn the attacks that appear to have taken place on the homes of non-nationals, including a Filipino family. We have to come out and make this clear. Gender-based violence is gendered violence. It has nothing to do with nationality. Northern Ireland has an horrific history of violence against women - a native history. According to a recent Ulster University survey, 98% of women there have experienced at least one form of violence in their lives. It has the second highest femicide rate in the EU. The PSNI says there is a domestic violence report every 16 minutes. Unless those facts are brought out north and south of the Border, racists will continue to use this issue to stir up the racism they want. We need real action on gendered violence.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputies for raising a variety of issues. Deputy Shane Moynihan asked about the sports front. There has been a range of investments. Casement Park is a significant one, with a €50 million allocation. There is also the sports club electric vehicle, EV, charging scheme, which got into difficulty in terms of procurement and the roll-out of public

EV charging points in community sports clubs across the island. In September 2024, the Department of Transport announced that more than 220 sports clubs across the island were eligible to apply. There were then issues with different standards and approaches North and South. In any event, the Department of Transport now expects delivery to progress quickly once the procurement process is completed. It was launched in early April. That is just one illustration. To give another example, the shared island fund unit allocated €12.5 million to the Dublin-Belfast rail service, which was matched by the Department of Transport. The new hourly frequency has resulted in a 50% rise in passenger numbers on the Enterprise service. That is enhancement of transport connectivity, which is good for SMEs and good for business. The shared island initiative has been able to bring that about, apart from all the other projects we have funded. Sixteen research projects have now been published by the Economic and Social Research Institute, which makes for a transparent piece of work. There is a compilation of those research outcomes on different issues on both sides of the Border.

On Deputy Brendan Smith's question, there is a proposal on workspace hubs in the central Border area. That is progressing and I will ask the unit to engage with the Deputy and to fill him in on the details of that. The shared island unit funded an earlier enterprise project between Donegal and Derry. That also took some time to get together, but the local authorities have identified it as an issue of concern in the central Border area. The shared island initiative has been effective as a catalyst to get local authorities North and South talking and working together to create a pipeline of projects for the future.

On Deputy Bacik's question, the shared island initiative does not deal with legacy issues. However, I am engaged in those issues with the Tánaiste and Minister for foreign affairs. We have made progress on the legacy issue with the United Kingdom Government. We believe there should be an investigate arm to whatever vehicle is finally decided on to have a permanent structure to deal with legacy issues. I believe that needs to happen. There have been ongoing discussions between the United Kingdom Government and the Irish Government. I hope they come to a conclusion in the coming month or so. It could be more than a month, but that would be the objective. A lot of engagement has happened. In respect of the murder of Denis Donaldson, I will speak to the Minister for justice. If the Garda is investigating, that needs to happen. It cannot cut across that but, on the other hand, I hear there is significant trauma. The family have written and there has been publicity of late in respect of that. I will speak to the Minister for justice about it.

On Deputy Paul Murphy's question, most people do not perceive that there is an invisible hard border.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** That is why it is invisible. It does not affect most people.

**The Taoiseach:** But they do not see it as a hard border.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** For a migrant it is.

**The Taoiseach:** We have been criticised on the opposite side, on the other side of the scale. There have to be rules around migration. I think the Deputy's view is that there should not be, which is fair enough and he is entitled to have a view, but I think his view is that there should not be any rules at all.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** These are EU migrants who are legally present in the North and cannot travel to the South. That is the point I am making.

**The Taoiseach:** That is not sustainable. I thought he was talking about asylum seekers coming North and South.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Not in that part of my question.

**The Taoiseach:** Anybody who is legally resident in Northern Ireland can travel to the South.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** No, they cannot. That is why it is a hard border.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We have reached the point where we have to move to the next piece of business.

**The Taoiseach:** Deputy Coppinger raised an important issue. Gender-based violence is not nationality focused, or exclusive to any person irrespective of race, creed or colour. It is something we need collectively to rid out of society. It takes a lot of work. We have policies relating to it in this Government. As Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee, did a lot of good work in this area. Her successor, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, is following up on that. Under the shared island initiative, we have a joint programme on gender-based violence with Northern Ireland to try to develop a programme to educate and get awareness of the issue.

### **Housing: Statements**

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins):** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the challenges we face to secure a housing system that meets the needs of our society. The Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, and I will set out how we are building on the progress made in recent years under the Housing for All plan to address the serious housing challenges touching every family in this country, and the Minister, Deputy Browne, will give concluding comments. He is doing media engagements at the moment.

Building new homes is a top priority for this Government. We have committed to delivering 300,000 new homes between 2025 and 2030, targeting an average of 50,000 homes annually in this period. These new targets are ambitious but provide a pathway to deliver the scale of housing needed for our people. As a reference, these new targets are more than double the output of the past five years. No doubt there are challenges and barriers to addressing these numbers, but I reiterate our strong commitment and determination to address these. As Minister of State with responsibility for planning and local government, I know more than anyone that an effective planning system remains a critical piece of the solution to the housing challenges we face. A number of key achievements have been delivered in that regard in recent weeks and months, which I am happy to set out for the House. The revised national planning framework was approved by the Government in April and passed by both Houses of the Oireachtas in May. It provides the basis for the review and updating of the regional, economic and spatial strategies and local authority development plans to reflect matters such as updated housing figures, projected jobs growth and renewable energy capacity allocations, including through the zoning of land for residential, employment and a range of other purposes. Given the urgent need to ensure the updated housing requirements can be incorporated into the planning system as quickly as

possible to address housing need and demand, local authorities will be required to vary current development plans. This is a key priority for the Government. We want to see what has been agreed under the NPF translated to a local basis urgently. The Minister, Deputy Browne, has already written to local authorities advising them to commence the process of reviewing and updating their development plans. New housing growth requirement figures will be issued shortly, on completion of the necessary screening.

The Planning and Development Act 2024 represents a significant reform of the planning system and is being commenced on a phased basis to the end of the year. It will bring greater clarity and certainty for those navigating the planning system. For example, new statutory timelines for decision-making and a streamlined judicial review process will help to reduce delays that may be constraining housing supply and will ensure investment decisions can be made knowing when a decision on a planning application may be forthcoming.

The Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill 2025 was approved by Cabinet for priority drafting on 27 May. It is intended to be enacted before the summer recess. The Bill will ensure sufficient time is given to activate planning permissions for much-needed housing across the country. It will enable an extension of the duration of permissions for housing developments nearing the end of their duration period but which have not yet commenced. The Bill will also allow the duration of a judicial review period to not be counted as part of the effective life of the planning permission, on a retrospective basis. This is important because at the moment the clock does not stop on the duration of a planning permission when the permission is subject to a judicial review. Both measures are pragmatic and grounded in common sense. They are an integral part of ensuring sufficient housing units through the planning permission that can be activated to deliver much-needed homes for individuals and families.

Other activation measures are being progressed so no measure should be viewed in isolation. As part of the implementation of the Planning and Development Act 2024, urban development zones are another new element of planning legislation that will enable further housing development. They constitute a progressive measure which will allow for a plan-led process that includes a key decision-making role for planning authorities. They also provide upfront certainty for communities and the development sector, building on the best elements of the former strategic development zones. The Minister, Deputy Browne, has signed an order that will enable local authorities to identify suitable sites for UDZs and will enable the Land Development Agency and regional assemblies to bring appropriate sites to the attention of local authorities and the Minister. It is imperative this work begin as soon as possible and I envisage it being completed in tandem with the variation process.

With regard to exempted development regulations, we are committed to expanding and improving existing planning exemptions for housing, including subdivision of dwelling and detached modular units to the rear of a dwelling.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** On a point of order, there is not a quorum here. I need to leave. I have been here for a few hours. I am calling a quorum.

**Deputy John Cummins:** We had a quorum when we started.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** Well, I am leaving now. The Government could not even get a quorum for housing statements.

*Tugadh faoi deara nach raibh cúig Chomhalta i láthair; comhaireadh an Teach agus ó bhi*

*cúig Chomhalta i láthair,*

*Notice taken that five Members were not present; House counted and five Members being present,*

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** A quorum was called. There was a quorum when it was called. Therefore, proceed.

**Deputy John Cummins:** It is quite astonishing there is nobody here from the Opposition during statements on housing, despite the fact it is the most important issue facing this country.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I am behind you, Minister of State.

**Deputy John Cummins:** That is very good. Nice of you to join us.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** We are with the Housing Commission in committee so we are stretched over two places.

**Deputy John Cummins:** Perfect. The Department is undertaking a review of the exempted development provisions, which will provide further options for provision of housing. A public consultation process will commence this month and updated regulations will come into force later this year.

The commencement of Part 17 of the Planning and Development Act to establish An Coimisiún Pleanála to replace An Bord Pleanála is imminent. It will build on the work under way to reduce cases on hand, which have fallen from 3,616 in May 2023 to 1,364 in April this year, and introduce the mandatory decision-making timelines I referenced a few moments ago. All these measures are about getting things moving and ensuring we do not lose out on important developments and that the many planning permissions granted are realised and increase housing supply.

Infrastructure is another crucial aspect of enabling housing supply. The provision of critical infrastructure is at the centre of Government's priorities. We are committed to delivering on the key objectives for infrastructure to support delivery of 300,000 houses by the end of 2030 and to boost the country's competitiveness. To this end, we are establishing a housing activation office in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to identify and address barriers to the delivery of public infrastructure projects needed for housing developments through the alignment of funding and co-operation of infrastructure providers.

The Government has also established an infrastructure division within the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation to lead the process of infrastructure reform. The Government is investing record levels of capital in critical infrastructure, including in water and energy, and will continue to do so under the national development plan for the period 2025 to 2035, which is under review and will be published shortly.

I am keen to listen to contributions this evening and to engage in productive dialogue. I hope contributions - when Opposition Members decide to enter the Chamber - are given in the spirit of increasing housing supply, rather than just for the sake of opposition, which has been the case in many of the debates heretofore on housing.

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan):** I echo the Minister of State's sentiments. The Opposition has been

calling for a debate on housing for a while and has accused the Government of avoiding and not having the debate. When we eventually have it, one Opposition Member graces the benches. Well done, Deputy Ó Broin. There is no one here from the Social Democrats or the Labour Party. That is disappointing.

I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for the opportunity to address the House on housing matters. As highlighted by the Minister of State, the Government's clear focus is on building new homes, including social and affordable housing, particularly through new build projects delivered by local authorities, approved housing bodies and the Land Development Agency. Our goal remains a housing system that truly serves the needs of our people.

It is important to reflect on the progress we have made in recent years under Housing for All. It is easy to forget that in 2012 and 2013 we delivered less than 5,000 new homes each year. By 2020 and 2021, this had increased to 20,500 new-build homes added to the national housing stock per year. In 2022 and 2023, an undeniably significant step change in delivery was achieved, with almost 30,000 and over 32,500 houses delivered respectively, exceeding the Housing for All targets. More than 92,000 new homes were built from 2022 to 2024, an annual average of almost 31,000. Despite the upward trajectory of supply through this period, there have been some recent disappointments, most notably the dip in the number of new homes built last year. This, in particular, brings into stark focus the enormous task of securing enough housing to meet our needs.

Over 32,500 social homes were added to the social housing stock between 2022 and 2024 under Housing for All. There is also a strong pipeline with over 24,000 social homes at all stages of design and build, which will be delivered over the coming years.

Housing for All also provided for the introduction of a number of new affordable housing supports, which have allowed the delivery of significant numbers of affordable homes through both new builds and homes brought back into use. These supports, including cost rental, are starting to deliver at scale and this momentum will continue as the pipeline is developed. Nearly 13,000 affordable housing supports were delivered in 2024 by approved housing bodies, local authorities and the Land Development Agency, alongside schemes such as the first home scheme and the vacant property refurbishment grant. Over 7,100 affordable solutions were delivered in 2024. This is the highest yearly delivery to date, exceeding the year's target of 6,400.

On 13 May, the Government approved an additional €30 million in State commitment to the first home scheme, bringing the total State commitment for the scheme to €370 million. Under the scheme, more than 6,700 buyers have been approved to date and more than 3,300 homes were bought using the scheme to the end of quarter 1 of 2025.

The Government is extremely focused on tackling vacancy and dereliction. We have provided a €150 million fund to end long-term vacancy and dereliction in towns and cities under the urban regeneration development fund. Up to the end of quarter 1 of 2025, over 8,652 approvals had issued already and €112 million has been paid out to refurbish almost 2,100 homes. We also extended the local authority home loan to help to finance the purchase and renovation of derelict and non-habitable properties. This Government will continue to roll out the largest social and affordable housing programme in the history of the State. This is demonstrated by the record level of investment being provided for the delivery of housing in 2025, with overall capital funding of almost €6.8 billion now available. The capital provision for 2025 is supplemented by a further €1.65 billion in current funding to address housing need.

Despite this undoubted progress, we must acknowledge that housing remains an enormous challenge. The number of new homes coming on stream each year is far short of where it needs to be. Over the past four years, we have learned there is no silver bullet solution to the challenges we face. The State has invested unprecedented levels of public money in the delivery of housing in recent years and we must continue to do so. We must consider every lever at our disposal to increase supply. We remain steadfast in our commitment to meet the challenges head-on and ensure that all those aspiring to independence in the housing market can realise their aspiration.

In the programme for Government, the Government has committed to delivering 300,000 new homes between 2025 and 2030, targeting at least 60,000 homes annually by the end of the period. The new targets are ambitious but provide a credible pathway to delivering the scale of housing needed. The targets are not a ceiling. We plan to revisit them in 2027 and if, reflecting demand and growing industry capacity, we need different targets for 2028 and subsequent years, we will revise them. Our immediate focus must be on achieving these targets.

Key to achieving these targets will be the delivery of new apartment developments in our cities and urban cores. Much of the investment needed for such developments must come from the private sector, financed through appropriate sources of private capital, much of which will come from international sources. This capital is critical to apartment delivery, particularly for the private rental sector. Many of the apartments delivered last year were State led, and while this secured much-needed social, cost-rental and affordable housing, it is not a sustainable long-term solution. A stable and certain policy environment will help to attract the private investment needed and the changes to rent pressure zones, RPZs, approved today by the Government will be critical in this regard. The Minister, Deputy Browne, will address this issue in further detail later. The approach agreed seeks to strike the right balance between protecting affordability for renters on the one hand, while encouraging new investment in the residential construction sector on the other. We can both protect renters and attract sustainable long-term investment to finance new homes for rent.

The Government has committed to introducing a new all-of-government housing plan to follow Housing for All, underpinned by a multiannual funding commitment. The new national housing plan, which will be published in the coming months, will focus on policies and structures that set us on a sustainable and resilient footing as we seek to secure a long-term pipeline of delivery and funding to 2030 and beyond.

I will return briefly to today's announcement in respect of RPZs. There is an effort and intention to try to increase the amount of investment and deliver units at scale. That will, as I have said, require private investment, private finance and international finance. That is one of the intentions of these proposals. The other intention is to provide security for renters. The extension of the RPZ nationally is a move that I am fully supportive of and squarely behind. To bring it to a local level, half of my constituency is within an RPZ and half is not. Half of my constituency is afforded the protection of an RPZ and the 2% cap on rent increases whereas my hometown of Clonakilty and the town of Skibbereen do not have that protection. The move made today provides that security for those tenants.

I welcome the comments and contributions of other Members and will listen to the debate.

**Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Healy-Rae):** I declare an interest in this debate. For the past 40 years, I have been

strongly involved in the provision of housing. I will continue to be involved for the rest of my time in an accelerated and growing way, year on year, despite all the difficulties in that sector.

There are issues surrounding this whole debate and why it is happening. An awful lot of people in opposition wanted a debate on housing. It is ironic that there is, thankfully, one representative of the Opposition-----

**Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Malcolm Byrne:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Michael Healy-Rae:** -----who is willing to come into the Chamber. Other people grandstand, shout and roar about housing. I am glad and proud that this Government is strongly focused. The provision of more housing is one of the main objectives of this Government. We must ensure protection for people who are looking for their own houses or to rent local authority houses or houses provided by approved housing agencies. We have, however, many difficulties to overcome.

I wish to highlight an initiative about which the Opposition has been silent. I thank the Minister for his work and compliment him strongly in this regard. The new planning exemptions will apply to the adjustment of existing houses, the subdividing of houses and the provision of accommodation overhead in shops and pubs. We are trying to tackle the scourge of dereliction. It is ironic to think that at a time when we want more housing, we have such a number of vacant properties.

We must also tackle the long waits in turning around local authority housing and ensure that when a house becomes vacant, it will be treated the same as a house in the private sector, turned around and rented out again. We do not have that at present. The Government and local authorities must work hand in hand to ensure we turn properties around quickly.

The exemptions in respect of modular homes will also help our planning authorities, which often struggle with an awful lot of red tape and officialdom. That will, thankfully, be sorted out by these new exemptions, which will clear their decks to deal with what they should be dealing with, which is applications from people who are seeking to build, particularly on their own family farms. These are people who want to provide a house for themselves and hope to secure planning permission to do so.

Before I move away from local authorities, I will raise an issue those in the Opposition know an awful lot about, that is, serial objectors. Unusually for an institution such as Dáil Éireann, and this is something that many members of the public do not realise, in parties such as Sinn Féin and others, there are serial objectors. People are on the record as having objected to thousands and thousands of homes. The majority of normal people go through their lives and do not object to one house. They do not object to anything and are able to carry out their lives that way. However, some people use their political platform to stop development. How can people stand up in Dáil Éireann and say they want housing to be provided while at the same time, when somebody comes along and puts in a planning application in their area, they object to it and think that is all right? They object for various reasons but, to be honest, those reasons are best known to themselves. I cannot understand why anybody would use his or her position as an elected representative to object to somebody else having a home, be that a flat, an apartment or a house, just because that representative does not want it and somebody else has asked him or her to object to it. That is crazy.

What should happen, when it comes to objections, is the €20 fee that is there at present for putting in an objection, and the €200 fee to take somebody to the board, should be increased by many multiples of euro. Why? If people have a genuine complaint, they will not mind paying money to put in that observation or objection, but if they are doing so for very frivolous reasons and have to stick their hand in their pocket to stop somebody else from having a home, and have to pay a higher price for it, it might stop them doing that type of activity.

I note the absence of Labour Party Members. They were the people who were going to build a million houses. They are interested in building a million houses out of thin air and also seeking another new bike shed. That was what they wanted to build. They wanted to take the bike shed from the back of Leinster House and put another out the front. That has to be put on record. It is there on the public record that the leader of the Labour Party wrote a letter to the Ceann Comhairle asking for a bike shelter to be provided on the Kildare Street side of Dáil Éireann.

With regard to our banks, AIB and BOI, I deal every day with people who want to borrow money from the bank. They are workers who want to borrow money to get a mortgage but they cannot because of those two banks, which were served very well by the taxpayers of this State in keeping their doors open. I appreciate the work our banks do, but why in the name of God are they closed to giving people loans and mortgages? It is impossible for young people to get a loan from the banks at present.

I welcome the fact we have a grant scheme for vacant and derelict houses but, unfortunately, there are an awful lot of problems administering that. People are finding it very cumbersome and awkward to get through that process. Of course, local authorities charged with administering the scheme have to be prudent and careful, but there is such a thing as prudence and such a thing as making something virtually impossible for a person to qualify for. If a person owns a derelict or vacant house and wants to do it up, and this Government wants to give assistance in providing a home for that person or somebody else, surely we can look at the difficulties we are having in administering the scheme and streamline those to ensure it will become a more user-friendly way of getting the financial assistance people are entitled to.

On private investment, this Government acknowledges, which the Opposition does not, that we need private involvement in the housing market. Again, there are parties on the other side of the House that really think we will be able to pull billions and billions - up to €20 billion a year - out of thin air and put it into housing. We will not be able to afford to solve the problem on our own. We need private investment. Maybe people in the Opposition do not like that but if we want to protect people who need a home for themselves, and we want to do good by those people, the only way we will do so is by providing more and more opportunities for homes for them to live in. At present, we are not doing that. One of the reasons we are not doing it is that the confidence has gone out of private investment because people are looking at what is being said in places such as Dáil Éireann. People are forgetting the fact that for those who provide accommodation, the Government takes the biggest stake out of that in taxation on rents. Everybody is talking about high rents but nobody is talking about the fact that, in many cases, 56% of that is tax. It is tax. That is where the money is going. It is not going into anybody's pocket. It is going in tax. These people are collecting money, but they are paying up to 56% in tax.

We need to provide more housing. We have a big job of work to do but this Government has the practical solutions. It has the drive and determination to take the necessary measures. I support the Minister for housing in what he is endeavouring to do. I really do. We need somebody

who will catch this problem, who will catch the bull by the horns and really tackle it, who will be imaginative and who will try to instil confidence back into the housing market. The actual cost of providing housing has gone through the roof, as has the cost of building. When people are doing their sums, it quite simply does not make sense any more for people in the private sector to provide accommodation. That is one of the biggest problems we have. When they see some of the statements that are coming from people in opposition, that certainly will not give them the confidence to get involved in the housing market.

One of the biggest losses we have is the fact that small builders are a rare breed at present because they have gone out of business. Not only do we need big developers to provide big housing schemes, we also need, and this was a very important person, the person in a local parish, community or town who built one, two, three, or maybe five or ten, houses a year, but were doing so year on year. We need expertise and good advice in housing. There are what might be called big developers in this country who have been at it for decades. They are people who are reputable and have been steeped in the provision of housing for decades. We have to look to those people for advice and guidance when it comes to exactly what we will do in future to tackle this ever-increasing problem. We have a growing population and so many young and beautiful people growing up here. We want to be able to retain them. We want to be able to keep them in this country. One of the most important things they will need for themselves and their families in the future is a home they can call their own. We have a big job of work to do. I hope the measures that are being taken will be helpful.

The fact is that An Bord Pleanála has a free hand at present as it has no statutory times or dates. I welcome the fact that will change. I welcome that it will have to ensure it will deal with appeals in a timely and swift fashion.

I do not want to eat into anybody else's time. We can listen to the shouting and roaring but what we need is a Government of action. I believe the measures taken over the past couple of weeks are the first steps in the right direction, but we need to grow confidence in the housing sector to ensure that more and more houses can be built over the coming months and years.

**Deputy Aisling Dempsey:** Housing is the number one priority for this Government. It is the issue I hear most about when I meet people across Meath West. This concern is not limited to one age group. Our twenty-somethings are struggling to gain independence. They are stuck in expensive rental markets with little hope of home ownership. Our thirty-somethings who are ready to settle down and start families are squeezed by high prices and limited supply. Our fifty-somethings are often parents watching their adult children remain at home far longer than they ever expected, not out of choice but by necessity. This is not a uniquely Irish challenge. Across the world, advanced economies are grappling with housing crises. In Canada, cities such as Toronto and Vancouver are facing skyrocketing prices, despite significant state intervention. In Germany, rent caps introduced in Berlin were struck down by courts, proving that simplistic solutions often backfire.

Housing is a deeply complex global issue rooted in supply shortages, regulatory delays and demographic shifts, yet here in Ireland real progress is being made. Fianna Fáil in government is delivering practical results. I recently met a man in Kildalkey in my constituency of Meath West who restored a vacant property into a beautiful family home, which was made possible by the vacant property refurbishment grant. That is policy working. I know countless couples in Trim, Enfield and right across Meath West who could not have secured their first home without the help-to-buy scheme and the first home scheme. These programmes are working. We are

expanding them to include second-hand homes and adjusting value bands to match market realities, as needed.

We must reject the notion that home ownership is a stroke of luck. It should be an achievable standard, whether through owning or secure renting. While progress may not be as fast as any of us would like, we are moving in the right direction. Having worked in homebuilding for many years, I have seen first hand how the private sector is often unfairly scapegoated. Builders who contribute to communities are too easily vilified by the Opposition, which treats for-profit developers with suspicion and casts international investors as villains, but facts matter.

*5 o'clock*

Mitchell McDermott has reported a 24% drop in apartment completions. The reason is a lack of international investment - investment driven away by the very rhetoric and policies championed by the Opposition.

Rent pressure zones, once hailed by the Opposition as the saviour of tenants, have in practice discouraged investment and stifled supply. Now, even modest proposals to tweak the RPZ model are shouted down before being seriously examined. We believe these changes can support small landlords, many of whom are simply families trying to rent out a single property. Allowing new tenancies at market value is not about profiteering; it is about keeping these landlords in the market to provide badly needed rental homes.

Yet again, the Opposition's view is reductive: landlord equals bad; investor equals worse. Sinn Féin has claimed there has been aggressive lobbying by institutional investors to roll back RPZ rules but it does not acknowledge that the consequences of driving out these investors are fewer homes, longer waiting lists and higher prices. It is not ideology that builds homes; it is capital, labour and land.

The Opposition's approach is full of contradictions. It opposes the current RPZs, rejects the revisions to same, attacks landlords and condemns international investment. It romanticises a world where local authorities can suddenly build housing at scale but refuses to say how or when or who will pay for it. It is politics over policy. We welcome scrutiny and debate but we need real, workable solutions, not slogans or vague wishlists.

The Minister, Deputy James Browne, alongside the Department of housing, is focused on cutting red tape and moving fast but smart. He has been criticised for taking his time to amend Housing for All but now we are seeing the benefit in detailed, deliverable measures: zoning more residential land before Christmas, extensions to planning permissions delayed by costs or judicial reviews, and exemptions for modular homes on family land to provide flexible housing for older parents and younger generations.

Many critics have laughed at the idea of building in back gardens but in Meath, families are embracing it. Downsizing parents are helping their children take the first step on the housing ladder and they are doing it with dignity, comfort and a sense of community. There is no silver bullet here. No single law will solve this crisis but a co-ordinated, sustained series of actions targeting social and affordable private housing will do so. Housing is not a partisan issue but it must be met with seriousness. This Government is doing the work. The Opposition must stop playing to the Gallery and start helping us build a future our people deserve.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputies Cleere and Byrne have two minutes each.

**Deputy Peter ‘Chap’ Cleere:** Two and a half minutes, is it?

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** It is 52 seconds divided by two. The Deputy can blame his Cabinet colleague from Kerry.

**Deputy Peter ‘Chap’ Cleere:** I appreciate the opportunity to speak here this afternoon on such an important topic. As Deputies know, the housing crisis is the single greatest issue facing this generation. I, like many of my colleagues, have spoken to so many people who still feel locked out of the property market. They are, perhaps, living at home, or are young people living abroad because they see a better quality of life and a better chance abroad. There are working families in a rental trap, unable to afford a mortgage. There are social housing waiting lists, and older people relying on a pension who are worried about their tenure in years to come. There are a lot of challenges out there with regard to the housing market.

I wish to quickly talk about three things. First, it is a specific measure and a commitment in the programme for Government to increase the level of capital to Irish Water over the next while. This is absolutely imperative. It has to be tied to new supply to enable housing and infrastructural development around the entire country, particularly in towns and villages across my constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny. We all know housing is the number one social issue and crisis facing this country but enabling infrastructure such as water would enable us to get more houses built more quickly and evenly throughout the country. We could get an awful lot more done.

In 2013, there were only 5,000 homes delivered. We are now in a situation - and it is a commitment in the programme for Government - to deliver 300,000 homes between 2025 and 2030, targeting at least 60,000 homes annually by the end of the period. We know from the ESRI and the Central Bank that it will cost €20 billion of investment, and the State - the Government, on behalf of the people - is contributing €7 billion towards that, the highest in any European country. The Government is putting more than any European country into trying to get the housing supply up.

We cannot do it alone. We need to support small businesses and the small builder out there, making sure they have access to finance and that the infrastructure is there when they build. I welcome the really positive news that the county development plans are being looked at again throughout the country. It is important that brownfield and greenfield sites are going to be looked at-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy’s time has expired.

**Deputy Peter ‘Chap’ Cleere:** I think the Leas Cheann-Comhairle has the time wrong. I thought it was five-----

**Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh:** No, the Deputy’s colleagues kept talking.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** The clock is never wrong, nor is the Leas Cheann-Comhairle. We are very generous; go ahead.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I will be flexible as I go through it.

**Deputy Peter ‘Chap’ Cleere:** I think the Leas Cheann-Comhairle is wrong.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** Who knows? We might learn something.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I am sorry about that, Deputy Cleere.

**Deputy Malcolm Byrne:** I thank the Leas Cheann-Comhairle for the indulgence, and I welcome the fact that there are members of Sinn Féin present although I notice that members of “performance before policy” are not present or, rather, the bourgeois wing of the party who, since the split happened, seem to be cosyng up to Sinn Féin, according to other Members. It marks the fundamental difference between Government and Opposition in many ways.

My party has always supported the aspiration to own a home. It is a very legitimate aspiration and we need to involve the private sector to ensure that can happen. Most of the home-building being done at present is being done by the State. That is right. We need to provide social and affordable homes but we also need to make sure we support those who aspire to own their home.

In the brief time that is allowed to me, I wish to echo the importance, as emphasised by my colleague Deputy ‘Chap’ Cleere, of addressing the question of water and electricity connections. These are essential - specifically water, where we know the costs that are involved. The Minister of State will appreciate the importance of linking up small villages with water and wastewater schemes. I will instance two schemes which have been long outstanding in my constituency, namely, the Ferns-Camolin wastewater scheme in north Wexford and the Aughrim wastewater scheme in south Wicklow. They can be transformative if we can see them developed in those villages, allowing those villages to survive and be sustainable, and that can be replicated throughout the country.

**Deputy Eoin Ó Broin:** I apologise for being slightly late for the debate. A very important session of the housing committee is taking place. The Housing Commission, after almost a year of delay and being ignored by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, is finally giving a very interesting session. I will refer to some of that in my testimony here.

With respect to the remarks of the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, it is slightly ironic that he criticised Opposition parties for not being here, told us he was very interested to hear what we had to say and then, the moment he finished his speech, he stood up and walked out, as other colleagues have done. I know Members are busy but if the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, does not want to be accused of being a hypocrite, he should be very careful of the criticism he levels at others when he is guilty of the very same thing.

I chuckle every time hear somebody in Fianna Fáil say it is the party of home ownership. Home ownership has collapsed under Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael over the last decade and a half. In fact, it has never been so difficult for young people in their 20s, 30s and early 40s to buy homes. The rates of home ownership are getting lower by the year because of the Government’s policies. With regard to the claim that the majority of homebuilding is being done by the State, as the Deputy for Wicklow-Wexford just said, that is not factually true. In fact, between 80% and 90% of all new homes are built by private developers. The State is buying a bunch of those but the number of new homes being built by local authorities and approved housing bodies is far too low.

Yes, it is true that €7 billion has been spent by the State on various housing matters but a lot of that is incredibly wasteful expenditure, including €1 billion on HAP, RAS and rent supplement - money straight into the pockets of landlords - and another €1 billion or so in subsidies that are not actually delivering any new homes. The actual amount of money spent on the de-

livery of new social, affordable rental and affordable purchase homes is only about €4 billion, which is why the Government is missing its targets every single year. It will miss them again this year and next year.

I will use the time I have to run through a number of issues of enormous concern, the first of which is the announcement by the Minister for housing today. It is essentially the death knell for rent pressure zones. I welcome the fact that the RPZs are to be extended to the 20% of renters who previously did not have them but the big issue is when. Landlords have now been told that they are coming and the more the delay, the greater risks there are to renters, including those in the constituency of the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, that they will get even higher rent increases now as landlords anticipate the application of the RPZs. The urgency around that legislation is crucial and I would like to see it introduced immediately.

There is also no great value in extending RPZs to everybody else in the State if you are hollowing out those RPZs to such an extent that they do not do what they originally intended to do. Let us look at the facts. One of the big changes the Government has made is the application of allowing landlords with existing rental properties to reset the rent to market rent when a tenant moves out voluntarily or through a fault eviction, and a new tenant moves in. Do we know how many of those tenancies are created every year? Last year there were approximately 50,000. That means the first consequence of the decision by the Government is that tens of thousands of tenancies that would not otherwise have had their rents reset at market rents will have them reset. That is a fact. Go and check the data from the Residential Tenancies Board.

We also have this very confusing issue of what happens at the end of a new tenancy. A new tenancy is not just when you move into a property; it is also when your existing six year tenancy expires and you sign a new one because the press release from the Minister stated that at the end of that six years rents can be increased to a market rent. We need urgent clarification on this because it seemed that both the Minister for housing and the Taoiseach were incredibly confused by that earlier. Whatever way we look at it, rents will begin to increase at a faster rate for greater numbers of tenants almost immediately after these rules come in. The irony is that I do not believe the Government will get the new rental stock it thinks it will get by linking new rents and new rental properties to the consumer price index and even if it does, it will be so expensive and in such limited parts of the country that it will simply make matters worse. What we have is a Government gaslighting renters when it says it is protecting them but when the exact opposite is the case. The Government will make renters lives more difficult in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis and we will keep highlighting that to the Government as we proceed.

I will also talk about the enormous delays in the Department of housing. I am speaking to local authority director of housing managers and AHBs and they are telling us that across all of the delivery programmes for social and affordable housing - SHIP, CAF, CAS, CREL and the affordable housing fund - there is a growing backlog, the delays have gone from weeks to months and that is slowing down the pipeline of new homes. The Minister is denying it. The officials are denying it. They are refusing to provide Oireachtas Members information in responses to parliamentary questions. We had to secure the intervention of the Ceann Comhairle. If the Government was not able to meet its targets last year, the year before or the year before that, it will definitely not be able to meet them now which means fewer social homes and fewer affordable homes with all of the consequences of that.

We also had the decision of the Minister, Deputy Browne, last week - a shocking decision for many - to collapse bundle 3 of the public-private partnerships, PPPs, for 500 new-build

social homes across five counties. I have never supported the PPP process; I always knew it was more expensive. However, by collapsing this process two years in, the Minister has created great uncertainty both for those 500 homes and the two other schemes following that. The Minister needs to come to the House as a matter of urgency and tell us how he will ensure the local authorities and AHBs involved will get the money to deliver those homes because we cannot have any further delay.

In regard the Housing Commission, Mr. Michael O'Flynn, who is a very well-respected Cork builder, has presented a very stinging criticism of the Government's housing activation office. He said it is not what the Housing Commission recommended, not underpinned by legislation and emergency powers and will not do the things he, the Housing Commission and others suggested it would. Sinn Féin fully supported the Housing Commission's recommendation of a housing delivery oversight executive. For the life of me I cannot understand, one, why the Government did not do that and, two, why it is trying to misrepresent a bad policy proposition as something other than what it is not. Do not listen to me, listen to the member of the commission who partly wrote that section. He is saying the Government got it wrong and I agree with him.

Then there are the cuts to the social housing acquisition programmes. It is becoming increasingly apparent that the decisions made by the Minister at the end of March and early April are devastating the ability of local authorities to prevent families from homeless through the tenant in situ scheme, and get single people, in particular, out of emergency accommodation through housing first. Why, when we have rising levels of homelessness, the Minister would cut funding for homeless services is beyond me.

Then we have the other delays. It is all very well folks from Government coming into this House and saying that we need planning reform, more water utility connections and more ESB connections but the Government is not investing the money in the staff and in the infrastructure. That is why we have this problem and maybe some of those from Fianna Fáil and Fianna Gael, who have been here longer, should let their colleagues know that you guys have been in government for a decade, you guys have been underinvesting and you guys have been failing to recruit staff - planners and housing staff for local authorities, the board, etc. That is why they are having the problems in their constituencies, not due to the view of the Opposition.

With regard to Uisce Éireann and ESB in particular, a year and a half ago Uisce Éireann stated it needed an extra €2 billion to upgrade water and wastewater treatment so that we could move from 30,000 to 40,000 to 50,000 to 60,000 homes. It is still waiting for an answer from the Government. When will that answer come? Increasingly, we have almost everybody bar the Taoiseach telling us that given the limited grid capacity we have, we cannot continue to allow data centres to connect to that grid - they already take 20% of our energy - at the expense of housing. Everybody is telling us that and I am sure the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, when he is asked privately, probably agrees. The idea the Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, is saying there is adequate grid capacity for homes, public transport and data centres simply is not true.

So, where are we at? We have had a decade of bad Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael housing policy: a decade of rising rents, rising house prices and rising homelessness with more than 4,500 children in emergency accommodation tonight. That is a stain on this Government and on the parties in it. At the same time, we are not seeing an adequate delivery of social, affordable rental, affordable purchase or indeed private owner-occupier homes for people to buy. That is why the Raise the Roof campaign has called for a demonstration in Dublin for next Tuesday at

6 p.m. That is why the progressive Opposition has combined to table an alternative emergency Private Members' motion. That is why the Raise the Roof campaign has called for a demonstration in Cork city, for all of Munster, at 2 p.m. at the National Monument on Saturday, 21 June because the Government is failing. It failed during its last iteration and in the iteration before that and I have heard nothing today but more gaslighting from the Government and Government backbenchers who clearly do not understand the extent to which the Government is immiserating an entire generation of people who cannot afford to put an affordable roof over their heads. The Government can spin all it likes but the facts speak for themselves. The Government is failing and until it listens to us, the commission and to others, it will continue to fail and the people the Government represents and we represent will continue to suffer the inability to put an affordable, secure and adequate roof over their own heads.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** Two weeks ago, Cork City Council announced an affordable housing scheme. This will be delivered through the Department's funding and by Cork City Council. There is shock that it will cost just under €400,000 to buy one of these properties. For years people who cannot get a mortgage and who do not qualify for social housing have been contacting my office and I have been telling them about affordable housing. Those people are now asking me: where is the affordable housing because for most families this is not affordable? To give an idea, the maximum someone who is on Cork City Council's social housing list - that is three adults and four children - can earn is €48,000. The average is much less, probably €44,000 or €45,000. The minimum income threshold to qualify for these affordable houses is €71,500. That is €24,000 in the difference - maybe €25,000 - between the average family's earning. What about those people who are trapped in the middle and who cannot qualify for social housing, cannot get a mortgage and now under the Government's scheme cannot get affordable housing? Does the Government know what it is doing? Does it know what these people can afford? About the only thing they can afford is a plane ticket to Australia and that is for sure. This is State-sponsored emigration that the Government is driving, through its lack of housing, investment, and by letting down generations.

We are saying to people considering emigrating, the parents or grandparents of someone who is looking at emigrating, or a person or family who cannot afford a mortgage and all of those people who are angry or frustrated at this Government's housing policy failure to come to the National Monument in Cork on 21 June at 2 p.m. This is not just Sinn Féin but it is across all political parties in the Opposition, unions under ICTU, charities, homeless organisations, and student unions under the Raise the Roof banner. Everyone is coming because the Government has failed and people want action. People want homes.

