



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—*Neamhcheartaithe*

(OFFICIAL REPORT—*Unrevised*)

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions	634
Air Corps	634
Military Neutrality	636
Air Corps	640
Air Corps	642
Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions	644
Naval Service.	644
Defence Forces	646
Military Neutrality	648
Defence Forces	653
Air Corps	657
National Security	661
Defence Forces	663
Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions	664
Special Educational Needs	664
State Examinations	666
School Curriculum	669
Special Educational Needs	671
Schools Building Projects.	675
Special Education Needs	677
School Admissions	678
School Accommodation.	680
Education Schemes.	683
Early School Leavers.	685
School Facilities	687
Educational Disadvantage	689
Message from Select Committee.	690
Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions.	690
Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltai Eile - Other Members' Questions	702
Ceisteanna ar Pholasai nó ar Reachtaíocht - Questions on Policy or Legislation	704
Fisheries: Statements.	714
Nursing Homes and Care for Older Persons: Statements	739
Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters	767
Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate	767
Schools Refurbishment	767
School Transport.	770
Special Educational Needs	772
Energy Infrastructure.	775
Criminal Law (Prohibition of the Disclosure of Counselling Records) Bill 2025: Second Stage [Private Mem- bers]	778

DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 12 Meitheamh 2025

Thursday, 12 June 2025

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mairéad Farrell) i gceannas ar 8.47 a.m.

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

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Air Corps

1. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence his views on the implications of reduced capacity at Casement Aerodrome at Baldonnell caused by a reduction in staff. [31320/25]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: There is a great deal of concern at the moment regarding the situation at Baldonnell. The recent departure of some air traffic control personnel is resulting in a significant reduction in the capacity of Baldonnell, with consequent significant implications for Government aircraft and Air Corps aircraft and, more widely, for sea rescue and so on. I am seeking an update on the situation and how the Minister intends to resolve it.

Tánaiste and Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Harris): I thank Deputy Ó Laoghaire for raising this important matter. It provides me with an opportunity to set out the position and the immediate steps that I and the Government have taken to ensure that air traffic control services operating at Baldonnell are restored to full service.

Initial indications from the military authorities were received by my Department in May on the likelihood of challenges in regard to service provision. Since then, significant engagement has taken place and a number of immediate actions have been identified. This week I sought and secured Government approval for the following measures: the introduction with immediate effect of a service commitment scheme for air traffic control personnel; new entry options to air traffic control service, namely a direct entry option; new promotion opportunities within the service; and outsourcing of aspects of the training provided. All of these individual actions are now being actioned and are aimed at ensuring that existing personnel and indeed those known to be considering leaving the service are incentivised to remain in the service. These actions build on other specific measures that have been introduced, including the provision of a mentor

in provision of air traffic control and the introduction of a bespoke air traffic control cadetship competition in 2024 which has been advertised again this year. The actions pursued are aimed at delivering an ongoing stream of qualified people to fill vacancies as they arise. I assure the Deputy that I am firmly resolved to ensure minimum disruption to services. My officials are also actively engaged with their Air Corps colleagues in securing additional resources, including from external service providers, to ensure all avenues are being examined.

Looking to the longer term, I advised Cabinet this week of my intention to conduct a peer review of how our air traffic control services are provided as compared with how other militaries provide similar services. There is a worldwide shortage of air traffic controllers. We have seen pinch points like this before. It is important that we learn from how other militaries are addressing similar challenges.

I thank the Chief of Staff for working with me closely on this. I was asked to get that service commitment scheme in place with immediate effect. We have done that this week and I now expect people to get on with it.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: A couple of issues were raised there. We discussed the issue of service commitment levels in our last session. It reflects the fact that this is an issue across a number of areas in the Defence Forces for specialist personnel. There is severe competition with the private sector. It appears to have hit a particular pinch point in Baldonnel. This is the home of the Air Corps. It is the most important military aerospace facility in the State and it is, in effect, operating nine to five. Former TD Cathal Berry, our erstwhile colleague, identified this as a perfect example of a single point of failure with the potential to cause the entire operation to end. The entire basis of functioning of the Air Corps is challenged by this. In addition, he and others flagged that this issue has been brought to the attention of the Air Corps, of the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces more generally for some time now. When was the first recommendation made to the Government regarding a service level commitment for air traffic controllers?

Deputy Simon Harris: The service commitment scheme has been referenced for a number of years, from my recollection, and it is no more than my recollection. I believe it might have surfaced around 2021 in a list of recommendations but I am open to correction on that year. Generally, the way of progressing these issues is through local bargaining. In fairness, the Deputy will recognise that normally the Department of public expenditure and reform would say to go through the local bargaining, there is a pot of funding there and the issues should be worked out. In light of the importance of the issues highlighted and as this is our national military airfield, we have decided to act outside of local bargaining. These decisions are very rarely taken outside of normal public sector pay processes. We are doing that because of the immediacy of it.

I want to say two things to try to reassure people. I was told by military leadership that if we got this in place, it would make a very real difference in ensuring that people who had been considering leaving will stay. Therefore, I expect significant restoration of services at Baldonnel very quickly. Contingency arrangements have been put in place with other agencies. I want people, including bad actors, to know that there are measures in place to ensure that there are contingency arrangements.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Local bargaining seems to be the solution to a lot of things and I am not sure how far that 1% is going to stretch to fix all of those issues. It seems to

me that this was allowed to get beyond the eleventh hour before it was addressed. This is in the context of people talking about the need to take issues around defence seriously, yet it was allowed to escalate to the position of the national airfield functioning nine to five, and struggling to do so, as far as I understand.

At what stage does the Minister believe full cover will be restored such that aircraft will be able to land outside the hours from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.? There is a potential issue in the medium run with regard to the EU Presidency and the need for defence cover for Heads of State arriving here and so on. Has the Minister any concerns regarding the implications of this for helicopter emergency medical service support, particularly on the west coast and Shannon?

Deputy Simon Harris: On the latter point, I do not. I have been assured that contingency arrangements are in place. The Deputy is right about how we need to look more at the pinch points in our Defence Forces in general, and I will come back to this in a moment.

I expect significant restoration of services at Baldonnell to happen very rapidly. I expect that to be the case because in my conversations with military leadership and the new Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces, I was made aware that a number of air traffic controllers may leave the Air Corps to work in other environments, as they are entitled to do. Providing this service commitment scheme may make a fundamental difference with regard to them changing their position. We have delivered our bit in terms of the Government putting this in place. I expect Defence Forces leadership and Air Corps leadership now to do their part and I know they will.

I agree with the Deputy on the broader point - there is a question on this from either him or Deputy Crowe listed for later and I will come to it - regarding how we look specifically at some of the technical skills required in our Defence Forces, separate and distinct from how we look at broader issues around recruitment and retention. There is great sense in that.

Military Neutrality

2. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence the human rights monitoring mechanism, if any, planned for missions without a UN mandate in light of the proposed removal of the triple lock, given the potential lack human rights monitoring at UN level in missions without a UN mandate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31235/25]

4. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence if he will outline his proposals to remove the triple lock neutrality protection; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31322/25]

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: We have discussed the issues pertaining to the abolition of the triple lock many times. I am reading the draft Bill which seeks to do this. I am struck by the apparent lack of human rights monitoring mechanisms which could be included as safeguards for deployment, given the removal of the human rights monitoring at UN level. What human rights monitoring, if any, is envisaged to ensure missions in which we take part are human rights compliant?

Deputy Simon Harris: I propose to take Questions No. 2 and 4 together.

I thank Deputy Gibney for the question. As she is aware and has alluded to, I brought forward the general scheme of the defence (amendment) Bill 2025, which amends the legislation

underpinning overseas deployments of the Defence Forces. This was agreed by Cabinet on 4 March. The Bill will, among other things, provide for the modification of the existing requirement regarding the dispatch of the Defence Forces for service outside the State as part of an international force. Under the current proposals in the general scheme to amend the existing legislation, the requirement for a UN mandate will be removed. I wish to again underline that the legislation in place currently allows members of the UN Security Council, by means of a veto or indeed threat of same, to bind Ireland's hands in its international peacekeeping engagements. The veto by a UN Security Council member on a proposed resolution for a full and unconditional ceasefire in Gaza on 4 June last is further evidence of this. It is simply untenable for this Government to continue with this policy.

I recently saw some people at a press conference opposing the abolition of the triple lock and then asking me to send the Navy to the humanitarian blockade in Gaza. There would not be a UN mandate to do that. The inconsistency in respect of this is quite breathtaking.

I strongly believe that such consideration on international engagements should be within our sovereign control. The people of Ireland decide where our peacekeepers go. Their democratically elected officials decide, not people who have never received one vote in any constituency in this country. That is how our democracy works. It is how many neutral countries work as well. The triple lock is not the norm in other neutral countries. In my view and the view of the Government, the decision-making should be within the remit of the Government of the day and the people's representatives in Dáil Éireann, people who have been democratically elected.

I very much recognise, however, that in removing the UN Security Council mandate there is a need to provide alternative safeguards to underpin the future dispatch of Defence Forces personnel.

9 o'clock

I am very open to the Deputy. This is why we publish draft legislation and have pre-legislative scrutiny. I am very open to working across the House on this. So far my thinking on this is that in parallel with removing the UN mandate requirement, I have proposed that governing principles will be included in the legislation. Those already proposed in the draft Bill will require that the mandate of these operations must be consistent with and adhere to the principles of the UN Charter and international law. The UN Charter is the bedrock here. If there is a view that we need to strengthen that, I am happy to engage. In assessing any request to participate in a mission, among the main considerations are its compliance with Irish law and our foreign policy. Other elements include consent of the host nation. This is important as I have heard people asking if this could apply to non-peacekeeping or peace enforcing. Further elements are trust in partners in the operation and that the operation operates in accordance with international law and is consistent with the UN Charter. In evaluating proposals to join an operation consideration of the legal framework, rules of engagement, concept of operations also form the basis of deliberations. I would also like to highlight the current legal framework that applies for EU military missions. Under Article 21 of the Treaty of the European Union the Union's action shall be guided by the principles of democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity, and respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law.

During the drafting process these principles will be refined to make sure we provide legal

effect to them, and I would welcome any further suggestions on safeguards from the committee and from Members. I look forward to the pre-legislative scrutiny report of the Committee on Defence and National Security. I wish to underline again that the proposed amendments to the legislation are in keeping with Ireland's values and policy of being militarily unaligned and being militarily neutral, and these changes do nothing, and do not wish to do anything, to undermine that policy. As this House is aware, Ireland's policy of military neutrality is characterised by the non-membership of military alliances or common or mutual defence arrangements, which is set out in the Constitution. These legislative proposals have no effect on the Constitutional provision that underpins this policy.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: The Tánaiste mentioned hypocrisy around calling for humanitarian naval action in Gaza----

Deputy Simon Harris: Inconsistency

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: ----which of course is not covered by the triple lock anyway. The Tánaiste mentioned the triple lock not being the norm in other neutral countries, and once again I say that they have not had the same journey to neutrality that we have had. They did not have the same engagement with the Nice and Lisbon treaties which required us to enshrine the triple lock for that purpose.

I will go back to the main point of the question today, which is around human rights monitoring. I welcome the principles the Tánaiste has outlined such as consent for nations. They are great principles but they are not monitoring. They absolutely are not active monitoring. The only organisation that does active monitoring is the UN. The other organisations the Tánaiste mentioned do not have the primary purpose of peacekeeping and therefore do not apply the same level of human rights monitoring. Even in respect of the UN Charter, which the Tánaiste mentioned, he is not talking about applying it by the letter. He is talking about the principles, which once again falls short of that human rights monitoring. I welcome the opportunity to engage on this.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: We will have a fair few engagements on this. I am not all that convinced there was a lack of clarity, but if there was a necessity for clarification on humanitarian evacuation, drug interception or rescue of civilians, the Government should just legislate for that. That is my suggestion. As far as the Irish people are concerned, we do peacekeeping with the UN. The UN is not perfect but we do peacekeeping with it. We do not do peacekeeping with NATO or other organisations. That is the standard that offers us the highest level of international law, of confidence.

One of the bases on which Irish troops can be deployed is that of strengthening international security. I am sure the Tánaiste will agree that is very broad. Can he tell us a bit more about what he has in mind?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputies for their concerted engagement. I definitely did not use the word "hypocrisy". I know the depth of feeling that people have in relation to Gaza. I am just making the point that there is an inconsistency - I think that is the word I used - in relation to it. I do not want to use a loaded phrase because I have huge respect for people who are quite rightly highlighting the situation in Gaza. I am just making the point that we are living in a world that is so turbulent we can no longer rely on international partners to necessarily provide sanction. We cannot even get the UN Security Council to agree a motion in relation

to Gaza. That is the point I am making on the current level of dysfunctionality around the veto.

I take very seriously the points Deputy Gibney makes and appreciate her professional background and expertise in these areas. I am happy to work constructively on this issue. We have a clear difference on the triple lock. I respect that difference. It is clear we are not going to resolve it. If Government intends to do what it does intend to do, it is legitimate that the Deputy asks about the safeguards and human rights monitoring. I am happy to engage on how we can strengthen that and try to address it in legislation. Deputy Gibney is right that I did refer to principles of the UN Charter, which is the fundamental grounding here. We are very much open to looking at how we can refine and strengthen that and give it legal effect. I will constructively engage with any recommendations that come from the Oireachtas committee and the pre-legislative scrutiny report regarding that.

To Deputy Ó Laoghaire, I genuinely welcome the points he makes at the start on being happy to legislate to provide greater clarity. This Bill is looking to do a number of things. All is not the triple lock. I think that is the point the Deputy is making. We are looking to reform and change the triple lock, absolutely, but we are also looking to do other things that are separate and distinct from the triple lock, which I think provide clarity for our people on rules around deployment in terms of rescuing Irish citizens from abroad, for example. I welcome the Deputy's constructive support on that. I do think the Deputy picked one element of the draft Bill there. It does have to be read in the round. We are very clearly saying in the draft legislation that people could only be deployed where there is the active consent of the host country and the likes. However, in terms of keeping international security, there is absolutely no doubt our troops in Lebanon are helping to keep the security of Lebanon right now.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank the Tánaiste. On the dysfunctionality he has described in the UN, this is exactly the time for us to recommit to our engagement with the UN, to help resolve the difficulties we are experiencing at Security Council level. As we have been at pains to point out throughout this debate, and will continue to highlight, the triple lock can be satisfied by the UN General Assembly. I had answers from the officials of the Department of Defence to that effect, which confirmed that the General Assembly can satisfy it. The same thing was put out in the literature on the Lisbon and Nice treaties. Some of the Government spokespeople will talk about the difficulty that might present but again, it is exactly the time to commit to that and make sure we work within the UN structures rather than stepping away from them at this crucial time of volatility on our globe.