I spoke to the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, a few weeks ago about the tenant in situ scheme. The Taoiseach made a statement. The Minister, Deputy Browne, made a statement. I know of two families who became homeless last week despite all of the Government's promises about funding. I know of two more who will become homeless during the next two weeks. I ask the Minister of State a straight question. Will Cork City Council and every local authority get the funding to prevent more families and children going into emergency accommodation and becoming homeless because this is one problem the Government can fix it if wants to?

**Deputy Pa Daly:** The fundamental difference between the Government's attitude towards housing and the Opposition's attitude is that the Government thinks - the Taoiseach said it again today - that the answer to all the problems is just to provide more units. He believes that providing houses that have rents of €3,000 per month is okay so long as there is more supply in the market. He thinks that is going to fix everything. It is a market-based policy which has been

failing for years and it will continue to fail in the future.

A housing officer on Kerry County Council recently told me it is like a jungle out there. We are now dealing with more older people in their 50s, 60s, and 70s who are renting houses and are made homeless. There is a situation in Kerry where all of the people who need emergency accommodation in the county are put into one place. A person might live an hour or two away from Tralee but that is the only emergency accommodation that is available for that person. After five or ten years of this Government - whatever way you want to call it - and 14 years of Fine Gael in government, that is the situation for people seeking emergency accommodation but, in addition, there is no affordable housing scheme in Kerry. We saw the recent changes to the tenant in situ scheme. There were three very worthy cases into which a lot of work had been put by the local authority. There were a lot of effort and these are people who really needed to be helped out. Sale was agreed but now they cannot progress the sale or sign contracts to give these people the security they deserve and require.

A couple of years ago, the Government announced a new tenant purchase scheme. The terms and conditions of that scheme specified that the sale must be completed within four months. Anybody who knows anything about buying a house or conveyancing knows that is impossible. When it was raised in the Dáil, Micheál Martin said it was a cop out by Kerry County Council when it sought basic details as to how the scheme was to be implemented. It is clear to me that there is no plan. Today's announcement was more chaos and more confusion for people who are vulnerable. People are looking for answers. They are going to get their answer. They are going to get their answer this day week outside the Dáil and they are going to get their answer in Cork on Saturday week.

**Deputy Pat Buckley:** The housing crisis that the country is currently in the grips of is affecting entire communities, none more so than the communities I represent in east Cork. What was once known as a great region with welcoming towns, strong community spirit and national beauty is now grappling with the growing problem of the lack of social and affordable houses. As we speak, there are currently more than 300 empty council houses in County Cork, of which 100 have been vacant for more than two years. While these homes remain idle, the rate of homelessness in Cork has reached an appalling level. In the past three years, the number of children spending more than 12 months in emergency accommodation has jumped by 171%. In April, a shocking 650 adults were in emergency accommodation across Cork. In that same month, Cork City Council shut down its tenant in situ scheme due to insufficient funding. We have seen the pressure intensify in places like Midleton, Youghal, Cobh, Carrigtohill, Fermoy, Mitchelstown and others. The demand for housing is so high but supply is not keeping up with it. Too few social and affordable housing projects are being built. The planning process is so slow, and short-term rentals sit vacant while families go without roofs over their head.

We need this Government to treat housing like the emergency that it is. Housing is not a commodity; it is a human right. The Government's failures on housing have become normalised, which is shocking. Nobody expects anything from this do-nothing Government which constantly fails our communities. There are solutions to the housing crisis, however. We in Sinn Féin are calling for the immediate reinstatement of the tenant in situ scheme, the reinstatement of the no-fault eviction ban, a freeze on private rents, and the Government to provide adequate funding to Cork County Council to build enough council and affordable homes to tackle the housing crisis and end homelessness for good.

Other Deputies mentioned the event on 21 June at the National Monument in Cork city. I

am calling on everyone to come out and show the Government that we have a housing emergency and to bring attention to other failings - the 10,000 people on boil-water notices, failing mental health services in east Cork and flooding issues. I am asking everybody to vote with their feet and show this Government that it is not providing what it should.

**Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh:** This week I spoke to a woman in Kildare town who is facing the prospect of homelessness. She told me, “I have done everything right, and now the State is slowly killing me.” The pain and dread she is feeling as the clock runs down is absolutely crippling. Her landlord is selling up and she simply cannot afford to re-enter the private rental market. Just a few weeks ago in this Chamber, we discussed double-digit rent increases in Kildare. Homelessness rose by about the same figure last year as well. This woman is a nurse in Naas General Hospital who has served her community for nine years. She is also a single mother to a beautiful nine-year-old girl. She is about to fall into homelessness. The Government knows this story well. Its own Department of housing has said private rental is the second most common route into homelessness, yet renters are being punished again and again. It is shameful. Families like hers are falling through the cracks and are squeezed by a cost-of-living crisis that this Government pretends no longer exists. Too many are earning just above the threshold for help but are still living month to month, one bit of bad news away from sleeping in their cars.

Tá céimeanna gur féidir linn a thógáil le feabhas a chur ar an scéal. Ba chóir go mbeadh maoiniú ar fáil don scéim cís costais do thionóntaí in situ de réir an éileamh atá amuigh ansin. Ní féidir leis an mbean seo aon chúnamh a fháil toisc nach bhfuil aon airgead fágtha ag Comhairle Contae Chill Dara chun aon teach dara láimhe eile a cheannach i mbliana. Rud eile a bhfuil géarghá leis ná criosanna brú cíosa a choinneáil mar a bhí. We need to ensure the tenant in situ scheme is adequately funded to meet the needs that are out there and we need the RPZs to be applied across the board. Instead, this Government is too busy protecting those who are already set up and settled and it wants to woo institutional investors. When will the Government stand up for the ordinary people in their 20s, 30s and 40s and give them a chance to have a home of their own so they can start their families, have a little peace of mind and live with the dignity they deserve?

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** We are in a housing emergency. This is an ongoing crisis that this and previous Governments have failed to come to grips with. They have not even acknowledged the scale of the crisis they have delivered to us. Later this evening we will debate a motion on the huge number of vacant council homes that lie derelict, but this crisis extends far beyond that. Renters face extremely high rents of €2,405 per month, on average, in my home city of Limerick. Those in the market to purchase a house in Limerick can expect to pay €320,000 on average for a semi-detached three-bedroom home. This is an increase of 10% since December 2023. Those who are in the unfortunate situation of having become homeless find it increasingly difficult to extract themselves from that nightmare. Every month there are more people availing of State-provided emergency accommodation. The latest figures show that 15,500 people - of whom 4,775 are children - are in such accommodation. That figure does not include those who are on the streets or those who are moving night to night from couch to couch because they do not have a place to call their own. Service providers in Limerick have repeatedly told me over the years that they have to turn people away from their doors every day as they do not have capacity. The failure to tackle runaway rents, allowing no-fault evictions, the failure to curb the cost of house purchases and the inability to provide secure accommodation to those on our housing lists impact families and particularly children.

I have absolutely no doubt that a future Taoiseach will stand up in this Dáil and apologise on behalf of the State for the way we have treated children in emergency accommodation and, for many of them, destroyed their potential for growth. These are real people impacted and children damaged by our housing failures. There have been far too few housing completions to make any impact on the number of Limerick people in need of housing, and the cost of rental properties also plays a role in this regard. In some cases, three generations of families are living under the same roof in already small homes. There are families working off rotas as to when an adult child can avail of a bed or must content themselves with a couch. This is the 21st century and we have families living cheek by jowl in these conditions. Why? It is because house prices are out of reach of the average worker, private rent is too expensive and the list for council-provided homes has people waiting years to be housed. Against this crisis the Government did act and brought in the useful tenant in situ scheme, but it has now cut it and it is not working for families. It is a housing emergency and it needs to be treated as such. As my colleagues have done, I encourage everybody in the Munster area to come to Cork on 21 June and stand up and demand housing.

**Deputy Cathy Bennett:** Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have failed utterly to tackle the housing crisis. It is the number one issue in our country. Whether it be a renter's tax credit, a ban on no-fault evictions or limiting the level with which renters can be additionally burdened, in each incident the Government has dragged its feet in taking any action on this. What it has done has been too little and too late. In virtually every instance, the Government then finds false justification to reverse course in the face of a rental market even more cruel than before.

Today, we hear that renters are once again to be punished for what are the Government's housing failures. Its haphazard proposal of a four-tier rent pressure zone regime will leave renters worse off. Has it thought about older people who are going to retire? How will they afford these rents of up to €3,000 per month? For young people who are now out there trying to rent, how are they supposed to rent at €3,000 a month? They do not make this in their salaries. While many have given up hope of ever owning their own home, for those who have secured a mortgage, the Government continues to allow the banks to withhold the benefits of cuts to the European Central Bank interest rate. Irish banks have failed to pass on as many as four or five interest rate cuts to their consumers since the general election - squeezed homeowners, Government indifference. Sinn Féin has outlined what is needed to rectify this, namely, create a dedicated multimillion euro fund, stop artificially capping what councils can recoup and ensure a turnaround time of 12 weeks on council-owned properties.

**Deputy George Lawlor:** The current housing crisis in this country can only be described as a catastrophic failure of leadership and policy, leaving countless families in despair and homelessness while developers and landlords profit from the misery. The Government's inaction and ineffective measures have turned the dream of so many of getting a social house or owning a home into a cruel joke. In my county of Wexford, as of yesterday, there were 2,818 households on the housing list. That number is households, not individual people, and the response of the Government can only be described as ambitionless. In the recent announcement for social housing across the country, the Minister, Deputy Browne, declared that the reason there was no allocation for Wexford was, effectively, that it was doing grand and was meeting its targets. The targets for County Wexford, with nearly 3,000 households languishing on the housing list, are 189 homes for 2025 and 193 social homes for 2026. These are absolutely paltry numbers when we consider the number of families crying out for a roof over their heads, a place to call home for life and security of tenure.

Of course, the real figures of the housing crisis are completely masked by the fact that so many hardworking families and individuals are prevented from accessing the housing list in the first place because of the insulting income thresholds. I will give an example of the ridiculous reality in my county. A couple, both earning just the minimum wage, are prevented from accessing social housing supports or going on the housing list in County Wexford because they are deemed to be in excess of the threshold. In fact, they are deemed to be well in excess of the threshold, preventing them from receiving any assistance. They are both earning the minimum wage and are deemed to be earning too much.

What happens to these hardworking people who happen to have a job? They are forced into the private rental market and in many cases condemned to poverty as a result. They are forced to pay thousands of euro every year in rent to the private sector because their low wages are deemed to be too high. These people are plunged not only into despair but into poverty as a result of the policies that have been foisted on them by this Government and the previous Government when it comes to the provision of social housing in this country. These people have simply no hope of ever accessing either a social house or purchasing a house themselves despite working hard day in, day out to keep food on the table and a roof over their heads.

I will give a real-life example of the damage the Government's policies are doing. A family whom my office and I are working with, a husband and wife with three children with additional needs, were forced to leave their home last year and move into a damp, 30-year-old mobile home just outside Wexford town. What was their crime? He was a hardworking father with a wage that put them €625 above the Government's ridiculously low thresholds. These are the real-life results of the policies of the Government and how they have devastating impacts on hardworking families. It simply has to stop.

**Deputy Marie Sherlock:** In the changes announced today, there is an air of desperation on the part of the Minister of State and the Government to try to drive up housing supply. By lifting the cap on rents in order to attract institutional funding, the Government is effectively condemning workers and families, in Dublin in particular, to a lifetime of astronomical rents when there are fewer and fewer options to buy. Young workers, those new to the city and those evicted will not stand a chance. It is about pulling up the ladder from those who are trying to find rental accommodation. There will be some protections for those in rental accommodation, but only up to six years. Rents are already impossibly high in this city, at over €2,000 and growing at just short of 5% this year. Often, the rent pressure zone cap is breached because people are having to accept rents increased above the 2%, faced with no alternative.

I want to understand from the Minister of State what he thinks the impact of these changes will be. Apartments are the future of living in Dublin. The Government has made clear to people that it does not believe homeownership of apartments will ever be a possibility. We saw that a number of years ago with the bulk-purchase regulations that were brought in only for houses and not for apartments because, as we were told at that time, we had to leave bulk-purchase for apartments to attract institutional investors. It did not work then. I am not clear as to how raising rents will provide an absolute guarantee that we will see a big rush of money into the State, given that these funds will often be looking for a guaranteed rent. This is the critical point here. About 5,000 evictions have been notified at the start of this year and about €500 million has been spent on HAP. With higher rents, how are people going to pay these higher rents the Government is now accepting that people should pay. It will put them into the hands of social housing waiting lists and HAP and increase that State bill all the more. I do not see any fiscal prudence in all this.

I have one question. If there is a downturn, can rents fall as well as rise? That is the premise of linking them to the CPI. We must remember that in 2008, when prices began to fall, it took ten years for consumer prices to get back up to their 2008 levels. Are we going to see some sneaky introduction of an upward-only rent provision in the regulations or the legislation when rents are increased? We all remember that from the recession. It seems institutional investors will be demanding that in the regulations. We need clarity from the Government as to how exactly that CPI measure will be introduced.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** While the Government says today that the measures announced aim to improve the circumstances of renters, in reality it will make life more difficult for many renters across the country who are not covered by the provisions, such as renters who voluntarily leave tenancies, renters who are near the end of the six-year expiry date or will come to that in 2032, students and those who will rent new-build apartments. This announcement aims to do two competing things, neither of which it will achieve properly, namely, protect renters and incentivise private investors. Investors do need certainty and they have had anything but from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, which have chopped and changed their housing policy at least eight times, particularly regarding the private rental market over the past decade. For nine years, we in Labour have called for the entire country to be made into a rent pressure zone, a measure we have long believed to be necessary as long as the system of regulating rents by these means remains. This is something both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have continually refused to do. They even went as far as describing the measure as unconstitutional back in 2017. This raises the question as to why the sudden volte-face. The only answer I can see is that the Government is scrambling and is fudging this as it goes along.

There is a poverty of ideas in this Government. It is too timid to implement a nationwide freeze on rents or, on the other hand, to remove rent controls entirely as the vulture funds have been lobbying it to do. Instead, it has cobbled together a halfway house that seeks to satisfy competing interests but in reality will satiate neither. There is a clear need to implement a better way of regulating rents and its own expert-led Housing Commission report, which the Government continually ignores when it suits it, has stated the need to do this. A system of reference rents merits serious consideration and is something that we in the Labour Party proposed as far back as 2016 in our social and affordable housing Bill. I will seek to introduce legislation on this in the coming weeks. If the Government were serious about protecting renters without caveat, it would pass our renters' rights Bill, which includes measures such as a complete ban on no-fault evictions without exception and a register of rents so that tenants can have transparency on the rent that was previously paid on a property. Thousands of renters leave tenancies every year, particularly students, many of whom are packing up at the moment or have packed up by this time. They are already anxious thinking about where they are going to live next year. By allowing landlords to reset rents in between tenancies, the Government is throwing these people, and eventually all renters, under the bus.

I cannot understand why the Government is doing this as a stand-alone measure and not in conjunction with its new housing plan. The proposals as they stand will invariably lead to an increase in homelessness and they should be done in tandem with a successor plan to Housing for All. The proposal to cap the rent of new-build apartments at the rate of inflation creates more uncertainty for renters, given that inflation increased to 7.8% as recently as 2022, not to mention the added unpredictability posed by the Trump Administration and the proposed tariffs.

It is clear that we need more supply but this must come with the condition of affordability. We have some of the highest rents in Europe and it is very clear, with what the Government is

proposing, that it is baking in upward-only rent increases. The Minister, Deputy Browne, spoke to the media today about a tranche of key decisions to come. To make such a fundamental change to the regulation of renting without, at the very least, doing it in tandem with the Government's new housing plan is reckless. Tweaking planning exemptions for attic conversions and granny flats does not make a suite of measures. The failure to include critical infrastructure, such as water infrastructure, in the Government's changes to planning exemptions represents a missed opportunity.

An announcement was made in recent days on public-private partnerships, PPPs. The PPP model was championed by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael as recently as 2021. The Government's Housing for All plan recommitted to the PPP delivery model and despite misgivings, local authorities across the country were incentivised and did use PPP to deliver social homes. Last Wednesday, a bombshell was dropped on local authorities, with the Minister and the Government deciding to halt bundle 3 of the Dublin City Council-led PPP project, which has ramifications well beyond just Dublin. My Labour Party colleagues from right across the country have raised the very real possibility of hundreds of shovel-ready homes being stopped in their local communities. This is especially true for my Kildare South colleague, Deputy Mark Wall. In the midst of a deepening housing crisis and record levels of homelessness, this is shocking. If the Government is going to go down the PPP route, at the very least it should see the existing bundles through. In Dublin City Council, not only is bundle 3 up in the air, but subsequent bundles 4 and 5, which could deliver thousands more social homes, are now also facing an uncertain future.

Last year, before the election, the Government promised to oversee the building of 40,000 homes in 2024, only to miss that target by a whole third. Now it seems the Government is going to fail to meet its targets again this year. Indeed, the Government has never met its targets for social and affordable housing. I understand the concerns that people have about value for money - I have them myself - but where was this concern when PPP was introduced? The Government was warned about this. Local authorities and the Opposition warned the Government. Given that a lot of these projects are so close to having builders on site, it is unfathomable that with the stroke of a pen, the plug has been pulled.

What is going on in the Department? How will the hundreds of homes that are supposed to be delivered in PPP bundle 3 now be delivered? Can the Minister offer certainty over the future delivery of bundles 4 and 5? What action is the Government going to take to ensure that procurement processes that have concluded will not end up subject to lengthy legal battles because the Minister decided to do this out of the blue last week? Six housing projects are included in PPP bundle 3. The bundle 3 project board, which includes Dublin City Council, was informed by officials from the Department of housing last Wednesday that the Minister would not be sanctioning approval for the national social housing bundle 3 projects to proceed to contract award due to concerns with costs. These projects were scheduled to commence construction this month. The board was also told, even more worryingly, that future PPP bundles will also need to be reviewed. How does the Government intend to deliver bundle 3? Will bundle 4 and subsequent bundles be going ahead? If the Government is discontinuing the PPP schemes, that is understandable and fine but I do not understand why it is doing it mid-stream. It should see the bundles that are already in the pipeline through and then, if it feels the need to pull the plug, pull the plug.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** Housing remains one of the defining issues of our generation. If we are serious about solving it, we must deal in facts, not sound bites as some in the Opposition

have done and are focused on. Let us start with where we are now. Housing supply has increased significantly since Fianna Fáil re-entered government in 2020. In 2022, 2023 and 2024, completions were 29,644, 32,525 and 30,330 units, respectively. Almost 92,500 homes have been built for people in the past three years, the highest level since 2008. Over 5,900 homes were completed in quarter 1 of this year alone and commencements in 2023 and 2024 totalled nearly 102,000 units, representing a strong pipeline. In my area, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, we are seeing real delivery. The Shanganagh development, of which I have spoken previously in the Chamber, delivered 597 homes, including 200 social, 305 cost-rental and 91 affordable homes, which are almost complete. Families are moving in as we speak. St. Laurence Park in Stillorgan, Ballyogan Rise and Wood Park are also in progress, as is Dundrum Central, which will include 900 homes. Supply has increased and we are determined to drive it further.

There are still challenges, however. The reality is that we need more homes faster, especially in urban areas and for renters. Striking a balance between supply and protection is at the core of the Government's new housing plan. Today the Minister, Deputy Browne, has brought forward a suite of reforms that directly address the concerns of renters while supporting new supply. These include the extension of the rent pressure zones to all existing tenancies, a cap on rent increases at 2% or the rate of inflation and a ban on no-fault evictions by large landlords. At the same time, rents in new homes will be linked to inflation, which is essential to attract investment in apartments and increase rental supply. Urban development zones, replacing strategic development zones, SDZs, will fast-track large-scale housing projects with State-backed infrastructure. The housing activation office will break through delays. These are practical, targeted reforms, not empty promises.

Locally, the housing pipeline in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown is strong. Just this month, the council approved three Part 8 schemes, including 124 homes at the Blackglen Road in Sanddyford and 70 affordable purchase units at Leopardstown Road. I thank the Taoiseach for his personal intervention to help to secure up to 800 homes at the Leopardstown Racecourse, a site that can deliver at scale and which is close to transport links and jobs. This is work that makes a real difference. It is not about sound bites but delivery. In that regard, I acknowledge the Minister's own role in this. I met with him recently and was impressed by his focus on solutions, openness to ideas and commitment to progress. That stands in sharp contrast to what some in the Opposition have offered today. There was little beyond criticism and a failure to bring any serious, costed proposals. What we need now is momentum in this sector, across all levels of government, with local authorities, developers and communities working together to deliver homes for our people. We need to remain focused, stay constructive and deliver.

**Deputy Martin Daly:** As the Minister of State knows, as does the Minister, housing is the most pressing challenge facing the State today and will define the Government's success. While the previous Government met its targets under the Housing for All policy, rising demand means we are now acting swiftly to further increase supply and improve affordability. The public, especially younger generations, expect urgency, but the Government must ensure solutions are effective and do not create unintended consequences. Tough decisions are being made by the Minister of State and the Minister and will continue to be made. The rationale for those decisions must be communicated to the public to build confidence and expose the paucity of the Opposition's solutions.

Planning is a major frustration, especially in the Roscommon-Galway constituency, where slow processes and inconsistent decisions hinder development. The planning Bill 2024 and the planning framework of 2025 allow local authorities to rezone where there is critical need.

Ministerial leadership is needed to maintain that momentum. We must insist on a proactive planning culture in our local authorities.

Private investment is vital. A total of €6 billion to €7 billion is committed by the Government this year but it cannot carry the entire estimated investment requirement of €20 billion, especially in apartment construction. Private equity is critical.

Striking the right balance between security of tenure, rent controls and supply is critical. The rent pressure zone reforms align with the Housing Commission's recommendations. The Opposition has offered no credible and coherent solutions. Opposition Deputies are excellent at enunciating the problems but they do not provide solutions. Across my constituency of Roscommon-Galway, limited serviced sites and poor planning have stalled housing supply in places like Ballinasloe, Boyle, Castlerea and Roscommon. Rent and private housing options have dwindled, leading to a demographic shift as young people remain longer at home or leave the country. In my town, Ballygar, a decade passed without the provision of any new homes. Now, a new wastewater treatment plant has gone to tender, providing hope. This is the type of infrastructural development that must be expedited, as I know the Minister of State and Minister recognise.

We must use all available technologies to ensure delivery. Offsite or modular construction is vital. I have been assured production can be scaled up once there are predictable supply lines from the State. I welcome the modern methods of construction action plan published by the Minister, Deputy Lawless, in the past few days. It provides a roadmap to a sustainable industry that will help us to meet our targets.

Balanced regional development is essential. In Roscommon-Galway, thriving communities are ready to grow but the lack of affordable housing stands in the way. The *status quo* cannot hold. This crisis affects families, the economy and essential services as workers such as teachers, gardaí and nurses struggle to afford homes. I know the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy Browne, understand that. We must continue to deliver sustainable solutions. Today's announcements form part of a succession of measures they will take to deliver on the commitments in the programme for Government.

**Deputy Catherine Callaghan:** Carlow-Kilkenny has much to offer in terms of amenities, education and jobs but we have a difficulty with providing houses for the people who would love to live there. Some of the difficulty relates to the provision of water and wastewater treatment plants and road infrastructure. Developer-led infrastructure provision and investing in services is the only way we will move forward. It is imperative that we make provision in this regard. In County Kilkenny, not a single housing development can currently be built in The Rower, Inistioge, Toher, Mullinavat or Graiguenamanagh. This is simply due to the lack of wastewater services.

I balance this by noting that in parts of Tullow and Muine Bheag in County Carlow, great work has been done by Uisce Éireann and Carlow County Council. We have future-proofed capacity for many more houses in both of those towns, which are the second- and third-largest settlements in the county. However, in Carlow town, which is a university town, I am reliably informed it will be quarter 1 of 2031 before wastewater services provide capacity for the houses developers are ready to construct in the town. We also need more student accommodation in Carlow town to help sustain our thriving university.

The programme for Government commits to bringing Uisce Éireann, local authority planners and developers together at the start of a project to ensure the smooth running of the development. However, this provision is for developments of 100 or more homes. In my constituency, it is smaller developments that are struggling the most to get connected. For example, a proposed development in The Rower of approximately seven to ten homes, for which planning permission was given, cannot proceed due to the lack of wastewater capacity. Allowing for developer-led provision would be done under the strict regulation and guidelines of Uisce Éireann. This, in turn, would take the pressure off the system, and off Uisce Éireann, and free up more moves in a quicker timeframe. We must recognise the good work the people in Uisce Éireann are doing locally and give them the support they need to drive on services and infrastructure delivery. Without doubt, further investment is needed in the organisation. That funding must be ring-fenced for use specifically in providing new housing in the future.

We also need more investment in roads to access and unlock potential sites for home building. Snoddy's Road in Carlow town, for example, has been partially completed. All that is required to complete the project and unlock the land that has potential for housing is a further 800 m stretch. There are already footpaths and street lighting. Another example is the proposed Tullow ring road, which would unlock housing development potential in an area that already has sufficient wastewater capacity. I have already asked the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, to include the ring roads for Carlow town, Kilkenny city and Tullow in the national development plan in order to secure the much-needed funding for those projects, which can only go to enhance and develop counties Carlow and Kilkenny, and provide more housing, as we go forward. The infrastructural needs of both counties, which I have outlined, must be met if we are to fulfil the programme for Government target of delivering more than 300,000 new homes by the end of 2030.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** Housing provision is so dysfunctional across every part of the sector that it is no exaggeration to say it is an emergency. Day after day, I have to inform people who are on the housing list for six, seven, eight or nine years that they have many more years left on the list. That was not the case four or five years ago. The situation has grown worse and worse and I see nothing the Government is doing that will improve it. There are families so long on the housing list that children who were toddlers when they went on the list are now adults. Unable to move out, they are penalised because they are working and their wages push them over the income limit. One family I know of had been 16 years on the housing list before being removed by the council because they went over the income threshold.

People who are renting are terrified, waiting for a termination letter from their landlord. Some landlords are using Part 4 of the Residential Tenancies Act to evict people and then double the rent. The new rules for renters will cause huge distress and concern. It seems there will be a free for all within a six-year period and the RPZs will not be worth the paper on which they are written.

Students should be excitedly looking forward to a new chapter in their life as they go to college, with many thousands moving to a new city. However, foremost in their mind is the question of where they will live and how much it will cost. I heard a student yesterday telling RTE about the €800 cost per month for accommodation from Monday to Friday. The students are kicked out of the property on a Friday by the landlord, who then rents it out on Saturday and Sunday before moving the students back in on Monday. That does not happen in a functional housing market.

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In my constituency, the starting price in a new development down the road from me, Luttrellstown Gate, is €520,000 for a three-bedroom house, with the cost going up to €800,000 for a four-bedroom home. In the Government's eyes, affordable housing starts at approximately €400,000. One could not write this stuff. The Government has let this generation down and by the looks of its new rent strategy, it will also let down the next generation. I ask everyone who cares about the young people who cannot rent or buy to go out to Kildare Street on 17 June and make their voices heard outside these buildings.

**Deputy Mark Ward:** As we speak, there are 83 vacant homes in my area of South Dublin County Council, five of which have been empty for more than a year. Each one of those homes should have a family living in it. It is disgusting that adults are stuck living in their parents' back bedrooms while the house next door is boarded up.

*6 o'clock*

Young people are boarding planes to Australia when they could be starting lives in these boarded-up homes. Children are walking past these boarded-up homes on the way back to hotel rooms they are sharing with their families. This is simply not good enough. Tonight Sinn Féin will bring forward a motion calling for urgent action to get these vacant homes back into stock and get families living in them. I am calling on everybody to support it.

It is also time we introduced a social housing passport. I have raised this numerous times, including with the Tánaiste previously. Many people have contacted me who started out in one local authority, had to move to a different local authority because of the housing crisis, have had children and integrated into that community and now have been told that if they would like to remain in that community in a council home, they will have to come off the list on which they started thereby losing all their time and starting again. This is a direct consequence of the housing crisis. Nobody should be waiting over 12 years for a home. A social housing passport would allow people to carry their time from one local authority to another. This is a very fair request.

Rents in my area are at an all-time high. People tell me that new rents in some of the new builds in Lucan come in at over €3,000 per month. I have never seen the likes of it. What does the Government do to resolve this? It looks after industrial landlords and the vulture funds by removing the sole protection renters had, which was rent caps. Instead the Government will link rents to inflation. The Minister of State can shake his head all he likes. It is going to link rents to inflation. One would need to be living under a rock not to realise what inflation has been like over the past number of years. The price of food, petrol, gas and electricity has gone through the roof and now the Government wants to do the same with rents. Shame on the Minister of State and shame on this Government. Once again, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have shown that they are firmly working hand in hand with industrial landlords.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** Today the Taoiseach said that rents are supposedly not going to increase but we know it is the case that rents will increase as a result of the measures brought in today by the Government. We are in the midst of an emergency that the Government accepts is an emergency, with rents higher than they have ever been in the history of the State - they are completely unaffordable and unsustainable - and we will now see rents rise even further. The removal of that rent cap between tenancies means we will see rents increase across the board; make no mistake about it. The move today by the Government was a signal to landlords to go ahead and increase the rents. It is telling them that they can do so - that is what the Government

is saying to landlords of existing properties and landlords of new properties who build them. The Minister of State is shaking his head, but it is the case that in introducing these measures, he said it is about activating the supply of institutional investors delivering housing. If it is about activating supply, it clearly does that through allowing higher rents because that is what the Minister of State said is needed, that is what lobbyists have been saying and that is what institutional funds have been looking for and now the Government has given it to them. Every tenant will face increased rents within the next six years.

We will see rents rise even further but between now and March when the changes come in, we will also see landlords evict tenants so that they can then have the market rent charged.

**Deputy John Cummins:** They cannot.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** Of course they can; they are doing it every day. How many evictions took place last year? There were thousands and thousands of evictions. They can evict a tenant through the sale of the property to a family member. Landlords are already on the radio saying that they are leaving properties vacant for two years so they can charge the market rent. They now know that next March, they will be able to charge the market rent full stop. That is what the Government is allowing them to do.

Regarding the idea that the Government is introducing protections for renters, half of all renters will not get these protections because they are in properties owned by landlords who own fewer than three properties. Make no mistake about it - anyone who has lived in the private rental sector in this country knows this means that landlords will be able to turn to tenants and say “the rent is increasing and if you don’t accept it, we will evict you or if we can’t evict you directly, we won’t do the maintenance”. It will force renters out so they can charge the market rents. These measures will reduce the one protection renters had. This is a policy shift back to institutional investor funds. It is about making build-to-rent corporate landlords central to housing policy and renters will face evictions. We will see more homelessness as a result of these policies.

The no-fault eviction ban should be for every renter and it should be implemented immediately. We need a register for rents and a freeze on rents for three years. The Government has been lobbied very heavily by institutional investors and landlords; that is so clear. The records are there. The lobbying register shows it. The Government has bent to those lobbyists instead of protecting renters. Renters are already struggling - they are in poverty and they cannot afford food, basics and healthcare. Families are going into homelessness as a result of this and what the Government has done today has made matters worse. It will lead to rising rents. When will rents be high enough? Is it when they are €4,000 or €5,000 per month? At what point will the Government say we need to freeze rents? When will rents fall? These policies will not lead to rents falling. We are disgusted with this policy and will fight it as much as we can.

**Deputy Aidan Farrelly:** So far this Government has said that housing will be its number one priority but it appears that its members are not even talking to each other and continue to think up housing policy on the fly. It cannot even get its story straight on today’s announcement about rent pressure zone reform. So far, we have seen thinking-out-loud policy briefing about sheds in gardens; a housing czar that no one wants, including prospective candidates; record homelessness; abandoning the tenant in situ scheme; and commencement and completion figures miles off the Government’s own commitments. I do not have time to talk about the calamitous situation facing our utilities like water infrastructure and grid capacity. Who is in

charge here? Who is thinking up this policy? Where is the evidence to give anyone assurances that this situation is likely to get better?

This Government is the latest Government to get housing and homelessness utterly wrong. The 2011 Fine Gael and Labour Party programme for Government committed to ending homelessness. It failed. The 2016 confidence and supply programme for Government committed to ending homelessness. It failed. The language in the 2020 Fine Gael-Fianna Fáil-Green Party programme for Government changed from eradicating to reducing homelessness and it still failed. Now the 2025 programme for Government talks about supporting people in homelessness. We have gone from an ambition of eradication to support. When did we give up on the ambition to end homelessness? When did the Irish State decide to accept any level of homelessness? There are 4,775 children in homelessness.

Today the Children's Rights Alliance published its annual poverty monitor. It tells us that 100,000 children and young people experienced consistent poverty in Ireland in 2024. This report provides more evidence of the catastrophic impact on children of the failed housing policies of successive governments. I sincerely hope this Government will be better than the previous three but from what we have seen so far, we should fear the worst.

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** The Government strategy through the course of the housing crisis has essentially been to increase developer investment - in a nutshell - and it has failed catastrophically. The Government now seeks to double down by creating a system that will result in the removal of the 2% rent pressure cap nationally for new builds. The whole point of building more houses is to drive rents down, not up. This proposal puts landlords and their profit margins above renters and their basic right to a roof over their heads. Housing developers are making tens of millions in profit yet the Government continues to hand out tax credits and cuts and now paves the way for mass evictions to maximise profit. Níl sé sách maith. Ba cheart go mbeidh an gnáthdhuine ag breathnú ar na praghsanna ar Daft.ie ag dul síos. Déanfaidh an plean seo a mhalairt.

Expanding RPZs nationwide is a welcome move but the cap, in line with inflation, is specifically designed to raise rents and ensure all new builds are unaffordable. Throughout autumn and winter, we will see more and more people forced onto our streets and out of their homes. Government policy created a housing emergency, then a housing crisis and now a housing disaster. This Government has consistently implemented policies that benefit institutional investors instead of renters, yet it is keen to keep digging. Measures such as the restriction of no-fault evictions are welcome but are outweighed by the consequences of the rest of the proposed changes.

The Government has failed to recognise its duty of care to those who are already struggling to pay rent or find somewhere affordable to live, particularly those on lower incomes. These people are already forced to choose between heating and eating. The vast majority of people in Ireland are not able to save money or buy a home of their own. There are now multiple generations of young people locked out of home ownership. The hole that has been dug for them is reaching all the way to Australia, Canada and New Zealand where so many people in my constituency of Dublin Rathdown have told me their children have gone. This lack of affordability results in a concentration of housing in the hands of institutional investors who see a house as an asset and not as a family home. These measures make our crisis of affordability worse than ever. The Government has failed to see the real human cost of the guaranteed higher rents as a result of this policy.

As a result of this proposal from the Government, a landlord will now be incentivised to bully out their tenants, or refuse to renew a lease and raise the rent by hundreds if not thousands of euro overnight. The Government needs to recognise that without a serious reset of housing policy, as called for by the Housing Commission, the housing catastrophe will only continue. There will be more poverty, more exploitation and more and more homelessness. There is a solution to this, and it involves releasing at least some of the more than €8 billion in the Government's 2024 surplus to build social and affordable housing, and viewing housing as a human right and renters as people rather than as commodities to be exploited.

**Deputy Liam Quaide:** Homelessness is well recognised as both a cause and a consequence of mental health difficulties. For the many thousands of children in this country who are caught up in the various forms of homelessness, whether that be conditions of extreme overcrowding, couch surfing, time spent in domestic violence shelters or emergency accommodation, mental health and developmental outcomes are likely to be very serious and far reaching. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the need for safe and stable accommodation is fundamental to the realisation of all other needs for the person in order to attain a decent quality of life. Therefore, a foundational aspect of mental health is being denied to many of our young people by Government policy. That basic sense of security many of us take for granted, which stems from the fulfilment of the core need for a home, is damaged by homelessness and precarious living.

There are also other psychological effects, as Róisín McDonnell, family services manager with Focus Ireland explains:

All the normal childhood stuff goes out the window. Sleepovers are gone, friends coming to play, even family visiting may be gone. They will have to give up pets. They cannot celebrate birthdays. They have no space for their toys. Even the kids who seem to be coping at first, may become withdrawn or they may start acting out. They will never say 'I am angry because I am homeless' but they are a ball of confusion. 'Why has this happened to me? Why is my mam upset?'

Róisín hits on an important point, which is that children have great difficulty in emotionally assimilating to traumatic experiences. They often blame themselves for misfortunes they or their families are caught up in. Homelessness pervades the young person's experiences. Not only do they live with an internal lack of security, but they see worry, stress and unhappiness etched on their parents' faces day in, day out. Seeing a parent or parent figure distressed or at their wits' end much of the time is a particularly deep psychological wound that many of these children will carry with them into adulthood. The core response from the Government must be recognition, in the first instance, that housing policy over successive Dáil terms involving the same parties has failed. We will get nowhere fast if it does not face this reality. Countries such as Austria have implemented housing policies that have been much smarter. Austria has been more versatile in how it has used public money, which has consequently been more effective. As a party, the Social Democrats have put forward pragmatic solutions to the housing disaster.

The mental health fallout from the housing emergency will continue until the Government treats the issue as an emergency. We need to see much increased investment in the range of supports needed for homeless people, including multidisciplinary treatment for addiction and mental health difficulties, as recommended and highlighted by organisations such as Depaul and Simon.

**Deputy John McGuinness:** It is my strong belief that all stakeholders responsible for de-

livering houses are not on the same page and do not share the one ambition. In this case, I separate out the banks. It is almost impossible for young people seeking their first mortgage to get a mortgage from the bank to build their own house or to purchase one. The mortgage approval rate may be high and may look impressive but when you look at the figures, there are the numbers drawing down mortgages and those just waiting because they have not been approved for enough or cannot afford it. The banks need to come up with various financial packages and mortgages to enable those who want to draw down a mortgage and to make it possible for them in respect of the amount and so on.

Likewise, insurance companies have placed many difficulties in front of those seeking a mortgage, particularly those who may have had health issues in the past. They are being told they cannot get mortgage protection and are not given any other options; that is it for them. This needs to be reviewed.

The whole planning process regarding accommodation needs to be relaxed. When it comes to right-sizing in local authority housing, there are too many people waiting for a right-size to get a house that is smaller than the one they are in and for that house to then accommodate a family. This is not happening at any great speed and needs to be looked at by the Minister, Deputy Browne, and the various chief executives of the local authorities.

The biggest problem here - I have heard it from other Members - is Irish Water. I know many towns and villages throughout counties Carlow and Kilkenny that simply do not have the facilities to enable planning permission to be given because Irish Water will object and say it does not have the services there. This issue exists in every single county and needs to be addressed immediately. It is only by way of ministerial intervention that we will see any change in this area. I say to the councils around the country: for god's sake, do something to act as proper managers of your tenants. At present, there is no management and there are people in flats or apartments or groups of houses who are experiencing the sale of drugs on a daily basis, the abuse of their rights as a tenant or antisocial behaviour. It is shocking that tenants are forced to continue to live like this when the local authority, which is the landlord in this case, is not facilitating a proper standard within its own housing stock. I ask that this be part of the review of the activities of local authorities. The small solution of selling a big house, if you own it, and building a smaller house to accommodate a different family structure needs to be looked at. In many of county development plans, if you build in one area, you are not entitled to build again. Yet, if you were allowed to build, you would downsize and make another house available to the market. It is that simple. All the stakeholders should be brought to the table to hear what all of us have had to say and they should be asked to do something about participating in the project fully.

**Deputy Maeve O'Connell:** I welcome the opportunity to make a statement on housing, which every representative in the House knows is the most important issue facing families in our country today. I was delighted with the news last week in my constituency, Dublin Rathdown, that an agreement had been reached with the Land Development Agency for the transfer of 17 acres, giving the Government the ability to develop 800 new homes on the site. This land was identified under the Government's Housing for All plan and shows that real progress is being made. I also commend the foresight used in selecting the location. Every new housing development must take into account the need to deliver additional services to ensure residents are well supported. This site located right by the currently unused Leopardstown Luas station, meaning this development will activate existing infrastructure and residents will have access to efficient public transportation from the get-go. Such a large development will of course have

a huge impact on the local community. That is why it is important the LDA and local councils work with local communities to ensure the best outcomes for everybody so that we can deliver the greatest number of houses possible, of benefit to everybody in the community, with the least amount of disruption. That is why I am also glad to see confirmation that Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council will create a new master plan for Leopardstown. We all understand housing delivery must have an all-of-government approach. Many Deputies highlighted the issues in that regard. We cannot focus on one section and expect everything else to fall into place. This is why master plans are vital. Taking this Leopardstown area as an example, for those not familiar with the area, it skirts right along the edge of the M50, with the Leopardstown Road being a main distributor road off junction 14 and linking to the N11, so 800 new houses could bring 800 new cars. With the readily available local public transport infrastructure already in place, this project will keep Dublin moving, not clog it up. Public transport infrastructure alone is not enough. We face a problem where planning applications are held up for too long by objections and judicial reviews which the Government is taking strong action to address. Stopping the clock on permissions held up by judicial reviews will be an important lifeline for keeping developments alive which our country would otherwise have lost, an important measure to ensure we do indeed have housing for all.

**Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí:** I wish to raise two issues in this debate, which I welcome. The first is planning certainty. If you talk to any home builder of a medium scale, 20 or more units, they will tell you planning uncertainty is a huge challenge when it comes to being able to build new homes. This includes the additional information processes in local authorities, adding uncertainty to their timelines, and unclear decision timelines in An Bord Pleanála appeals process which adds months of uncertainty to their projects. Judicial reviews add months if not years of uncertainty. A local home builder told me recently that planning uncertainty means he has to plan for three to four years in total from start to finish even for a small scheme delivering a small number of units. It is really challenging for them. As a result, Bank of Ireland and AIB will not lend so development finance is a struggle. Deputy O'Connell mentioned, and I welcome, enacting key provisions of the planning Bill urgently as a priority, even if it means getting through the inevitable court challenge from some quarters. We have to put our shoulder to the wheel and get it done to shorten those timeframes.

Bank of Ireland and AIB are not lending because of these risks. The HFA will lend to local authorities. It has very good rates for social housing building - 1.75% for ten years and 2.25% for new lending at 25 years. The margin of the Home Building Finance Ireland on the other hand can range from 4.75% to 7.5% over EURIBOR, one of its pricing rates. There is an inherent unfairness to those rates. HBFI has a huge opportunity to provide development finance to a whole coterie of medium-sized builders but the rates have to be competitive. AIB and Bank of Ireland are just not lending. People cannot get development finance. It is 20% upfront and then these guys building have to provide the rest themselves at a very high rate. I urge that the HBFI be looked at seriously to scale it up as a lending institution with competitive rates somewhere near the HFA rates to local authorities. There is so much demand that the risk is really limited for HBFI.

**Deputy Ann Graves:** The housing emergency is the biggest challenge facing people in Ireland today. There is no leadership or strategy from the Government. Its response has been flip-flopping, chaos and confusion. This has a direct impact on public services with teachers, gardaí, firefighters and nurses unable to afford rent and unable to get a mortgage. It is time for this Government to wake up to the damage its policies are doing to our communities. My office

in Fingal East is inundated with housing queries. Every day, I deal with people languishing on housing lists, families in overcrowded conditions and those constantly living with the threat of no-fault eviction. I am dealing with a family of six in a two-bed duplex in Swords who have been on the housing list for 24 years and a senior citizen living in Malahide looking for a transfer due to serious antisocial behaviour. He has been on a transfer list for two years but Fingal County Council has nowhere to move him to. I am also dealing with a 71-year-old man renting in Portmarnock who worked for 50 years, retired last year and can no longer afford the rent. He told me it is either rent, food or heat - he cannot do all three. I am also familiar with a woman living in Donabate with her severely autistic child who cannot get housing despite being on the housing list for ten years. These are just a couple of examples. The Government's decision to cut funding for the tenant in situ scheme has made things worse. This scheme was a homelessness prevention tool. Now, families do not know where they will go once their notice to quit has run out. It is shameful when there are 2,500 vacant council homes in the State. In Fingal alone, 126 council properties lie vacant. There is growing anger and frustration with the Government which has abandoned communities and failed to deliver on every housing promise. People will bring that anger to the gates of the Dáil. I call on members of the public, unions and housing groups to support the Raise the Roof rally on Tuesday, 17 June at 6 p.m. outside Leinster House to stand up and fight back. It is time for this Government to listen to people.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** Tá an oiread sin gnéithe den cheist tithíochta seo nach féidir liom iad ar fad a chlúdach san am atá agam. Déanfaidh mé déileáil le gné amháin ach cosúil le mo chomhghleacaí tá mé ag iarraidh ar dhaoine teacht le chéile anseo Dé Máirt seo chugainn ar a 6 a chlog mar chuid den Raise the Roof campaign.

Tens of thousands of young couples are locked out of renting, never owning their own homes. These couples have okay wages but because of Government policies and the whole-sale subsidisation of private landlordism by successive governments, these couples face a dilemma - live apart in their parents' homes with their parents and siblings or, as in far too many cases, move out of their local areas or emigrate. Young people are competing against vulture funds, AHBs, landlords, scrupulous or unscrupulous, and councils, which are buying up new and second-hand homes. Many even consider giving up work on the presumption they may get a home quicker on the council list. Many couples are earning too much for the affordable homes threshold and too little for a mortgage for even a modest house, even after qualifying for the State's inflationary subsidies, such are the obscene prices being sought for homes. It is €450,000 for a two-bed 1930s Dublin Corporation home with a BER of E or less and in need of modernisation. That is madness and unsustainable. Another €100,000 will be required to modernise those homes. There is also a need to address prices from estate agents. Every home I know of in Dublin 10 and 12 is going for 15% to 20% over the advertised price for the last five years or so and the agents know this is happening. They also know the amount couples have and can go up to because people must produce their mortgage approval in advance of any bidding as part of the documentation. Agents then play those couples off against each other. The advertised prices should be the price that is got so people cannot play around. It is absolutely obscene what is happening.

Tá ceisteanna eile maidir leis an Ghaeltacht, maidir leo siúd atá gan dídean, maidir leo siúd atá ina gcónaí ar na sráideanna agus maidir le tithe sóisialta. Is gá dúinn díriú isteach ar na ceisteanna seo. Tá géarchéim ann. Impím ar dhaoine brú a chur ar an Rialtas seo ionas go n-admhódh sé go bhfuil géarchéim ann agus gá le gníomh láithreach chun an fhadhb a leigheas, seachas an tslí a bhfuil sé á déanamh atá ag cur leis an bhfadhb seo in ionad a fhadhb a leigheas.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** There are a lot of things I could say about housing, but because of the announcement from Government I feel compelled to comment on the new rent proposals. The new restrictions, such as they are, or rather the changes, will mean there are no controls for new builds and no controls for new tenancies when tenants change. This is going to drive up already sky-high rents. This is really going to increase them further. They are going way beyond what ordinary people can afford.

Most tenancies end voluntarily. People move on. They get housed by a local authority, purchase a house, move to new rental accommodation or they have to go to a larger house because of family size. The other side of that is people downsizing, and then some people are just emigrating because they are giving up. When all those tenancies change over it is a free-for-all in terms of what landlords can do with the rents. The Daft report last year showed Laois had the fastest increase in rents outside Dublin. Those renting a house or apartment are being told by some there is a problem with profitability. Pull the other one. There is nobody who really believes that. The charging of rents of up to €3,000 within the Pale and over €2,000 outside the Pale means huge profits are being made. That is €36,000 per year in rent alone for a bog standard house. Families and workers who are on €400 to €700 per week simply cannot afford that. One week's pay is completely wiped out.

There is a myth as well that the number of units is decreasing, but it has increased. Between 2016 and 2022 it went up by 45,000 and the evidence since, as I understand it, shows that as well. The commission report set out a need for reference rents, which the Government ignored. They would be based on location, family size – I raised it with commission members again today at the committee to clarify what they were saying – and the average rent in the area and it would be just index-linked increases. The energy rating would be counted as well. That at least was some kind of half-decent proposal. What we have instead is what has been set out by the Government today. What will happen is rents will be driven up way beyond what ordinary families can afford. There will not be no-fault evictions, but there will be so-called fault evictions because people will not be able to pay the rent. They will owe so much in rent landlords will be able to get them out. Once they are free that is another group of houses and flats where rents can be increased. This is a recipe for chaos for families and workers.

**Deputy Charles Ward:** I will start by thanking the housing Minister for bringing forward, in his first few months, a Bill that will address some of the changes needed to the defective concrete scheme. However, I have communicated to him there are a few issues that need changing.

The decision, for example, to fix a cut-off date for the increased scheme cap and updated grant rate as 29 March 2024 is simply unfair. It flies in the face of what the previous Minister for housing, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, said when he publicly promised early movers would not be penalised. Only 43 homes were actually completed by 29 March 2024. That means the vast majority of families well into the process of rebuilding their lives have been unjustifiably excluded. This is unfair treatment. As well as this, splitting eligibility mid-project is complete madness. It creates a two-tier system that punishes those who acted quickly and in good faith according to what the former housing Minister told them to do, often at great personal and financial risk. We have people who started their build in August 2023 and completed it in March 2024 before the cut-off date who are now not entitled. However, a neighbour who goes on 29 March is entitled to the 10% retrospective.

To make matters worse, the doubling of timelines for rebuilds through no fault of the homeowners has not been acknowledged. The auxiliary grant support scheme will run out and

people will be forced to pay rent and mortgages at the same time with money they simply do not have. Who gains from this? The answer is greedy contractors who are inflating prices while vulnerable families are left with the burden to carry as they try to get through this scheme. I acknowledge the genuine impact this has had on the homeowners.

The housing Minister engaged with us and I acknowledge that. Together we can create a scheme that is fair and leaves absolutely nobody behind. We need to listen to those who are affected. I am urging the Minister of State to speak to the Minister and reconsider the fixed date of 29 March 2024. I know many people who will be left behind if this date is used and I am sure this is not the Minister's intention. He can fix this but he needs to get rid of that date.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** It is again very unfortunate the Minister is not here for a debate on a slew of new measures affecting the whole rental sector.

**Deputy John Cummins:** He will be here.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The debate is nearly finished.

**Deputy John Cummins:** He is on the "Six One" news at the moment.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** He is on the "Six One" news. He is not here, is what I said and the debate has been going on for an hour and a half.

**Deputy John Cummins:** He will be here in a minute.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** We have not had a chance to question the housing Minister, that I can recall, since coming into this Dáil. I wanted to register that. We have already seen him raising this great idea of the housing tsar. Somebody commented that we have not seen a tsar disappear so quickly since 1917. That idea has gone.

I will address some of the measures announced today. No-fault evictions have been banned for landlords who own four or more properties. How will the tenant know? How would a tenant have any idea how many properties their landlord actually owns so they can challenge an eviction if it is put to them? Before the Minister of State says they are all registered with the RTB, we know the vast majority of tenancies are not actually registered with the RTB. We have TDs in this Dáil who have a very big problem remembering they have tenancies, never mind other landlords registering them as well. The other thing is balance. What balance is there? All the cards are in the hands of landlords now. There is no need for this balance. Landlords already have all the power and nothing has been rebalanced. We keep hearing we must attract landlords back into the sector, but the number of landlords rose last year. This is constantly reiterated. It has been since 2016. Despite this landlords are increasing.

The other issue I want to raise is that the Taoiseach said earlier these measures are to activate supply and we can never reach our target of 50,000 unless we take some measures like these. It is this pivot Fianna Fáil has taken that we need to shift to the private sector. I do not accept that. There is huge capacity that is not being realised in the local authorities and the public sector. I have given the following example and I have asked the Taoiseach about it and am now asking the Minister of State. There is a strategic land bank in Scribblestown in Ashtown owned by Fingal County Council. The council says it can provide 7,000 homes. There has not been a meeting between the Minister and the council about that. It has asked for €200 million to help start development. It has not received a reply as far as I know. That is a strategic land bank. We

do not need to be kowtowing to the likes of Urbeo in Hansfield, for example, which is currently charging tenants a minimum €2,000 for a two-bed property. This is miles out of the city centre. We need the State to develop public housing. That is the only solution.

**Deputy Roderic O’Gorman:** We are facing a housing crisis of unprecedented scale. More than 15,500 people, including more than 4,700 children are living in emergency accommodation. This is not just a statistic; it is a national failure, and one that demands urgent action. At the same time there are an estimated 80,000 vacant or derelict properties across Ireland. These are properties that could and should be homes. This is not just inefficiency; it is injustice. That is why the Dereliction and Building Regeneration Bill 2025, recently proposed in the Seanad by my Green Party colleague, Senator Noonan, is welcome. It offers real and workable solutions. It expands the legal definition of dereliction. It strengthens enforcement powers. It replaces a weak levy with a 7% annual tax on the property’s market value and it introduces a new town centre first planning path to bring vacant properties back into use. This Bill is practical, targeted and overdue, but despite the rising levels of homelessness and that untapped stock of housing, the Government proceeded with a timed amendment delaying this Bill’s progress by up to a year. This is deeply disappointing. With thousands of people still without secure housing we need delivery and not deferral. Day after day the Taoiseach stands up and says that on the matter of housing the Government is open to all Opposition proposals and solutions. However, the reality is that time and again when the Opposition comes with reasonable solutions they are voted down and delayed.

In government, the Green Party introduced the Croí Cónaithe vacant property refurbishment grant of up to €70,000 to restore empty homes. We supported the town centre first policy, which boosted compact growth and prioritised urban generation, and we successfully opposed the efforts to delay the land hoarding tax, a tax that this year has already brought in €40 million to the Exchequer. The Government cannot afford to let another year slip by while homes lie idle, and this housing crisis worsens. There are solutions on the table. The Green Party’s Dereliction and Building Regeneration Bill is one of these. Let us stop managing this crisis and start fixing it.

**Deputy Ryan O’Meara:** Housing is the single greatest issue facing my generation. I start with an issue I have raised in this Chamber a number of times, and will continue to raise, which is modern methods of construction, modular homes, log cabins or whatever we want to call them. I recognise the Minister of State’s position on it. I welcome the work done to date by Government on planning exemptions relating to backyard development, but we need to go further. I have said repeatedly and say it again that there is a place for these types of homes across Ireland, particularly rural Ireland. I canvassed in the local and general elections last year. There are countless laneways in north Tipperary and north-west Kilkenny where I see those modular homes and log cabins. They are working for people who cannot afford a house otherwise, and for a lot of young families. We need to see planning for those, but furthermore we need to allow planning retrospectively for houses that can meet the planning requirements. I am not saying there should be a free for all. I am saying that where wastewater and water connections, utilities and proper planning can be met, the ban that is there in many county councils should be removed and they should be allowed to be built. They are the only form of affordable housing that many young people in rural Ireland can afford, whether young people trying to take over a farm, or a young person who might have a site from their parents they could potentially build on. It is an option for some. It is not a perfect solution, but it will work, and we need urgency in allowing that to happen.

There is also the issue of development contributions in rural Ireland. I am not particularly

pleased that they have now stopped, and the one-off house in particular has to pay its development contribution and the levy again. People contact me and ask what they are getting in return for it. To be honest, in a rural area, they are getting essentially zero except the privilege of building on their own site. We need to re-establish that waiver to help those people with the cost of building. There is also student accommodation in Thurles in my constituency. Thurles has two universities, TUS and Mary Immaculate College. Mary Immaculate is bursting at the seams, and TUS is continuing to grow now that it has university status. The town desperately needs student accommodation. Every year we see students rush to Thurles to try to find somewhere and it is only putting more pressure on a market that is already ferociously under pressure. We need to see purpose-built student accommodation in Thurles as a matter of priority. I also want to see affordable housing developments built across Nenagh, Thurles and Roscrea in north Tipperary to begin with. Affordable housing is a major issue in my constituency. We are seeing lots of active planning permissions on an issue I will come to shortly - wastewater capacity. However, affordable housing is a must, particularly for younger people and working families who are trying to get a start in life with a home on their own.

On wastewater capacity, I name Nenagh, Cloughjordan and Ballycommon as three examples I have raised multiple times in this House. Nenagh is the largest town in north Tipperary. There is no capacity in the system at the moment to build any houses, despite the fact that approximately 1,000 could be built in the morning. There are probably other constraints, but there is planning there for them. Social housing and private developments are being held up because of a lack of capacity. We thought there was capacity in Nenagh until the census was done. Even without new houses being built, because population has grown to the extent it has, there is now not capacity in that system. We are looking at 2029 for that to be completed, and that is just not good enough. Cloughjordan, where I live, has been facing major constraints for 15-plus years, waiting for Irish Water at least since its establishment to get its act together and build out the plant to allow us build homes in our village. Similarly, Ballycommon could have more than 30 houses built in a small village. We need the investment in wastewater and water infrastructure going into Uisce Éireann to remove those blockages and allow those houses to be built.

**Deputy Séamus McGrath:** I thank the Minister for facilitating this debate. I do not want to focus on individual issues, initiatives and schemes. I will focus on the big picture in terms of the acute housing crisis we are in. To me the only solution is ramping up supply across all forms, whether new builds, reuse of existing buildings and better utilisation of existing buildings such as over office, over shop and so on. That will help deliver where we need to be in terms of social and affordable housing delivery, cost rental and private purchase, which is sometimes not mentioned when we discuss housing. We have to provide options for individuals and couples to purchase housing as well. In many areas they do not have new builds to purchase, which is a significant issue.

Supply is the only solution when you look at the scale of the problem. As a country we are putting forward more than €6.8 billion per annum in trying to stimulate housing activity. That is a huge amount of money. Should we spend more? Can we spend more? I believe we should. We have to increase that because we are in an acute crisis whether or not you want to use the word “emergency”. I would use the word “emergency”. We are in a housing emergency, and we have to up that public expenditure. Allied to that we have to significantly increase private investment. I note the comments made earlier, but it is delusional if you do not accept that we have to increase private investment in housing. That has to happen. For that to happen, developments have to become viable. That is the key issue. Many developments are not viable,

whether you are talking about apartment building or house building. The reason they are not viable in many cases is because of land costs, servicing costs, lack of infrastructure and so on. We have to address those issues. I am hopeful the national planning framework will improve land availability, and that the national development plan review will increase investment in infrastructure, whether water infrastructure, wastewater, drinking water and energy. We cannot look at housing in isolation. Investment and capital expenditure in infrastructure such as water and energy are absolutely linked to housing and the housing crisis we are in. We have to look at that separately, but we also have to acknowledge the scale of the problem here.

I have just come from the housing committee where we met the Housing Commission. The key point it made is acknowledgement of the scale of the problem. We currently need approximately 50,000 houses per year to meet the demand now, and that is not addressing the deficit and shortfall that have built up over years. To address that we need even more houses delivered. We are a long way off where we need to be, and we have to acknowledge that and treat it as such. We need to bring forward measures in an urgent and radical way to try to address the crisis we are in. That is the key message that has come across today. We need to be radical and treat this as an emergency, and we need to do all in our power to make things happen as soon as possible.

**Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil:** I acknowledge the progress made this year to date. The CSO has announced 5,938 home completions happened in quarter 1 of 2025, which is the second highest first quarter since the series began in 2011, and that apartment completions in quarter 1 of 2025 were up 13.4% on quarter 1 of 2024. Many more apartments need to be built and I hope the announcements being made will increase the number being built.

Regarding the NPF, there is a need to be ambitious about not just town and village centres but the outskirts where there is green space available on which to build additional housing and apartments. What is critical, along with the building of homes, is that we build the social infrastructure to go with them. That means schools, childcare and playgrounds, as well as the water and energy we often speak of in here. It is primarily around the building up of sustainable communities.

I look at Kildare North specifically. The waiting lists for childcare in Kildare are astronomical. People are number 400 or number 500 on childcare waiting lists and women cannot plan on going back to work after maternity leave because they cannot secure childcare. It is not sustainable. It is the same with schools. Parents who come to me are worried about getting their child into school for the following year, be it primary or secondary school.

The basics for any community are the likes of playgrounds. There is, for example, no swimming pool in the entirety of north Kildare. All the swimming pools are in the south of the county. My home town, Maynooth, has a population of 17,500, not to mention 17,500 students, and there is no community centre. That does not lend itself to building a sustainable community. When we look at building additional infrastructure in houses, apartments, towns, villages or wherever it may be, it is imperative we look at the social cohesion and the sustainable element of those communities.

We cannot just build shells. Shells are not homes. Homes are defined by the families and individuals within them but the collective living in those homes is what builds the community. Community is at the heart of what this country stands for. We have amazing communities the length and breadth of the country. However, if we do not go down the route of building sustain-

able communities, we leave ourselves open to societal problems further down the line.

I appeal to the Minister of State and Government. While it is imperative we build as many homes as possible, be they duplexes, houses or apartments, a critical part of that plan is to ensure there is adequate social infrastructure in place. That is schools, crèches, community centres and sports organisations in towns, villages or communities and there must be adequate ground for them to grow as the community grows.

A difficult task lies ahead but progress is being made. We see that by comparing the quarter 1 figures with those from quarter 1 of last year. I ask that a sustained focus be given to sustainable communities.

**Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan:** Across Kilkenny, almost 100 council-owned homes lie empty. Over 60 of them will remain empty throughout 2025. Almost one third have been boarded up for over a year. Dozens of families and people in dire need of housing have been blocked from a home of their own this year. While the Government will try to pass the blame on to the local council, the fault and blame lies solely at the feet of the Government and Minister for housing.

The black and white reality is Kilkenny County Council does not have the funds to turn these homes around. For each vacant council home, central government gives the council a mere €11,000 to get that home fit for tenancy. Giving just €11,000 to bring a house up to spec shows how utterly removed the Government is from the real cost of building works. It is an insult to the council and the people of Kilkenny. This housing crisis is devastating families and workers across the State. To see dozens of council-owned homes lying vacant across Kilkenny and over 2,500 lying vacant across the State drives home that this is not a priority for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. If it was and there was political will, local councils would be appropriately funded and would not be given the pence they are currently given.

Sewerage and water treatment facilities are a fundamental requirement of expanding communities and building new homes but Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, in their wisdom, did not see fit to provide the necessary infrastructure in the upgrading of facilities across Kilkenny and Carlow. As a result, many prime sites for building are left untouched and towns across Carlow and Kilkenny are left paralysed. We have to invest in the basics because without them villages like mine of Knocktopher and others across the State are dying on their feet. Shops, pubs, etc., are closing. It is ripping the heart out of communities. It is laughable for the Government to say housing is its number one priority. We are in the middle of a housing crisis. It is time to start acting like it.

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** This man-made housing crisis continues to spiral out of control. We have once again, to the shame of this and previous Governments Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have been members of, reached record homeless figures. Over 15,500 people are now officially considered homeless, of whom over 4,600 are children.

Bad as they are, these numbers do not take account of those affected by what is described as hidden homelessness. They are those who have to sleep in their car or coach surf because of their insecure housing situation. An estimate of those affected by hidden homelessness suggests that in 2024 over 30,000 people were in this precarious situation. A great number of these hidden homeless became homeless because they received a notice of termination from a landlord who was selling up the property or wanted it back for his or her own use.

It is clear the country faces a significant housing shortage. Even young professional couples with good incomes are finding it impossible to get on the property ladder. Adding to their difficulties are the investment funds, which have sufficient resources and at times were given tax exemptions and access to grant funding to allow them to buy up large numbers of apartments, houses and new estates. Not only are these vulture funds depleting the housing stock, they are also driving up property prices and rents. The serious lack of social and affordable housing stock is a scandal in a country ranked in the top three or four richest in the world.

The Government is consistent in one thing: failing to reach its own targets. The national planning framework says around 50,000 new homes will be needed each year up to 2040. However, the Government has consistently missed its targets for delivery of social and affordable homes. The tenant in situ scheme has been effectively nullified by its actions and restrictions, having prevented over 2,000 families being made homeless in the past couple of years. The Government should give local authorities the lead in building social and affordable housing. They can replicate the work of housing bodies such as Ó Cualann, which have been building and delivering affordable housing for years. This Government has proven time and again that its policies cannot solve the housing problem. The number of people I see every day in my constituency office who are about to be made homeless is beyond alarming. There will be no respite from this until radical action is taken.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** This Government has been saying - as did the previous one and the previous two before that - that housing is its number one priority. If so, I cannot understand why it did not take up Independent Ireland's strong advice and policy that this should be declared a housing emergency. This is an emergency. A recent poll in the *Irish Independent* found 65% or 67% of people said housing is the biggest issue to be dealt with in this country, but it has not been dealt with. The declaration of a housing emergency would have dealt with a lot of areas that have been continuously not dealt with by the Government. It would have given us a chance to reform planning laws urgently, limit irrelevant and vexatious objections, fast-track water and sewerage infrastructure and basically stop the blame game. Everybody is pointing the finger but nothing is getting done. We would prioritise housing projects that have been stuck in limbo.

*7 o'clock*

If the declaration of a housing emergency dealt with that alone, we would start making moves to provide homes for people.

Our biggest trouble in this country is that we have objectors who object to planning permission applications for major developments and one-off developments. They object to sewage treatment plants. In the name of God, the Government has no understanding of how to deal with these people. It has left them to take control of the country. A small handful of individuals have held this country to ransom. The Government should be looking at these serial objectors. Some people have a legitimate cause to object but most are serial objectors. They need to be severely fined. The Government needs to stand up to them because they are bullies but it has accepted that and laid down before them. They have destroyed our country. Developments have been blocked. The sewerage infrastructure that is needed in local towns and villages has been blocked because people who do not live in the area have decided to object to it. The Government has not stood up to them. That is true of one-off planning applications in rural communities. We need to make changes.

10 June 2025

At the time of the formation of the Government, there was talk that log cabins would be allowed. Why are we not moving somewhere in that regard?

**Deputy John Cummins:** We are.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** That is another thing that is coming down the road. People are calling me now. I want to see the legislation.

**Deputy John Cummins:** It will be introduced this year.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Is it there today?

**Deputy John Cummins:** It will be introduced this year.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** This is the problem. Everything is about kicking the can down the road.

**Deputy John Cummins:** No.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I would appreciate it if something were announced today and dealt with in a week or two rather than dragging on down the road. That legislation could have been put in place. We were advising it should be introduced years ago but nobody would listen to us.

We must consider the building of houses in cities. We are building out but what about building up? When I am in Dublin and places such as that, I meet people who say they are well able to do that but are being blocked from going forward.

The turnover of council houses is an issue in Cork and elsewhere in this country. There is a problem with the speed of turnover of houses. We meet many people who would love a home, would do it up and look after it themselves. Some people leave the houses in meticulous condition but at the same time, there is a hold-up in bringing it back into the system again.

I have many clinics over weekends and through those, I find creeping into society again is that the powers that be, the planners, are blocking people from getting farm sheds. I know we are talking about building houses but farm sheds are important for young people who are trying to find a way to belong on their farms. They are being asked what they need a shed for. Nobody wants to build a farm shed unless they need it. I cannot understand how a planner can ask such people to prove they need a shed by asking how many cattle they have. Nobody is going to put themselves to an expense of €30,000, €40,000 or €100,000 only that there is a need for it on their farm. Surely, they should not be asked those kinds of silly questions.

The whole point is that infrastructure is at a standstill in most parts of this country. In my constituency of Cork South-West, you cannot build a house in Dunmanway. I am bored of saying that in this Chamber. Imagine that in a town as big as Dunmanway. It has a great opportunity because of its close proximity to Cork city and towns such as Clonakilty. Dunmanway feeds into Clonakilty, Bandon, Bantry and Skibbereen. You cannot build one house in the town and there is no possibility of building there for the next five or six years. The same is true in Shannonvale in Clonakilty, where raw sewage is pouring into the sea and nobody cares. The same is true in Rosscarbery. Nobody gives a damn. Ballydehob and Goleen have been waiting for a sewerage system for 25 years. In God's earthly name, what has gone wrong with this country? It is at a complete standstill. The Government needs to stand up and call a housing

emergency. It should listen to Independent Ireland for once. That is what we are asking. It will be embarrassing to take the hit for a couple of weeks and people will roar and shout, but we will get things done if that happens.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** This is a record-breaking Government for all the wrong reasons. Under Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Independents, there is record-breaking homelessness, as well as record-breaking house prices and rents. Rents, incredibly, have doubled since the bottom of the crash. This must be the most pro-cyclical Government in the history of the State. Deputy Micheál Martin was a member of a Cabinet that crashed this country. His actions led in part to a significant spike in house prices and rents in the noughties. His policies led to the crash, which gutted the value of people's homes. Incredibly, Deputy Martin, in partnership with Fine Gael, has pursued policies that have led to an eye-watering peak in rents and house prices. I cannot think of another minister in the world who was, in part, the author of two eye-watering housing inflation spikes and one devastating crash. The Government is in reverse in practically every single housing indicator in the country.

The housing crisis is damaging so much of Irish society. It is impoverishing renting families and making mortgage slaves of other families. It is damaging the economy because businesses cannot get workers and is driving wage inflation. It is damaging the mental and physical health of the many people who are homeless. Members of generation rent are forced to emigrate to Australia and Canada.

Incredibly, the housing crisis is also changing the very nature of the Irish family. The number of children families are having is collapsing at the moment because families are forced to delay having children because they cannot get a home. The Government is shredding the fabric of Irish society at the moment. It should be mortified and humiliated. It should be apologising to the Irish people but it is not. Instead, it is jacking up rents on hard-pressed families again. It is the objective of this Government's plan to increase rents for families. The idea that we have to increase rents to provide more is nonsense.

The plan also prioritises the rental sector over the house building sector, which provides people's homes. If the plan works, it will put families into competition with big international investors to buy up those scarce homes.

The idea is that the Government is looking to increase rents to increase the level of supply, but it could do that another way very simply. In the North of Ireland, there is no VAT on construction. If the Government were to zero rate VAT on construction in this country, it would increase the level of market activity and reduce the prices for families who want to buy homes. That would bring more builders into the sector and make it easier for people to buy homes instead of investing in Uisce Éireann. A representative of Uisce Éireann told me at a committee meeting that it will not be able to fill the gaps in water infrastructure that are stopping the building of houses before 2050. That was an incredible statement from Uisce Éireann.

I raise the following subject because nobody else is raising it in the Dáil. Dan O'Brien recently published the number of visas that are being issued in this country versus the number of houses that are being built. In 2023, 80,000 residency visas were issued. We cannot keep issuing visas at such a level without affecting rents and prices. We must get to a situation whereby we reduce the number of non-essential visas being issued to ensure that we do not put the same pressure on house prices and rents in the future.

**Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty:** It is now six months since the Government was established and we have seen very little. We now have a moderate and small-scale proposal on the hikes on the price of rent. The Minister said it is an effort to get a balance between keeping rents down and getting investors in. Different lobbies have different statistics to throw out but in places such as San Francisco, for example, rents have risen where rent freezes have been abolished. Even if we get in the supply, it will take longer so many people will be put under pressure with their rents rising when they do not have the market opportunities to look for another rental property because the competition has not been created. It is a seller's market and not a renter's market, as we know.

The incentives for small-scale landlords are not sufficient. Many people may have inherited a house or bought one property, maximum two, as an investment. I note there is a distinction in the Government's proposal between people with up to three houses and those with four or more. We can keep rents at a frozen level and provide tax incentives to smaller landlords to ensure they stay in the market. They are the ones who keep the tenants in the properties. They are the ones who offer lower rents as long as they get guarantees that the house is being looked after. Commercial investors have hiked rents massively. As Deputy Tóibín and others have said, we need a plan to ensure that people cannot come in and buy large blocks of houses. The only way a block of houses should be bought is if it is a part of a strategic plan and those houses are, for example, beside a hospital where we would want to rent houses to doctors and nurses who are starting off in their careers. Another example is that of an area where there is a shortage of teachers, where there could be affordable rents while people start their careers. The census figures, more of which will come out in September, indicate that the reason people left this country before the economic crash versus the reason they leave now has changed. Irish people are still leaving even when the economy is good, but we have seen mass immigration. That is putting pressure on housing. We need to be more strategic in what sort of work permits we provide. We also need incentives to make sure that the Irish people leaving because they cannot afford a house, such as nurses and teachers, stay in Ireland. They need those incentives and they need incentives to come back.

Ultimately, as everyone has said, it is down to supply. I still do not see why, if not in employee terms but in building, the State should not be the biggest constructor of housing. We did it in the 1950s when we were poor. We need a strategic plan to provide the infrastructure and build the houses. We have not seen that from the Government yet.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** I spent five years on the housing committee during the previous Dáil, and I learned fairly quickly that there is no silver bullet to solve the housing crisis. It is by turning on the supply in multiple different streams that we will be able to reach that. Despite what previous speakers said, we cannot ignore the fact that we are now at the stage where we are building more social or public housing than we have done since what might be called the golden age of social housing in the sixties and seventies. Let us be clear: we are building substantial amounts of social housing.

In the past five years, we have also tried to concentrate on other forms of housing in the form of cost rental and affordable purchase. These are the areas we have to drive home in the term of this Dáil. We need our local authorities to be the ones leading the charge on it. Over those five years, I have identified nearly 2,000 units that have been developed in my constituency. Many of them have gone through Part 8 planning. Some of them have been started through the PPP bundle process. Those 2,000 units will be public housing on public land. They will be delivered by Housing for All and will make a very substantial difference in our constituency. It

is important over the coming five years that local authorities know that delivery is the key. Of course, the housing activation office, when it comes on stream, the Minister and the Government have ultimate responsibility for the delivery of housing, but local authorities are the housing authority. That is their role. They often object to being stripped of powers. The power they have is the ability to deliver, and they have the funds and now the new mechanisms to do that.

A number of bundles in my area come under the PPP programme, including bundles 3, 4, 5 and so on. I was very concerned, and I expressed this to the Minister, Deputy Browne, about reports that there appears to be a delay at Shangan, where there are to be 93 accommodation units for older persons, and at Collins Avenue, where there are to be a further 83 social homes, which are included in PPP bundle 3. The delay appears to come down to the fact that the price that came back under the PPP bundle did not prove good value for money for the taxpayer. As a member of the public accounts committee, I think it is right for Ministers to protect public money but what is not right is to not have an alternative plan. If the price that has come back exceeds what we believe to be good value and, as I said, I support that concept, we have to have a very rapid alternative plan in order to deliver. Those homes at Shangan and Collins Avenue are badly needed in our constituency. People who have seen the planning notices are already coming to my constituency office. They have seen the conversations that councillors have had about the units, which were due to go on site this year. We need to make sure they get on site this year.

These locations are backed up by other sites, including the Church of the Annunciation, the Collins Avenue Bring Centre, Wellmount Road, the Ballymun bundle, which has multiple sites, Barry Road, Carton Lands and Silloge Road. All of those are within different PPP bundles. At this early stage, we need to make sure that they do not sit for any length of time in terms of being solved. The Minister has committed to me that is what will happen. We will hold him to account in that regard because delivery by local authorities has to be paramount. They are the ones that will deliver the kind of affordable rental and affordable purchase we can deliver.

If local authorities believe that we will not have their back when they go for a PPP process, and contribute a huge amount of time and effort into that process, only to then find that the funding is either pulled, sanctioned or not granted at the last hurdle, local authorities will default back to not delivering or saying there is no point in them doing that unless they have the support of the Government. I urge the Minister of State, who is a big supporter of delivery and of local authorities delivering, on behalf of people in my constituency who are contacting me, to impress on the Department the need to bring forward a plan as soon as possible for these sites. As I said, I am not in favour of spending hundreds of thousands of euro per unit more than we need to. We should not do that, but we have to have an alternative delivery mechanism if the PPP does not deliver.

**Deputy Erin McGreehan:** The Minister of State is very welcome. It is great to have an opportunity to talk about housing. This is a huge issue. It is a serious issue that consumes all of us in these Houses and in each and every one of our constituencies. It affects our families and communities. In reality, despite all the talk about all the different things, we have to build out of this nightmare.

Fianna Fáil has always believed that every person should have the right to a secure and affordable home, whether that is through ownership, social provision or cost rental. That belief is at the heart of our role in the Government and is central to the work we are doing under Housing for All. This is the most ambitious programme in the history of the State but we need to see

more delivery, although we have already seen some. More than 32,000 homes were completed last year. That is the highest annual figure in more than a decade. More than 10,000 social homes have been added to the national stock. The cost-rental model, long championed by Fianna Fáil, is no longer a theory. It is a reality that is giving working families secure, affordable options below market rates. Let us be honest, however, that there is a very long way to go yet. For every young person priced out of the market, for every family waiting too long on a list and for every community under pressure, the progress is not enough and we know it.

We face many structural, financial and infrastructural challenges. We must be unapologetic in tackling each one head-on. There needs to be a mechanism to ensure that critical infrastructure is built, whether that infrastructure involves issues with the electricity grid or water infrastructure. We have huge deficits in these areas. Road infrastructure is also needed to support the development or unlocking of land, such as the port access route in Drogheda. Under the leadership of Fianna Fáil during the previous Government, we introduced the Planning and Development Act. This was a once-in-a-generation reform to make planning faster, fairer and more transparent. We need to see the start of this to make sure that we have results from this legislation.