I thank the Tánaiste for his engagement on the issue of human rights monitoring. We will be bringing forward suggestions on how we can satisfy that.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: On the safeguards and so on, the difficulty is who the arbiter will be. The arbiter will be the Government of the day, which will be the self-same Government that intends to deploy the troops.

Deputy Simon Harris: The courts.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: That does create a difficulty, if a Government is so motivated to deploy troops and it is being asked to evaluate. I understand the arguments the Tánaiste has made about the UN Security Council. It seems to me that it is a sovereign act by a sovereign Parliament to decide that this is the threshold. We have decided that this is the test. The Parliament here sets tests for numerous areas of public policy. Sometimes we ask other

organisations to do that. We asked the Low Pay Commission to set tests as to an appropriate method of determining low pay. We do ask outside bodies at times where we trust that they have a certain standard to be an arbiter. The Government is going to be an arbiter. That is fundamentally what is proposed in the legislation.

Deputy Simon Harris: The courts arbitrate on our law, Irish courts. They are the arbitrator of any law passed here and ensure that the Government of the day, any Government of any hue - the Deputy might be in government one day - keeps within the laws of the land as passed by the Oireachtas. The law is arbitrated on by the Irish courts, not any Government. There is an arbitrator and it is our courts system.

The Deputy is right that the test today on whether we can deploy peacekeepers is the UN Security Council. My contention is that it is now the wrong test and we need to change the test. The Deputy has referred to things like external bodies and the Low Pay Commission. The Government of the day and the Oireachtas appoint people to the Low Pay Commission. The geopolitical situation has evolved significantly over the last several years and extraordinarily rapidly in the last number of years. The idea now that a UN Security Council where we have the likes of Russia threatening to veto things is really serious. I touch wood and hope this does not happen, but we have brave men and women in Lebanon today serving under a UN mandate. We all support them fully. I visited them and they are doing a great job. What if the UN does not renew that mandate? Would it be the view of the Opposition that those peacekeepers should come home, even though it is my view and I think that of the Oireachtas and of the overwhelming majority of people that they are doing an incredible job? What if Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin or any of the leaders of the permanent members of the Security Council decide they are going to try to save a bit of money this year and are not as committed to multilateralism? In the context of the Elon Musk review being spoken about at the minute, what if it is decided there is a further need to pull back funding from the UN? Are those people going to decide whether the men and women of Óglaigh na hÉireann have to come home from southern Lebanon? That is not what I think should happen.

Air Corps

3. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence to outline, further to recent Dáil debates, his views on past health and safety measures in the Air Corps, and potential engagements with interested groups; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31321/25]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: This question relates to issues relating to the safety measures, or lack thereof, that potentially existed in terms of Air Corps aircraft maintenance personnel over the course of recent decades. We spoke about two broad areas during our last discussion. One was the court-related issues. I flag that in response to the points the Minister made last time, several people have told me the engagement with the State Claims Agency is not anything like it should be. Even separate to that, there is the need for a policy-oriented response from the Department.

Deputy Simon Harris: In fairness to the Deputy, he put me on notice that he is going to raise this issue on each and every occasion, quite rightly and understandably considering the seriousness of it. As I set out previously, and as I am obliged to set out every time this question is posed to me, and despite the constructive way in which the question has been put forward,

any discussions we might seek to have or any comments I make are necessarily limited in light of the ongoing litigation in respect of this matter currently being before our courts. I have set out this position in the House previously. There is a limit to what I can say in the circumstances to avoid intrusion into the independent role of our courts in respect of these matters.

The issue of alleged exposure to chemicals in the Air Corps is, as the Deputy said, the subject of a number of litigation cases, the management of which has been statutorily delegated to the State Claims Agency. I do, though, wish to advise the Deputy - while remaining faithful to the limitations I have just set out - that at my request and following on from our discussions my officials have started to develop preliminary options and begun a process of the consideration in relation to any possible actions that may inform the general position of those who allege experiencing harm arising from potential chemical exposure. The initial exercise is under way. It is exploratory and arises from my undertaking to the Deputy during previous sessions of oral parliamentary questions. I do not want to go into too many specifics at this point. This is primarily because a considerable portion of the nature and scope of any proposal will need to take account of what can be done without cutting across the current litigation cases and in the context of agreeing these limits and appropriate consultation.

This is not in my prepared answer, but I would be very happy to have a briefing with the Deputy on this matter and to ask my officials to sit down and hear his views and thoughts. As I said, there is a challenge in respect of meeting individual people but perhaps we could have my officials engage with the Deputy concerning some of his thoughts on this matter. I know they are working to try to make progress.

I again draw the Deputy's attention to the point I made during our previous discussion on this matter, namely, that there is an ongoing process of engagement between the State Claims Agency and current plaintiffs. I did ask that this process be given the time and space. I am interested to know what the Deputy is hearing in respect of that engagement.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: On that point, while I understand there are restrictions on what the Minister can respond to me on, a former personnel member who was a part of aircraft maintenance said there was no current active engagement between the State Claims Agency and litigants despite what the Minister had claimed in the Dáil the previous week. The former personnel member stated that nobody from the State Claims Agency had talked to any survivors since before the recent settlement of a particular case. I ask the Minister to take that information away. I know there are limits on what he can say in response to me, but I ask him to take this information with him and put it to the State Claims Agency that there is not engagement.

Aside from that, I am glad to hear what the Minister said in respect of options being looked at. In terms of what we should be looking at, this seems clear to me. There are things that need to be worked up, but one of the most fundamental things is a health review and analysis of health outcomes. Related to that, it must be ensured that people are not out of pocket as a result of the healthcare situations they have found themselves in.

Deputy Simon Harris: I will very much take away the point made by the Deputy there in respect of a lack of engagement because my note tells me there is an ongoing process of engagement. Clearly, both cannot be factually true. I will, therefore, personally undertake to clarify this point with the State Claims Agency and I am happy to revert to the Deputy.

As I said, my officials have begun an exploratory process to consider what options may be available to me from a policy perspective to consider this issue further. Without straying too far, my thinking is that there are legal cases and I would like all these resolved insofar as they can be in a constructive manner. Legal cases, however, always require cause and effect and being able to prove cause and effect. Regardless of that threshold, if there are people in our country who have health needs, there are examples in the past of where we have endeavoured to meet those health needs, separate and distinct from any legal process and trying to establish cause and effect, which people have every right to try to do. These are the two separate issues I am trying to grapple with. I do think of times in the past when, without any admissions of liability, the State has taken actions to try to meet the health needs of some of its people. This is something we should explore.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: That is in the area we need to be looking at. There are potentially more things than that, but that is one of the crucial areas. It is not only the case here that other sectors or categories of people have had wrongs inflicted on them and sometimes it is difficult to put them all through the courts for a variety of reasons, but it has also been the case internationally. I have raised previously with the Minister some of the responses in Australia and the Netherlands in the context of aircraft maintenance personnel. The self-same issue has arisen elsewhere and it has been on the healthcare side of things.