The Land Development Agency was a huge flagship push by the previous Government to use public land for public good. We are seeing success throughout the country, including in Cork and Dublin, where sites have been activated. However, we need to make sure that places such as County Louth are firmly on that list. I am not satisfied at all about progress in County Louth. The LDA commits to meeting the need for affordable homes for purchase and rent throughout the country but no workable affordable housing schemes are available in Dundalk as yet. Three sites have been identified on which the LDA stated it could build up to 1,000 homes. To date, we have had no real action on making this a reality. Dundalk is a thriving town and is very important to the economic growth of the country. Housing is key to unlocking more growth in the area. I want the Government to make Dundalk, Drogheda and towns like these a priority in ensuring we have affordable housing schemes.

On his recent visit to County Louth, the Minister of State saw the building across Drogheda and elsewhere. There is loads of building. Louth County Council is reaching targets but it must be supported in surpassing those targets. It is working on its voids. To its detriment, it worked through voids at a very fast rate and ran out of money. It has the capacity and ability to work through voids faster. It needs funding for this. It must be supported to do more.

The massive increase in commencements was a big story in 2024. One factor in that was the waiver of local authority contributions, but we have seen a reduction in those commencements in recent years. What is more concerning is the trend of the decrease in the number of new applications for housing developments and housing units. If we do not have planning, we have no supply in the future and there is no way we will meet our targets.

**Deputy John Connolly:** Ba mhaith liom caint faoi fhadhb ar leith maidir le cúrsaí tithíochta sa tír: an fhadhb atá inár nGaeltachtaí agus inár gceantair Ghaeltachta. Mar a luadh go minic sa díospóireacht seo, tá fadhb an easpa tithíochta fud fad na tíre i ngach áit. Ach is fadhb ar leith í sin i gceantair Ghaeltachta. Cuireann sí todhchaí na Gaeltachta i mbaol. Más rud é nach bhfuil duine nó daoine in ann cur fúthu i gceantair Ghaeltachta, beidh tionchar aige sin ar an teanga sa cheantar sin agus ar thodhchaí na nGaeltachtaí.

Tá a fhios agam go rachaidh an tAire, an Teachta Browne, go Gaillimh ar an Aoine chun

casadh leis an ngrúpa BÁNÚ, grúpa gníomhaithe sa cheantar sin atá ag impí orainn ar fad níos mó a dhéanamh chun soláthar tithíochta a chur ar fáil sa Ghaeltacht do dhaoine atá ina gcainteoirí dúchasacha agus gurb as na ceantair seo iad. Tá súil agam go mbeidh cruinniú maith againn ansin agus go mbeimid in ann réiteach a chur ar an bhfadhb ar leith atá sna ceantair Ghaeltachta.

On that, I know the Minister, Deputy Browne, is visiting Galway on Friday to meet some of the activist groups who are campaigning for further housing options in the Gaeltacht. I hope the outcome of that meeting will be positive because while we have a housing problem throughout the country, the lack of housing in the Gaeltacht puts it in danger. If young people who speak the language cannot reside there, obviously that is going to place its future as a Gaeltacht region i mbaol, in some danger.

I have heard a lot in the debate regarding the lack of infrastructure and the need to expand the areas in our local authorities that are zoned for residential development, and I concur with that. However, in some locations it will be more challenging. There is scope, albeit limited, to increase the amount of zoned residential land within the confines of the boundaries of Galway city. It is the smallest geographical local authority in the country, yet we expect its metropolitan area to expand by 40,000 people within the national planning framework timeframe. The constraints of the city boundary are an issue we need to look at. We do have the MASP area but, again, we need clarity around the planning of it.

Reasonably large tracts of land have been zoned for residential development in Galway city but we have the problem, as has been noted by many other speakers, of the lack of road and water infrastructure to trigger the development of that land. I am looking forward to the work of the housing activation office and the infrastructure task force because as much as we need anything else in the whole area of housing, we need both of those offices to commence work soon. I imagine that come July, when the new housing plan is published, that will feature centrally in it and there will be concrete actions to show us how both of those bodies will work with respect to triggering housing development.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy.

**Deputy John Connolly:** I might say one thing, a Leas Cheann-Comhairle, about the provision of public housing. I have consistently found it frustrating that it takes 59 weeks - that is the Department's own estimate - to bring a public housing project from the initial concept to the signing of contracts to begin construction of that project. That is immensely frustrating. It is too long. There is currently a four-stage process on which the local authority must engage with the Department, and approval must be sought at each stage. I think we are duplicating work. As my colleague Deputy McAuliffe said some moments ago, the local authority should be advised that it has a certain budget and that the Department would like to see a certain number of units being developed based on that budget, rather than this toing and froing, which is taking too long.

The programme for Government commits the Government to reducing the four-stage approval process to a single-step process. We should do that at the earliest possible opportunity.

We need to look at the funding for capital acquisition, tenant in situ and the capital advance leasing facility. Local authorities and approved housing bodies are advising us that they are finding the approval process challenging, lengthy and burdensome. That is delaying the com-

mencement of public housing development. We need to look at that, streamline it and get quicker decisions.

**Deputy Máire Devine:** Most of this Government's housing policy has thrown renters around the country, and in particular in my area of the inner city and Dublin South-Central, under the bus. However, the peculiar decision to severely limit a successful programme, the tenant in situ programme, seems to be the Government driving the bus over my constituents. Why the Minister would cut the legs from under this popular programme, which has helped so many people, is a mystery.

I will tell the Minister of State about just a few of the constituents who have contacted me recently and would be massively helped by a fully funded and functioning tenant in situ scheme. One woman in the Liberties has lived in the same property for nearly 14 years. They only served a notice to quit and contacted DCC in November 2024 to offer the unit for tenant in situ. The tenant's position on the housing list is over 500, meaning it would take decades to place her. She said:

You will be well aware of the dire housing situation in Dublin. To find suitable accommodation is next to impossible. I am extremely concerned, desperate in fact. I find it hard to believe that after 14 years living, working, paying taxes in Dublin and being in the same apartment, my home, that it has come to this. Everything has stopped for me. I find myself paralysed with fear and anxiety and I am asking you for help. Please help.

Separately, a family of six in Crumlin face homelessness after 15 years in the property. They tell me:

The situation has placed an unbearable amount of stress on us all. Tragically, my husband has recently experienced cardiac issues directly caused by the pressure of anxiety of our housing crisis. This is no longer a housing issue. It has become a serious threat to our well-being.

They have applied for hundreds of houses but with no replies, with a notice to quit only a month away.

I want the Minister of State to answer one simple question. Why has the tenant in situ ceased? At face value, if a house in Crumlin is around the €400,000 mark, that will be paid back within 13 or 14 years. It will go back into the housing stock and, more importantly, it gives security to families and individuals. It protects communities and health and well-being. It prevents the trauma of homelessness and moving for children. It is, conversely, value for money. It is not rocket science, so I ask the Minister of State to please answer the question: why has tenant in situ ceased?

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** In my two minutes, I want to focus on the issue of affordable housing in Meath East for working people to buy and rent. I looked at *daft.ie* before I came to the Chamber. Four-bedroom second-hand properties are €535,000 to buy, on average, with three-bedrooms €430,000 and two-bedrooms €240,000. There are no properties at all to rent.

Not a single affordable unit has been delivered under this or the previous Government in Ashbourne, the biggest town in my constituency. There was a discussion across party lines among local councillors regarding a council-owned site and the issue of affordable housing, and I looked at the minutes of it, which state:

There was a lot of discussion around affordable housing and the Executive shares the Members concerns regarding the lack of affordable housing in the county generally and, in particular, in the settlements close to Dublin. However, it must be pointed out that changes in government policy will be required to address the situation, and this was highlighted to Minister Browne on his recent visit to the county as well as with direct meetings with the Affordable Housing Section within the DHLGH.

The affordable housing scheme from the Government does not work. The Minister of State's colleagues in Ashbourne, Fianna Fáil colleagues, agree with my party colleagues. Many would call them out as being hypocrites; I do not. I say fair play to them. They are absolutely right. They see it on the ground. The Government schemes are absolutely failing and they need to change.

I ask the Minister of State to fund affordable housing in Ashbourne and deliver affordable housing to rent and buy for working people. There needs to be a change in Government policy. It is clear the schemes do not work. As I said, not a single affordable house has been delivered in Ashbourne, the biggest town in my constituency. It is totally unacceptable. It locks working families and working people out of homeownership and it has to change.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I am delighted to be here for these statements. We are all well aware of the housing issue. It is the single biggest issue and everybody knows that. I believe the Government thinks there is a panacea with Airbnbs but it is not. We had that before in this city where the Government closed down 1,000 bedsits - 1,000 units - and made that many people homeless with no place to go. I think the Government has it wrong about Airbnbs. The vast majority of Airbnbs I know of in Tipperary are solely used for holidays and are bringing people into the area who spend money in the area as well.

Social housing purchases, including the tenant in situ scheme, has been reduced significantly this year. While I acknowledge the importance of focusing on local authority-led social housing builds and the need for properties to go onto the private market, it is a very difficult. The same people who have been in long-term rental accommodation through HAP and RAS schemes are losing their places and they are devastated.

I welcome the appointment of Mr. Jonathan Cooney as the new director of services for housing in Tipperary County Council. I have called him a visionary and for public representatives and for people who are looking for houses, he is a very good man to deal with. The same fund is expected to do everything. We only have €5 million in the budget and we are trying to do everything with that - CAS purchases, social housing acquisitions and the disabled person's grant - and it is simply not enough.

We are blue in the face talking about Uisce Éireann. We have to do something about Uisce Éireann. It is too slow dealing with applications. Recently I saw a planning application for 26 houses that would have taken 29 weeks to build. Mr. Flannery, the contractor, is great and was ready to build but could not get the connection. That is simply not good enough and we must deal with that. Uisce Éireann should be brought back to the county councils to deal with things in tandem and have everything ready to go when the houses are completed.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** Over-regulated, underdelivered and a catastrophic social disaster that is resulting in the untold misery of thousands of people who are trapped in a bleak housing nightmare. We are witnessing an epidemic of incompetence when it comes to housing. We are

witnessing the third Government in a row that has shown no real, dynamic leadership on this issue. We have the third Government in a row that will not speak in an honest way about the impact that massive levels of unsustainable inward migration are having in terms of our housing and accommodation capacity.

This is not just moral and political cowardice; it is betrayal. It is the kind of refusal to describe the known dimensions and contributors to a crisis that is nothing short of infuriating. When demand exceeds supply, it is very logical and very straightforward that we need to have a serious look at inward migration.

We have a generation of children whose birthdays are spent in crowded hotel rooms; a generation who cannot plan their futures and who live on the edge of homelessness. We have tens of thousands of couples who are locked out of the housing market.

In my constituency of Offaly, we are not seeing affordable housing schemes. I have dealt with many people in my constituency offices in Tullamore and Birr. Their income happens to be too high to go on the social housing list but too low to get a mortgage. Those people are caught and they need help. We need affordable housing schemes quickly.

This whole crisis has gone beyond an emergency. It is a housing collapse. What good will our words do when no one seems to be prepared to treat this with the gravity it deserves, take a logical approach and deal with the unsustainable, crazy level of inward migration.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I am glad to have the opportunity to talk about housing again tonight. Since I came up here in 2016, we have been talking about it constantly. Every man and woman who has sat here in the Dáil has talked about housing but little has changed.

I want to speak about vacant properties. I spoke about this last year, the year before and recently but the story is the same. There are vacant houses and properties all around the countryside. They are all around Kerry - on streets in villages and towns and in the countryside. They are everywhere but nothing is being done about them. I ask the Government to, for God's sake, reduce the tax so people who have another income and who have a house to rent will not have to pay a 50% tax because it is not worth their while renting the house out if they are being charged 50% or 52% tax. The houses are idle and the Government is getting not getting a bob or a copper of tax from an empty house. Surely to God if the Government took a lesser amount of tax that could be managed.

People are afraid to rent out their houses because if they do, they are afraid they cannot get their houses back when they want them. The RTB has too many powers and it is on the tenants' side. I do not mind if it is being fair but it is not being fair at present. I know tenants are striving to get houses and want to stay in houses but we have to be fair if someone wants their house back. People are afraid so they will not rent out their houses and that is it.

Why not extend the first-time buyers grant to vacant or second-hand houses? They are first-time buyers so why not extend the grant to allow them to buy second-hand houses?

As for planning in rural areas, we have been told here several times about people being denied planning in rural areas because of urban-generated pressure, and yet the farmer's sons and daughters living right next door to them can get it. This is discrimination. I am not saying the farmer's son should not get planning permission - I fought long and hard for that - but the people who have lived next door to them all their lives, have a couple of acres or can get a

site from a next door neighbour should be allowed to get planning permission. The Planning Regulator decided that.

I do not know how many times I have heard this but people cannot get planning permission to get access on to a national road even though it is established access. There is a straight mile in Ballagh where people could come out onto both sides the road but they are being denied planning permission there. There were no affordable houses at all in Kerry during the reign of the previous Government. If we think Irish Water can build all the treatment plants and bring water up to scratch without getting funding, it will not happen. Irish Water has no funding stream and if we are being realistic and honest about, it will have to get funding to build.

Yes, the population is doubling or trebling due to inward migration but we are not matching this with houses being built. We are not doing enough to release vacant houses and ensure they come onstream.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** We need to do more. We have talked enough and the Government needs to act now, please.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I now call the Minister, Deputy Browne, to make his concluding statement.

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne):** I very much welcome the opportunity to come before the House this evening to speak on housing matters. I take this opportunity to thank all of the Members who contributed this evening to the important, worthwhile and very interesting debate.

First, I echo the contributions of the Ministers of State, Deputies O'Sullivan and Cummins, earlier and reassert the Government's commitment and determination to tackle the challenges in the housing sector. We know these challenges are having a very real impact on people's lives. We understand the urgency and need to ensure sufficient numbers of homes are delivered right throughout this country. We are working tirelessly to address these challenges and to implement policies that will make a very real difference. While there is still so much more to do there has been considerable progress made to date under Housing for All. We have laid a solid foundation for future delivery. The measures introduced under Housing for All have helped to establish a strong platform to scale up housing delivery further in the short term and secure a sustainable level of future supply that will help us to meet the emerging demand.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that housing remains an enormous challenge. The number of new homes coming onstream each year remains far short of where it needs to be. The Government has committed to delivering more than 300,000 new homes between 2025 and 2030, targeting at least 60,000 homes annually by the end of that period. To this end, the programme for Government commits to a new national housing plan to build on the success of Housing for All. The plan will incorporate pragmatic actions to boost housing activity in the short term, as well as longer term actions that will implement systemic change and help to achieve and sustain the levels of supply that we need for the long term. There is no one single policy approach, decision or silver bullet that will solve the housing challenges we face. We must therefore consider every means available to us. The Ministers of State, Deputies Cummins and O'Sullivan, have set out some of the key changes we have made already in this regard and our plans, including those relating to planning, critical infrastructure and affordable and

social housing delivery. I will use my time to focus on a crucial decision that the Government has made today regarding new policy measures to support the rental sector by strengthening tenancy protections and security of tenure. The current system is not optimal for renters or potential new landlords, and changes simply have to be made. The changes that the Government has approved today will provide significantly stronger protection for tenants and a fine balance between the interests of tenants and the need for further private investment in the rental market. In order to boost the supply of new homes available for rent, the Government has today approved modifications to rent controls to come into effect immediately, following the expiration of rent pressure zones. Legislation will be introduced later this year to give effect to these measures.

The key changes approved today by the Government include significant improvement to tenant protections for all new tenancies, further enhancing security of tenure following the introduction of new legislation. Tenancies of unlimited duration are to be enhanced by the introduction of rolling six-year tenancies of minimum duration for smaller landlords with restricted grounds for ending a tenancy. While no-fault evictions for larger landlords will end, landlords with four or more tenancies will not generally be able to end a tenancy where the tenant has complied with their obligations. All landlords will have the right to reset rent where below-market rent is in place at the end of each six-year tenancy unless a no-fault eviction occurs. Landlords will also be able to reset to market rent for new tenancies from 1 March 2026 where previous tenants have left of their own volition. Under the Residential Tenancies Act, it will remain prohibited to set a rent above market rent.

I need to make it absolutely clear that those who have tenancies at the moment will not be subject to the proposed six-year resettings. Ultimately, we aim to improve the situation for renters by increasing the supply of rental accommodation to stimulate investment and keep existing landlords in the market. The resetting of rents to market value will be allowed for new tenancies as part of the reform of rent controls. Given the critical need to attract investment in new apartments for the rental market, the Government will provide that any rent increases for new apartments - those subject to a commencement notice to a planning authority today or going forward - will be restricted to the inflation rate. To mitigate the risk of economic evictions where landlords seek to move tenants out in order that they can charge a higher rent, it is intended that resetting rents will not be allowed for no-fault evictions. The RTB will enforce this by ensuring that any improper conduct by landlords is sanctioned. We will ensure the RTB is properly resourced.

The measures providing greater certainty of protection from no-fault evictions will also be a critical intervention in preventing homelessness. The Government also intends to keep student-specific accommodation under rent control and to develop proposals for specific arrangements for that sector with the Minister, Deputy Lawless, and the Attorney General. We will revert to the Government with these proposals in the near future.

Numerous market expert reports have identified our current rent control system as an impediment to the supply of new private rental accommodation. Increasing the supply of private rental accommodation is crucial in supporting the Government's overall housing targets and addressing affordability in the private rental sector. Today's measures represent just one avenue of support for new housing delivery. The forthcoming national housing plan will encompass many additional strands of work, including the scaling up of social and affordable homes; address the homelessness challenge; boost the capacity of the construction sector; continue to reduce vacancy; and bring much-needed stock back into use. The new national housing plan will

follow the review of the national development plan. Until then, I will continue to engage with Government colleagues, including the Minister for public expenditure, Deputy Jack Chambers, as these reviews take shape over the coming weeks. I will make the case to reaffirm the critical importance of housing as recognised in the previous national development plan review.

I wish to make it very clear that we do not underestimate the scale of the challenge. We recognise that a radical step change is needed in housing supply. That is why we are considering every lever at our disposal. We remain steadfast in our commitment to meet the challenge head on and ensure all those who aspire to independence in the housing market can realise their aspiration.

### **Vacant Council Housing: Motion [Private Members]**

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— there are at least 2,656 vacant council homes, excluding Approved Housing Bodies (AHB) homes, across the State, including 776 homes vacant longer than 12 months;

— the National Oversight and Audit Commission Performance Indicator Report 2023, found that the average reletting time was above 33 weeks and cost, on average, €28,347.05;

— this reletting cost represents a 49 per cent increase on costs when compared to 2019;

— central Government have only provided €11,000 per home in 2025, and have only funded the return of 1,900 homes this year;

— the periodic opening of the Voids Programme, and the restriction on local authorities claiming reimbursement, leaves public homes vacant for months even when only minor works are needed;

— over 250,000 maintenance requests were made for local authority owned homes in 2024;

— local authorities have only budgeted on average €347.45 per unit for planned or proactive maintenance; and

— central Government has only provided €67.23 per unit for stock surveys and planned maintenance in 2025, resulting in only €10.1 million this year;

further notes that:

— these empty homes are an insult to those impacted by the housing crisis, and have a negative impact on the surrounding community;

10 June 2025

- the housing maintenance direct labour workforce in local authorities was slashed during austerity, and has never returned to its necessary strength; and

- failure to properly fund the maintenance of homes leaves people living in unsuitable and unsafe conditions, while also increasing the repairs needed to relet homes; and

agrees that the Government must:

- create a dedicated Department of Housing, with an annual multi-million euro maintenance fund starting in Budget 2026, to allow local authorities recoup the costs of improving and upgrading existing stock, including vacant council homes;

- remove the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage cap on the amount of money that can be recouped by local authorities when bringing vacant council homes back into use;

- ensure that a standard average turnaround time of 12 weeks is met by all local authorities for bringing vacant council homes back into use, including refurbishment works, allocation and tenanting;

- ensure the maximum use of council employed direct labour, for the refurbishment of vacant council homes being relet and that public procurement rules are applied with flexibility to ensure no delays in cases where private contractors are being used for refurbishment works;

- give local authorities the maximum level of delegated sanctions, to proceed with refurbishment works to bring vacant homes back into use without the need for Department approval, and to allow this process to happen year-round;

- address the delays in securing Garda clearance through better coordination between the Gardaí, councils, AHBs and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage;

- address the delays in local authorities providing nominations to AHB social housing schemes through agreement of a protocol between the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, the City and County Management Association and the Irish Council for Social Housing; and

- the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, must publish a real time report every six months, listing the number of vacant homes in each local authority area and the average length of time these properties are vacant, to track progress in addressing council home vacancy.

In April I submitted a freedom of information request to every single local authority in this State. Last night, I received the latest response, from the 29th local authority to respond to me. The most recent figures show there are now 834 council houses boarded up for longer than a year. The Minister will hear Deputy Daly talk about how in County Kerry houses are boarded up for ten years, Deputy Quinlivan address how in County Limerick there are 220 such homes and Deputies from counties Donegal, Dublin, Wexford and Louth discuss how their communities are crying out for houses. The Minister will also hear solutions. This is a simple solution. It will not solve the housing crisis but for hundreds if not thousands of families it will make a real difference. The families who need these empty homes are in emergency accommodation,

are sharing houses between three generations, or are using box bedrooms. The Minister's colleague, Deputy Séamus McGrath, recently told me that if Sinn Féin brought forward solutions, he would support them. I am hoping he and the Minister will vote in favour of this Bill tomorrow because it offers a solution.

We hear criticism all the time from Fianna Fáil but when we come to it with solutions, what does it do? It shoots us down. Why? This will make a real difference for thousands of families. Right now, today, thousands of boarded-up homes cannot be repaired. Does the Minister know why? It is because he and his Government closed the voids return programme, meaning that local authorities do not have the money to renovate those houses. If someone hands back the keys of their house today, it will be boarded up until next year when the Minister's Department opens the programme again. Does that make sense? Those are the facts. The Minister should not shake his head; I have the facts. Twenty-nine local authorities have now said this about his Department. I am giving him the facts. Each local authority can get a maximum of €11,000 to retrofit a house when the average cost of a retrofit - local authorities have told me this via freedom of information - is more than €26,000. Councils do not have that extra €15,000. The Minister proposing an amendment to my motion is an insult. For the love of God, there are 2,000 families in emergency accommodation tonight and the Minister wants to clap himself and this Government on the back. Has he any shame? What about all the families looking for houses? What about all the children out there? I spoke with a family the other day about a house that has been empty for five years. The house has been retrofitted with brand new windows and insulated walls, but there is a major problem with the stairs and the local authority does not have the money to repair them. The Minister will not give it the money. The house has been idle for five years and that is down to the Minister.

We discussed a stock survey. In the past three years the Government has carried out a stock survey on 6,000 homes. At that pace, it will take the Government 78 years to complete the stock survey, yet the Minister is talking about the preventative maintenance programme his Department is rolling out. He is in cuckoo land. These are the figures. This is what the local authorities are telling me and yet the Minister claps himself on the back and says the Government is great. Does it have any shame? It is a fact that the Government is giving local authorities a maintenance budget of €67.23 for every local authority house. The Government has given them €67. Will the Minister check those figures out? If I am right, will he support this Bill tomorrow?

There are thousands of vacant houses across the State. What is worse is the hundreds and thousands of families who have to pass them every day and the people who have to live next to them. There is so much I want to say about this. I know of a girl at the moment and herself and her 14-year-old daughter are in a bedroom sharing a bed. Her mam passed away recently. Her dad cannot grieve because his son is in the front room, and the daughter and the granddaughter are there in the other room.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Deputy.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** Will the Minister think of the families? I ask him to reconsider his motion and to support ours.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** There is nothing more disgraceful than knowing we have thousands of families and children homeless or in insecure accommodation while we have thousands of empty council homes around the country boarded up and left to rot. We constantly

hear the Government saying that bringing vacant properties back into use is key to tackling the housing crisis and yet we have over 2,600 council houses boarded up across this State. We need these houses turned around and brought back into use for families and workers. There are people in these communities who have been languishing on housing lists for decades. Can we imagine how it feels for those people or those living in emergency accommodation to be walking by boarded council houses every day? In some cases, they are walking by for an entire year. It is insulting and it is not on. Leaving homes to rot is also causing other problems in our communities. We get antisocial behaviour. In my own constituency, you can actually see that some of these houses are used as a dumping site. We all understand that council properties need to be refurbished and it takes time. We all agree with that. However, there is no way it should take a year. The longer these houses are left sitting there, the more work that needs to be done on them to bring them back into use. The Minister needs to take the reins here. This would be an easy win for him. He should create a maintenance fund that councils can have access to, give the councils the authority to do the works without waiting on approval from the Department, and ensure the councils have directly employed housing maintenance teams that can do this work and also have the capacity to maintain these properties all year round. I ask the Minister to support this motion. It makes sense.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** It must be heartbreaking for those on the housing waiting lists to daily pass boarded up homes or the many derelict, abandoned or underutilised private homes on their way to bringing their kids to school, day in, day out and year in, year out. It is scandalous in a housing crisis - an emergency - that all homes connected to sewers, water and electricity do not have families in them. The laughter of children should be heard in all homes - public or private - rather than the echo of emptiness. I firmly believe in the "use it or lose it" concept. It breaks my heart to see flat complexes in my own estate which have been long promised regeneration that are limping along. The regeneration of St. Michael's estate was promised nearly 25 years ago and it is only now that the hoarding is going up. St. Teresa's Gardens was knocked down ten years ago, but again the hoarding has only gone up recently. It is time to act. It is time to ensure that a housing emergency is declared and that this Government is got rid of. That is why I support the Raise the Roof campaign and I support those who are going to be here next Tuesday at 6 o'clock in their rally to demand action is taken and money is properly spent.

**Deputy Donna McGettigan:** In the middle of a housing crisis, there are more than 2,600 houses boarded up across this State. Some 91 of them are in my own constituency of Clare and of those, 18 have been empty for more than 18 to 24 months. This is not down to a lack of work on the part of Clare County Council. It is being hampered by a lack of Government commitment, a lack of action and most of all a lack of funding. Can you imagine being homeless through no fault of your own and having to see perfectly good homes left to go to rack and ruin? These homes should have families living in them. It is a national disgrace that children are growing up in hotel rooms instead of these homes. We have had more than enough excuses, broken promises and missed housing targets. Media reports yesterday revealed that this year's targets will be missed by 10,000. How many missed targets is that? I am starting to lose count. My colleagues in this Chamber have been condemning the Government for its failings for years and receiving platitudes, promises and reassurances, none of which are coming true. Blaming local authorities or anyone else is just scapegoating and avoiding responsibility for the Government's failings. Along with previous governments, this Government is simply not providing enough funding to maintain homes for people on waiting lists and is not providing enough new builds to cope with the demand that is out there. It is not rocket science. It is an ongoing failure of the two main Government parties spanning years. In Clare, we have families in desperate

need of housing and yet homes are left empty. We know these homes can attract antisocial behaviour and illegal dumping. This stands as a monument to the Government's failures. If the Government cared about the plight of children growing up in hotels or of families trying to cope in one room or in hostel rooms, it would be treating this as the emergency it deserves to be treated as. Young people are emigrating to try to find a better chance of life, make a decent start in life and raise a family in a home of their own. Students who cannot access accommodation are either not taking placements or are led down the road of insecure and unregulated digs. We will be joining the Irish Congress of Trade Unions at its Raise the Roof protest. In my case, that will be the Munster rally on 21 June at Grand Parade in Cork. These will be major demonstrations of people's anger and disappointment in this Government and they have my full support.

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** The snail's pace at which vacant council homes are being brought back into use is a disgrace and it tells a wider story about the Government's other failure in housing delivery. In communities right across the State we see the consequences of this every day in vacant homes gathering dust while families sit on waiting lists, dereliction, antisocial behaviour and the crassness of people walking past these houses knowing that they would provide lovely homes for their families while they languish on waiting lists and raise their children in their childhood bedrooms.

In Waterford, like other counties, we see projects held back and frustrated by a lack of resourcing for local authorities and crucially, if we are being honest, by a lack of political will from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Take the social housing development in An Sean Phobal that entered the Department's own fast-track process in 2021. It is now mid-2025 and nothing has happened. It still has not commenced. In Dungarvan, an affordable and cost rental housing scheme I proposed back in 2022 has received no approval from the Department yet and no green light. A recent parliamentary question to the Minister's Department has confirmed what I feared which is that those homes will not be ready until 2028 at the absolutely earliest. That is six years later and that is at the best rate of progress the Department can deliver. In Ardmore, a beautiful seaside village in County Waterford which is a victim of its attractiveness, young people are being priced out by short-term lets and holiday homes. Families are being priced out of this and the village is facing a demographic cliff edge because the Government will not pull the trigger and get affordable housing delivered there. In Gaeltacht na nDéise, the crisis is deeper. The community is facing an existential threat. It is not just about supply. It is about the survival of this unique language community. Young families cannot get a home, they cannot set up a place to live, they cannot build a home if they have the wherewithal to do it and the Government has not grasped the reality of that. We are still waiting for the treoirlínte pleanála Gaeltachta, the planning guidelines.

On affordable sites, local authority chief executives are telling us there just is not enough money there to make it feasible for a local authority to develop affordable serviced sites in rural communities. This would provide a space for young families to build a home in their own area when they cannot get planning permission on a site that may be available to them and cannot afford to purchase a site that would have planning permission. It is a litany of failure after failure. Into that context we have the scenes we saw earlier in this Chamber where the Taoiseach had not read the-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Deputy.

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** -----press release issued by his own Government today and had to consult-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** You are in your other Deputy's time.

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** -----the Minister across the Chamber in answering questions. The Minister and this Government need to do better.

**Deputy Pat Buckley:** The Minister has heard from the speakers here tonight. This is absolutely bonkers. We are talking about dereliction and vacancy.

*8 o'clock*

I am going to relate two very brief stories. I am lucky enough to be able to walk the dogs every Sunday morning and when I do I pass two beautiful, three-bedroom semi-detached homes that have been vacant for over 12 months. They are probably still good enough to be turnkey but they are lying idle now and are going to rot and it is going to cost thousands to repair them. Prior to being a TD, when I was on the council, my dad lived in a council house. When he died, three separate times over a nine-month period I raised the issue of the house. It was turnkey. A change to the lock on the front and back door and someone could walk in. We left the coffee table, the Sky box and so on so that whoever came in could just plant his telly there and would have free-to-air Sky. The house was pristine but the council spent €28,000 on it. It ripped the whole lot apart and it took nearly two years to bring that house back into service. It is disgusting when we have people coming into our offices every single day and in our clinics, crying because they do not have a home and yet they are walking past empty houses that are clearly pretty good, that people could actually move in to. I just cannot understand why the Government has tabled a countermotion. We come in here and we try to do the right thing but I find it so difficult and frustrating. How do we explain it to constituents when they are walking past an estate and see two perfect houses? One of the Deputies mentioned €67. One would not buy a lawn mower to cut the grass for that. I appeal to the Minister to withdraw his amendment and support our motion tonight.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** When speaking to people in Kerry and dealing with the housing officers in Kerry County Council who are swamped with a deluge of people who are suffering from notices to quit, long waiting lists, rents they cannot afford and being denied access to some of the various schemes, it is obvious that the answer is more social and affordable housing. However, in Kerry, there was no affordable housing scheme. Under the tenant in situ scheme there were three sales agreed but they have all been pulled from the most vulnerable of people who were waiting. Houses in Kerry have been boarded up for close to ten years, which is the worst in the country. A few years ago when the tenant purchase scheme was announced, the Government expected that conveyancing would go through within four months but that was never going to happen. There is only one other county, Wicklow, which has two houses empty for longer than seven years whereas in Kerry we have 18 houses empty for that long or more. Linked to that is the fact that Kerry has the longest average turnaround time for boarded-up houses, a staggering 65 weeks. A full 30% of boarded up houses in the entire State are in Kerry. What is going on there? This week we discovered that the OPW has 70 empty properties around the State, some of which have been empty since 1974, which is more than 50 years. It is difficult to deal with the OPW. It agreed to give a site for a playground, for example, in Dún Chaoin but three years later that still has not been completed. There is no management and nobody seems to be in charge. It is up to the Government to sort it out rather than blaming the hard working staff of Kerry County Council or the people who are waiting on the housing waiting lists.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I do not know how many times I have come in here and spoken

about housing. It is almost a single transferable speech although previously I might have said that things were not getting better but now it is very obvious for anyone to see that things are getting a lot worse. I have no doubt that the Minister and his Government colleagues have the same types of cases as those coming to my constituency office and are meeting the same types of people on the street, people would previously have been able to rent or buy a house or find some other solution that suited but that does not exist at this point. I will not do what I have done over the last number of months which is go through the Daft.ie figures. They are absolutely ridiculous. Had the Government told people in Dundalk, Drogheda or anywhere else in this State that we would be talking about rents of €1,400, €1,600, €2,000 or €2500 and more, they would have been laughed out of the place but that is what the Government has delivered at this point.

In fairness to Deputy Gould, who tabled this motion, we are talking about 2,656 vacant council homes. We talk about the complex issue that is housing but this is not very complex. There are 2,656 vacant council houses, 776 of which have been vacant for longer than 12 months. That is a simple solution. The solution is there in front of the Government and it is about ensuring that the money is delivered and the capacity to deliver happens. Then we could have at least 776 families that should have already been housed being housed how. If we get our act together, 2,656 houses could be made available. We should not allow these delays, which create other problems.

It looks like renters are paying the price for the failures of Government. I do not see any solutions in the dismantling of the rent pressure zones. We could talk about rising homelessness, the homeless services that are under severe pressure-----

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

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** -----and pushing back because they do not have the facilities and the tools but that would be a far longer conversation.

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell):** I move amendment No. 1:

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

“notes that:

— the Government aims to minimise the level of vacancy in every local authority area, and this is reflected in a decade of Exchequer investment in addressing long term vacancy, while acknowledging that there will always be a level of vacancy in the system, as tenancies end for various reasons and homes are prepared for reletting;

— significant progress has been made over the past 10 years to address long term vacant local authority homes, which has been supported by Government funding of over €360 million;

— funding was ramped up considerably in 2020 to particularly tackle legacy voids and begin the transition to planned maintenance;

— the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) has found that across the local Government sector, the level of vacant local authority homes is only 2.8 per cent, the lowest rate in many years, reflecting the success of Government’s approach;

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— there is no cap on the amount that can be spent per home, provided the maximum average of €11,000 is maintained across the works programme;

— in addition, local authorities can complete the suite of works under the Energy Efficiency Retrofit Programme (EERP) in parallel, up to a maximum of €48,850 per unit, increasing the overall funding available per unit as compared to the pre-2020 position;

— local authority homes are in general wholly owned by local authorities, which are encouraged to ring-fence some of their own resources from housing rents and other sources to the maintenance and protection of these homes;

— the Voids Programme operates on the same basis as all other Exchequer funded programmes;

— the transition to a programme of planned maintenance began in 2022, and aims to provide a sustainable model of management and maintenance to proactively address the level of maintenance requests annually;

— the commencement of stock condition surveys funded by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, which are supported by the very recent roll out of a dedicated Information and Communications Technology system which will capture stock condition data and provide for informed work programmes and strategic asset management across all 31 local authorities;

— the funding available in 2025 for planned maintenance is a 100 per cent increase on 2024, and it is expected to increase further over the coming years as the shift to planned maintenance continues; and

— local authorities determine their priority works programme based on the condition of their units and the available funding, and that stock surveys are key part of this decision-making at local level;

further notes that:

— addressing vacancy across the housing sector, both public and private, has been and remains a key priority of Government;

— providing good quality homes that meet the relevant standards in the Housing (Standards for Rented Houses) Regulations 2019 is another key priority, which the transition to planned maintenance seeks to support;

— the EERP for local authority homes aims to increase the energy efficiency of those homes, increasing comfort levels and reducing energy costs for tenants;

— staff issues, including the nature of employment in local authorities and requirements for Garda clearance where relevant are the operational responsibility of local authority chief executives;

— maximum flexibility in terms of delegated sanction is already in place, within the framework of the Public Spending Code;

— the allocation of social homes is a local authority function under section 10 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and the Social Housing Allocation Regu-

lations 2011 and requires several factors to be considered; and

- NOAC publishes a report on vacancy matters, including turnaround times, annually; and

highlights that:

- over 13,100 vacant local authority homes have been returned to active use since 2020, aided by Exchequer funding of over €189 million;

- since 2021, 9,092 homes were retrofitted under the new EERP;

- funding for the EERP has increased from €17.9 million in 2021 to almost €90 million in 2024, demonstrating the importance the Government places on this programme;

- over 2,350 stock surveys have been recorded on the new asset management system;

- dedicated teams are in place in both the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Local Government Management Agency to support this work; and

- the Programme for Government commits to a new Voids Programme, with an emphasis on shorter turnaround times, and that the transition to rolling planned maintenance will support this.”.

The Government will make it clear that the concerns being raised are in fact being addressed through various stock improvement programmes run by the Department and the steps being taken to move from a response-based approach to a planned and strategic approach to the management and maintenance of the local authority social housing stock informed by stock condition surveys.

The Government is absolutely committed to ensuring that the level of vacant local authority housing stock is kept to the minimum possible at all times. Let me start by acknowledging the progress we have already made in addressing vacancy. Over the last decade, there has been sustained and significant Exchequer funding committed to improving the condition, availability and occupancy of local authority housing stock. Over the last ten years, over 25,600 formerly vacant units have been brought back into productive use supported by Exchequer funding of over €361 million. The financial support from central government, channelled through voids funding, has allowed local authorities to target long-term vacant units and carry out essential works. Without this targeted investment, many of these homes could have remained idle, risking further deterioration and compounding the problem.

I also want to mention the work of the National Oversight and Audit Commission, NOAC, relating to the performance indicators in local authority housing stock. Its most recent findings indicate a welcome reduction in local authority housing vacancy rates to 2.8%, a notable and commendable achievement. To put this in perspective, a vacancy rate of under 3% in a housing system as large and diverse as the local government sector reflects both the commitment and effectiveness of our local authorities. That said, this figure must not be seen as a conclusion, but as a milestone. We are making progress and we want to continue to strengthen planned maintenance regimes, and to build even greater capacity at the local level.

The Department undertook a review of the issue last year which identified some 1,900 homes that could have been put forward by the sector for inclusion in the Department's voids programme. This is because the issue of vacancy is a continuous process, with tenancy surrender and the re-letting of homes ongoing throughout the year. It is also of note that some homes currently vacant are not voids, but vacant as a result of them being new turnkeys or second-hand acquisitions awaiting letting, currently under repair or earmarked for demolition in areas of major regeneration. The Department has supported the remediation of these 1,900 units this year and will provide maximum flexibility for any additional units that become vacant throughout the year.

Equally important is the move we are making from a reactive model of maintenance to a planned and preventative one. This transition to planned maintenance is critical. It ensures that local authority housing stock remains in good condition, reduces the incidence of unplanned vacancy and is more cost-effective in the long run. Rolling out planned maintenance programmes means we can identify issues early, respond systematically and protect the State-owned housing assets. It also improves tenant satisfaction, strengthens trust and reduces disruption. To that end, it should be noted that nearly €200 million per annum of Exchequer funding is being provided to local authorities for improvement works on the local authority housing stock. This funding is being provided under the following programmes: planned maintenance or voids programme, the energy efficiency retrofit programme, the regeneration programme and the disabled persons grants programme. As we look forward, the key to improving vacancy levels lies in robust stock condition surveys and the continued expansion of rolling planned maintenance programmes. Stock surveys provide the foundational data local authorities need to make smart, strategic decisions about their assets. These surveys allow local authorities to profile their stock, prioritise interventions and plan capital works effectively. With this knowledge in hand, local authorities can budget effectively, avoid costly emergency repairs and extend the life of their properties.

The ICT solution has been implemented nationally to manage the housing asset and the planned maintenance programme. All 31 local authorities have been on-boarded. The ICT solution provides the ability to carry out and gather the data on stock condition surveys, which will inform future work programmes. Investing in planned maintenance is not just a technical issue. It protects housing quality for existing tenants and helps to ensure every property remains a viable home into the future. It supports quick turnaround times by completing the works necessary to meet the rental standards at the time of vacancy, with all other works completed over the life cycle of the tenancy.

The reduction to 2.8% vacancy rate is not just a statistical achievement. It represents thousands of homes brought back into use, lives changed and communities strengthened. It is a sign our policies are working and colleagues in local authorities are rising to the challenge. There is still more to do and the demand for housing remains acute. Every vacant unit must be viewed as an opportunity to meet housing needs and reinforce our commitment to social housing delivery. The Department will continue to drive improvements and change in this area. We are working with stakeholders in local government to ensure every home counts, vacancy is minimised and maintenance is planned.

As I said, the Government has provided funding for remediation of 1,900 void units this year and will provide flexibility in respect of any additional funding that becomes available throughout the year. If units become vacant above that figure, local authorities are advised to apply to the Department for funding. The survey carried out by the Department last year came

up with a figure of 1,900.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** I did one last month and the figure is 2,700.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy Gould can address that in his closing contribution.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** The message must go out loud and clear to local authorities that they should come forward with those additional voids and the Department will look at providing funding.

I thank all Deputies who contributed thus far to the debate on this motion. I commend the amendment to the House.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** The Minister of State has some neck to move that amendment. I thank Deputy Gould for bringing forward the motion and for all his work on this issue.

There are 126 boarded-up homes in Fingal County Council's area. That amounts to 500 men, women and children who could be housed. Can the Minister of State imagine what it must be like for people to walk past those houses when they are living in overcrowded and unsuitable accommodation that absolutely interferes with their ability to live a decent life? They walk down the road and see a boarded-up house. The Minister of State's party colleague is clever enough not to have an office locally. Constituents cannot find her because she is hiding from his housing crisis. I see it because they come to my constituency clinic and ask me a question: "Why is there a boarded-up house down the road from me when I am stuck in my mother's back bedroom and my kids are all forced to share the same room?" What do I say? I tell them it is Government policy because that is what it is.

The responses to the freedom of information requests by Deputy Gould's office make an absolute lie out of the Minister of State's weaselly words this evening. The Deputy has put the facts on the record. He has offered a solution, which is what my constituents want. How dare the Minister of State come in here and pat himself on the back. He said rolling out planned maintenance programmes means issues can be identified early on and there can be a systematic response. Will he go away out of that? There as twice as many applications for housing maintenance as there are local authority dwellings in my constituency. The Government is not maintaining the housing stock, which is being left to rot. When people hand back the keys, it is far too expensive to remedy because the Government is not funding the local authority to bring those homes back into use. We have a housing crisis because of Government policy. That is the only reason.

**Deputy Seán Crowe:** There is general agreement that it is taking far too long for vacant houses to come back into service. Properties may lie idle for months or years. There are some in South Dublin County Council that are idle more than a year and others that have been vacant for years. I know of one building suitable for housing in Rossfield that has been lying idle for more than 20 years. In Mac Uilliam, two apartment blocks are idle, with a row ongoing between the council and the Housing Agency. Such properties are an eyesore.

Deputy O'Reilly referred to the challenges families face. People come to my office and ask whether they can take on a vacant house and do it up themselves. I have to tell them it does not work like that. People just do not get why these properties are lying idle. The main point we are trying to make in this debate is that resources should be put in to ensure they are not left idle. We need to speed up the process. South Dublin County Council has less than half the

maintenance budget per unit of Dublin City Council. Will the Minister of State explain that? I do not understand it. The same types of properties get different funding depending on whether they are in south Dublin or Dublin city.

We need a different approach. People need to look at the current situation and see how it can be resolved. It has been going on for years. We have been told for years it will be tackled but people are not seeing it happening. When they go around their own estates, they see vacant properties with dumped rubbish that attracts vermin. It is time for a new approach and that is what we are proposing in this motion. It is incumbent on the Minister of State to agree to it.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** I was going to start by saying there is nothing more insulting to families languishing on the housing list than the sight of an empty house. The Minister of State found a new insult when he stood up and said his policies are working. I tip my hat to him for having more faces than Clerys clock when it comes to the housing crisis. Every single one of those boarded-up houses is a constant reminder of the failure of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael on housing. If they cared about families and children growing up in bed and breakfast accommodation, those houses would not be empty and the Minister of State would be moving heaven and earth to get people on housing lists into them.

In my constituency of Longford-Westmeath, there are 93 such properties. Every local authority has boarded-up housing because the Government simply refuses to fund them sufficiently to maintain the properties and return them to use. I have spoken to families who are sleeping in cars or living in emergency bed and breakfast accommodation or overcrowded box rooms and sitting rooms while 93 council houses are boarded up and rotting behind padlocks. I firmly believe the homeless figure is underestimated. I know of people who have presented as homeless and been refused assistance. I know families with young children who presented as homeless and were not only refused assistance but were threatened with referrals to Tusla. That is absolutely scandalous and it needs to stop.

What is happening is beyond shameful. It shows up the Government for what it truly is. It will pass the blame to anybody rather than taking responsibility for its failures. When did the Minister of State's moral compass do a 180° turn and enable him to decide this was good enough? When did he make the decision that this was good enough for the families languishing on council housing lists?

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** The Minister of State and I both come from the Limerick City constituency. Before I came to the Chamber, I listened in my office to what he said. I was surprised. As he knows, we officially have 220 boarded-up council houses, of which 62, or 28%, have been boarded up for more than a year. He knows that because he has seen it. Across the city, Ballynanty, Kileely, Thomondgate, Moyross and Southill all have boarded-up houses. Those 220 homes should have families living in them. They are lying empty while children grow up in hotel rooms without access to play areas or, in many cases, a desk at which to do their homework.

I raised in this House previously the situation of a woman who is in emergency accommodation with her family. She can see the estate she comes from, and would love to live in again, through the window of the hotel. There are two houses on the street she grew up on that have been boarded up for three years. I ask the Minister of State not to tell us his policy is working. He is aware of the houses I mentioned.

Local authorities such as Limerick City Council should be funded to do their job. Instead their efforts are met with red tape and a lot of underfunding, leaving these homes vacant, often for years. Funding of €11,000 per home is far short of what is needed to ensure these homes are safe and welcoming for new tenants and that is the problem. The more than 2,656 vacant council houses across the State must be ready for occupation.

The motion calls for an average turnaround time of 12 weeks to be met by every local authority. Crucially, local authorities must be given leeway to proceed with refurbishments without the need for housing Department approval on every single house. This should occur all year round and there should be no blockages on that. We need a dedicated annual maintenance fund to allow local authorities to recoup the cost of upgrading existing stock, including vacant homes. We should also allow councils to plan for when people are moving out of a house so someone can move in pretty soon afterwards instead of three, four or five years later.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** We just had statements on the report of the Housing Commission. We hear all sorts of arguments about how this is complicated, we need to do this and how there are multiple factors at play. We are talking about 2,500 apartments and houses that the State already owns. They are there. They are empty. Of all the low-hanging fruit in terms of the housing crisis, surely the 2,500 houses and flats the State already owns should be first and foremost. Other people have given examples of constituents living in overcrowded accommodation with three generations under one roof, many of them in seriously overcrowded accommodation, people sleeping on couches and people living in poor-quality rental accommodation and poor-quality local authority accommodation. The Minister of State spoke about planned maintenance. There are dozens of council engineers listening in who are laughing and thinking, “Chance would be a fine thing to get planned maintenance”. Forget about it. It is just not happening. My constituents are walking past houses every day - two or three very often on streets congregated together in places like Mahon, Ballyphehane, Togher and Greenmount. There are 99 properties in Cork city that have been idle for more than two years. It is a dagger to their heart to walk past these houses. These people have been on the housing list for nine or ten years or might not even have qualified for social housing. They are living in desperate housing conditions and are walking past these idle units. It is a disgrace.

My next comment is for the Minister of State to bring back to his officials. Councils have to go cap in hand to the Department. The message from Ministers seems to be, “Look, spend the money and it’ll be sorted afterwards”. Look at what happened with the tenant in situ scheme. Is this not a fine lesson for councils? If they spend the money and the Department decides to change its mind later on, the ladder will be kicked out from under them. That is the lesson.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** Ar dtús báire, ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil le Sinn Féin as ucht an rúin seo a thabhairt faoi bhráid na Dála anocht. The Labour Party has long campaigned against the scourge of vacancy and dereliction in our communities. Vacant local authority homes are the low-hanging fruit of the housing crisis and constitute State-sponsored dereliction. The undisputed fact is that local authorities do not receive adequate funding from the Department to deal with this. They get on average €11,000 per unit when it costs on average €48,000 to bring a vacant council home back into use. Construction inflation has increased by 114% since 2014. In Limerick, a city represented by the Minister of State and me, there are always more than 200 vacant local authority homes.

I wrote to the Minister last week to support a detailed and costed business case put forward by Limerick City and County Council for additional voids funding following a special meeting

of the council and signed by all councillors, including those from Fine Gael. There are 113 homes awaiting minor refurbishment, which cannot be done for €11,000. There are 115 units assigned to the housing maintenance team of the council awaiting minor repairs. Of these, 87 are eligible for €11,000 in voids funding and 28 are being funded entirely through the council's revenue budget. The current funding deficit stands at €1.4 million. There is a forecast deficit of €5 million to refurbish 105 units, which leaves a total deficit of €6.5 million. I am asking the Minister of State both as a line Minister in the Department and a fellow TD for Limerick city to try to engage practically with the local authority to plug this gap. I know he is a practical person who is well able to get things done. All of us can work together to see whether, at the very least, we can plug some of that deficit and get some movement on this. Vacant homes are an eyesore. They are often a magnet for antisocial behaviour, draw vermin and rubbish and are desperately unfair to other residents living in a community.

The mechanism by which the voids scheme operates is flawed, with local authorities required to bundle vacant homes together, which often takes months, causing them to be welded up at considerable cost to the taxpayer and left to rot for months and years until they are refurbished. In Limerick, we are literally operating on what is effectively a one-in one-out model. It makes no sense. The Minister of State knows that. I was very dismayed when, in response to my party leader during Leaders' Questions a few weeks ago, the Taoiseach said there is a culture of dependency in local authorities. This is ridiculous. He was either being disingenuous or he is out of touch. There are council homes in parts of Limerick that have been vacant for up to three or four years. A total of 3,500 local authority homes become vacant every year. As we all know, councils are legally obligated to fit them out to a certain standard under the standard for rented housing regulations, which were established in 2019, so it is a bit more complicated than just giving them a lick of paint as the Taoiseach tried to misrepresent a couple of weeks ago. It takes over a year to refurbish and re-let these homes in Limerick. It is important to note that our local authority has been very proactive in funding some of the cost of the refurbishment of these homes. As we both know, in 2015, Limerick City and County Council approved a loan to Limerick 2030 to purchase and develop the old Dell factory site into a film studio. Following the sale of the studio, when Limerick 2030 repaid the loan to the council, the council repurposed this to fund the refurbishment of vacant council homes. The problem is that the money is effectively gone and, outside the €11,000 voids funding, the only source is the local authority's own resources. The local authority does not have the financial means to address the shortfall in funding, which means it cannot meet the targets set by the Department. It is important to note that the targets set by the Department do not call for the elimination of all voids, which they should do. These things should not exist. We are in a housing emergency. As others have said, they are literally the low-hanging fruit. Every day, I hear somebody in this House talk about vacant council homes and I feel like it is Groundhog Day because we are collectively saying the same thing week in and week out, year in and year out and nothing changes. As councils are required to bring vacant homes up to a standard, this compels local authorities in some cases to carry out significant work in order to re-let the property. We might be able to look at this to bring about a bit more flexibility to allow the local authorities to carry out some of the necessary work with the tenant *in situ*.

In failing to adequately fund local authorities to deal with voids, the Government is yet again failing to meet its own objectives under Housing for All. Objective 20 of Housing for All places a requirement on local authorities to make more efficient use of existing housing stock. If the Government is serious about taking radical action to solve the housing crisis, I urge it to go at this with all the armoury and resources of the State. We need urgent action to tackle

dereliction and bring vacant homes back into use. I know that as part of the programme for Government, consideration is being given to the introduction of a new voids programme with a view to improving turnaround times for vacant social homes, which can vary wildly, from a couple of weeks in County Laois to the bones of a year in other places like Limerick. We need much more consistency in respect of the turnaround. In this housing emergency, the Government must bring forward this new void scheme immediately. The first thing it should do is look to increase the funding available to councils to do this. I urge the Minister of State to speak to departmental officials regarding the specific ask in the letter that went from Limerick City and County Council on that funding deficit. There is scope for increased funding to be allocated to the council. In fairness, when the council has got funding, it has been good at spending and utilising it properly to bring homes back into use.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward the motion today on voids in council housing. I have worked for many years in the area of public and council housing. One of the key issues is that local authorities, historically, for the past 30 or 40 years, have been not just undermined but effectively decommissioned in their role in housing. I remember this clearly from when I worked in council housing in Dublin for many years. I worked as a regeneration worker in social housing flats on issues of voids and tried to work with the council and communities to get social housing delivered properly. I remember speaking to many of the council officials during the latter years of the Celtic tiger and into the crash. During the Celtic tiger period, Government policy had decommissioned local authorities from their role in housing and the private market was seen as the way forward in delivering housing. We had the introduction and main focus of policy on Part V, the delivery of housing through private developers.

Of course, within all this, local authorities staff left and were not replaced. Unfortunately, within councils, we never saw a focus on, and delivery of, public housing as a public good. I contrast how councils view housing and their housing stock with, for example, our teachers and our education system or our nurses and doctors and our health system. We do not deliver public housing as a public good whereby we see this as our role. It is a council's role to ensure housing stock is up to the highest standard and is delivered as a public good and a human right in the same way we see that education and health must be held to certain standards. Of course, this is part of the problem. We do not have a system whereby local authorities are held to account.

While I have been and am critical of local authorities regarding attitudes to tenants and the failure to deal with issues, there is no getting away from the fundamental cause of the problem, which is that local authorities have not been given the resources or responsibility to treat and deliver public housing as a public good and human right. That is a fundamental missing aspect of our housing policies. In my own areas of Ballymun and Finglas, there is boarded-up social and council housing, which is so frustrating. Indeed, it is more than frustrating. It is deeply upsetting to people whose families are in homeless accommodation and who look at these boarded-up council flats while they are in homelessness, are unable to access social housing or have huge issues in overcrowded rental properties.

It is not acceptable that voids are left for months and in some cases years. There is no excuse for these properties to be left like that for so long. The issue of tenant in situ is linked to this. I spoke to Dublin City Council and have raised this in the Dáil before. The changes the Government has made to the tenant in situ scheme are resulting in local authorities having less funding to purchase tenant properties where tenants are at risk of homelessness. This is directly leading to homelessness, because local authorities are being told their acquisition budget is to go towards tenant in situ schemes and that they will not be able to invest in the same way with

regard to remediating properties they are buying through tenant in situ. Where a local authority wants to prevent a person or family becoming homeless, it must decide whether it is taking it out of the maintenance budget, which again results in the issue of not addressing problems like voids, and it is forced to make decisions between taking people out of homelessness or trying to address voids and other issues. Local authorities should not be forced to make that decision. They should be able to retain the tenants in place in homes, to buy those homes and to renovate voids.

Another issue I want to raise relates to the Minister for housing pulling funding for social schemes that were due to go ahead in Dublin, including some in my constituency, in Ballymun. These public-private partnership projects, which I have huge problems with as a way of delivering housing, were due to deliver social housing in several areas but the Minister has now informed Dublin City Council that he is pulling the funding for them. It is absolutely shocking that the Minister is pulling funding from social housing projects that were ready to be delivered in some of the areas most in need of social housing in this country and in parts of Dublin, as I said, from Ballymun and other parts of the city. An emergency motion that was passed at Dublin City Council last night called on the Minister to reverse his decision to cut funding to these social housing programmes. It beggars belief that in the middle of a housing emergency, the Government would pull funding from projects about to deliver and build social and public housing.

Some of the councillors at the meeting last night asked whether there is an anti-public housing agenda within this Government. They asked why the Government was cutting funding from a scheme that had been all set up. Mary Callaghan, a local councillor of ours in Ballymun-Finglas, has done huge work in trying to progress social housing projects. She and other councillors described the full withdrawal of funding for these projects as a gut punch. I ask the Minister of State to raise this project with the Minister.

I was at the housing committee today and listened to the Housing Commission talk about its report and the huge work that went into it. It was shocking to hear members of the Housing Commission talk about the way they have been treated by the Department and the Minister for housing. Some said they have done a great deal of work for different public bodies and Departments down through the years and had never been treated so badly. They asked why the Housing Commission report was ignored by the previous Government and the current Government when the report specifically talks about local authorities, with a number of proposals. The report says we need to achieve the target of 20% of our housing stock being social or public housing.

What does this mean in terms of numbers? Currently, we would need to double the number of social housing units in this country. If we were to do that within ten years, as Professor Michelle Norris said today at the housing committee, it would mean delivering 18,000 social housing units every year for a decade to reach that 20% target. We are nowhere near delivering that number. They make the case in this report that fundamental to solving the housing crisis is getting back to building social housing, and central to that is local authorities. The councils need the capacity. Policy needs to be shifted to allocate in a way that says clearly that local authorities are public housing providers. Just as our health system and our hospitals deliver public health, our local authorities need to deliver public housing. This means having the capacity to maintain it properly, invest in it and be able to build it in the first instance. Professor Norris made an interesting suggestion - it is in the Housing Commission report - involving the creation of local authority housing delivery organisations that would have the responsibility to deliver

housing and manage it. That needs to be looked at.

**Deputy Pádraig Rice:** I echo everything said by Deputy Hearne. Nothing causes more frustration for people in housing need than seeing council houses boarded up. It causes huge frustration for people when they look out and see a house across the way that has been boarded up for weeks and months while they are living in an overcrowded house. Intergenerational families are stuck living together while there are houses across my constituency in Cork that are boarded up. Across County Cork, 495 houses are boarded up. In Cork city, there are 345. Some 196 of those have been boarded up for more than 12 months. These houses have to be turned around more quickly to provide homes. The costs associated with this are also frustrating. In the past five years, Cork City Council spent €890,000 boarding up vacant council houses. The amount of money being wasted boarding up vacant houses is scandalous when people in our city are homeless. It is a disgrace. Every day they are boarded up, the cost goes up because there is a per day rate to board up houses. The Taoiseach came into the House a few weeks ago and said council houses should be turned around in about three weeks. In the place he lives, Cork City Council, it is 32 weeks - far from the target set of three weeks. Pressure needs to be put on local authorities and they need to be provided with the resources to turn them around. At a time when far too many people in my city are homeless and in need of homes, it is disgraceful that there are vacant houses.

On the bigger picture, we have seen a very slow increase in the overall number of social houses in the city. As Deputy Hearne said, the number of social and affordable homes needs to be massively increased. That is the only way this housing crisis will be solved. Older houses also need to be retrofitted. In 2023, Cork City Council retrofitted just 53 of its houses. At this rate, it will take Cork City Council 200 years to retrofit all of its homes. It is madness and it needs to change.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** Having vacant homes in the middle of a housing crisis is a scandal, particularly when they are local authority houses. There are more than 2,700 vacant at the moment. A third have been vacant for more than a year. This is simply not on. Reletting times average more than eight months and are much more in many cases. The cost of preparing a home for reletting has increased in five years by almost €10,000 per unit. It is now more than €28,000. I want to give the Minister of State the message - if he looks around at vacant houses in Limerick, he will see it himself - that the longer a home is vacant, the more it deteriorates and it becomes subject to vandalism, and this causes problems. The quicker they are reletted, the cheaper it is to do it. One problem is over-reliance on private contractors. I understand that contractors have to be used in certain cases, but when we are totally reliant on them, it causes delays and drives up costs. Laois County Council has started using direct labour. It set up a dedicated reletting team of internal tradesmen and general workers. It is a small county with a small budget but it has a team doing that. It is speeding up delivery of relets. Reletting times are now three months and less. It has also proven to be more cost-effective. Out of a stock of 2,500 homes, fewer than 30 are empty at any given time. It would be better if it was even fewer than that. Eighty homes were relet last year in the county but only half received money from the Department. The average cost of relets in Laois is less than the State average. It works out at around €17,000 or €18,000 compared with the average across the State of more than €28,000. Relet grants from the Department are just €11,000. The Department only funded 40 of the 80 relets in Laois last year. That slows down reletting, along with the stop-start nature of the funding in how it is released by the Department. Boarded-up homes have a negative impact on local communities, not to mention the families desperately waiting for them. All local authorities

should have a dedicated relet team made up of direct labour and use it where possible. It cannot be used all the time but it should be where possible. The Department and the Government cannot have a stop-start funding programme for relets. It has to be moving all the time. The Government and Department must provide a greater share of the cost of relets; €11,000 is not sufficient. We simply cannot have homes boarded up in the middle of a housing crisis. It is not on. This is no longer sustainable.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this motion. I cannot tell you how many times I have spoken on this issue. I will come to the housing task force, the minutes of which the Minister was instrumental in getting us. When we talk about empty houses tonight, we are doing so against a background of the highest ever number of homeless people: 15,580, 4,475 of whom are children. This Government is taking pride in its policy, a jigsaw of pieces that adds more confusion, keeps house prices artificially high, and continues to treat housing as a commodity rather than a fundamental, basic unit of society - a home. You clap yourselves on the back with no overall picture. Sinn Féin has tabled a motion that is very practical. Honestly, if the Government had any sense, it would agree with it, even just for appearances' sake. It asks for the turnaround time for an empty house to be 12 weeks with some flexibility, for direct labour and for a report in real time every six months. I have no problem supporting it. I cannot understand how the Government has a problem with it.

Let us go back to this famous task force in Galway. It was announced in 2018 and set up in 2019. It is now six years later and the task force is still sitting. All that has changed is that there is a different chair. It was set up because there was a housing emergency in Galway directly related to the Government's policy because it failed to build houses. Deputy Hearne is perfectly right. I put it differently although I agree with him. There is an absolute prejudice inbuilt into this Government and every government in relation to public housing, which should be an essential part of the solution. When it abandoned that, it created an emergency that is getting worse and worse. The Housing Commission has asked for a radical reset of housing policy, but it has been utterly ignored by the Government except for the piecemeal tinkering with rent limits. The Housing Commission says that we need at a minimum 20% public housing, but this has been utterly ignored. I have looked at the most recently available minutes of the task force. The new chair, if I am not wrong, is a former general secretary or economist. He has expressed his utter frustration at what is going on in Galway city and county. I will quote him precisely. This is what he is telling us, six years after the task force was set up. The minutes state:

For the next meeting the Chair requested a short document providing a story of the maps to include the following: What is going on in the Housing Market in Galway (both private and public).

What is going on? I imagine that was the most basic question. It was the first question that should have been asked back in 2019. A report on that should have been produced. Here we are in 2025, and there are waiting lists on which some people are waiting, without exaggeration, up to 20 years. Most are waiting somewhere between eight and 15 years for a public house.

He tells the two managers what is needed and asks what is going on in the market. The minutes also refer to:

Usage of Local Authority land for housing purposes ... What lands are not being used ... Location of land acquisitions. Where are main areas for private development and where is significant development taking place. How many units are dependent on critical infrastruc-

ture [and so on].

He also talks about “funding” and “resources”. This is 2025, and an emergency housing task force is finally beginning to ask questions when the crisis has become absolutely out of all proportion.

We can look at what has happened. We see the county and we see An Cheathrú Rua i gcroílár na Gaeltachta gan aon chóras séarachais. Níl aon chóras séarachais. Tá séarachais amh ag dul isteach san fharraige. Is constaic ollmhór í sin do chúrsaí tithíochta. Tá sé ráite go neamhbhalbh ag an gcomhairle contae nach féidir leo tuilleadh tithe a thógáil de bharr easpa infreast-ruchtúir. Níl seans dá laghad go mbeidh forbairt chothrom i gceist ó thaobh an chontae agus ó thaobh na cathrach. Tuigeann an tAire Stáit é sin. It is impossible to have balanced regional development and balanced city and county development if we do not have basic infrastructure. If we take one major example in Carraroe, there is no sewage treatment plant so no houses can be built. When we go to updates twice a year, finding out what the problems are is like pulling teeth without anaesthetic. We find absence of infrastructure is a problem.

Galway city is destined to grow as one of the five cities. I ask the Minister of State to come and look at what is happening in Galway, because there is not even a site for a treatment facility for east Galway. The plan is for Ardaun to have a population of 10,000. There is not a sign of a treatment plan for that. Then we have two pipes under the Corrib Estuary, down where I live in the Claddagh. A report was done on behalf of Uisce Éireann to say one of those pipes is in imminent danger of collapse. There is another more technical name for it. This is one of the major pipes carrying the sewage from east Galway out to the Mutton Island treatment plant and it is in imminent danger of collapse. The former Minister of State, Senator Noonan of the Green Party, was there and he took this seriously enough but it went nowhere. We were told it was a misunderstanding and the engineer had not said that and the engineer’s report had not said that, so I went back and looked and of course that is the position in Galway.

I am a proud Galwegian. I want it to grow sustainably. I want to see development but I want to see balanced regional development. I want to see a masterplan for the public lands because there has never been one. The harbour, which is public land held in trust for the people of Galway, is going ahead with its own plan for premium housing on public land to keep the price artificially high. Ceannt Station, with something like 14 ha in the city, has its own plan. There is no masterplan. When I was there I was told the council could not afford to produce a masterplan, so it would let the developers do that. Thus we have developer-led development. I say this openly at the risk of losing votes. We have developer-led development in Galway. We have absolutely no vision and no understanding of the challenges we face due to climate change and flooding.

We need transformative action for Galway. We need to take it as a pilot city, a city of the future with an integrated public transport system including light rail and at least 20% to 30% public housing so we can bring the price of houses down and treat housing as what it should be, namely, the most basic requirement if we are going to call ourselves a republic and a democracy. The Minister of State is nodding and he is a decent man whose heart is in the right place, but unfortunately government after government has made the situation worse. It is a neoliberal ideology that is completely out of control and is treating housing as something to be bought and sold with a huge profit as opposed to a basic requirement to allow people take part in society and not be looking at insecurity of tenure.

With this motion we are focusing on one aspect. At any given time in Galway the number of vacant houses is between 80 and 120. Some of them have been vacant for ten years and some for five years. Two beside my estate have been vacant for three and five years.

**Deputy Ken O'Flynn:** We are not simply facing a housing shortage, but confronting a failure of governments, of planning, of priority and of moral seriousness. This motion shines a light on a scandal that should never have been allowed to become routine. There are 2,656 vacant council homes across the State. Nearly 800 of them have been empty for over a year while nearly 4,000 children sleep in tents on cold streets and the lucky ones sleep in emergency accommodation. The average letting time in a local authority is now 33 weeks for the turnaround of that property. The average cost of bringing that property into repair is €28,000 per unit. This has increased by 50% since 2019, yet central government provides just €11,000 per unit. That is a shortfall of €17,000. This is not policy, but dereliction that is expensive, bureaucratic and utterly inefficient.

Let us be candid in this House. This government policy is neither centre-right nor centre-left, but it is certainly the centre of chaos. It has no ideology beyond inertia, no vision beyond the next press release and no instinct for delivery. It reacts but it does not lead. It is entangled in the process, paralysed by indecision and blind to the urgency of this generation's housing emergency.

However, let us not pretend those bringing forward this motion have all the answers. They have spent years shifting the blame from government to local authority and back again depending on which way the political wind is blowing. Some of their councillors have made spectacles of themselves online, in print and on social media by pointing the finger at the Minister today, at the council tomorrow, at the Department the next day and around and around again.

I will not, and this Parliament must not, allow local government to be the scapegoat in all of this. I place on record my admiration and respect for the staff of Cork City Council and Cork County Council who continue to serve with professionalism and resolve despite being expected to deliver with one hand tied behind their back by the departmental Scrooge. They are not failing, as some Sinn Féin TDs have said in the past. They are instead succeeding in spite of departmental procrastination.

We in this House must consider a broader truth. Ireland is ten years ahead of the population plan. We have already passed 5.3 million. This milestone was projected for 2035, not 2025. This growth is not a surprise. It comes with inward economic migrants and a sharp rise in refugee and asylum applications. According to the Department of justice there was a 290% jump between 2019 and 2024. The CSO projected 5.6 million by 2030. We are already nearly at that point. This type of demographic pressure demands clarity, a tough boldness and action. Instead we are getting delay, drift and dysfunction from this Government. Other countries and cities across the world face similar pressures, from Vancouver to Vienna. The difference is those countries are acting while we are hesitating. We are handing off responsibility to others. We are waiting until the problem becomes unmanageable and then we wring our hands in this House and we act surprised.

I congratulate my friends on this and agree wholeheartedly that we must have a permanent, ring-fenced refurbishment beginning with budget 2026. We must end the spending caps that cripple local authorities to deliver. We must have a national standard of a 12-week turnaround period for vacant homes to come into use. Direct labour terms and procurement rules must

enable us and not obstruct the delivery. There must be full autonomy for local authorities, no more delays and waiting lists and departmental greenlighting to fix the door of a council house. There must be a public register of vacant homes updated twice yearly to ensure transparency and accountability.

*9 o'clock*

These are not radical ideas by my friends; they are common sense ideas. It is what a competent and functioning Government would have already done. If in 2025 a Government cannot turn an empty house into a home in under 90 days, we must ask ourselves a question in this House. What exactly is it in office to do? What are we witnessing? What we are witnessing is not leadership. We are witnessing mismanagement, systemic, habitual and increasingly costly mistakes that are being presided over by a Minister with intellectual caution, a Minister run by a Department of administrators more interested in the optics than the outcomes. Ireland is at a drift. We deserve better. We need better and we need more than just empty slogans. We deserve a Government worthy of the challenges that this country faces.

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** I move amendment No. 1 to amendment No. 1:

To Insert the following after “rolling planned maintenance will support this”:

“commits to:

— reducing the turnaround time for vacated local authority homes to new tenants from the current average of eight months, to a two month average turnaround time; and

— ensuring that local authorities be permitted to apply to the Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant for the purpose of refurbishment of vacant council houses.”.

This amendment seeks to bring vacant council property homes back within two months, as well as ensuring that local authorities can apply for, and avail of, the vacant property refurbishment grant. The housing failure has had a catastrophic impact on the citizens of this country. In just a few short years rents have doubled right across the country. In Claremorris, County Mayo, I recently spoke with a constituent whose rent between 2019 and today has more than doubled. Young people are emigrating at increasing rates, and last year at rates we have not seen since the recession. Bidding wars have become the norm. I ask for the Minister of State’s attention briefly. There was a time when you would look at Daft and have an idea how much the cost of a house was. Now, you have to ring the auctioneer to see what price above the asking it is due to sell for. I was listening to what was said in the council chamber in Mayo County Council this week and a Government councillor said that homelessness in Mayo is now a new and almost commonplace phenomenon.

There is an elephant in the room with this debate. I have listened to hours of debate and with the odd exception all of the House is focused on one dimension of this equation. That is the supply side. However, the truth is that this housing crisis cannot be solved by addressing one side of this equation. It is important to note that the demand side must be addressed and managed as well. It is an incredible situation where we have had hours of debate today, and weeks of discussion on housing, and there is so little mention of the demand that is driving. It is a fact that this Government is failing to meet its modest targets. Meanwhile, the growth of the population and the demographic pressures are really quite significant. I was struck by a recent Savills report that stated the population growth to housing delivery is 4:1, which ultimately means that

for every house built the population is rising by four. This is the worst in terms of western countries. In Britain, it is 2:1. In Australia, it is 1:9. The USA is 1:5 and Germany is almost 1:1. In Ireland, it is 1:4. In the past 12 months, 150,000 immigrants arrived in Ireland, while circa 30,000 citizens emigrated from the State. Ireland is experiencing one of the worst levels in the area of supply and population growth. We are taking a small step forward, but two steps back. It is important to be honest. We cannot solve a problem that we do not fully understand and that is the part of this equation that is being completely lost on this Government. It must be said that it has been utterly lost on this Government and on much of the Opposition.

I was struck by Dan O'Brien's research. He is a leading economist in the country and he outlined the figures with regard to work permits. I went back and looked at more data. Data from 2015 and 2016 shows we were issuing approximately 10,000 employment visas. Between 2022 and last year, we were issuing approximately 40,000 visas per year. I have no doubt that many immigrants are providing tremendous value to the economy and the labour market is particularly hot. However, we should recognise that the demand is making the housing situation worse, and I ask the Minister of State to engage with the Minister for trade to see if we can reduce these numbers of visas. Can we, for example, provide visas for the essential services of the economy like healthcare and construction but manage that system better? We certainly need to. The same trend exists with residency permits. I do not have time to go into full detail. There is an inevitability to this housing crisis. On the one hand, the Government has failed to address the issues and build houses in this State and address the obstacles and bottlenecks it has consistently presided over. On the other hand, it continues to mismanage the demand. I ask the Minister of State to work with the Minister for trade on this. I have the data here. The trends are here. They say pictures do not lie, but they are significant, and the demand has been rapid in recent years. I would appreciate it if the Minister of State would get back to me on those points.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I am widely supportive of the aims of the Sinn Féin Private Members' motion. We wish to do more to ensure that social housing stock is turned around and reallocated in a timely manner. I note in media reports over the weekend that Tiobraid Árann is one of the four biggest offenders in returning long-term voids. I acknowledge that large strides have been made by Tipperary County Council under Jonathan Cooney, and the engineering and other staff of the council, in addressing the issue in recent years, including bringing back more than 80 homes or voids in 2024 and 100 in 2023. There are two that supposedly have been empty for four years, which is totally unacceptable, but there were issues with planning which I understand are being resolved at present.

Another big issue relating to voids is the cost of bringing them back into use, especially when local authorities can only recoup up to €11,000 per house despite a recent NOAC finding stating that the costs of same are closer to €30,000 per house. I would say that is conservative, because we know the costs even of painting and decorating. We must look at that, because €11,000 is a paltry sum to give the county council. This is often a cost that councils are unable to sustain along with the availability of labour and delays with engaging contractors, so €11,000 is wholly inadequate to do that. We must also be mindful of other limitations on local authorities in turning around houses after a tenant leaves, passes away or vacates to attend a long-term nursing home for care. Many of these issues are sensitive and all of us here know that, including the Ceann Comhairle. It might take longer than normal to get back the keys and there are extenuating circumstances that will not allow this, so you have to be sensitive about that too. It is not just flicking a switch. What is required is an ongoing maintenance-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Time is up, Deputy.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I think there is only me and Deputy Nolan.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Two minutes, yes.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I am here as well.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** I have three minutes. I am fine.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** No-----

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** We are missing one.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Excuse me. Go ahead.

**Deputy Mattie McGrath:** What is required is an ongoing maintenance programme for all stock to ensure it is routinely kept up to a decent standard. No house should be in such poor condition when it becomes vacant that it takes several months to bring back. Usually, it is only after a house is vacated that it would be considered for an energy upgrade to thermal insulation and heating systems, or a new window set. I believe the council should be continuously assessing their houses. The rent collectors are gone from the job, but they were always on the ground and knew what was happening. They also reported back on the condition of the houses. We need to have regular inspections of rented houses.

**Deputy Edward Timmins:** I wish to bring my experience as a county councillor to the topic of vacant homes. I was until recently a member of Wicklow County Council. A number of years ago as the housing challenges became more acute, I proposed that every month councillors receive a total number of vacant houses, broken down by district. This could be discussed every month at our full council meeting. This happened. I also asked that the list be aged by how long the houses were vacant. The proposal was adopted by the council. My logic for introducing it was that if you want to manage something, you must first measure it. I ask that Members, rather than constantly focusing on being critical, come up with practical solutions. I call on all councils to implement what we did in Wicklow a number of years ago. Of course the lead time for reletting of vacant property should be shorter but remember that all relets are brought up to a high standard and many of the houses have not been refurbished in decades.

I see some false information being put into the public domain by politicians, in particular statements that funds given for refurbishment are of the order of €800 per house. That is actually the maintenance cost.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** No. The figure we mentioned was €11,000.

**Deputy Edward Timmins:** The average cost across the country is €28,000, as per the most recent NOAC report. There is a national spend of over €100 million. The Government provides €11,000 per house and not €800. The waiting times can clearly be improved. Some counties take an average of 60 weeks for a refurbishment while one takes only 13 weeks. However, there are a variety of reasons for delays, including delays with contractors, the time taken for full retrofits and tenant refusals of properties.

I reiterate that we need to monitor vacancies on a monthly basis at county level and use the reports we have used in Wicklow.