Regarding what the Minister said about exploring options, I have two questions. What kind of timescale are we looking at? I would welcome the opportunity to have a briefing with the Minister and some of his officials, but, equally, it would hardly be appropriate if it was simply Members of this House who had that opportunity. There are representative organisations, such as the Air Corps Chemical Abuse Survivors organisation and potentially others. It would be only right that at some stage in this process they would have the opportunity to have an engagement.

Deputy Simon Harris: When the time is right and the advice to me is that it is appropriate for me to have meetings, I will be very happy to engage. I obviously have the Deputy in a separate and distinct category as the spokesperson on defence for the largest Opposition party. I am happy to engage with him to see if we can constructively make progress. I will ask, and I have already asked, that we look at the examples in the other jurisdictions referred to by the Deputy. I do not have an exact timeline in relation to this matter. I am informed there are significant complexities in this regard. Perhaps at a meeting or a briefing we could tease through some of this issue in a bit more detail and then no doubt return to it at the next session of parliamentary questions as well.

Question No. 4 taken with Question No. 2.

Air Corps

5. **Deputy Tom Brabazon** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence the actions his Department is taking to ensure that Casement Aerodrome is fit for purpose in terms of infrastructure, capacity, and operational efficiency. [31286/25]

Deputy Tom Brabazon: Like other speakers this morning, I wish to raise the issue of the aerodrome at Baldonnel and the problems that have manifested in respect of air traffic controllers. We note that there have been problems with air traffic control on three occasions since

2010 and that a report was done internally in 2021. It does not appear to have been acted on in a meaningful way to date. I know the Minister made some announcements in this regard yesterday, but my concern is that support flights for An Garda Síochána and air ambulance services are being missed out on as a result of the service not operating fully as it should.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. He is right that there have been real challenges in terms of pinch points regarding specific positions our Air Corps is fundamentally reliant on and the air traffic controllers is the most obvious and current example. In fairness to my predecessors in this role, I point out that the context has changed significantly even since that 2021 report. We have seen an increase in commercial activity in terms of there being other opportunities for air traffic controllers in Ireland. We have also seen a growing shortage of air traffic controllers globally. Both of those things have added to what was already a challenge back in 2021.

We have, though, taken big and significant decisions this week. The Minister, Deputy Chambers, and I agreed to go ahead with the service commitment scheme for air traffic controllers, which is an extension of the scheme available to pilots in the Air Corps. It will be extended to air traffic controllers. As I pointed out in reply to an earlier question, it is unusual to do this outside of regular processes, for want of a better phrase, but we are doing it as a recognition, as the Deputy rightly said, of the fundamental importance of these air traffic controllers not just to Baldonnel but to our country, to our security and, of course, to our Air Corps.

My Department is investing some €50 million in national defence infrastructure this year, with a further €12.5 million being provided to the Defence Forces on a fully delegated basis. In respect of Casement Aerodrome at Baldonnel specifically, the following projects, costing a total of €5.8 million, have been completed in recent years: new redeployable modular accommodation; an upgrade to hanger 3; main technical stores refurbishment; and a watermain upgrade. In addition to this, planning is under way for a new barracks service store, a new accommodation building, a new gym, a new crash rescue building, an upgrade to building 12; and a new ATC tower. I am looking forward to visiting Baldonnel because my Department has recently completed the development of an airside master development plan to further develop Casement Aerodrome.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I welcome all the additional promised investment in the Air Corps. When the Garda Commissioner was before the justice committee earlier this week, he pointed out that one of the main methods for tackling the scrambler scourge in the city is through deploying the Garda helicopter, which principally operates out of Casement Aerodrome. In circumstances where it is only operational half of the week, his hands must be severely curtailed in that regard. We need to do whatever we can to get this problem resolved at the earliest opportunity.

Deputy Simon Harris: I fully agree with the Deputy. My Department and the Defence Forces have been working in close collaboration with An Garda Síochána, the health service and the Air Corps to ensure contingency arrangements are in place while we resolve this pinch point.

I had a good meeting with the excellent new Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces, Rossa Mulcahy. I wish him well in his role. My management board in the Department of Defence and I had an excellent meeting with him and the leadership of the Air Corps. There is a list of things that needs to be done, as the Deputy said, arising from the 2021 report, and even beyond

that. The big ask of Government was the service commitment scheme, which we implemented this week at Cabinet. We have taken the decision to provide the funding. That is now available. Air Corps management believes it will make a big difference.

There are also a number of other operational recommendations that fall to the leadership of the Defence Forces. They now need to get on with them. This has to be a collaborative effort to put all of the pieces in place to build a sustainable service. I reassure those who watch these debates that there are contingency plans in place, including ones to support An Garda Síochána in its excellent work.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I welcome that last contribution and I look forward to seeing the fruits of that work.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Naval Service

6. **Deputy John Connolly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence for an update on the development of a national maritime security strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31156/25]

Deputy John Connolly: As the Minister is aware, the Commission on the Defence Forces report proposed the development of a national maritime security strategy. I hear welcome news this morning that a public consultation process on the development of the strategy has been opened as of this morning. Will the Minister provide us with further information as to how the strategy will develop and evolve from here towards its completion? Will he provide a time-frame as to when we will see the strategy completed and ready to be enacted?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Connolly for highlighting this important matter, that is, the need to have Ireland's first ever maritime security strategy. I heard it said that we would have a new maritime security strategy in place by the end of the year. While it is true that it will be in place by the end of the year, it will be Ireland's first ever maritime security strategy. I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I am launching a public consultation on Ireland's first ever national maritime security strategy today. The purpose of this strategy is to map out our country's approach to maritime security over the next five years, with a particular focus on dealing with emerging threats and vulnerabilities and protecting our subsea infrastructure. The public consultation will run for four weeks. I invite individuals and groups with an interest in this area to make a submission. The intention is to have a new maritime security strategy approved and published before the end of this year.

We are an island nation with one of the largest sea areas in Europe. It is absolutely vital we have a robust and effective maritime security strategy in place. This strategy will be crucial to assessing any potential threats and vulnerabilities. We need to have a particular focus on protecting our undersea infrastructure. I invite the many people who have an interest and expertise in this area to make their views known and to bring forward their ideas on how we can put in place a strategy that will ensure we take this critical opportunity to have a new and robust ap-

proach in order to safeguard our waters. I hope we can have open and constructive dialogue in order to get this strategy right in the time ahead. It is the first strategy of its kind. We need to prioritise the risks and threats we face in our maritime domain and then include a plan to address the most urgent and immediate concerns.

Deputy John Connolly: The Minister has outlined well the potential threats that exist to our subsea cable infrastructure and to other aspects of our maritime domain, which require addressing and this strategy. One other recommendation that came from the report of the Commission on the Defence Forces was that the powers required by the Naval Service for effective enforcement in support of national security in the maritime domain should be addressed as there appears to be some inconsistency between the pieces of legislation in this area. Has the Minister any plans to address that issue? There seems to be an inconsistency between the Sea-Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act 2006, the Maritime Security Act 2004 and the Maritime Safety Act 2005. Is a consolidating piece of legislation needed in this area?