**Deputy Michael Cahill:** Local authorities need to do much more about our vacant council housing stock. We have houses vacant for one, five, ten, 15 or 20 years, or longer. Some of these properties are beyond repair. Others require substantial works. There are vacant rural cottages that were part of a farm and that family members wish to buy and have been trying to do so for many years. Where there is value for money, of course we should be doing up these properties and reallocating them to qualified housing applicants; where it is too costly to repair them, we need to sell them off as soon as possible and put the moneys raised back into replenishing the housing stock.

I would like to get the figures for the number of properties vacant for more than one year, five years, 15 years and 20 years in each local authority. What is the longest vacant local authority house in each local authority area? What number will be repaired? What number will be sold? What will happen to the remainder? There may be title issues, boundary issues, etc. Can we be told when the properties will be sold, repaired, etc? To address the housing crisis, we need to make radical decisions. We need to zone land in all our towns and villages. We need to zone lands for affordable, social and private housing. We also need to zone land for modular homes. We need to give our people a choice. We should make low-cost sites available to our citizens.

In that regard, we need somebody radical. I hope he will forgive me for saying it, but we may need somebody like Michael O'Leary to be given a free rein. This problem is sortable. I wish the Minister, Deputy Browne, well and will support him in any way I can. I know his heart is in the right place. We will get to the end of this crisis but it will take doors being knocked down, windows being opened, etc.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** I welcome the motion and the opportunity to once again place a spotlight on the extraordinary levels of vacant housing. The motion is pragmatic and I will support it. When I think of housing vacancy rates, I think of a man dying of thirst while a giant pool of water remains within his reach. There is a stupidity and recklessness to this issue that is mind-boggling. In the middle of a great housing crisis, we are sitting on thousands of empty homes. It is ludicrous beyond words.

I have raised the unacceptably high levels of vacancy and dereliction in many local authority areas, including my area of Offaly, for some time. A year ago, almost to the day, I called on the Government to commit to increased funding to tackle vacancy and dereliction rates in County Offaly. The response from the then Minister, Heather Humphreys, was more or less that everything was fine and the Government was doing all it could to tackle the issue - but here we are a year later, going around in circles. The former Minister spoke about the urban regeneration and development fund, the town centre first policy and the Our Rural Future vision for a thriving rural Ireland. The Government also spoke of measures being rolled out on building acquisition, measures which would support local authorities in purchasing vacant and derelict buildings. Yet only in the past fortnight the Taoiseach has spoken in this House about how slow he feels the turnaround process is for vacant social housing. It sounded to me like a blame game. Even if I accept some local authorities are better than others, the fact is many local authorities, including Offaly County Council, are understaffed. Reductions in staff numbers were made many years ago and they have never reached the same level since. We should be collaborating, working together and supporting our local authorities to tackle this issue.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I thank Deputy Gould and Sinn Féin for tabling this very important motion. There is no shadow of a doubt that houses in the local authorities are taking

too long to turn around. There was one house in Killarney I fought tooth and nail over. From the day it first came up here, it took over five years to get that house in Marian Terrace turned around. There was vermin and everything else gone into it.

I was shocked the other day to hear the Taoiseach say a house should only take four or five days to turn around. He is right that maybe that is what it should take, in some instances, like the two houses in Kilgarvan that people left a few months ago. What happened then? Some crew came along, took off the roof, took out the chimney and they are still at it, putting in an underground heat pump or whatever it is. The houses are riddled. Under my own nose in Kilgarvan village, that is what is going on. It is wasting money. I believe the two houses will cost more than €100,000 each to turn around. They are gone over now to another village in east Kerry and they went around to 18 houses to tell them they are fitting heat pumps. This is a waste of money when there are other houses to be turned around. It is wasting good money. One poor woman rang me and said “Danny, they’re talking of taking out my little fireplace and taking down the chimney. That’s all I have after all my years and I want my little fire.” I have been on to Kerry County Council. This is wasting money, while other houses around the parish and around different parishes in Kerry are having no work done to them. That is ridiculous. It is taking 64 weeks to turn around a house in Kerry and the Taoiseach thinks it will only take five days.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** Go raibh maith agat.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** He is ambitious but I do not think he will bring it down to that. He is a good man and he is trying his best but it will not happen if we are here until-----

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** You are in full flight. Go raibh maith agat. Anois, ar ais go dtí an Rialtas. Glaoim ar an Aire.

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne):** I thank all Members for their contributions. I echo the comments made by the Minister of State, Deputy O’Donnell, and reassert this Government’s commitment to tackling the challenges in the housing sector. I will highlight the steps being taken by the Government to minimise vacancy and to ensure strategic and informed programmes of planned maintenance work for local authority housing are implemented and support by stock condition data and the appropriate ICT asset management solution. The completion of the roll-out of the ICT solution to all 31 of our local authorities has occurred in the past few weeks and is an important step.

Furthermore, since 2014, Exchequer funding has been provided through my Department’s voids programme to support local authorities in preparing vacant units for re-letting. This funding was initially introduced to tackle long-term vacant units and is now, in light of urgent housing needs, increasingly targeted at ensuring minimal turnaround and re-let times for local authority vacant stock. Vacant properties need to be refurbished and re-let as quickly as possible, with the emphasis only on those works that are necessary to ensure compliance with the housing regulations of 2019. Works that may be desirable but not necessary to meet those letting standards should not delay the re-let and can instead be carried out later under a planned maintenance programme. Prioritising such work on vacant units ahead of similar works required on homes occupied by tenants is not advised or supported by my Department because it is contrary to the principle of good stock management through regular planned maintenance.

I will be looking at the overall picture in respect of funding local authorities for voids man-

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agement and planned maintenance, coupled with various other local authority stock improvement programmes by my Department. Since 2013 until the end of 2024, under the planned maintenance voids programme, the energy efficiency programme, including the midlands pilot, and the disabled persons grant scheme, local authorities have received just shy of €1 billion in Exchequer funding. That is substantial State support.

With specific reference to voids, however, it should be borne in mind that there is no upper cap on the amount that can be spent or recouped on an individual dwelling, provided the total amount averaged across all dwellings-----

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** That is the same thing

**Deputy James Browne:** -----submitted by a local authority does not exclude €11,000. In addition, and where turnaround times are not impacted, local authorities can also complete the suite of works applicable to the energy efficiency retrofit programme on a vacant dwelling with additional funding up to a maximum of €48,850.

There is evidence to suggest, however, that while re-letting costs are higher, the turnaround times are longer. Pre-letting works being completed to the highest possible standard in order to future-proof these dwellings does not need to be carried out between tenancies. Such an approach causes unnecessary delays in re-let times and is inconsistent with Government policy on the management and maintenance of local authority housing stock. Additional funding was made available in 2020, which provided uncapped funding levels. This was supported again in 2021 with the non-standard voids programme. Further uncapped additional funding was made available to the sector in 2023 to finally tackle any remaining legacy vacant support for the transition to planned maintenance. There should be no long-term voids in this country after the substantial funding that was provided to get them back in place.

Deputy Gould gave the example of a house that was waiting for a retrofit for five years because it did not have a stairs. The idea that a Cabinet Minister needs to get involved with a local authority to put in a stairs because it is beyond the wit or ability of a local authority to do it in five years is, quite frankly, farcical.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** The authority did not have the money.

**Deputy James Browne:** It did not have the money to put in stairs.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** It did not have the money.

**Deputy James Browne:** It did not have the money to put in stairs. Is the Deputy having a laugh? This is the problem. The local authority should be putting in those stairs.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** The Minister is having a laugh when he is blaming local authorities when he will not do his job.

**Deputy James Browne:** The Deputy should think about what he is saying. These voids should not be there. The local authorities have the ability and wherewithal to resolve the issue.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** They are not getting the money.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** Please, Deputy.

**Deputy James Browne:** The Government has in the past given them the money to do so.

The funding available from my Department under the planned maintenance voids programme is available to support minimal turnaround times, with all local authorities moving to a position of aligning works with the criteria of the relevant regulations and meeting their legal obligations as a landlord. This will limit the impact of funding shortfalls, which must be absorbed from the local authorities' own resources. Given the significant Exchequer investment into the stock improvement programmes over recent years, particularly for voids, I now envisage that local authorities should be in a strong position to continue the transition to a strategic and informed planned maintenance approach to stock management and maintenance.

A Sinn Féin TD earlier gave the example of a house having been left in immaculate condition. What did the local authority do? It went in and gutted it. That is absolute madness.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** You are the Minister. Is he the Minister?

**Deputy James Browne:** The Deputy comes in and blames the Government for allowing that to happen.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** Please, Deputy.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** He was asking me a question.

**Deputy James Browne:** It is madness and should not be happening.

Of course, in line with local authorities' best practice and with regard to rental standards, whether a house is old or has a long-standing tenant in situ, it should be inspected and improvement works carried out at regular intervals to prevent excessive maintenance costs and delay when the property becomes vacant. To that end, my Department and colleagues across the local authority sector are working to transition from a largely reactive response and a void-based approach to stock management and maintenance to a planned maintenance approach. This will require the completion of stock condition surveys by all local authorities and the subsequent development of strategic and informed work programmes in response. My Department will support these work programmes by ensuring that the funding available under the various stock improvement programmes is aligned with this approach.

In consecutive years, my Department has ring-fenced €5 million for planned maintenance under the planned maintenance of voids programme. This has been doubled to €10 million for 2025. I hope to increase it further in future years. This funding has supported the implementation of an ICT asset management system for the local authority sector, which, as I mentioned earlier, is now available, with all 31 local authorities on board. This investment is also available to provide a funding contribution for the completion of stock condition surveys while simultaneously funding planned maintenance works that arise from these surveys. This approach will also ensure that the properties are returned to productive use as quickly as possible while allowing more extensive works to be carried out on a cyclical basis.

From an asset management perspective, local authorities are moving to a position whereby properties are inspected and maintained at regular intervals.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** That is not true.

**Deputy James Browne:** The move to the planned maintenance approach for stock management and maintenance is crucial in this regard to ensure that local authorities can maximise the funding available from relevant stock improvement programmes by only completing the

measures applicable with the housing standards for rented housing regulations when a property becomes vacant. Providing cyclical maintenance over the life cycle of a tenancy will ensure houses can be re-let more quickly, deliver far better value for money and limit the exposure of the local authority to excessive costs and significant turnaround times when a property becomes vacant.

The motion from Sinn Féin tabled for this evening's debate does not fairly represent the efforts and progress the Government has made and is making. It makes the point that we need to create a dedicated Department of housing with annual multi-euro maintenance funding, starting in budget 2026, but this is already in place and is further supported by the housing delivery co-ordination office. Some €90 million is available for the energy efficiency retrofit programme, which is an increase of almost 40% since the programme was implemented in 2021. Some €50 million is available in 2025 for a regeneration programme. Some €31 million is available under the planned maintenance voids, with over €10 million of that funding ring-fenced. The disabled persons grant for local authority housing is receiving a budget of €25 million to support improvement works and additionality for existing local authority-owned dwellings in the form of adaptations and extensions, which allow people to live in their communities for as long as possible.

The motion refers to the failure to properly fund and maintain homes and the failure to remove the cap associated with the costs of remediation for vacant units. As explained, there is no cap-----

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** That is not true. That is not true.

**Deputy James Browne:** -----provided a maximum average is maintained across the local authority's programme.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** Deputy, please allow the Minister to reply.

**Deputy James Browne:** Given the legal responsibility on local authorities with regard to management and maintenance, they play an important role to ensure adequate budgetary provision for the purpose of housing repairs and cyclical maintenance from their rental income. The funding my Department provides is supplementary rather than available to fully replace local authorities' own self-funding.

Returning to the example Deputy Gould gave earlier, in five years the local authority could not find the wherewithal to put in stairs.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** The Government will not give the local authority the money.

**Deputy James Browne:** That is not a Government responsibility but a local authority responsibility.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** The Deputy will have the chance to speak shortly.

**Deputy James Browne:** We will continue doing everything in our power to minimise turn-around times, as referenced in the programme for Government, with the proposed introduction of a new voids programme to support local authorities to ensure their homes comply with the relevant standards and to provide good comfort levels for their tenants and implement strate-

gic programmes for planned maintenance informed by stock condition surveys. When these houses are made vacant, there are families who have just been living in them. How it can take months and years to put new families into those houses is incomprehensible. It should not be happening. As the Minister, I will ensure that local authorities do not indulge in these delays any more. If a family is moving out, a health and safety assessment and basic repairs should be carried out, but leaving houses vacant for months and years on end is not on the Government but on the local authority.

**Deputy Dessie Ellis:** We are in a housing crisis. Over 2,700 vacant council properties are boarded up and lying vacant across the State. Of those, more than 800 have been vacant for over a year. It is estimated that Dublin alone accounts for 27% of such vacant properties. Dublin has a growing senior population and along with it an increase in the demand for senior citizen accommodation. There are a number of senior citizen complexes in my constituency of Dublin North-West. I often take the time to visit these complexes to meet with residents and talk about their concerns. What strikes me most when I visit is the number of units that are lying idle. Many of these units are not necessarily boarded up, but they are lying idle and empty. I know there is a demand for such accommodation because I regularly get requests for help from people who wish to move into it through my constituency office in Finglas. Some of these units have been idle for two years or more. The reason there are a number of such vacant units is that refurbishment work on senior citizen accommodation was the responsibility of direct labour within the council, not private contractors, but this has changed in recent times. The council has cut back on the use of direct labour and is now relying more and more on private contractors. This has increased costs for the council, which means that not as many units can be refitted and refurbished as before. This has created a logjam in delivering such units, which would be delivered much quicker if direct labour were used instead of private contractors.

In a housing crisis, vacant council properties need to be turned around as fast as possible. With almost 60,000 people on the housing list throughout the country, not including 85,000 on HAP, RAS and rent supplement, every vacant property needs to be made available as a matter of urgency.

**Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin:** We have a bit of contradiction in that there are so many people without homes, yet there are so many homes without people. The vast majority of these are in private hands. However, there are more than 2,500 vacant council houses throughout the State. Of these, 834 have been vacant for more than a year. Each of these homes should have a local family living in it. Almost all councils have unacceptably long waiting times for reletting, caused in part by underfunding on the part of central government, lack of council staff for turnover, red tape and bureaucratic delays in the approval of funding by the Department.

As the Minister knows, letting times vary quite a lot. For instance, in my constituency of Wicklow-Wexford, County Wicklow has double the letting time of County Wexford. The Minister is familiar with Wexford County Council. We both served on it at the same time. However, of the 108 vacant council houses in County Wicklow, shockingly, seven of these are lying boarded up for more than three and a half years. Four of them have been lying empty for more than five years and two houses have been lying empty for more than seven years. That is unbelievable. All the while, local families are looking at these crying out to have a roof over their heads.

Sinn Féin has repeatedly called for greater funding for refurbishment, an adequate number of council staff to turn them over and a faster streamlined process for getting vacant homes back

into use. We want to see the average relet time down to, at most, 12 weeks and to ensure best practice is adhered to across all local authorities. There is nothing more annoying and insulting to those impacted by the housing emergency than the sight of perfectly good homes lying boarded up and empty. We need to see local families in these as a matter of urgency.

**Deputy Máire Devine:** Dublin City Council has 362 vacant homes that residents urgently need to be returned to the available housing stock. Of the approximately €50,000 needed to fully refurbish a council home, central government is funding only about 20%. Has the Minister heard of index-linked funding? Is this a deliberate decision of neglect?

The voids return programme must be revoked in order to provide a quicker turnaround for bringing social housing stock into use and an appropriate budget must be calculated to make this happen. The lack of appropriate funding can lead to inadequate repairs or the construction equivalent of trying to put a plaster on a bleeding head wound. One constituent in Inchicore, Dublin 8, was allocated her home in March. It had been void for more than a year. She has had nothing but trouble with the boiler, the heating and the water supply. The property requires additional remedial works and might possibly require a completely new heating system. There have been delays that lead to deterioration, the broken windows syndrome, or the nail that lost the horse.

Budgeting for voids maintenance needs to be realistic rather than aspirational. The Government is causing councils and, in some cases, tenants to pay for serious repairs in order to keep their homes livable and safe. Deputy Gould has done the maths. He is giving the Minister a quick win here. If I were him, I would take it.

**Deputy Johnny Mythen:** As I mentioned previously, we have 2,749 council houses boarded up and left idle. Some 800 of these have been so for more than 12 months. Another shocking figure is the 15,580 homeless citizens in emergency accommodation - not including those on the streets - including 4,775 children. Why is the Government allowing this to continue?

I spoke to a young man in Wexford town only yesterday. He is 34 years old and his wife is 30. Their rent was increased substantially and they had to leave the house they had rented for more than nine years. They had to spend nine months in emergency accommodation with their two children aged under two. It almost broke them. There are 39 boarded up local houses in County Wexford. How can anyone justify this position? How can it be explained to this family, or the many other families in the same predicament, why those houses are empty in a chronic housing crisis? Each of these houses should have a family living in it. Surely, in a country with huge surpluses amounting to billions, it is not an unreasonable ask to properly fund local authorities to maintain and return their homes to families in dire need.

It is totally delusional for central government to think that, in 2025, a cap of €11,000 per home is financially adequate to return these council houses to occupation, taking into account alone the high cost of materials and goods at today's prices. It is time to get real. These homes should be returned to families. It can be done. Four thousand seven hundred and seventy-five children deserve a home, a life and a future. Give local authorities the tools and funding they need to proceed with refurbishment works to bring vacant homes back into use without the need for departmental approval.

I ask everyone to please support the Raise the Roof rallies outside Leinster House on 17 June and in the rebel county of Cork on 21 June.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** I will bring forward a solution. Right across this Chamber, people have outlined how there are vacant boarded up houses in every constituency. We are criticised by those in Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, who ask where our solution is. This is the solution. It is a genuine attempt to make a difference to hundreds if not thousands of families but the Government has dismissed it. The most disgusting thing about the Government's contribution tonight is it is upset with me and the Opposition because we do not give it a clap on the back or recognise what it has done.

I assume the Minister must be an intelligent man but his understanding of the situation is to say there are no more long-term voids after what the Government did in previous years. If there is a house that has been lived in for 70 years and the keys have been given back, that house requires a serious number of renovations, and not to a maximum of €11,000. The Minister was untruthful when he said local authorities can claim back what they want, once the average is €11,000. That is a cap in anyone else's world. Do not try to cod us.

We want to turn houses around in 12 weeks. The thing about it is we want to get rid of bureaucracy and the red tape. Council staff have to go up and down to Dublin for permission. We want to let local authorities do their job. We want to give local authorities the money and staff to do their job. The Minister comes here and asks why local authorities are not doing it and why houses are boarded up for so long. He is the Minister. He should be answering those questions. No house should be boarded up for years, but they are. I raised this with Darragh O'Brien, who was the previous Minister, and another Fianna Fáil Minister. I raised it at the housing committee. I was at the housing committee today, attended by the Housing Commission, which wants radical reform. This will not solve the housing crisis but it will make a difference for hundreds if not thousands of families.

I invite the Minister, as I invited his predecessor, who did not have the guts to take it up, to walk Dublin, Limerick and Cork with me and some of my colleagues to meet the families who are living next door to boarded up houses, with rats, mice, dumping and antisocial behaviour. The Minister came here and said that the Opposition does not appreciate all the Government has done. All he is short of is telling us, "Let them eat cake". It is not good enough. We have a solution. I want to move that tonight. It is about time the Government took it at face value.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** I will deal with the Aontú amendment. The question is that the amendment be made. All those in favour abair "Tá" and all those against say "Níl".

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** Níl.

**A Deputy:** Tá.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** Sorry, I thought it was the Government amendment.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** It is the Aontú-----

**A Deputy:** It is the amendment to the Government's amendment.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** Yes. It is Aontú's amendment to the Government's amendment.

**Deputy Máire Devine:** Tá.

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**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** Tá an ceist rite. The question is carried.

**Deputy James Browne:** Vótáil.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** A vote has been called by the Government. It will be taken during the voting block on Wednesday night.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** In relation to our-----

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** The other amendment comes first.

## **Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions**

### **Energy Prices**

99. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the measures he is taking to address the high cost of energy; if he is planning to rule out categorically an additional levy on household bills to contribute to the proposed strategic emergency gas reserve; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30270/25]

**Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** On 4 March this year, I received Government approval to proceed with the development of the State-led strategic gas emergency reserve, securing Ireland's energy system, which all would agree is essential. I will continue to take decisive action to protect Ireland's economy and citizens from the potential of a catastrophic impact on or disruption to our gas supplies.

The delivery of temporary gas reserves is critical to Ireland's energy security as we continue the transition to indigenous, clean renewable energy. Crucially, the strategic gas emergency reserve will also ensure compliance with EU standards and regulation. In identifying this as the optimal approach, the Department has built upon the extensive review of the security of Ireland's gas and electricity systems published in the energy security package in November 2023. The emergency reserve will be in the form of a floating storage and regasification unit to be owned on behalf of the State by the system operator, Gas Networks Ireland, GNI.

The standard approach for cost recovery for security of supply measures and investment to meet EU regulations is through the existing regulatory framework and is achieved over the lifetime of the asset. Identifying opportunities to minimise the impact of the cost on energy consumers is a key workstream of this project. GNI is now progressing the project through the relevant planning and regulatory structures.

Given the risk we seek to address, all options to accelerate delivery of the project are being pursued. The final cost to deliver the strategic gas emergency reserve and cost recovery model are being assessed as we progress the project through the detailed design phase, and every effort will be made to minimise the cost to consumers. The final investment decision will be subject to Government approval and will be supported by independent assessments undertaken by the

financial and commercial advisory authority, NewERA, as well as the Commission for Regulation of Utilities.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** It is interesting that the Minister mentioned the independent surveys and the recovery model because as he knows, Irish households are crippled by the most expensive electricity prices in Europe. Average electricity costs here are almost €1,800 per year, €350 more than the European average. The Government parties all promised they would introduce measures to help with the cost-of-living crisis when they were campaigning last November. Despite this, energy prices are 61% higher than they were in 2022. The Government has ruled out energy credits this year, saying they cannot become the norm. People are struggling, yet as part of the energy security review, the Government has suggested another levy, which would push up bills even further.

When the Minister says temporary, what timeframe does he have in mind? The last time we were here, the Minister said he would publish the CEPA and GNI reports. Will he publish them? Will the Minister categorically rule out any new levy on household bills? I ask him to do so. Will he ensure that the PSO levy network charges are distributed more fairly?

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** That report will be published this week. If anyone wants a briefing on it with officials, it will be available to colleagues. It is important that people understand the risks we are trying to mitigate.

I restate that the programme for Government acknowledges the growing energy price and cost pressures on households and businesses and commits to bringing forward measures to contain these costs. The Government recently approved an extension of the 9% VAT rate currently applied to gas and electricity by a further six months to October 2025. That will cost an estimated €85 million and it will be looked at again in the context of the budget.

My Department has established a cross-government energy affordability task force to identify, assess and implement measures that will enhance energy affordability for households and businesses. It is crucial that we do that. The focus of the task force will be on medium- and long-term structural reform measures to address high energy costs in line with the EU action plan for affordable energy.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** There is an awful lot the Minister can do to bring down household electricity prices. The additional costs on household bills make up around 50% of the final electricity price to consumers. The programme for Government omitted any mention of network charges. It gave a vague commitment to explore funding models for the PSO to reduce bills. Is the Minister going to do that? He can tackle the regressive PSO levy on network charges now because network charges could be four times what they are now following the conclusion of price review 6. This burden could and should be distributed fairly, rather than ordinary householders being forced to bear the brunt. Grid upgrade and repair could also be financed through Exchequer funding rather than levying it on top of household bills. We also need to look at the role of the regulator, which needs to be strengthened. Is the Minister going to make these changes? Will he distribute network charges and the PSO levy to reduce the energy burden on households, if he is not going to introduce the other measures?

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** Everyone agrees that we need substantial further investment in our grid, and price review 6 will bring that forward later this year. As part of the NDP, we are looking at other ways by which we can fund investment in our grid, which is critical to ensure

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we can realise the potential of more onshore and offshore renewables.

Later this week, the Deputy will see a decision on the PSO, which I think will be welcomed by many. I will not pre-empt that decision but the word I have on it so far indicates it will result in a reduction in the PSO for the year to come.

Ireland's energy network is different from many others. The fundamental issue is how energy prices are struck at EU level and the link to wholesale gas prices. I intend to raise that with EU colleagues at the Energy Council next week. We need a bigger and broader discussion on that as countries like Ireland expand their renewable resource. Last year, 40% of our energy was generated through renewable resources. There are many things we can do and we will work towards them.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** There will be plenty more announcements this week.

### Electricity Grid

100. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment if he is satisfied with the current resilience of the ESB network in light of the damage caused by Storm Éowyn; the measures that have been taken in the five months since that storm to identify and develop dedicated corridors or pathways to protect electricity infrastructure; if he will provide an update on the measures taken, particularly as winter approaches in some months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30718/25]

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** I ask the Minister about Storm Éowyn and the preparations that I hope are under way to make the grid more resilient. I am sure the Minister is well aware of the difficulties, as is the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, in my constituency, which experienced huge fallout from the storm. Many houses have only recovered connectivity and landline communications in recent weeks. What steps are being taken to address and improve the resiliency of the network?

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** I thank the Deputy for his timely question. He will know and acknowledge that Storm Éowyn was one of the most severe weather events to impact Ireland in recent decades. At its peak, as we are all acutely aware, including the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, and I who were dealing with it at the time - 768,000 customers were without electricity. Despite these challenges, ESB Networks restored power to most impacted customers within 72 hours. The Deputy is right, however, that many others waited for three weeks.

I commend all of our teams across the country who worked extremely hard to reconnect power and communications. We must continue to strengthen the capacity of the electricity grid to withstand further extreme weather events, and a range of targeted measures are now being advanced to do just that.

Following the storm, I brought forward a memo to Government on 5 February requiring the development of an ESB Networks winter 2025 grid resilience plan. This plan was approved by the Government on 8 April and set out the actions across key areas, including hazard removal and surveying, forestry management, materials and spares review, resourcing and innovation measures that will increase resilience of the electricity network for the winter ahead.

Progress has been significant. Defect and hazard clearance is actively under way with addi-

tional timber contractors to be mobilised to tackle large vegetation clearance, ESBN continues to target and prioritise the inspection of the network in the worst affected areas, a lot of them in the north west, through the use of helicopter, drone and foot surveys. At the most recent energy security group meeting, ESBN presented a status update. As of 4 June, while the national programme of network inspection continues, the status of the survey regarding the prioritised portion of the network since Storm Éowyn is as follows: approximately 70% of the transmission network, or 4,994 km of 7,000 km and 98% of the 38 cabling network or 5,565 km of 5,600 km have been surveyed. I will give more information during the supplementary response.

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** This Government, in fairness, is great at documents and plans but very poor on delivery. The Minister spent most of his time acknowledging the work of the ESB, which has done tremendous work, but I want to know how many meters have been cleared. For example, there are thousands of kilometres of ESB lines where trees are growing up through those lines. There are guidelines that state the lines should be 10 m minimum away from the felling line of the tree. That is not being met, and my understanding from speaking to the ESB is that these are guidelines and there is no obligation regarding them. I want to know, how many meters have been reduced? Where are we now? We are six months away from Christmas. Last week, Hollymount, Taugheen and Foxford in County Mayo lost power because of a relatively small summer breeze and we need to ensure this is tackled.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** For the Deputy's information, there needs to be more than 10 m each side of a tree in most areas.

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** Clearance.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** Actually, in some instances 30 m either side are required.

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** It is depending on the tree.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** It is obviously depending on the tree but I am telling the Deputy we have to work on this in a very structured way. Surveys are critically important. The whole network had never been surveyed as it has been done now. While I was in the process of telling the Deputy about the extensive survey work that is being done, a lot of clearances have happened already post storm, and the Deputy will know that from his own constituency. Three years' worth of timber was affected during the course of the storm that needed to be cleared, either having been felled by the storm or needing to be attended to. What we are doing now is, the survey work is nearly completed. This is exactly what we said we would do, by the way, as well as that we would get the winter resilience plan in place and we would have more spare capacity. That programme of additional works will be undertaken in advance of the winter. All of those corridors will not be cleared by the winter. If you look at the forested areas across the country, it is just not possible to do that so we are focusing on the worst affected areas and those most at risk.

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** With respect, it is six months after the storm and we are still at survey stage.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** No.

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** In many cases what we need is action. I recently had contact from a family who experienced a power outage. They live at the end of a forest. They are living in fear of the next storm. They know that should a storm hit, they will certainly experience a power

outage. This is the type of work we need to get down to business on. I appreciate the survey is being undertaken but we are now in the summer and in many cases the best time to achieve this work in terms of ground conditions is now. My fear is that there will be further delays and further inertia. We will get to the autumn and ground conditions will be so poor and maybe in the winter we will realise we are not as prepared as we should be.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** I assure the Deputy that all of us want the same thing here. I have answered Deputy Daly's question about the importance of continued and enhanced investment in our grid, in that resilience aspect and in our distribution network in particular. Our generation network was not affected as much as the distribution network because the grid in those areas was resilient, but there is a significant amount of work to be undertaken. If the Deputy has specific details, such as about the family he mentioned - I am not sure exactly where they live - I am sure they will be within the plans that are there already for clearance work and a lot of clearance work has happened already. The Deputy will understand that, as we embark upon an accelerated programme of clearance, especially of vegetation, that has to be done in a very structured way based on surveys so we can tackle the areas most at risk first. That is what is being done. As much resources as are required to go into that, through ESB Networks and through private contractors, will be supported by the Government and finance will not be an issue in this regard.

### Energy Usage

101. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment if he is aware of the latest emissions figures as reported by the Environmental Protection Agency; the steps he is taking to address this; the contingency measures he is putting in place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30271/25]

102. **Deputy Ciarán Ahern** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the reason, according to analysis from the Environmental Protection Agency, Ireland will only deliver a 23% reduction in emissions by 2030, not the 51% target in the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021, or the 42% target in the EU effort sharing regulation; how the State plans to finance the potential fines of up to €26 billion for missing EU targets; the actions he will take to remedy the situation and reduce our target emissions gap; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30748/25]

**Deputy Pa Daly:** The Minister is probably aware of the latest emissions figures as reported by the Environmental Protection Agency last week. It is a stark warning. Ireland seems to have gone backwards in its climate ambition because the latest greenhouse gas emissions projections from the EPA said emissions would fall by up to 23% if every climate policy currently planned is implemented on time, down from the projection of 29% during the previous year. The gap is widening between what is achievable and what are legally binding emissions reductions.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mattie McGrath):** This question is being taken with Question No. 102 so I call Deputy Ahern.

**Deputy Ciarán Ahern:** My question is the same. I am happy for the Minister to answer about how the gap is widening.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 101 and 102 together.

I thank both Deputies for the questions. The latest projections from the EPA are a clear signal that, while we have made progress, we need to move faster to meet our 2030 climate targets, and that is going to be incredibly challenging and incredibly difficult. The Government is building significant momentum and the EPA's analysis will help to guide that. In particular, the next phase of the work as we accelerate delivery to meet and exceed our ambitious climate targets. Our progress in recent years provides a strong foundation for this acceleration. In 2023, for example, Ireland achieved its most substantial single-year emissions reduction on record, falling by 6.8%. This is clear evidence that policies are delivering tangible results. We are successfully demonstrating that a thriving economy and climate can go hand in hand.

Since 1990, and it is important to look at where we have come from, our economy has grown dramatically and our population has increased by half. Over the period 1990 to 2005, emissions increased from 56 megatonnes to 70.2 megatonnes, but since the peak, Ireland has successfully reduced these emissions by 22% to 55 megatonnes, showing that, with a determined response, we can reverse these trends in the most challenging of circumstances.

We have always known that meeting the carbon budgets and delivering the economic and societal transformation will be challenging. All of us recognise that. However, the vast majority of people in this country back climate action and we are already dealing with the effects of climate change, so this Government's mandate and resolve around climate action is unwavering. It is important to remember that Government initiatives are working and Irish people, communities and businesses are making this change. We need to accelerate and build on that momentum.

It is important to recognise those efforts across Irish society. We achieved almost a 7% reduction in emissions in 2023. We are undergoing a renewables-led energy transformation. Peat is gone, coal is on the way out by the end of this month, and renewables are now the backbone of our power mix. Electricity generation from renewables has increased fivefold since 2005. A total of 40% of Ireland's electricity demand was met by renewable energy last year. This represents significant progress since 2005 when the comparable figure was 7% of our energy being generated by renewables compared with 40% last year.

*10 o'clock*

By 2025, Ireland has 6.5 GW of grid scale renewable electricity generation capacity, which comprises 5 GW of wind and 1.5 GW of solar. This is 13 times the 0.5 GW of solar and wind electricity infrastructure that Ireland had in 2005. We are delivering new interconnectors. The Greenlink interconnector to Britain is now operational. That doubles Ireland's interconnector capacity. The Celtic interconnector to France is on track to be completed by 2026-27. The North-South project, which is crucial, is advancing, yet delayed. These projects boost energy security and allow greater import and export of clean power. Private wires policy, which I will introduce, is designed to unlock private investment in electricity infrastructure by allowing generators to connect directly with users. This will mean quicker connections, more clean power on the ground and less strain on our national grid. The switch to electric vehicles, EVs, is accelerating. While we did not hit our target last year and it is unlikely that the target of more than 900,000 vehicles by 2030 will be hit, we will still have a significant increase. In April, there was a 23% increase in EV registrations compared to the same time last year.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** The thrust of the question is why the slowdown and what measures exactly is the Minister taking to accelerate or redress the apparent slowdown, according to the statis-

tics from the EPA. On the ramifications, we all know about the ecological collapse and energy independence. We know that there is a need for clean energy and to reduce the bills of consumers but the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council and the Climate Change Advisory Council have said that it could cost us up to €26 billion in effective fines from the European Union. The 23% figure is based on additional measures that have yet to be identified. With the Government's plan, the best we can hope for is a reduction of 9%. What exactly are those additional measures? What are the unallocated savings? What we need from the Minister are urgent measures such as the publication of the land use review, the onshore wind energy guidelines and the marine protected areas legislation. Where are those?

**Deputy Ciarán Ahern:** The Minister referred to moving faster and we agree with him. He mentioned 1990, 1995 and 2005 figures, but these are irrelevant. The only figures that we are concerned with in this House anymore are the 2018 base levels. We need a 51% reduction from them by 2030. We are miles away from it and we are getting further. Is the Minister worried about the gap between promise and delivery? Can he tell us once and for all whether he has given up on the 51% reduction target by 2030? His own climate action plan for this year if implemented in full, which is vanishingly unlikely, will only bring us to reductions of 42% by 2030. What is he going to do? What radical steps is he going to take to increase the speed of delivery as he has pointed to here?

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** Unquestionably, there are major challenges with meeting the 2030 targets. Anybody can see that from the EPA projections and previous projections. It is not hopeless though, not in any way, shape or form. I mentioned specifically energy generation because that is going to be the key and cornerstone to a reduction in dependence on fossil in particular and reducing carbon emissions while securing our energy future. The reason I have gone back to 2005 is to show that these things are possible because if we look at where we were on renewables in 2005, 7% of our energy was generated through them. It is now 40%. If I use 2018 as an example, 0.6% of energy was generated through solar. Now on a good day, it is 14%. There are improvements. There are challenges in some sectors, certainly in transport. I have referenced the fact that since 1990, our GDP has grown six times. Our population has increased by 50%. They are the realities that we are dealing with. That is a good thing. We also need to ensure that we continue to transition our fleet, particularly in public transport, and to invest in that. Last year, there were record numbers of public transport users. There were a total of 330 billion public transport user journeys right the way through the year and we can do more. It is a combination of that.

On the land use review that the Deputy asked about, I am meeting Geraldine Tallon this week again. I expect that the review will be published in the coming weeks. It will be an important guide there as well. There remains issues on unallocated savings. It is about increasing the pace of change and increasing delivery. The State has not done well on offshore renewables but we have created the architecture and infrastructure to do that. Five projects off the east coast are into the further information stage in planning. A decision is to be made by An Bord Pleanála. I hope that it is responded to expeditiously. We have a major opportunity with regard to offshore renewables. We will hit aspects within our targets. The overall target is still going to be extremely challenging. It will be very difficult as outlined by the EPA, but that should ensure that we redouble our efforts to do everything we can to tackle climate change and to transition to a greener cleaner economy.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** The Minister hinted at electric vehicles. The EPA report emphasised not only that the plan is not working but also its unfairness. It is not being done in an inclusive

way. Many people are locked out of the Government's schemes. As the Minister mentioned, we need to have hundreds of thousands more EVs to keep within the carbon budget but the grant scheme that the Government has does very little to help ordinary workers and families who cannot afford the huge price. According to the latest research, the Government scheme does not adequately support lower income households, impedes EV take-up and jeopardises the achievement of emission targets. That is reflected in the uptake where it is concentrated mostly in wealthy areas of Dublin and Cork, but working-class and rural areas are left behind. If someone can already afford a car that costs €45,000, a grant of €3,500 is not really going to cut the mustard. Will the Minister introduce tiered grants to encourage more people to access EVs?

**Deputy Ciarán Ahern:** Not only is the Government failing in this regard, it is also regrettably going backwards. Only last year, it was predicted that the State could reach 29% emission reductions. This year, it was reduced to 23% by the EPA. Our target for 2030 is that 80% of our energy will be renewable. The EPA is telling us that now only approximately 68% will be able to be renewable by 2030. When it comes to transport, the Minister referenced the number of EVs on the roads. The EPA is not even bothering with the previous goal of almost 1 million cars on the road; it is now talking about approximately 650,000 EVs on the road by 2030 at best. It feels that the Minister is pursuing policies that are pushing us further and further away from reaching our climate goals through the Government's pursuit of road over rail and obsession with energy hungry data centres. There is change in policy on fracked gas and the green light was given for liquefied natural gas, LNG, terminals and increased fire powered generation. I call on the Minister again to change course.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** Let us look at the facts. We all agree that the targets were always going to be challenging but we are still focused on doing our level best to achieve them. Certain sectors have done significantly well. If we look at energy industries, there is a 21.6% reduction in emissions while it is 4.6% in agriculture, 7% in residential and 5.8% in industry. Transport emissions did increase marginally by 0.3% but emissions are now 4.3% below 2019 pre-Covid levels. We are seeing things going in the right direction but not fast enough. There are things that we can do. If we look at renewable energy, there is the 80% target to 2030. That is a significant target, even the EPA projection is that we will be at 68% of our energy. Let us be frank about it: the offshore projects have been delayed, probably by another 18 months, because of decisions that have been made by An Bord Pleanála. An Bord Pleanála is there to make those decisions. I am not criticising it. That is just a reality. We cannot ignore that. There is still a commitment to deliver those projects. We have got to see the offshore renewable electricity support scheme, ORESS, 1 projects delivered and in construction. We will have another auction relating to onshore energy, both wind and solar, later this year that there is significant interest in. We are a leader in Europe in onshore renewables. The same will happen with offshore renewables. It is unlikely that all those east coast wind farms will be on the grid in 2030 but they should be under construction but if it is in 2031 or 2032 that they are on that will still be a good thing. If 68% to 72% of our energy is being created by renewables even by 2030, that will be significant progress. That will not hit our target but that will be going significantly in the right direction.

10 June 2025

## Data Centres

103. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment if he is aware of recent concerns expressed by officials in his Department that policy choices would need to be made between data centre expansion for AI and housing delivery; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30272/25]

**Deputy Pa Daly:** Regarding officials in his Department expressing concerns that policy choices will have to be made between data centre expansion for AI and housing delivery and the priorities relating to same, will the Minister make a statement?

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** The programme for Government outlines the policy position regarding energy policy, housing policy, foreign direct investment growth and the many other goals and objectives of this Government. It reflects the balance between the many opportunities and challenges facing the country and the actions that will be taken over the lifetime of this Government. It recognises that increased and unprecedented investment and delivery in our grid and expanding our energy generation capacity is critical. While in the near term, already-contracted data centres will be accommodated on the grid for the medium term, the Government has committed to developing a plan that will guide the development of plan-led data centre and larger energy user infrastructure in alignment with our decarbonisation objectives and growing Ireland's knowledge-based economy and that will provide certainty for the sector over the medium term.

Moreover, the electricity system operators, namely EirGrid and ESB Networks, assess the various expected future demands on the system, including in the context of economic and population growth, housing and targets relating to electric vehicles and heat pumps, as part of their network development plans. These plans will form a vital input into system operators' submission to the price review process, which sets out the level of investment required over the next five years. That is price review, PR, 6, which we have already discussed here. The CRU is currently reviewing the proposals from ESB Networks and EirGrid in terms of their investment requirements. The submissions made to the CRU propose a significant uplift to the investment required in terms of distribution and transmission to support the requirements of a growing population and economy. The exact level of this will be part of the CRU's final determination later this year. The programme for Government seeks to address the challenges of balancing energy needs by committing to scaling up investment in critical infrastructure and our electricity grid, which will be advantageous for customers and enhance the data centre and digital economy footprint to support continued foreign direct investment, FDI.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** Anybody who was in the House for any period earlier today will realise the priority and urgency afforded to the housing crisis. There are 15,580 people homeless. Then there is the rest, which Minister would have heard about, such as the average cost of rent being above €2,000. There is a housing emergency but instead of prioritising homes, this Government and those that preceded it have been reckless when it comes data centres. Instead of an approach that balances the energy demand from centres alongside that of other users, there is an absence of a plan. This Government is allowing the limited space on our grid to be gobbled up by data centres. The Minister's officials, including the Secretary General of the Department, have stated that policy choices need to be made between further data centre expansion and increasing housing supply. Why has the Government been blasé about these warnings? The reality is that successive Governments have failed to plan. The reason we cannot connect homes

and data centres is straightforward; there is not enough capacity on the grid. What measures is the Minister taking to ensure that data centres do not gobble up all the new capacity? Will he review and reform the first-come first-served policy and mandate the CRU, which has commented on this issue, to prioritise new connections?

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** I am sure the Deputy and his party have interacted in respect of the CRU's draft statement on large energy users. There is a strategy being brought forward that is plan led rather than developer led, and that is critically important. There is no question that the number one priority for this Government is housing and continuing to increase of housing delivery. We also have to invest in our grid. It is housing, the grid and water. Three critical things we need to do over the next five years is improve our infrastructure in order to support housing delivery and FDI development. We also need to ensure that we continue to be at the cutting edge of new technologies. There is a view among some people that all data centres are bad and are not required at all in this country. Some of the largest employers and FDI investors in this country also hold their data here. It is not a question of one or the other. Unquestionably, our priority is housing. The Deputy will see from PR6 later this year the level of investment that will be in our grid for the next five years. It will be multiples of PR5, and the national development plan will further support increased investment in housing and our grid.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** Does the Minister have a view on what the CRU said about mandating data centres to have a supply of electricity for themselves? Access to public infrastructure and our natural resources has been prioritised for data centres. However, the energy regulator in the Netherlands has the power to prioritise projects that identify social goals which can be prioritised for connection to the energy grid. That does not seem to be the case here. Does the Minister have an opinion on that? He must examine these measures and their applicability here. Ordinary workers and farmers cannot continue to shoulder a disproportionate burden by paying for the grid through network charges - we spoke earlier about the unfairness of how these are distributed - when data centres are being given the green light to gobble up all the new capacity that has become available in recent years. In other jurisdictions, these centres pay a larger amount towards essential infrastructure. The exact same should happen here. If the Government is serious about prioritising the construction of new housing, it must follow this path.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** In the context of PR6 and the previous review, it is not a question that it is data centres first at all. PR6 takes into account Government targets and includes the connection of up to 50,000 new homes per year, up to 1 million electric vehicles and currently contracted data centre demand, which means currently contracted data centres - no new ones - and those with contracted connection agreements. There is no question of data centres or other large users gobbling up, as the Deputy says, energy instead of housing being built. That is not happening, and that will not happen under PR 6. When the CRU published the draft plan on large energy users, there was significant stakeholder engagement. The strategy into the future will be very much a plan-led approach to connection and a medium-term outlook. The focus must be and is on housing, but in parallel with that is grid investment. We will see grid investment over the course of the term of this Government like we have never seen before in order to allow us to distribute the additional energy we are creating through renewables right across our network in order that we can power more homes and more businesses throughout the country.

## Climate Change Policy

104. **Deputy James Geoghegan** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment his views on the recently published national climate change risk assessment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30710/25]

**Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí:** What are the Minister's views on the recently published national climate change risk assessment as published by the EPA?

**Minister of State at the Department of the Climate, Environment and Energy (Deputy Alan Dillon):** I thank the Deputy for his question. I welcome the publication of Ireland's first national climate change risk assessment. We can already see the effects of climate change through the impact of storms including Babet, Darragh and, most recently, Éowyn. Attribution studies inform us that climate change is adding significantly to the strength of these extreme weather events. Adapting to the new reality and building resilience to the impact of climate change is critical. The Government is committed to protecting Ireland's present and future generations by developing climate adaptation measures to manage the impact of extreme weather events. We recognise the need to support communities, businesses and ecosystems as climate risks continue to rise.

Last year, the Government approved Ireland's second national adaptation framework. The national climate change risk assessment is a key deliverable under this framework. The risk assessment is a significant piece of work that will support our understanding of the risks of climate change and will help the Government to prioritise actions and direct resources to counter the risks that we must deal with most urgently into the future.

My Department is leading on the national co-ordination of sectoral adaptation actions to ensure cross-cutting issues are identified and addressed. Across Government, 15 sectoral adaptation plans, SAPs, will be completed this year. These will set out the extensive adaptation actions and measures that will be actioned over the next few years and that the sectors will build into their long-term plans. The risk assessment provides the necessary evidence base to inform and support this work.

**Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí:** I read the EPA report. It is a little unexciting - that may be the way to put it. There are four really good priority risks identified well in the report. These include the risk of disruption and damage to energy transmission and distribution infrastructure due to extreme wind, which is exactly what happened during Storm Éowyn. There is a similar risk to communications, which is also what happened with Storm Éowyn. To be fair, the ESB was a lot faster than the telecommunications providers in their response and that is something that must be looked at. There is also risk of disruption, damage and loss of transport infrastructure due to sea level rises and coastal flooding, as well as risk of damage and loss of buildings due to sea level rise, coastal erosion and coastal flooding. The latter is a problem in Dublin. Clontarf, in my own area, has been exposed for a long time. There are efforts afoot, and have been for a long time, to put a defence in place there.

The report signposts some very good priority actions. What is the mechanism by which they will be implemented? The Minister of State mentioned the new adaptation framework which is welcome. What is the mechanism by which they are turned into action and what is the budgeting process involved? There will be a fair bit of capital required for these projects.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** Again, I thank the Deputy for his question on concerns that have been raised in relation to the publication of the risk assessment, which is both comprehensive and evidence based framework that identifies, ranks and prioritises the climate risks, as the Deputy has outlined. What is essential here is that it draws on international best practices from the UK, New Zealand and the EU. It highlights the complex risks, including those we saw during Storm Éowyn, which impact across the energy system and forestry. Through the framework and the 13 different adaptation plans that will be finalised this year, we will have plans that can deliver real world actions while also putting strategies in place to protect communities, infrastructure and the economy. They will be led out through various Departments and through local authority-led actions.

**Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí:** Just for my own information, how does it work in terms of capital funding? Does that come through the NDP? If the Minister of State does not have the answer now, perhaps he could come back to me later. I am interested in understanding how that funding channel works.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I thank the Deputy for his question and I can certainly respond later in relation to that. The focus now is on delivering the 15 sectoral adaptation plans. That is really important. As I said earlier, we need to take significant steps to future proof Ireland's key infrastructure around electricity and gas. We will put these plans out for consultation. That is really important. What we want to do is ensure that we plan ahead, invest wisely and protect our key infrastructure to ensure future adaptation measures are introduced as we deal with future serious and extreme weather events.

## **Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions**

### **Renewable Energy Generation**

105. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the number of times the biomethane implementation group has met; when the group is next to report to his Department; when the biomethane sustainability charter will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30331/25]

**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** Residents in areas where anaerobic digesters have been proposed have been raising concerns about the suitability of the infrastructure in the area. They have been pointing out, for example, the absence of planning guidelines. When will the biomethane implementation group publish its charter and set out guidelines to clarify the situation for community groups, local authorities and promoters of such projects?

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I thank the Deputy for the question and welcome the opportunity to provide an update on the Government's progress on delivering on our biomethane ambitions. The Government has committed to supporting the production of up to 5.7 TW of indigenous produced biomethane by 2030, a key pillar of our national and EU climate and energy targets. A critical first step on this journey was the publication of the national biomethane strategy,

which outlines 25 strategic actions to drive growth across the sector. To oversee this work, the biomethane implementation group, chaired by my Department, was established in 2024. It has met four times to date, bringing together key Government Departments, agencies and sectoral stakeholders. The group will meet again in September of this year and is currently finalising a progress report that will be published shortly on *www.gov.ie*. This report will provide updates on the key deliverables including the biomethane sustainability charter and the development of the biomethane information hub and communications strategy.

The charter is a priority action under the strategy. It has now been finalised following extensive consultation and is being prepared for publication. The charter will set out best practice guidelines to ensure that anaerobic digestion is developed in a more environmentally sustainable manner, protecting waste, soil, biodiversity, and ensuring that health and safety standards are maintained. This work is part of a broader policy framework that includes forthcoming renewable heat obligations and the heat networks Bill, both of which are progressing through Government and will provide the regulatory certainty and investment signals needed to scale up renewable heat and district heating infrastructure. In short, we are moving from strategy to action. The biomethane implementation group is central to ensuring that we can translate a coordinated policy into accountable and transparent action.

**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** The implementation group was established last year and tasked with drawing up the guidelines and the charter. We know that the various stakeholder groups are going to find a way to have an input into that charter. Where do community groups stand? What level of engagement has there been with various different community groups? What opportunity have they had to have their voices heard at the table? To what extent has there been engagement with local communities, particularly in areas where these plants are already being proposed?

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I am conscious that the Deputy is raising a question around the streamlining of the planning process. Certainly, I fully recognise the need for correct planning guidelines. Anaerobic digesters themselves are significant infrastructure projects so we need to ensure that these developments are sustainable, sensitive to local communities and are aligned with land use and ecology considerations. We want to improve clarity and consistency on this matter and included in the biomethane strategy is a commitment to developing an online information hub and to support public understanding and planning authority awareness of anaerobic digestion technology.

Planning policy is in the remit of my colleague, the Minister of State Deputy Cummins. We are working closely to align our Departments' commitments and the national planning policy that can evolve the timely and responsible development of these anaerobic digestion facilities.

**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** Residents in the areas where anaerobic digestion plants are proposed have raised concerns about the digestate, for example, and whether it would be grass based or municipal waste. Would the charter and guidelines set out and specify that? How would we monitor that? Would the charter have teeth in order to be able to back that up and enforce it? Will the guidelines set out land usage policy, whether areas around a facility would remain in farming or steered towards grass production for the anaerobic digesters?

In the absence of guidelines, plans have been advancing in various different areas and in some cases, projects are already in place while others are moving through the process. Will the guidelines, when they are available, apply to existing plants and ones that are going through the

process now?

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** The biomethane sustainability charter is the priority deliverable. It will chart the Government's commitment around many of the actions to which the Deputy has referred here in relation to ensuring that biomethane production in Ireland is environmentally sustainable. The charter will undergo extensive consultation with key stakeholders and will inform the guidance of the biomethane implementation group. We want to have the best practice guidelines for the sector, covering water quality, land use and ensuring biodiversity protection and health and safety standards. The charter is all about ensuring we can scale biomethane production to ensure we meet our climate commitments, that it is done in a more environmentally sustainable manner and that we strike the balance between community concerns and our ambition to meet climate targets.

### **Recycling Policy**

106. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment his proposals to increase the amount of polyethylene terephthalate, PET plastic recycled in Ireland. [30328/25]

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** The deposit return scheme is well known to people, sometimes for the hassle of it and sometimes for the economic benefit of it. A huge proportion of the plastic that is collected under the scheme is shipped as waste plastic out of Ireland even though there is at least one company in this State that could manage quite a large part of the process. Is the Minister of State making efforts to ensure a greater proportion of the plastic that is collected is recycled in Ireland?

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** In 2022, the most recent year for which EPA statistics are available, Ireland recycled 32% of plastic packaging waste. This exceeds the current target of 22.5% but meeting the stricter targets of 50% and 55% for 2025 and 2026, respectively, will be more challenging. These figures are in respect of all plastics, including PET. The EU list of plastic waste codes does not isolate individual polymers. Given the volume and grade of materials collected through our waste collection system, plastics are mostly recycled abroad for reasons of economic viability.

However, measures are under way that will help to boost recycling rates for plastics, including PET, and make recycling on the island a more attractive proposition for investors. These measures include the national deposit return scheme, as the Deputy mentioned. For the first time, a separate high-quality stream of PET is now available for recycling. Together with the requirement under the single-use plastics directive for incorporating 25% of recycled plastic in PET beverage bottles from 2025, rising to 30% from 2030, the case for investing in recycling here has never been stronger.

In keeping with the polluter pays principle, extended producer responsibility schemes have a key role in meeting national collection and recycling targets and supporting investment to ensure as much as possible can be recovered and recycled domestically. Repak, the extended producer responsibility scheme for packaging, and Re-turn, which operates the deposit return scheme, are both working with investors to maximise the recycling of all types of plastic packaging here in Ireland.

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**Deputy Matt Carthy:** It is regrettable that the figures the Minister of State gave a date from before the introduction of the deposit return scheme. The information I have is that by the end of this month, 17,000 tonnes of plastic will have been collected under the scheme but only 3,400 tonnes of that will have been brought to a factory in the State. I mentioned previously to the Tánaiste in the House that Shabra Plastics and Recycling, a company in my constituency, can do a large part of the work. The process involves the bottles being washed, flaked, pelleted and then returned as bottles. Shabra can do the first two parts, that is, washing and flaking. The immediate environmental benefit from this is that four lorry loads of plastic bottles become three lorry loads of flakes. Is Repak obliged to follow any environmental consideration in the operation of the scheme? It seems to me it is not.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** We are absolutely committed on this side of the House to moving to recycle more plastic in Ireland. We need to be honest about the current reality that the waste management sector, including plastic recycling, operates in a global market and that a large part of the plastic recycling collected, including under the deposit return scheme, is traded internationally, based on volume and quality and on economic viability. That is why we introduced the enhanced producer responsibility schemes such as Re-turn and Repak. In fact, Repak provides subsidies of €100 per tonne for plastic reprocessed in Ireland. We certainly recognise that we need to do more. The Government is very much focused on solutions. We are looking to incentivise the building of the infrastructure and building the partnerships needed to ensure Ireland leads the way in regard to waste management, especially for PET and plastic bottles.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** I do not know how the Minister of State can say Ireland leads the way on plastics recycling when, in fact, we are leading the way in shipping those materials all over the world. We need to build capacity. As I mentioned, Shabra Plastics and Recycling can do a large part of the work and could do it all if it puts in a pellet production line. That would involve a huge investment, however, and the company would have to have enough plastic coming in to do it. I hope the Minister of State accepts the real difficulty is that the plastic is achieving more money elsewhere. Repak is selling it to the highest bidder without any environmental consideration. That is a problem because it is not the best option environmentally and it is preventing us from reaching what the Minister of State has stated is his objective, namely, to have more of the plastic recycled in Ireland. Will he engage with the domestic industry and with Repak to end this absolute scandal?

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I would challenge the figures the Deputy outlined. In 2024 alone, Re-turn collected up to 12,000 tonnes of PET plastic, 34% of which was processed by Irish companies, and, separately, Repak funded the recycling of more than 8,300 tonnes, which represented 42% of reprocessing in Ireland. Is it enough? No, it is not. We are well aware we need to make a significant step forward. We fully recognise that Ireland's recycling infrastructure needs to grow. The Minister and I are very conscious of that. The enhanced producer responsibility schemes like Repak and Re-turn are investing in domestic capacity. We want to grow that but it is a challenge in terms of the scale. The most recent regulations by way of the single-use plastics directive and the packaging waste regulation are driving market demand for recycled materials like PET plastics. We want to make significant strides in this regard in the future.

*Question No. 107 taken with Written Answers.*

**Energy Infrastructure**

108. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment for an update on the North-South interconnector project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30279/25]

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** Will the Minister provide an update on the North-South interconnector project?

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** The North-South interconnector is an essential transmission infrastructure project that will link the electricity transmission network between South and North on the island of Ireland, leading to a much more secure, affordable and sustainable supply of electricity across the island, operating in a single electricity market. The project is fully consented in the State and in the North, with full planning permission granted for overhead lines in both jurisdictions. Once complete, the North-South interconnector will facilitate the connection of 900 MW of renewable generation, which is enough to power 600,000 homes. It is an incredibly significant project that is of critical importance to all citizens on the whole island.

In March 2023, the Government noted and published an independent report on the project, which concluded it would not be feasible to run the North-South interconnector underground. That was the third review of the project and it confirmed that the findings of the 2018 report remained valid. As a transmission project, it is being undertaken by EirGrid, which is independently regulated by the Commission for Regulation of Utilities. The CRU is accountable to the relevant Oireachtas committee and not to me, as Minister. The Government does not have any role in the delivery of the electricity infrastructure on the ground. In February, EirGrid announced a delay in the completion of the North-South interconnector. Following this, I met with it and set out that this Government supports electricity grid delivery and that the interconnector was central to it. Separately in March, I responded to correspondence from Monaghan County Council setting out the Government's support for this project and I asked the council to engage with EirGrid. My officials and I will continue to work to support the quickest possible delivery of electricity grid projects and the North-South interconnector.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I am firmly of the opinion that this project will never be delivered at the current rate and if the current approach is maintained. I do not say this with any degree of satisfaction. I accept the points made by the Minister in terms of the strategic importance of it and need for it and everything that goes with that but there have been incredible delays. I foresee this continuing because at the root of it is belligerence on the part of EirGrid. I do not believe EirGrid is fit to deliver this project because it is being so belligerent and is ignoring the concerns of communities. The third report contained real criticisms of EirGrid and its approach to a cost-benefit analysis, particularly with regard to carrying out an ENTSO-E cost-benefit analysis in line with those guidelines. EirGrid has never conducted a comparison between overground and underground that holds up to international standards and the local community can see that.

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** The project should have been delivered by 2030 and now it will not be. The revised date is 2031. We need the interconnector. Work has started in the North subject to challenge there too. Work should start in the South too. There are lessons to be learned. Engagement in some areas has been difficult. I am not going to apportion blame on either side. I have been in the Oireachtas since 2007. I know we have dealt with the east-west interconnector. The North-South interconnector has always a bone of contention in certain

areas but if we want more renewables on our grid, if we want a stronger grid and if we want to reduce energy prices for customers on the island of Ireland, this project is needed. The reviews have stated clearly that undergrounding is not an option. It is fully consented in the North and the South. The project should proceed. While there should be more engagement, the project needs to proceed because it is critical.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** We are talking past each other, which has been the difficulty. I am being straight with the Minister. It is my firm belief, as an elected Member who knows these communities, that this project is not going to proceed as currently planned. The only way I see it being delivered is underground. The 2021 review said that in the future, not only qualitative but more quantitative elements and evaluations shall be introduced in the cost-benefit analysis for the assessment of grid investment alternatives as well the operational impact of high voltage alternating current and high voltage direct current electricity cable technologies in line with ENTSO-E cost-benefit analysis guidelines. It specifically stated that EirGrid failed to adequately conduct an international standard cost-benefit analysis of overground versus underground over the full life of the project. The local communities can see that. At every hand's turn, their concerns have not been adequately addressed by EirGrid and they are fundamentally opposed to the plan as is. I do not see it being delivered overground.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** I reaffirm everything Deputy O'Rourke said. The statement read by the Minister could have been read by every single Minister for the environment since 2006 when this project was mooted. Since 2006, Minister after Minister has devolved this issue entirely to EirGrid and said it was an operational matter and since 2006, EirGrid has made a mess of this. The Minister said he will not apportion blame. I will apportion blame to the pigheadedness of EirGrid. It is a model exercise in how not to deliver public infrastructure projects because it has failed and refused to engage with communities and the facts as they are developing. I urge the Minister to check what he said in this Dáil about the reports that have been produced because the most substantive of them described undergrounding of the interconnector as a credible option, which is the opposite of what the Minister said here. I encourage the Minister to look at that and revert. The only question I would put to him is whether he will meet the campaigning groups on the ground to get a full sense of the challenges of presenting this project through overhead power lines because it is not going to happen on the current trajectory?

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** This is a critical piece of infrastructure for the island. It has gone on for far too long. I remember this as well going way back to 2005. I remember protests in north Dublin about undergrounding coming from Wales into Rush and discussions and arguments around electromagnetic fields. I respect Deputy Carthy's point of view but he did not mention that there are many residents and landowners who have consented-----

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** How many?

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** Could the Deputy let me answer? There are many residents who have consented. There is a need for further engagement but the reality is that if we go back through a planning process again, we would be talking about 2040. What will have happened then is that we will have less ability to bring more renewables on to our grid and will not have reduced costs for consumers North and South so we need to find a way forward on this. This is fully consented. It has gone through the planning process. I met residents in Monaghan during the previous Dáil.

*Dáil Éireann*  
**Energy Policy**

109. **Deputy Malcolm Byrne** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment his views on whether it is critical that Ireland generates sufficient energy to meet both housing needs and the requirements of a digital economy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30257/25]

138. **Deputy Roderic O’Gorman** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment to outline the framework his Department uses to balance between competing energy needs of different sectors of the economy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30074/25]

**Deputy Malcolm Byrne:** Are the Minister and his Department sufficiently ambitious to ensure that Ireland will generate sufficient energy to meet housing needs and the requirements of the digital economy?

**Deputy Darragh O’Brien:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 109 and 138 together.

Ireland’s energy policy is focused on achieving a sustainable, secure and competitive energy system with key elements centred around reducing greenhouse gas emissions, increasing renewable energy generation - 40% of our energy was generated through renewables last year - as well as improving energy efficiency and ensuring energy security. Members will see from previous questions how difficult this can be in certain areas with the politicising of projects that will hinder our delivery of much-needed grid infrastructure.

The new programme for Government outlines the Government’s position regarding energy, housing, FDI policy and many other goals and reflects the balance between the various needs, opportunities and challenges facing the country. It also states our ambition to achieve energy independence by harnessing our untapped renewable energy resources and recognises that increased and unprecedented investment and delivery in our grid and expanding our energy generation capacity are priorities. Three main priorities in the NDP review are energy, housing and water. Price review 6 later this year will see a multiple of price review 5 and the investment in our grid because we need to expand our grid capacity for generation and distribution to meet the needs we have.

Transitioning to a renewables-led system remains a key priority to ensure Ireland’s energy security and economic competitiveness. Energy security underpins the delivery of essential infrastructure, including new housing developments and digital services. Digital services are critically important for the future economic development of this country. It is not a question of one or the other. The CRU will bring forward the large energy users document that went out to public consultation, particularly with regard to PR6. When it does, we will see a plan-led approach not only to grid development, but also to energy delivery for all of our business sectors, the digital sector and housing. It will take into account the need for 50,000 homes per year over the period of PR6 as well as the additional energy required to meet the targets of nearly 1 million EV charging points.

The system operators, EirGrid and ESB Networks, assess the expected future demand on the system, for example, economic and population growth, housing, EVs and heat pumps, as part of the network development plans. These plans form a vital part in the system operator’s submission to the next price review. This sets out the level of investment required for the next five years, which will probably be in the region of €13.4 billion to €15 billion. If we compare

that to previous investment of approximately €5 billion, it is unprecedented but it is needed.

The CRU is currently reviewing the proposals from ESB Networks and EirGrid for the requirements for investment. Submissions made to the CRU propose a significant uplift in the investment, which will come to pass, in distribution and transmission to support the requirements of a growing population and economy. The exact level will form part of the CRU's final determination. The programme for Government seeks to address the challenges between balancing energy needs by committing to scale up investment in critical infrastructure and our electricity grid. It will be advantageous for customers and enhance the data centre and digital economy footprint to support continued FDI investment.

**Deputy Malcolm Byrne:** I am glad the Minister has clarified how the ambition of the Government is to meet those future needs. The future is both green and digital. It is wrong that the debate has been presented by some as a choice between one and the other. The critical issue is that we have a sufficient supply, particularly of clean energy, to meet our future needs.

On the new economy, data centres often get a very bad reputation. I want to highlight the recent €3.5 billion investment by Echelon in Arklow. This was the first grid connection for data centres approved in more than four years. Despite Sinn Féin opposition, the local Sinn Féin TD made sure to show up for the announcement of that investment and the future jobs that would be available there.

I get annoyed when this is presented as a debate of one or the other. The Minister is right; we must meet the energy requirements in total.

**Deputy Roderic O'Gorman:** It is important to outline that Ireland is at the most extreme end of vulnerability because of the growth of data centre demand. We host approximately 120 data centres. Today, they consume 21% of all energy we produce. Forty centres are in planning and development right now. No other country reports a higher share of domestic energy consumption by data centres than Ireland.

We understand the importance of the digitalisation of our economy but this can only be done in a way that serves the environment and people best. This is what was correctly alluded to by the Minister's own Secretary General recently. AI-supporting data centres consume much more energy than the typical data centre. How will the Government strike this balance? Will it prioritise housing over data centres when it comes to connections or will it step up LNG-fuelled electricity production to make up the difference and, as such, annihilate our climate targets?

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** We are not going to annihilate our climate targets. This Government is as committed as the previous Government was to the energy transition, reducing emissions and working as hard as we can to achieve the targets that have been set.

On the expansion of renewable energy, 40% of all our energy last year was generated through renewables. We have made incredible progress in that regard, not just in the previous Government, but since 2005. In 2005, 7% of our electricity was generated by renewables, but that figure is 40% 20 years later. There are real opportunities with offshore renewables. There are now five projects out to further information and planning on the east coast and there has been the Government decision on the national DMAP to accelerate the delivery of offshore renewables.

Investment in our grid is absolutely critical. The level of investment over the term of this Government in our grid, both in distribution and generation, will be unprecedented. It will be

multiples of the previous one. We must also ensure as a country that we remain at the cutting edge of new technologies.

Housing is an absolute priority for this Government. In the previous Government, we delivered 135,000 new homes. It was not a question of any sector above housing; housing was the number one priority and remains so. Under the national development plan review, however, the three main priorities are housing, water and energy. That is critical. I do not think anybody could or should disagree with that.

Look at the jobs underpinned by the investment in data and digital infrastructure in this country. Some of the largest employers in this country - in Deputy O’Gorman’s own constituency - are located in Ireland because their data is located here, too. There is headroom to 2030 on already committed connection agreements, and that is not instead of housing. Those who present this as an issue of data centres getting connections instead of housing are simply not correct. It might be populous to say that but it is not correct.

**Deputy Roderic O’Gorman:** The Minister’s own Secretary General presented it that way.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** Deputy O’Gorman will have his chance to speak in a minute.

**Deputy Malcolm Byrne:** I welcome what the Minister is saying. The Secretary General might wish to reflect on some of her words because the Minister’s Department is responsible for ensuring we have a sufficient level of energy. My frustration, as I know is the Minister’s, is about the delays, particularly when it comes to offshore renewables. We are talking about 5 GW of offshore wind energy being generated by 2030. Our target then will be to get up to 20 GW by 2040. We need to start thinking at that level. I do not like it being presented as we only have this much energy, so we have to make a choice. We have got to be ambitious, even if it requires the Minister banging heads together every Monday morning, to ensure that we meet the renewable energy targets to fund the housing we need but also the digital economy. I welcome the Minister’s ambition in that regard. The future is both green and digital.

**Deputy Roderic O’Gorman:** The Taoiseach and the Minister for public expenditure, Deputy Chambers, rejected the warnings raised by the Minister, Deputy O’Brien’s Secretary General that Ireland would be forced to choose between housing and AI data centres. I believe they and the Minister are far too quick to dismiss concerns by the most senior civil servant in the latter’s Department.

There has been positive growth in energy generated by renewables in recent years but we are also seeing this being eaten up by the increased demand of data centres. We need to be honest, in that there are some choices ahead of us. The Government needs to set out how those choices will be balanced. Currently, 21% of all energy produced in this country is consumed by data centres. Our digital economy is well supported and any additional growth cannot be at the expense of the nine housing connections, nor can it be done by increased fossil fuel dependency.

The Minister mentioned the plan earlier. When will that plan be ready and can he commit that it will entail no increased use of electricity generated from gas?

**Deputy Darragh O’Brien:** There is no dispute within my Department and the Secretary General is a very committed public servant who I work with extremely well. We are all in agreement that we need to expand our energy generation through renewables, which we are

doing, and improve our grid resilience and the capacity of our grid across the country. This is what we will be doing to ensure that we can meet not competing demands, but demands across all sectors. Housing for our people is fundamental. It is never in question.

Deputy O’Gorman stated that our digital economy was now well supported by that 21% of energy it was using. I am assuming by him saying this that he supports this happening or would he reverse that? Our job is to ensure we expand renewables in particular. While respecting the planning decisions recently made by An Bord Pleanála, some of those projects are now out to further information, which will delay their commencement, but those ORESS 1 developers are still committed to developing those offshore renewables.

*11 o’clock*

We learned a lot from that. We also have the south coast DMAP which went through without a judicial review. The accelerated national DMAP which will be completed by 2027.

Let us not forget about onshore. There is significant interest in the next auction this year. There will be significant participation in onshore wind and onshore solar. Look at what we have been able to do on solar - in 2018, 0.6% of energy was generated through solar in this country. Now, on a good day it is about 14%. The average in the last full year was just over 3%. It is growing and growing. That is clean, green energy, it is our energy, it is sustainable, and it is reducing our dependence on fossil fuels and on others for supplies of our energy. The Greenlink interconnector from Wexford to Britain is now electrified. There will be completion shortly of the Celtic interconnector. All that energy infrastructure has been put in place. There is no question of us increasing our dependence on fossil fuels. We are moving on and will continue to do that.

*Question No. 110 taken with Written Answers.*

## **Energy Policy**

111. **Deputy Roderic O’Gorman** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment if his Department’s policy correctly reflects the balance between energy demand for housing versus energy demand for data centres; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30075/25]

**Deputy Roderic O’Gorman:** Many jurisdictions over the past decade have been dealing with the dramatic rise in energy consumption driven by the growth in data centres. We are no different here. Our challenge is probably even greater. I believe, and it is witnessed by what has been said by the Minister, the Taoiseach and others, that there is a clear preference for increased data centres and their use. Will the Minister outline how that will be balanced with other elements of the economy?

**Deputy Darragh O’Brien:** There is no clear preference for data centres over anything else. That is just not correct. Our priorities are for the delivery of housing and additional water infrastructure, investing in our energy grid and supporting indigenous jobs and investment and FDI. This is a red herring, trying to bring forward the narrative that we are not connecting houses to the grid because we are connecting large energy users instead. That is not true; that is not the case. We have already contracted headroom to deal with large energy users up to 2030.

Independently of me - it is not just me saying it - the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, through EirGrid and ESB Networks, has already put forward its plans up to 2030, which will deal with 50,000 homes per year, the homes Government said it wants to deliver over its term, and deal with economic growth. Look at what our energy system has been able to do. Going back to 1990, the economy has grown sixfold, the population is up 50% and we built 135,000 homes in the previous Government, of which the Deputy was part. No one came to me and said an estate was not being built because there was a big data centre or large pharmaceutical or other company across the road. I will not say it is dishonest but it is disingenuous to continue with this argument that there is a conflict between economic growth, investment in our grid and housing growth; there is not.

**Deputy Roderic O’Gorman:** The Minister used the words “disingenuous” and “red herring”. I am referring to a warning raised by the Secretary General of the Minister’s own Department. It is a warning and an issue. She spoke about a balance between AI, particularly the highly intensive data centres required for new AI developments, and housing. If there is a red herring, it was not I who raised it originally. I made the point in an earlier question about 21% use of energy by data centres here in Ireland right now. The next nearest country is Singapore at 7.5%. That is the difference. It will grow to 28% if all of those 40 data centres about which I spoke earlier are granted planning permission. The Minister already set out how some of the big offshore wind projects have been delayed because of An Bord Pleanála’s decisions. How will we bridge that gap and, at the same time, decarbonise the huge parts of our economy that still rely on fossil fuels and need to be decarbonised?

**Deputy Darragh O’Brien:** There is still significant potential in onshore renewables. I mentioned the auction later this year, RESS 5, which I believe will be heavily subscribed. These projects already have connection agreements and planning permission. There has already been significant growth there. We want to see construction in our offshore renewable projects in the next couple of years. I am just being honest; it unlikely we will see those projects fully connected to our grid by 2029 or 2030. There will possibly be one. The remainder will come in early 2030 and 2031. Life exists post 2030. The year 2030 is a target date set clearly in our climate targets but there are years after that. Last year, we hit 5 GW of onshore. We have vast potential to do a lot more and we will because we have put the infrastructure in place to do that. We will continue with the auction and engagement process with the development sector in relation to our renewables.

**Deputy Roderic O’Gorman:** I thank the Minister for his honesty about the risk of some of those projects not delivering within the 2030 timeline. Would it be the Minister’s belief then that if those renewable projects are not going to deliver in that timeline, we must look at the timeline within which new data centres are brought on? There are 40 in various stages. Some have been granted full planning permission. If they are all brought on to the system between now and 2030, that will be a further 7% growth in the overall total of our energy system being used by data centres. If our renewables are not coming online at the speed we and the Minister would like, do we also have to take a similar approach to delaying the connection of further data centres to our system? Will the plan about which the Minister spoke be cognisant of that?

**Deputy Darragh O’Brien:** The plan will be cognisant of what energy capacity we have. That is across the board. I do not give the connection agreements. They are done independently. The Deputy will know that some data centres have not been given connection agreements. It has already happened where it is not deemed appropriate. We need to plan for the future too. That is why I mentioned 2030 and that life exists post 2030. Some project timelines for plan-

ning and delivery will be past that date. The priority for this Government is delivering housing for our people and investing in our grid, water and public transport. Electric vehicle charging and the advancement of electric vehicles also takes capacity from our grid, as will heat pumps and more homes, jobs and people. PR6 takes that into account. CRU will then look at connection agreements, especially the large energy user policy on which it has engaged with stakeholders, not just on the data centre side but across the board.

## Energy Policy

112. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment if he will provide an update on the preparation of the business case seeking to establish future State funding, from 2026 to 2030, to support efficient district heating projects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30338/25]

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Will the Minister of State provide an update on the preparation of the business case seeking to establish future State funding to support efficient district heating projects? I have spoken to the Minister of State before about the wider issue of district heating. Stakeholders in the industry say the support scheme for renewable heat, for example, needs to be looked at to make it more fit for purpose to deliver district heating. We have a specific issue with communal heating systems which also needs to be addressed, which I will deal with later.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** District heating can play a key role in improving energy efficiency and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Government policy is supportive of the expansion of district heating to contribute to the diversification of fuel supply to decarbonise the heat sector. A district heating steering group was established to support the development of district heating in Ireland. The steering group report, which was approved by Government in July 2023, contains a range of recommendations setting the future policy direction for the development of the sector, including with respect to providing financial support for district heating infrastructure. In line with the district heating steering group report recommendation to provide financial support for district heating, the Department and Ministers are seeking a multi-annual financial allocation for effective district heating projects over the period 2026 to 2030. Investing now in the early phase infrastructure will deliver key backbone elements for district heating networks that will decarbonise heat for larger anchor customers within the decade and can be further leveraged, through future investment, to target smaller heat loads in the medium to longer term. As part of this process, and in line with the infrastructure guidelines, my Department, in partnership with the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland's district heating centre of excellence, is preparing a business case seeking to establish future State funding from 2026 to 2030 to support efficient district heating projects in suitable locations, usually urban areas with high heat density.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** It would be good to have a timeline for when the Minister of State sees that business case being in place. I think we all agree on the necessity of renewables and decarbonisation. We have seen some district heating projects that make complete sense where waste energy, rather than remaining waste, is piped in and used as a means of providing heat. We need as much as possible of this done as soon as possible. The Minister of State talks to the stakeholders, I assume. I would like an update on the interactions with the companies that are looking to put plans in place because they are still talking about how there is insufficient support. We have schemes that are not fit for purpose from a point of view of delivering. I will

deal with communal heating systems and the particular issues in a moment.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** We are currently actively working to enhance the support scheme for renewable heat to better support district systems. Included in that is ensuring we have industrial waste heat from sectors like pharmaceutical manufacturing and data centres. The SEAI, which administers the scheme, has already completed its 2024 annual review. That made clear recommendations on adapting the scheme for large-scale district heating. That includes raising the investment aid cap to reflect the current intensity of district heat infrastructure. Others were ensuring the eligibility for key components like pipework, energy centres and network connections. We are looking at working to ensure we can support these recommendations. The Minister is also progressing the heat network Bill, which will provide the regulatory certainty but also customer protections and licensing frameworks. What we need to do is come together on this.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I ask him the Minister of State to come back to me in writing on where that is. Obviously it is very positive. We all want to have schemes that are fit for purpose. We want to see we can actually deliver district heating systems at scale. I return to the Achilles' heel that exists with communal heating systems. I spoke to the Minister before about Carlinn Hall and I spoke to the previous Minister many times. He opened this particular housing estate. It has 200 homes and unfortunately the system that was biomass-fed is now gas-fed. We need to find an alternative. I have spoken to some companies and the SEAI about it. There may be something in train, in which case it is a proposal we will be bringing to the Government. There has been a feasibility study in the area on geothermal energy, a solution that would probably require a number of parts. I hope to get a promise from the Government on delivering for the people concerned. This obviously became a huge issue when gas prices went through the roof, but it is also an environmental disaster. There is a legal framework in an awful lot of other countries to deal with this issue, but it is an anomaly we still have here.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh):** Glaoim ar an Teachta Byrne.