One further recommendation of the Commission on the Defence Forces was the development of a naval base for the Naval Service Reserve in Galway. This should form part of this strategy. The Naval Service has no coastal cover on the west coast between Limerick and Donegal. A naval base in Galway, therefore, would be appropriate.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Connolly and the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, who agrees with him. I thank him for highlighting this matter. There are a couple of things in this regard. The Deputy is right that the Commission on the Defence Forces recommended exactly what he said it did. I will bring forward, either over the summer or early in the autumn, the next iteration of the implementation plan for the Commission on the Future of the Defence Forces where we will take forward more recommendations. We are also looking at a new national security plan for Ireland more broadly, which will be co-ordinated by the Department of the Taoiseach. Its purpose will be to ensure there are no silos or, as the Deputy mentioned, overlapping pieces of legislation. The maritime situation can also be considered in that context.

On the issue of the naval base, I will speak directly to the leadership of the Defence Forces to get their sense on this matter. There will absolutely be a need for more naval bases in our country. There is no doubt about that.

In the time available to me, I wish to say that getting this strategy right is so important. We live in a country where approximately 78% of our energy needs are imported on ships or via pipelines, approximately 90% of our trade is transported by sea and 95% of international data and voice transfers are routed through our undersea fibreoptic cables. The majority of transatlantic data passes through cables situated in Ireland's economic exclusive zone.

Deputy John Connolly: I welcome that the Minister will engage with Defence Forces personnel regarding a base for the Naval Service Reserve in Galway. There is little coastal coverage for the Naval Service between Limerick and Donegal, which is quite a wide area. Some of the subsea cables to which the Minister referred come into the country through Galway, including some of the transatlantic ones. Indeed, some cables come in north of Galway as well. One cable comes inland in County Mayo.

Of course, Galway already has Defence Forces personnel within the city. We have Dún Uí Mhaoilíosa Barracks in Renmore, which the Minister has visited twice since his appointment. In the context of the recommendations of the Commission on the Defence Forces, this recom-

mentation for a base for the Naval Service Reserve is a prudent one. It would fit well into the development of the national maritime security strategy and a national security plan.

Deputy Simon Harris: I hear the compelling case Deputy Connolly is making loud and clear. I will talk to the Naval Service directly and to the Chief of Staff with regard to our plans for the expansion of naval bases in the country. I am proud to acknowledge, as the Deputy has acknowledged, the great tradition Galway has in its contribution to Óglaigh na hÉireann. I had the honour of visiting Renmore on two occasions to see the proud sense there is in Galway of the contribution that Renmore and our Defence Forces based there have made.

I always like to recall the fact that we live in a country where approximately 80% of our population live in coastal counties. While we have a small geographic land mass, we have a massive amount of ocean around us. We are duty bound for our own people, and more broadly in the geopolitical and geosecurity area, to take this really seriously. We want to get maritime security right and have the strategy in place by the end of the year. I very much welcome constructive submissions.

Defence Forces

7. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence if he intends to establish a special review body to examine means of retention of skilled technicians in the Defence Forces; and if the timeframe for the process. [30785/25]

Deputy Seán Crowe: While the Minister has addressed this issue earlier, the greatest challenge for our Defence Forces is the constant drain of skilled technicians. It is seriously hindering our operational capability, especially in the Naval Service where ships are tied up at dock. Will he commit to establishing a specific review body tasked with examining how we can stem the flow of knowledge and training out of our military?

Deputy Simon Harris: Although it is a phrase I might not use too often, Deputy Crowe is right. This is a real issue which he has rightly challenged. We have made very good progress on recruitment and retention in the Defence Forces, but we have a lot more to do. The Deputy's question gets to the heart of the fact that the statistics I can quote belie or ignore the fact there are real pinch points in respect of certain technical skills our Defence Forces require. When we lose those numbers of specialist personnel, we see how quickly it can cause real operational difficulties in Casement, as we have discussed this morning, as well as in other parts of the Defence Forces we have discussed previously. I thank the Deputy for putting this question down.

Since my appointment as Minister for Defence earlier this year, my initial focus has been on stabilising the numbers of Defence Forces personnel and facilitating the capacity for further increases. I am determined to achieve real progress on this issue and I have been very clear with the Chief of Staff of our ambitions in that regard. Challenges undoubtedly exist, particularly in the recruitment and retention of specialist personnel, as the Deputy referenced. This specific challenge is presently felt by employers across the economy at a time when we have full employment.

The Government has introduced a number of measures in recent years to try to make progress on recruitment and retention in the Defence Forces. There has been significant progress on pay and we should not forget that. Recruits on completion of training now start at €41,465 in

year 1, which represents an increase of 49% over the past six years. School-leaver cadets upon commissioning earn €45,341 while in full-time education, and the pay of graduate cadets now commences on €50,667. A further pay increase of 1% is due under the current pay agreement in August and a number of additional pay-related items are being negotiated as part of local bargaining arrangements. Increases in the recruitment age to 39 years for those roles that had a recruitment age below that, and to 50 years for direct entry specialists, have been introduced. The mandatory retirement age has been increased to 62. Private secondary healthcare has been rolled out to all members of the Permanent Defence Force. The provisions of the working time directive have been extended across the Defence Forces, subject to certain exemptions.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Whether it is pay, conditions, pensions or, dare I say, accommodation, there must be something we can do to compete with the private sector. When the review body is established and given terms of reference, it should do a deep dive into the levers that can be used to make the Defence Forces an attractive career, rather than just the fact they are trained up by some of the best instructors.

I welcome the initiative on air traffic controllers but it should not be a one-off. We need to look right across the services. It is could and should be done.

Deputy Simon Harris: I agree with the Deputy. What I am saying is I have a very open mind on his question. I believe we will need to do something in this space and I am considering what would be the best structure to put in place to examine this is because we should not just talk about recruitment and retention in general in respect of the Defence Forces. I hope and think we will be able to make more progress. We made some last year and I think we will make more this year. The Deputy's point about the deep dive into the specialist areas, the pinch points and how the Defence Forces are doing at a time when the country has full employment is important. These people are highly skilled. It is not really an issue to recruit them but it is an issue to retain them. As the Deputy noted, the service commitment scheme we brought in for air traffic controllers is good. That is one area. There are also other pinch points, including in the Naval Service.

We have local bargaining structures. They are meant to advance some of this but I am very open to considering, with colleagues in the Government, whether there is a better way of doing a deep dive. I intend to consider this with my officials over the summer and will come back to the Deputy in the autumn with my thinking on it.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I welcome the fact the Tánaiste will look at it. We have seen the strains in different elements of the different services, such as ships not being able to be deployed. It is not just happening in Ireland. Services are facing these challenges across the world. I welcome the Tánaiste's indication that he will look at this over the summer and come back to us in the autumn. If there is common agreement across the Government, this review needs to be established sooner rather than later. I look forward to the Tánaiste's report in the autumn.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy. As I said, we have objectively made good progress on pay, with a 49% increase in pay for a recruit entering the Defence Forces for training compared with six years ago, and rightly so. A school leaver can now be in full-time education and earn €45,341, while graduate cadets now commence on €50,000. We have also extended access to healthcare, brought in the working time directive, increased the mandatory retirement age and the recruitment age and made the patrol duty allowance payable the Naval Service.