**Deputy Malcolm Byrne:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach. I entirely agree with Deputy Ó Murchú on the importance of district heating systems, but a very successful model to examine is the one operated by South Dublin County Council which heats facilities of TU Dublin and the council. It was opened by the previous Minister, Eamon Ryan. It provides a sufficient level of low-carbon heating to a number of connected buildings in the area. Where does that heat come from? It is generated by data centres operated in south Dublin. It is a very successful model and one that can be followed.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I suggest Deputy Ó Murchú write formally to the Department about the specifics of the scheme he is interested in. We will certainly get a response to him.

To add to Deputy Byrne's point, we are building momentum in this regard and we can see there are practical realities on the ground in many communities. He talked about the large-scale operation in south Dublin. There is also one in Blanchardstown. Fingal County Council uses waste heat from a data centre to serve public sector businesses and residential customers. There is also a strong pipeline outside Dublin. In Waterford and Galway private developers are working with local authorities to submit preliminary project scopes to the SEAI. There are also feasibility studies in Dundalk, Drogheda, Naas, Maynooth and Arklow and more towns are expressing interest. The Department is currently working with the district heating centre of excellence in the SEAI and we want to ensure this vision is clear and that we can deliver district

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heating so it can become a mainstream low-carbon solution for many Irish communities.

*Question No. 113 taken with Written Answers.*

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh):** Táimid ag rith as am agus mar sin ligfidh mé don Teachta Daly Ceist Uimh. 114 a chur agus freagra a fháil air.

### **Departmental Schemes**

114. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the progress in meeting the 2030 retrofitting and heat pump targets; the measures his Department taking to accelerate this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30274/25]

**Deputy Pa Daly:** I ask the Minister to outline the progress made towards meeting the 2030 retrofitting and heat pump targets. Similarly to the EU targets, these measures seem to be out of reach for many people who are of limited means. What measures are his Department taking to accelerate this?

**Deputy Darragh O'Brien:** I will be really quick because I will supply the Deputy with the written answer, but I should have said earlier that I have tasked the SEAI with looking at options with its grants. I do not mean increasing the amount of grants but seeing how we can break them down and make them more accessible. I am also doing that with electric vehicles and looking at options for low- to middle-income families, including scrappage and seeing whether there is anything we can do in rural parts. The heat pumps seem to have plateaued in relation to delivery last year, though not on new homes. They have been extremely successful on new homes. The retrofitting and installation of heat pumps can be extremely invasive for householders as well. The technology is not there yet with plug-in heat pumps, so unless there is a very deep retrofit on the home, people do not opt for them. I have asked the SEAI to come up with certain options for that on how we might be able to break down our grants with respect to what levels of work one needs to do. I have received a report on that and I am assessing it. I will bring forward options, including, most importantly, perhaps new options, for householders over the coming months.

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### **Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters**

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

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss if the N70 national secondary Ring of Kerry road can be brought up to an acceptable standard.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the planned extension of a secondary school in Carnew, County Wicklow, and to provide an update and timeframe on project completion.

Deputy James Geoghegan - To discuss the need to expand the access and inclusion model to support children below the current age of eligibility which is two years and 8 months.

Deputy John Brady - To discuss provisions for children in Greystones, County Wicklow, still without a secondary school place for the upcoming academic year.

Deputy Erin McGreehan - To discuss use of Louth County Hospital in Dundalk as a surgical hub for the north east.

Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn, Pearse Doherty and Pat the Cope Gallagher - To discuss the need for a surgical hub to be located at Letterkenny University Hospital.

Deputy Brian Stanley - To discuss the implementation of safeguarding policies in nursing homes owned by (details supplied) following HIQA reports on nursing homes in Portlaoise and in Beneavin, Dublin.

Deputy Louis O'Hara - To discuss the need for redress for the former patients of an orthodontist.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh - To discuss the need for a public inquiry into the miscarriage of justice for those convicted of the Sallins train robbery in 1976.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae - To discuss the use of the district hospital in Killarney for respite care.

Deputy Alan Kelly - To discuss the need for greater investment to resource An Garda Síochána.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan - To discuss the up-to-date position on Veeva being made available on the drugs payment scheme.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss the establishment of a new secondary school in Cork for students with complex needs.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly - To discuss current and planned school building projects and related matters in Kildare.

Deputy Pádraig Rice - To discuss providing extra time to students with dyslexia when sitting State examinations.

Deputy Mattie McGrath - To discuss a sustainable funding stream for Cluain Training and Enterprise Centre in Clonmel, County Tipperary.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the need for disability services for residents of Lusk.

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss the urgent need for regulation and a statutory framework around commercial drone delivery services in residential areas.

Deputy Claire Kerrane - To discuss the Government response to recent wildfires in Gortaganny, County Roscommon.

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Deputy Roderic O’Gorman - To discuss the provision of an emergency works grant to a community school in Dublin 15 (details supplied) to undertake repairs to its roof.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss the interception by Israel of the *Madleen* ship which was travelling to Gaza with vital humanitarian supplies.

The matters raised by Deputies Moynihan, Stanley, Rice, Ó Snodaigh and Kelly have been selected for discussion.

## **Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate**

### **Medicinal Products**

**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** Veoza offers an alternative to HRT for women at menopause. It is a game-changer for so many, especially those for whom HRT is contraindicated. These are typically cancer survivors for whom hormone therapies are just not an option. Veoza was introduced into Ireland early last year and costs approximately €80 per month for the women using it. The pharmacoeconomic assessment has been ongoing since last spring. The Minister of State will be aware that Ireland has one of the slower processes across Europe for approving qualifying new drugs. Many other countries have approved the use of Veoza, and GPs are currently prescribing Veoza in Ireland as well. At €80 per month that is a difficult cost. When it is not included in the drugs payment scheme, DPS, that €80 is over and above any other medical cost the person may have. Many of these people have already fought cancer and may have other medication costs associated with that. The €80 payment for Veoza each month is over and above the costs of those medicines.

Some people may choose to take a non-hormone option, but for a limited number of people it is the only option. It is the only route available to them. When there is only a limited number of people, that means a limited cost to the State on the DPS. Studies have shown the dramatic quality of life improvement for those who are using Veoza. Symptoms reduced as quickly as within the first week. Since the pharmacoeconomic assessment commenced last spring, there has been a significant policy advancement for women with menopause care with the introduction of the free HRT in the this year’s budget and implemented last week. That made a drug option available from the State to people for menopause care. Is this policy decision feeding into the pharmacoeconomic assessment? Surely it is, as it would be a significant change in policy since the assessment commenced. It would surely add to the case for approving Veoza on the drugs payment scheme.

I mentioned that in Ireland we would have a slower process for approving new drugs under the DPS. Is there an indicative timeline for the pharmacoeconomic assessment? If there is not, will the Minister of State’s officials raise it with the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics to get a direction? Each month this goes on, this is an added cost for the women who are waiting. Has the Minister of State also examined the possibility of Veoza being included in a variant of the free HRT scheme?

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O’Donnell):** I thank the

Deputy for raising this issue, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. I will provide some background and then address the Deputy's question.

Fezolinetant, marketed under the trade name Veoza by Astellas Pharma is a medicine used to treat moderate to severe vasomotor symptoms such as hot flushes and night sweats associated with menopause. The European Medicines Agency granted marketing authorisation for this product in December 2023. The company marketing this medicine made an application for addition to the HSE reimbursement list in February 2024. The HSE has statutory responsibility for medicine pricing and reimbursement decisions, under the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013. HSE decisions on which medicines are reimbursed by the taxpayer are made on objective, scientific and economic grounds on the advice of the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics, NCPE. Formal processes govern applications for the pricing and reimbursement of medicines and new uses of existing medicines to be funded or reimbursed, or both. In March 2024, the NCPE completed a rapid review of Veoza. Factors that are evaluated during rapid review include the cost of the drug relative to potential comparators, uncertainty in comparative clinical effectiveness, uncertainty in cost effectiveness and the potential drug budget impact. On this occasion, the NCPE recommended a full health technology assessment, HTA, of Veoza to assess its clinical effectiveness and cost effectiveness compared with the current standard of care. Subsequently, the HSE commissioned a full HTA and a pre-submission consultation took place between the NCPE and the company in April 2024. The next step in the agreed process is for the applicant to submit a full HTA dossier to the NCPE. To date, a full HTA dossier has not been received by the NCPE. Given the substantial budgetary impact of the funds sought by the applicant, the company must engage with the pricing and reimbursement process in order for the application to progress.

The State acknowledges the importance of access to medicines and has made considerable investments in new medicines in recent years. A record of more than €3 billion, almost €1 in every €8 of public funding spent on health in 2023 was spent on medicines. This is an unprecedented level of investment in supporting patients through the availability of the latest and wide range of medicines. Between budget 2021 and budget 2024, an additional €128 million was allocated for new medicines, which facilitated the introduction of 194 new drugs for reimbursement by the HSE, including 74 for treating cancer and 46 for treating rare diseases. For 2025, funding of €30 million has been allocated to enable access to new medicines. This will come directly from efficiencies to be achieved by the HSE. Throughout this year and over the coming years, we will continue to focus on investment in medicines including through the maximisation of the considerable budget available, to ensure patients can access medicines in as timely a way as possible.

**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** While the assessment is ongoing, this is costing €80 each month for women who do not an alternative option available to them. It has been a constructive move to get free HRT available to people. However, it is almost like it is dangling out there and there is a cohort of women who are not able to avail of it and damn it they have already had a hell of a challenge seeing off their cancer. It does not make to have a game-changer drug available and just not made available. We have what appears to be one of slowest processes for approving new drugs under the DPS. There must be some way of improving that and making drugs available in a more timely manner, especially when we see that the same drugs are being approved in other states across Europe. These women have seen off their cancer but because of their medical condition, they do not have the option to go for HRT. This other option is almost available to them. It is available to women who can afford to pay the €80 over and above the

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DPS threshold. Is there a way of prioritising it? Is there any indication of a timeline for approval? Will the Minister of State raise that with his officials and give some guidance to women across the country who would avail of Veoza?

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** I once again thank the Deputy for his interest in this important area. I will bring his comments to the attention of the Minister for Health and the officials in the Department. As the initial reply stated, the next step in the agreed process is for the applicant company to submit a full HTA dossier to the NCPE. To date, a full HTA dossier has not been received by the NCPE, which awaits that submission from the applicant company. As stated, I will bring the points the Deputy raised to the attention of the Minister and her officials. The Deputy made a very cogent point on a particular issue for women.

### **Nursing Homes**

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** This matter relates to nursing homes and the lack of enforcement of standards. Last week, we witnessed shocking scenes in the Residence nursing home in Portlaoise and the Beneavin nursing home in Dublin. I am sure the Minister of State is aware that there are other cases as well. We saw was: a shocking level of neglect; abusive behaviour; residents told to soil on incontinence pads; elderly, vulnerable residents left lying in urine for hours at night, calling for help but getting none; rough handling; shortages of sanitary goods and other basic items; and no assistance with eating, which is a major issue. There are 15 or 20 minutes allocated to getting people fed. Some of these people cannot feed themselves, so the food is not eaten. Then it is taken away as if they are not hungry that day, when they might be very hungry.

A former carer in Portlaoise nursing home has informed us that the RTÉ programme only touched the surface. She described at length what she saw during her time working in the nursing home over a number of years and outlined the appalling practices there. There are some shocking examples, and these occurred before anything came out on RTÉ. An elderly mother was looking to have her incontinence pad changed and, despite repeated requests, it did not happen. Her family eventually took her out of there. A man with Alzheimer's from another town in the county was recognised by a former neighbour walking around the town - he did not even know where he was - and contacted one of his family members. They got him back to the nursing home. He was wandering around and nobody had missed him. A plan was agreed and corrective measures were to be taken, but these were not implemented.

The protected disclosure was about a third nursing home. It was not about those two nursing homes at all. The person making the protected disclosure had to go to RTÉ because nothing was done for two years. The shortage of staff was not addressed. The abuse and neglect continued despite families bringing it to the attention of management and being assured that improvement plans would be put in place and it would be addressed. This did not happen.

Worst of all, the nursing home continued taking admissions despite being banned by HIQA. Where are the sanctions? There are none. HIQA has failed miserably. I had faith in HIQA up to about ten days ago. I have no faith in it now. I have lost all confidence in its ability to monitor care in nursing homes and enforce regulations and rules. Will we have a Garda investigation into some of the criminal activity we saw? Has HIQA issued financial penalties? Has it deregistered any of the nursing homes owned by these large companies. I understand that the one in this case owns 27 homes.

I met representatives from the Irish nursing home alliance today. They outlined that 77 small independent nursing homes have closed in the past five years. Most of this happened due to strict demands. HIQA holds such homes to the letter of the law in order to make sure they are closed. Ballard Lodge in Portlaoise, which was providing excellent care - I never heard a complaint against it - closed recently. That is one of the most recent casualties of HIQA standards. These smaller homes are being held to the standards. Abbeyleigh public nursing home was almost closed 13 years ago because of HIQA demands, but a large public campaign that and others were involved in stopped it from happening. Thank God we kept it there. Why does it appear there is a more lackadaisical approach to the larger multiples such as that which we saw last week on the television? Have they got more clout? I do not know.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** I thank the Deputy for raising this very important issue. We were all shocked and appalled by what we saw on the "RTÉ Investigates" programme last week. I appreciate the opportunity to comment on the matter. I especially recognise how incredibly difficult it has been for the residents of the Residence in Portlaoise and Beneavin Manor and their families. We heard that first hand from the family of Audeon Guy this evening on "Prime Time".

I want to make it clear that poor care, neglect and any form of abuse of individuals residing in long-term residential care centres is wholly unacceptable. The highest standards of care and dignity must be always upheld, without exception. Every nursing home resident deserves the highest standard of care at all times. To achieve this, registered providers must adequately support their staff. Having effective governance and management arrangements in place ensures that staff are equipped to deliver person-centred care to residents.

The distressing footage aired during the "RTÉ Investigates" programme highlighted serious issues of non-compliance within these facilities. The welfare of residents and their families remains a paramount concern for me. Action is being taken to address these failures and strengthen oversight to ensure the protection and well-being of all individuals in these nursing homes.

First, I fully expect HIQA and the office of the chief inspector to utilise all powers available to them to ensure rigorous oversight and accountability in nursing home care. HIQA's chief inspector has confirmed their continuous intensive engagements with the two nursing homes concerned and has committed to providing me with an update on their progress by the end of this week. I assure the Deputy that my Department and I are monitoring developments closely, with both these nursing homes and the welfare of residents remaining my highest priority.

Second, I have formally requested an overview of the nursing home operators owned by Emeis. The chief inspector has committed to furnishing an interim report to me by the end of this week and a full report by the end of next week, providing an overview of regulatory history, including but not limited to regulatory compliance, escalating enforcement actions and any additional conditions of registration.

Third, the directors of nursing from both local HSE community support teams have been on site at the two nursing homes in question. Additionally, local safeguarding and protection teams are actively reviewing all safeguarding concerns raised in relation to these facilities.

I and Department of Health officials met with representative bodies and stakeholders from the nursing home sector earlier today. The engagements were constructive, with an immediate focus on delivering the highest quality of care to residents of nursing homes in Ireland.

On the safeguarding points the Deputy made and on adult safeguarding in the sector more generally, the Government is fully committed to strengthening existing protections. We will publish a national adult safeguarding policy for the health and social care sector shortly. The policy will commit to the development of adult safeguarding legislation for the sector and will build on the range of existing legislation, policies and procedures already in place in the sector for preventing, reporting and responding to abuse. The Government has included a health (adult safeguarding) Bill in its current legislative programme to facilitate this. It is recognised that this will be an important further development in preventing abuse and protecting vulnerable adults from abuse.

What happened in the two nursing homes featured in the “RTÉ Investigates” programme was appalling. It was sheer neglect and abuse of older people. This is something that I, the Department and the Government take very seriously. It is something I want to ensure, through the process I have outlined, never happens again.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I thank the Minister of State. I would like an explanation for a whistleblower having, after two years of inaction on the part of the chief inspector and HIQA, to go to the media to highlight all of this. Surely that is a scandalous situation. They say you judge a society by how it treats its weakest. The weakest are the elderly and the very young - infant children. The Minister of State said the chief inspector will carry out a review. The chief inspector has failed in relation to three nursing homes, and possibly many more. My understanding is the chief inspector’s position, legally, is supposed to be separate from the inspections carried out by HIQA operatives, yet HIQA staff must have their reports approved by the chief inspector. HIQA does the report but it is filtered through the chief inspector despite the fact that there is supposed to be separation. Why does the chief inspector have to approve all of these reports? The problem is that this rests on one person. One person’s determination or judgment will decide what will or will not happen. HIQA cannot issue the report without that approval.

When will unannounced inspections be carried out? They must be thorough and strict inspections. When will there be effective sanctions? What about deregistration and financial penalties? Are there financial penalties? I do not know. Perhaps the Minister of State can tell me whether there are penalties in law. When will this important legislation - the 2017 Bill on safeguarding the elderly - be enacted? It has been sitting there for eight years. We are all to blame for that but primarily the Government is to blame because it is a Government Bill. I would like to see it progressed. I understand that the officials have drafted the Bill but we have not seen it in the House. We need to do this urgently.

**Deputy Kieran O’Donnell:** There is a commitment in the programme for Government to bring forward an adult safeguarding policy for the health and social care sector. I expect the issue will be brought to the Cabinet before the summer recess. Following that, we will be looking for approval to progress a health and adult safeguarding Bill, which is in the current legislative programme. It is a matter of absolute priority.

I am on record as saying that I would like to see inspections taking place more quickly and timeframes for protected disclosures. The Deputy will appreciate that I want to work within a process. Immediately after the two nursing homes were named by RTÉ, I met representatives of HIQA and requested two things. The first was that HIQA would engage intensively with the nursing homes. It committed to doing that. The second was that it would provide a report on the Emeis group and all its nursing homes. I asked for an overview of all its nursing homes and

its regulatory history, including but not limited to regulatory compliance, escalating enforcement actions and any additional conditions of registration. I expect to receive a report with an update on the two nursing homes by the end of this week. I also expect an interim report in respect of the Emeis group by the end of this week and a more substantive report on it - the full report - by the end of next week.

This is all about older people in nursing homes. I want them to have safe environments. We all have elderly relatives. It is something I feel strongly and passionately about.

### **State Examinations**

**Deputy Pádraig Rice:** I wish the best of luck to all those sitting State examinations - the junior and leaving certificate examinations - across the country. Sitting State examinations can be a challenging and gruelling experience but it can be extra challenging for those with additional needs and dyslexia.

Unlike other countries and third level, the State does not provide additional time to students with dyslexia during State examinations. The State is doing a cruel disservice to these students by not providing them with additional time. I would like to see this change and the Minister to consider the proposal that extra time be provided for junior and leaving certificate students at next year's examinations.

I know from my own experience as somebody with dyslexia that the additional time provided at third level makes a significant difference. In University College Cork, UCC, I got ten minutes extra per hour in each examination. I also got great support from the disability support service in the university. I went on to do a master's degree in Oxford and was provided with 15 minutes extra per hour, a tutor and the option to type examinations. It is challenging that students must break through educational barriers to get supports and that the higher one goes up the educational ladder, the better the supports that are in place, which is counterintuitive. We need to provide students at second level with the same kinds of supports that are being provided at third level.

These kinds of supports are in place in other countries. In the UK, students are provided with 25% extra time. In Italy, it is 30%. In France, it is 33%. It is deeply unfair that students in Dundalk do not get extra time but those in Newry do. We need to consider this proposal seriously. Due consideration should be given to reforming the rules in advance of next year's junior and leaving certificate examinations.

We had a briefing in the AV room from students Sive O'Brien and Madison Moore from Our Lady's Bower Secondary School in Athlone. They talked about their own experiences as students with dyslexia. They did a project for the BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition that looked at the international evidence and made a strong case for providing this additional time. Other students across the country have also advocated for these changes. In my own county of Cork, Alice R. Perks was speaking out about this. She spoke powerfully on 96FM. She is a published poet. She was calling for extra time in examinations.

Dyslexia Ireland has also been campaigning on the issue. Some 33,000 people have now signed its petition calling for extra time. There are also recommendations from others. Professor Áine Hyland made a recommendation in 2008 to provide for additional time but it was not

acted on. The Ombudsman for Children raised concerns around reasonable accommodation in a report in 2016. What is holding this up? Why is the change not being made? Why are we not providing better reasonable accommodation for students with dyslexia?

While we talk about the challenges, it is also worth highlighting some of the positives. There is a great organisation called Made By Dyslexia, which highlights some of the positives of being dyslexic, including better reasoning skills, communication skills and visualisation. Richard Branson, who is also dyslexic, calls it his superpower. EY has published a report about better problem-solving skills. There are challenges for these students but some of them also have additional skills.

We in the Social Democrats would like additional supports, not just for the State examinations, but also throughout the second level experience. We also want better teacher training around dyslexia, dyspraxia and neurodivergence more generally. That needs to be ongoing throughout the school experience.

Is the Government going to provide the additional time that is being called for in next year's junior and leaving certificate examinations? If not, why not?

**Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy):** I thank the Deputy for giving me the opportunity to provide an update on this important matter on behalf of the Minister for Education and Youth, Helen McEntee.

The State Examinations Commission has responsibility for the reasonable accommodations at certificate examinations, RACE, scheme. A central tenet of the RACE scheme is to ensure equitable treatment for all candidates. The range of accommodations provided within the scheme has been designed to ensure fairness for all when facilitating candidates in demonstrating their level of achievement. It is important to note that access to the scheme is needs based rather than based on a specific diagnosis.

The review that the Deputy raises is being undertaken by the State Examinations Commission during a time of senior cycle redevelopment and in the context of the wider special educational needs policy landscape. It is a comprehensive and system-wide review of the scheme. The programme for Government commits to developing an appropriate mechanism to allow additional time for students with specific needs and in certain circumstances, and also to ensure that those who use assistive technology can do so in State examinations. The review now under way by the State Examinations Commission will seek to take account of these and all relevant issues, and best practice internationally. The review is being directed by the board of commissioners of the State Examinations Commission and overseen by a steering group, with the terms of reference published on the State Examinations Commission website. The steering group is chaired by the CEO of the State Examinations Commission and is composed of external members drawn from government, academic and international organisations, and internal State Examinations Commission members of staff. The inclusion of internal State Examinations Commission members of staff as well as external members is designed to ensure that rolling changes can be implemented as the review progresses rather than awaiting a big bang approach at the end of the full review period. This will ensure any changes are implemented as early as possible in the interests of students.

Already on a pilot basis for 2025 examinations, additional time for vision-impaired candidates who are under the care of the visiting teacher service is being increased from ten minutes

per hour or part of an hour to 15 minutes for the junior cycle, leaving certificate applied and the leaving certificate examinations. This increases the additional time for these candidates to between 25% and 38% of the total examination duration. For example, in an examination of two and a half hours, additional time of 15 minutes per hour increases the total examination time now provided by 30%.

The consultation to take place over the coming months will inform any appropriate changes to the shape of the scheme for the 2026 State exams and beyond, with the details of the scheme for 2026 to be communicated to schools before the end of this year in line with normal time-lines. Given the wide range of difficulties for which accommodations are sought, it is intended to seek the views of users through extensive consultation and engagement so as to capture all perspectives and ensure all voices are heard equally. This will include young people with special educational needs, their families, and representative organisations, including Dyslexia Ireland, and is to take place over the coming months.

The State Examinations Commission absolutely acknowledges that there is increasing complexity in the special educational landscape and, by extension, in the impact on candidates with special educational needs taking the certificate examinations. The extensive consultation and engagement to be undertaken as part of this comprehensive review will provide an opportunity for the views of those affected to be incorporated into the consideration.

**Deputy Pádraig Rice:** While I welcome the review, as I set out, we now have reports going back as far as 2008 that have called for this change to be made. Many people will view the Minister of State's answer as a delay. What we want is an answer on whether the Government will provide the additional time for students' exams that has been called for. It is ten minutes extra per hour in their exams.

It is also worth saying that the international evidence is already there. I have set out what other countries do. We also know what third level institutions in Ireland do, so we do not need to reinvent the wheel. We do not need a very wide consultation on this. We can look to what is happening in third level institutions throughout the country, where students with dyslexia are provided with additional time in their exams. It is deeply unfair that students get these accommodations at third level that are not being provided at second level. This is something that should be given real consideration. I would like the Minister of State to discuss this with the Ministers at the Department responsible. Students deserve a clear answer on whether this will be changed for next year. They have waited long enough for this.

As I said, views have been expressed quite clearly by people. More than 33,000 people have signed a petition calling for extra time. This is an issue that young people themselves are now speaking out about. It is not a massive change but it will make a real difference for those students. It will put them on a level playing field with other students, taking into account the challenges they face because of dyslexia, and give them the extra time to deal with comprehension, reading and a slower writing pace. The least the State Examinations Commission can do is provide these reasonable accommodations for students sitting their State exams. They are tough enough. They are gruelling exams and students with additional needs, dyslexia or other issues should not face these additional barriers. Reforms should be made. I would like the Minister of State to commit to doing that.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** As I mentioned, almost one in four candidates at the 2024 certificate examinations were provided with some form of reasonable accommodation within the RACE

scheme to support them in accessing State examinations, underlining the importance of the scheme. Deputies may be aware that an extensive range of accommodations are currently available for candidates with dyslexia. These include an individual reader, a reading assistant, an exam reading pen, a word processor, a recording device, additional time for any candidate who is using a scribe to provide for a time overhead in dictating answers, and a waiver from spelling, grammar and punctuation.

As the State Examinations Commission has affirmed, its review of the RACE scheme will seek to take account of all the relevant issues, including the question of additional time and best practice internationally. The State Examinations Commission's intention is to consult extensively with stakeholders, including representative organisations, as it progresses its review, which is of course crucial. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, welcomes its intention to progress any changes that may arise from the review on a rolling basis to avoid unnecessary delay in facilitating candidates to perform to the best of their ability in examinations. The Minister also welcomes the State Examinations Commission's commitment to addressing any issue and to improve the RACE scheme to best meet the needs of candidates with special educational needs now and into the future, while ensuring fairness for all candidates.

The Deputy asked me to bring the points he raised back to the Minister. I undertake to do so. He will appreciate that I am not in a position to give any confirmation of what might happen in the examination process next year. It is not under my remit. Equally, I do not think the Minister, Deputy McEntee, would have been able to give a confirmation today when a review is under way, but I undertake to relay back to her the points the Deputy raised.

### Miscarriages of Justice

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** I do not know how much the Minister of State knows, or even remembers, about what occurred in 1976 and thereafter following the robbery by the IRA of €150,000 from a train at Sallins, County Kildare. It was an audacious robbery at the time that hit all the headlines. What did not really hit the headlines afterwards was the Garda Síochána arrest, torture and beating of confessions out of six men. There was also a sleeping judge in the Special Criminal Court who subsequently died, a retrial thereafter, convictions and the overturning on appeal of those convictions. There has been a failure since to acknowledge the miscarriage of justice and the cruel and inhuman treatment of the men. The Minister of State might know of Nicky Kelly, who went on the run during the first trial and returned when the convictions of two others were overturned. He ended up having to go on hunger strike because all appeals failed, despite the fact that the others had their convictions overturned. Eventually, the only way to free him was to pardon him. These men are elderly at this stage with broken health. It is not just about those who are convicted. There were others who did not receive the full sentence of the court who were broken and tortured.

Nobody can deny the world has moved on from the 1970s. Oversight and transparency is the name of the game, in many ways, and are more respected. There is intolerance of any type of misbehaviour or criminal acts in An Garda Síochána, not only by members of An Garda Síochána but by the public and the political sphere. At the time, however, there seemed to be an acceptance of it. RTÉ broadcast a documentary a number of years ago, "Crimes and Confessions", which outlined the existence of a Garda "heavy gang" that seemed to be a law unto itself and seemed to have the cover of the political masters of the time. That has been followed up

recently by a podcast by the *Irish Independent* newspaper, which further outlined the failures in this instance and the need to address these failures.

It is not just myself asking. Obviously, the men themselves, namely, Brian McNally, Nicky Kelly, John Fitzpatrick, Mick Barrett and Osgur Breatnach, have relentlessly campaigned to get the State to acknowledge the truth of what occurred to them. Last year, Claire McEvoy, acting co-director of the Irish Council for Civil Liberties, ICCL, stated:

The human rights violations inflicted upon the Sallins Men by An Garda Síochána and accepted by other parts of the Irish criminal justice system were part of a systemic pattern of human rights violations endemic across many years in Ireland's history. The Irish State has systematically failed to address their treatment and the systems which enabled this treatment to occur.

*12 o'clock*

This, in a nutshell, is why there needs to be an inquiry into this.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** I thank the Deputy. This happened before I was born so my memory does not stretch that far back. I am taking this matter on behalf of the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, Deputy O'Callaghan. I will respond to the issue raised by Deputy Ó Snodaigh on the Minister's behalf.

Deputy Ó Snodaigh is aware that the issue concerns an investigation conducted almost 50 years ago, which resulted in the courts overturning the convictions of two people in 1980, a presidential pardon for a third person in 1992, and the payment of financial settlements. At the time, this case unquestionably cast a shadow on the trust we place in our criminal justice and policing systems to ensure justice is done. Miscarriages of justice serve absolutely no one. Those wrongly accused suffer greatly, as do victims and families who feel that they did not get justice. It is important to emphasise, however, that this case occurred several decades ago and I can say, without question, that the safeguards which were available at that time to those who were the subject of investigation were very different from those in place today.

As the Deputy is aware, following the Ó Briain and Martin committees, the Criminal Justice Act 1984, which regulates the treatment of persons in custody, the Garda Síochána (Complaints) Act 1986, and the Criminal Procedure Act 1993 containing a new appeal procedure based on an alleged miscarriage of justice, were introduced. In this century, the State has continued to enact legislation to develop and update our oversight processes, most significantly through the Policing, Security and Community Safety Act 2024, commenced by the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, in April.

Ireland has an exceptionally robust system of independent oversight of policing in place. Moreover, a human rights ethos is at the heart of the Garda code of ethics and in recent years a strong organisational focus has been put on embedding the principle that human rights are the foundation and purpose of policing into the everyday actions of members of An Garda Síochána.

The Deputy will appreciate that the establishment of any public inquiry is something which can only be proceeded with where it is warranted. The primary concern is that the matter at issue must be considered of significant public concern in the sense that the concern to the public is live or there has been a recent significant development and an inquiry would assist in estab-

lishing the facts.

Given all the developments that have taken place in the intervening years, including the adjudication by the courts and the granting of a presidential pardon, I am advised that the Minister is not aware of any matter of urgent public interest which would warrant reopening the matter. As the House is aware, the Minister is considering a petition received from a number of civil society organisations calling for a statutory inquiry into the Sallins case. I can offer assurances that the petition is receiving attention and the Minister expects to respond to the petitioners shortly.

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** The Minister received this correspondence almost two years ago, so it is taking a long time to receive attention. The matter itself should be receiving attention even though it is 50 years on. There is no doubting the innocence of the men; that is not why we are seeking an inquiry. The reason is the fact that the State had a system where there were rogue gardaí and non-rogue gardaí. Did the heavy gang exist at all and was it State policy? Why was it not accepted that there was a judge asleep on the bench? The reason the first case collapsed was that the judge died. Despite the denial, why was there torture of the men in question? Why, despite the fact it was obvious to everybody that the Irish Republican Socialist Party, IRSP, was not involved in the robbery, did the State continue with the convictions? Why, even when the initial convictions were overturned, did the State continue to go after Nicky Kelly and then pardon the men with no apologies to any of them for the trauma they went through, for the brutality and for the fact the State's case was that they inflicted the wounds on themselves, despite it being virtually impossible for them to do so because they were in Garda custody the whole time?

There has been no apology. The State is living in denial. The inquiry being sought is into the treatment of the men and not whether they were guilty. That has already been well established at this stage. As I said, there has not been an apology. It is not just the men themselves seeking an inquiry. Human rights organisations that are well respected not only in Ireland but abroad have demanded that the State look into this matter. It is bad form two years on that the Minister for justice still has not responded or has not met any of the men or their representatives.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** Again, on behalf of the Minister for justice, Deputy O'Callaghan, I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. As outlined, the case in question has been the subject of court proceedings, pardons and associated compensation settlements. More generally, the rights of suspects and the policing oversight regime have been completely transformed. I referred to the Policing, Security and Community Safety Act 2024, which provides a new governance and oversight regime for policing. A key part of the Act is the reformed and strengthened independent Office of the Police Ombudsman to investigate allegations of Garda wrongdoing. Another key part is the Policing and Community Safety Authority, which has significant powers of inspection and engagement and can engage with the Garda Commissioner and senior leadership team in public sessions. Our policing and criminal justice system has seen substantial and comprehensive change over the past 50 years.

In order for a public inquiry and all that entails to be warranted, it must serve an urgent public interest. With all of the developments that have taken place, there is no obvious purpose that would be served.

I assure Deputy Ó Snodaigh that the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, is examining the peti-

tion received from a number of civil society organisations seeking a statutory inquiry into the Sallins case and I am advised that the Minister intends to respond to the petitioners shortly. Deputy Ó Snodaigh alluded to the Minister having information for the past two years. As a matter of fact, the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, has been in office for approximately five months. Any fair-minded person would say that in those five months he has been very much on the ground. I take on board that he states he intends to respond shortly and I take his word on this. I will relay back to the Minister the points Deputy Ó Snodaigh has raised.

### **An Garda Síochána**

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan):** The next Topical Issue listed for debate is in the name of Deputy Kelly and it is to discuss the need for greater for greater investment to resource An Garda Síochána with the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** I am quite happy to listen to Deputy Kelly and relay his concerns to the Minister tonight but the information I was given was that this Topical Issue was withdrawn and I do not have a brief from the Department. I am not a Minister of State at the Department so I may not have a suitable answer for Deputy Kelly tonight. If he wants to proceed and make his intervention, I am happy to listen to it and relay it back to the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan. Another option is for Deputy Kelly to withdraw his matter and have it taken tomorrow. I am conscious he has waited until 12.05 a.m. and I am more than happy to sit here and take on board the points he makes this evening.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I will put it to the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach. In fairness to the Minister of State, he has been honest and direct. It is now 12.09 a.m. and I have spent five or six hours at committee meetings and then waited five or six hours to do this now.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan):** The floor is yours, Deputy.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** Wait a second though; the floor is mine but the Minister of State is saying that I withdrew this matter. I did not. It is on the system, as we can see with our own eyes. Obviously, I would expect the Minister of State to have a briefing. In actual fact, I believe the Minister or the Minister of State responding should be from the relevant Department. Is there any point in me doing this now? Where will this go if I do not take it this evening? Will it be prioritised?

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan):** What we can do is to raise it with the Ceann Comhairle for the next round of Topical Issues, if the Deputy so wishes.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** When will that be? The next round will be at 9 a.m. It is now 12.10 a.m. It is after midnight.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan):** Our options are limited.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I want to know what happened here.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan):** I want to make sure the

Deputy gets a fair go at it.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** To be fair to the Minister of State, he can only sit and listen to me. He is not even from the right Department. I will be sharing information. He will not be able to respond on the fly. It is detailed information. He will not be able to respond because he has no briefing and is not from the relevant Department, and it is now ten minutes past midnight. I was told by the Ceann Comhairle this morning, in writing, that my matter had been picked. I met the Ceann Comhairle and she told me in passing that it had been picked. I have waited all these hours to do this. It is up on the system, yet the Minister of State was not informed and we have no information or reply. What is the point in my going ahead? I want to know what relief I will get and what happened.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan):** We can raise it with the Ceann Comhairle in the morning and ask that the Deputy be accommodated in raising the matter as quickly as can be facilitated. Whether that is in the morning or on Thursday will be a decision for the Ceann Comhairle.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** At what time will I be informed in the morning? Will it be at 8.55 a.m.? This is farcical.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan):** I will not pre-empt what the Ceann Comhairle is going to do, but we can raise the matter with her because I want to give the Deputy-----

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I am not being difficult, but for this to happen at this hour of the night or morning - and I am not blaming the Minister of State - is farcical. It is an absolute farce to be waiting for all these hours and then be left in this situation. I do not see the point in proceeding.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan):** Does the Deputy want me to raise it with the Ceann Comhairle to be included in the morning?

**Deputy Robert Troy:** To be helpful, the matters for the morning will already have been selected and the relevant Deputies will be coming in for them. Perhaps I am speaking out of hand, but I do not think even Deputy Kelly will be ready to come in at 9 a.m. after staying here until 12.10 a.m. I will give a commitment. I accept that the error was probably made by the Department of Justice.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I do not know.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** It was an error, and errors can happen. To be fair to Deputy Kelly, however, he has waited until 12.10 a.m. I do not have the information to hand to be able to give him the comprehensive answer that he deserves and that is warranted. I am sure the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, will facilitate the hearing of this matter on the earliest possible date that suits Deputy Kelly and the Minister or a Minister of State from his Department, with the agreement of the Ceann Comhairle. Between the three of us, I think we can get it sorted out quickly.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan):** Is that fair enough?

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** Let me just have it documented that it is a farce to be left here until 12.10 a.m., waiting for hours, and then treated like this. In what other work environment would people be treated like this? We are all into family friendly environments.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach: (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan):** I want to make sure the Deputy gets the opportunity. We will raise the matter with the Ceann Comhairle to ensure that he does. I thank the Deputy for his patience.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** I do not have patience.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 12.13 a.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 11 Meitheamh 2025

The Dáil adjourned at 12.13 a.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 11 June 2025.