There is also the decision we took this week regarding air traffic controllers, and the new Naval Service tax credit has been extended for a further five years. Good things have been done, in addition to the extensive training opportunities provided to all personnel, but there is no doubt more needs to be done. I will explore with Government colleagues and my civil and military management teams how we can look further at this and whether we need to bring in external expertise to inform this work.

Military Neutrality

8. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence the basis on which the decision has been taken to legislate for the removal of the triple lock; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31260/25]

12. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence if he accepts that abolishing the triple lock was not necessary to release humanitarian deployments or secure the evacuation of Irish citizens abroad, as heard at a recent meeting of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Defence and National Security; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30282/25]

43. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence to provide an update on legislation he is bringing forward with respect to the triple lock; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30079/25]

48. **Deputy John Clendennen** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence if the proposed changes to the triple lock will impact on Ireland's policy of being militarily neutral; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30705/25]

51. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence if the general scheme of the defence (amendment) Bill 2025 removes, rather than reforms, the triple lock; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31229/25]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach. Bainneann mo cheist leis an nglas triarach agus an cinneadh atá déanta fáil réidh leis. My question relates to the triple lock. Will the Tánaiste outline as clearly as he can the basis on which the decision was taken to legislate for the removal of the triple lock? If he can outline that in a rational way, I would be very interested.

Deputy Simon Harris: I propose to take Questions Nos. 8, 12, 43, 48 and 51 together.

I will outline the policy rationale. First, I would mention the electoral commitment. I promised the people of Ireland, when I ran in a general election, that if I were elected to government, I intended to do this and I intend to keep my promises. It was in my party's manifesto. I think it was in our partner's party manifesto. It is in the programme for Government and we intend to act on it. We put it before the people as a proposition in our manifesto. We are in government with a mandate from the people and I intend to deliver on that mandate.

Under the UN Charter, the UN Security Council has primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. Shame on the council, by the way, for not being able to even pass a motion on Gaza in recent days. It is not working. It is letting the world down and letting the people of Gaza down. As this House will be aware, the five permanent

members of the UN Security Council can use their veto power to prevent the Security Council from taking decisions, including those related to mandates for peace operations. We have seen this illustrated most recently last week, where a UN Security Council resolution simply calling for an unconditional ceasefire in Gaza was vetoed. In practice, even the threat of a veto by a permanent member, rather than its actual use, is often enough to prevent the council from taking action. We have seen this on many occasions in the recent past, including in respect of the conflicts in Ukraine as well as in the Middle East.

This untenable situation has led the Government to the decision that we need to change the legislation that governs how we despatch our Defence Forces overseas. The programme for Government clearly sets out this Government's intention to reform the triple lock legislation and this is intended to be done while also ensuring that amendments to the legislation are in keeping with our values and policy of military neutrality. I reiterate, as I did earlier, that I want to work with people on that. We have vastly differing views on the triple lock - I respect that difference – but I want the legislation to look at how we can ensure that we are in keeping with our values and policy of military neutrality. It cannot be emphasised enough that we have no desire to alter our policy of military neutrality. The proposed amendments to the legislation are in keeping with Ireland's values and policy in this regard. As this House is aware, Ireland's policy of military neutrality is characterised by the non-membership of military alliances or common or mutual defence arrangements. These legislative proposals have no effect on this policy.

Having regard to the current ineffectiveness of the UN Security Council and the outcome of the consultative forum on international security in June 2023, the Government approved the proposals to bring forward the general scheme of the defence (amendment) Bill to govern overseas deployments into the future. The proposed changes will ensure that our legislation is fully up to date and fit for purpose. By making the changes proposed, we will be removing the veto power of Security Council members over Ireland's international engagement, thereby allowing us to reinforce our sovereignty and have the Government and the Dáil make a decision to despatch the Defence Forces overseas.

To address the question raised by Deputy O'Rourke and to clear up any misconceptions: the Bill proposes to amend the legislation on how Ireland deploys its troops overseas, both on peace operations as part of an international force and overseas for purposes other than as part of an international force. These include, for example, evacuation operations of Irish citizens abroad, which have become sadly more frequent due to the volatile geopolitical situation.

These provisions are separate to the triple lock provisions. There are people in this House who vehemently oppose the removal of the triple lock who are in favour of some of those provisions. I do not wish to conflate them and they should not be conflated. I think they got a little conflated during pre-legislative scrutiny. There are separate provisions here, namely, the triple lock provisions and those providing clarity on, for example, evacuation operations of Irish citizens. I want to be truthful and clear on that.

As I said in response to Deputy Gibney some moments ago, I am open to refining the legislation and want to do so. Pre-legislative scrutiny is not just something to go through to tick a box. It is about how we make this legislation have the safeguards that Members of this House want, how we make sure the UN Charter, which we value, is at the heart of all that we do and how we look at things such as human rights monitoring. These are all good things that we should do. We have produced guiding principles in the draft legislation around being welcomed

by the host country and the likes. We need to determine whether people think such measures are robust enough. A scrutiny process is under way and is expected to last around eight weeks. Following its conclusion, it is intended to draft a Bill to go to Government for approval and I hope to bring it through the various Stages of the Oireachtas.

I will want to provide ample opportunity to scrutinise and debate the content of the Bill and work constructively. No one has done this today, but I ask that we do not reduce every conversation to asking about military neutrality. Quite a number of militarily neutral countries have no triple lock. There are many ways in which a country can be militarily neutral and not have a triple lock. People in Ireland, including me, have a deep love of our military neutrality and want to be militarily unaligned. It is clear that the people of Ireland have an overwhelming desire for that.

However, I also think they understand the need to reform the current structures. As I said, we have troops in Lebanon today doing brilliant and amazing work. It is the longest unbroken commitment to peacekeeping. I am very proud our troops are doing that under a UN mandate. What is the view of those opposed to these changes if that mandate is not renewed this autumn? There is no discussion on this, but hypothetically, if Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin or anybody else decided, for whatever reason, not to renew the mandate at the UN Security Council, is the view that Irish peacekeepers should not continue their excellent work in Lebanon? That is not my view, but is it the view of the House? I say that to be constructive. These are the real-life things we may have to tease our way through in the time ahead.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Obviously, I cannot respond to the Tánaiste's five- or six-minute reply in one minute. He made many promises. We had promises in the Nice and Lisbon treaties and, separately, we have promises to end the housing crisis. There have been many solemn promises the Government has not fulfilled. For the Tánaiste to stand here and say he will fulfil a promise is not a response to the question I asked. My question asked about the basis leading to this decision. I would have thought that somewhere a document sets out the problems.

The continuous referral to the difficulty with the veto has always been framed in terms of the Russian veto being used. Even today, on his third occasion to speak on this, the Tánaiste spoke about the recent decision of the failure of the UN in calling for a ceasefire. He failed to call out who used the veto. America used the veto.

Deputy Simon Harris: Sorry-----

Deputy Catherine Connolly: The Tánaiste has referred to hypothetical situations, which, he has told us in the past, he does not like to talk about because he instead prefers to deal in reality. The reality is that America used the veto to stop a ceasefire and allow genocide to continue.

Deputy Simon Harris: To be clear, the United States of America used the veto. I have no issue about that. I think I referenced the President of the United States on a number of occasions today in regard to my concern about the potential use of the veto. The United States used the veto, and I think it was an appalling use of it. It is a sign of the dysfunctionality of the Security Council. I fully agree with the Deputy on that.

Regarding Nice, Lisbon, etc., I am talking about what we ran on in the election. Nice and Lisbon are very important and we gave commitments in our manifesto. We articulated them not just in this Government but in the previous Government. This proposal is not coming as

a surprise to the Deputy or anybody in the House. I believe the Irish people see a very clear difference, as we have seen in recent public polling, between valuing military neutrality and recognising that we can have an informed discussion about how we reform and change the triple lock. I do not think the two issues should be conflated.

Every time we try to have a conversation on defence, security or peacekeeping, we are accused of attacking military neutrality. We are not. Military neutrality is not owned by Deputy Connolly, the left or anybody else. It is owned by all of us. It is deeply valued on a cross-party basis, including by my party. We have no proposals to change military neutrality. I want to work with the Deputy to make sure that the legislation is clear. We might have differences in terms of the proposal on the triple lock but we should seek to get the legislation right.

I am not just talking about hypotheticals, although I accept what I said about Lebanon was hypothetical. On previous occasions in the House, I have mentioned the challenges we have already faced in respect of the veto. I do not understand what the problem is with the people who elected Deputy Connolly in Galway, me in Wicklow and others in Dublin making a decision such that the Government and the people's representatives can reach agreement. Deputy Ó Laoghaire asked about oversight structures, which are in place. Every law that is passed has arbitrators, namely, the courts. Why would we give that sovereignty away?

I have looked at other militarily neutral countries, ones the Deputy would not doubt at all are militarily neutral, and I am happy to discuss them when we deal with the legislation. She or I could not and would not question their neutrality. They do not have a triple lock. The idea that it is either the triple lock or no military neutrality genuinely does not stand up to scrutiny. One can favour the triple lock, but it is not the same as saying the triple lock must stay or military neutrality will be threatened. There are many examples of countries that are proudly militarily neutral that do not have a triple lock, and the Deputy would not suggest that they are militarily aligned.

There is a way of getting this right and I look forward in the first instance to the report coming back from the committee following pre-legislative scrutiny. My predecessor hosted an international forum on defence and security that examined the issue of the triple lock. There has been much work done on this over quite a number of years. There are genuine different views in the House and I respect that, but there is a way of getting legislation right that guards military neutrality while also recognising that we have to be able to deploy peacekeeping troops in a manner that does not succumb to a UN Security Council veto.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I do not know if the Minister understands the Lisbon and Nice treaties. We had to vote a second time because of people's concerns regarding the militarisation of Europe and neutrality. We got solemn declarations, or whatever they are called, in the Nice and Lisbon treaties and the then Government forced the people to vote twice. The Taoiseach has told us the triple lock is a fundamental and core part of our neutrality. Perhaps the Tánaiste should ask him when that changed.

If the Government is asking us change something as fundamental as our policy of neutrality, it should lay out in black and white what led to that decision. Which veto was used and at what time? Which country has used the veto the most? It has all been America. America has played an appalling role lately in voting against a ceasefire. Now more than ever, we need to use our voice. Earlier, the Tánaiste referred to the volatile situation in the world. That is why we need to stand up, not reactively but proactively.

It is difficult to cover everything because there was extra time. I am not sure what the position is regarding that, but other TDs were grouped with this question.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Mairéad Farrell): The way it works is that each TD gets one minute.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Do I get in again or is this the end?

Acting Chairman (Deputy Mairéad Farrell): This the end.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: That is all I wanted to know.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Mairéad Farrell): That is the way it works.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: It is unfair the way it has worked out.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Mairéad Farrell): I understand, but that is the way it works.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I am disappointed in how the heads of the Bill have been presented. I think there is support for 80% or 90% of what needs to be achieved in terms of our national security, or we could at least reach accommodations, such as on the extraction of our citizens from war zones. The Tánaiste will launch the national maritime strategy today, which I welcome and is much needed.

There is an emotive element to the triple lock, which will envelop all of these issues politically. Issues will be conflated. The Tánaiste said in his first contribution that they are separate, which is the case, but he knows the reality of political discourse in this country. We need to have a sophisticated discussion on all elements of national security and the triple lock, but they should be done separately. We do not need to rush into removing the triple lock as part of the legislation. A process of reform is ongoing in the United Nations and we should lead on that. We should try to improve the United Nations. We fundamentally believe in it, and any future of peacekeeping outside the United Nations is not something we can take a punt on at this point.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Most people would link the triple lock with our foreign policy and neutrality. A lot of people would be surprised at the proposal, given that during the Nice referendum campaign the Government parties were very silent on this issue and there was no real view that there would be a move to change it. The current position comes as a bit of a surprise. To follow on from what an Teachta Connolly said, perhaps the Tánaiste could explain in the remaining time the rationale and motivation to upend a system that has been in place since the 1960s. It is a huge step. There has been no real debate, but rather an announcement that it will be changed. The worry people have is that a fundamental part of our policy on foreign affairs will change all of a sudden. The Tánaiste will, perhaps, give examples later of Afghanistan and some of the challenges there but other challenges in the world face us today and people need to have a clear debate on this.

Deputy Simon Harris: People need to have a clear debate and people need to stop the spread of misinformation. I heard the leader of Sinn Féin, Deputy Mary Lou McDonald, speak about sending our sons to war. Let us get real. There is no proposal to send anybody's son to war. There are genuine differences on the policy of a triple lock. That is great and a legitimate thing to have. We also have to be truthful about this. The legislation is printed and it is there for people to read. I would love the Deputy to refer me to the line in the legislation that makes him believe we are sending anybody's son in Ireland to war. We are not. This is about peace-

12 June 2025

keeping. I am extraordinarily proud, and I think we all are, of what our peacekeepers are doing. It is a legitimate question to ask whether there is a better way of doing it. I believe there is and some people believe there is not. Some people believe my way is not the right way and that the current way is fine. That is grand and let us debate it. This idea of scaremongering and saying we are sending people to war and we are sending people to Iraq, come on, that is not true. It might get the emotion going but it is not the factual debate we need to have.

I take the point about not rushing this, which Deputy Duncan Smith has made. I do not intend to rush this. We have the pre-legislative scrutiny and the committee is doing its job well from what I can see. It sends its reports back. We need to make sure there is ample time to scrutinise this issue.

On the purpose of improving the United Nations, I fully agree. The Taoiseach will be there next week. We are very committed to the United Nations and to multilateralism at a time when it is under attack from many sources. We are increasing our multilateral funding and support for the UN all of the time. UN Security Council reform, unfortunately, is not likely in the near term. There are ways we need to work through what it is.

I believe we can get a landing zone here that is correct if there is a wish to do that. If there is a wish, which there is not from everybody in opposition, to suggest this big bad Government wants to scrap military neutrality and send your sons to war, we will not make any progress. That is misinformation and disinformation, and it is downright factually incorrect.

This is a question about how we effectively and appropriately deploy Irish peacekeepers to do the brilliant job they have been doing. There are real-life examples. No new peace support operation has been approved by the UN Security Council since 2014. Operation Althea in Bosnia is a recent example, whereby issues arose in 2022 on the continuation of a UN Security Council mandate and Ireland was faced with the real possibility of having to withdraw men and women from the mission as the roll-over of the mandate was not immediately forthcoming. There continue to be concerns as Russia has become very critical about it. It is very possible that Russia may veto a future renewal. We saw in 2015 that Ireland could not participate in the EU security mission in the Mediterranean, then called Operation Sophia, for more than a year after it started because of the lack of a mandate. In 1999 a permanent member of the UN Security Council vetoed the renewal of the United Nations preventive deployment force, and because the subsequent European Union peace operation in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia did not have a Security Council mandate we could not participate. In 2017 we could not participate in the Maritime Analysis and Operations Centre.

Question No. 9 taken with Written Answers.

Defence Forces

10. Deputy Duncan Smith asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence to provide an update on the incident in southern Lebanon where Irish peacekeepers came under fire from the Israel Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29866/25]

36. Deputy Conor D. McGuinness asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence the contact that has been made with the Israeli Government after Irish peacekeepers in southern Lebanon having most recently came under fire from the Israel Defence Forces, IDF, at the end of May,

which followed on from attacks by the IDF on Irish diplomats; how the Israeli Government has sanctioned the IDF soldiers involved in firing live ammunition at Irish citizens; and the security guarantees for Irish peacekeepers and diplomats he has demanded from the Israeli Government. [31306/25]

39. Deputy Aindrias Moynihan asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence to outline UNIFIL's engagement with the Israeli authorities on the recent shooting incident involving Irish peacekeeping troops in southern Lebanon; the response that has been received on any engagement with UNIFIL with the Israeli authorities on this recent incident; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31160/25]

Deputy Duncan Smith: This question is on the shots fired at our peacekeeping soldiers in Lebanon. Will the Tánaiste provide a comment on this?

Deputy Simon Harris: I propose to take Questions Nos. 10, 36 and 39 together.

I thank Deputy Smith for raising this question. Our peacekeepers in Lebanon are part of an international UN-mandated force under the command of UNIFIL. They are part of Ireland's long and proud history of peacekeeping, and I know from my recent visit to our troops in UNIFIL that they are making a really important contribution in a very challenging environment. They are acting as the international community's eyes and ears on the ground. I want to take this opportunity, joining with Deputy Smith and everybody in the House, to state again our thanks to our personnel for the valuable service they carry out in support of international peace and security in the region. I reaffirm once again that their safety and security is a matter of the highest priority for me as Minister for Defence and for the Irish Government. I also thank their families for the sacrifices they make.

To address the incident referred to, while the Irish patrol was not directly targeted by the Israel Defense Forces in the incident on 29 May, the firing of ammunition in the vicinity of an Irish patrol is considered extraordinarily reckless. Such actions are completely unacceptable in terms of the safety of our peacekeepers in the execution of their mandated duties. In my view, it was simply an attempt to intimidate our peacekeepers. We saw an attempt to intimidate our diplomats relatively recently and now we have seen an attempt to intimidate our peacekeepers.

The incident in Yaroun was unconscionable, and I categorically condemn any endangerment of our peacekeepers. On hearing of this development, I immediately directed that my officials convey a formal demarche to both the United Nations and the Israeli mission to the UN in New York to express my deep concern regarding the unacceptable nature of the incident and the actions of the Israel Defense Forces. In this regard, our permanent representative to the United Nations in New York made contact with the Under Secretary General for Peace Operations at the UN, Jean-Pierre Lacroix, on 30 May, immediately after the incident. The deep and well-founded concerns of the Irish Government in relation to the incident were clearly and frankly conveyed to the UN.

Also on my instruction, our permanent mission to the UN expressed our grave concerns and anger directly to the permanent mission of Israel to the United Nations and, through them, to the Israeli Government. Ireland has also requested that UNIFIL formally raise these concerns as a matter of urgency with the appropriate Israeli authorities. Should any further incident of this nature occur, we will continue to do so without hesitation.

I reassure the House that I remain in regular contact with the Chief of Staff with regard to the

deployment of our personnel in UNIFIL. The Department is also regularly kept apprised of all developments in those areas where Defence Forces personnel are deployed. There are robust force protection measures in place to support the security and safety of all personnel, and these measures are continually reviewed and enhanced as necessary to address any emerging threat.

We have to be clear about what is going on here. It is a constant attempt to undermine peacekeeping by the Israel Defense Forces. Then they come out with whataboutery and state they will look into matters and issue apologies. It misses the point. There needs to be accountability in relation to those who fired these shots, which were clearly an absolute breach of everybody's basic understanding of international laws and rules in relation to peacekeeping. Sadly, it is not an isolated incident because when our permanent representatives to Palestine were visiting a refugee camp, as diplomats during their duties, we saw a similar incident when shots were fired in their direction. This is a pattern of intimidation by the Israeli Government and the Israel Defense Forces.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I thank the Tánaiste and I welcome the swift and stern diplomatic response we had to this incident through the United Nations. As the Tánaiste has said, this is a pattern of behaviour. There is no sense this pattern will stop. We are lucky there were no injuries or loss of life but if, God forbid, we see further instances such as this or an escalation, what is open to us as a State in terms of escalating actions against Israel? Will we continue to demarche through the United Nations? We know that legislatively we have the occupied Palestinian territories Bill coming through the foreign affairs committee and we will debate it there but what else can be done? We had a delegation from the Palestinian Authority meet the foreign affairs committee to discuss issues such as planning and water services. Senior operations people gave an absolutely stark vista of Gaza, the West Bank and everywhere in terms of Palestine and Israel's actions. This pattern we are witnessing in terms of peacekeepers is just one of a host of aggressive actions by Israel against Palestinians and peacekeeping.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Smith. I believe that when the representatives of Palestine met the foreign affairs committee and addressed the matter, they referred to Ireland and possibly Algeria as two of the most supportive countries of their actions. Perhaps that is not articulated enough in the House. This country, the Government and the Oireachtas are doing everything we possibly can, and we will continue to do everything we possibly can, to support the people of Palestine, support international law and support human rights. It was good to hear that recognised by Palestinians at the foreign affairs committee as recently as this week.

Yes, we will continue to demarche but it is well beyond time for real practical actions against the Israeli Government. This is why Ireland has called for the association agreement review. We have a Foreign Affairs Council meeting on Monday week. What I would say today in the House is that I hope and expect the European Commission on that occasion to bring forward a list of options on what actions Europe can and should take on Israel's clear breach of our association agreement. It is my view, the view of Deputy Smith and the view of most Members of the House that the agreement should be suspended as Israel is clearly in breach of the human rights clauses, which are not just there for padding. It is clearly in breach of the human rights clauses. In the absence of that decision, which would require unanimity of the European Union, the very least we should expect is that the European Commission present to the Foreign Affairs Council options as to immediate measures and sanctions that can be taken. There has to be cause and effect between the breach of an agreement and action being taken by Europe.

10 o'clock

Yes, we will bring forward the Bill regarding the occupied Palestinian territories. I hope to bring it to the Cabinet next week; or if not next week, then certainly the following week. The Bill will go to the Oireachtas committee this month and it can begin its scrutiny process. We will continue to use every avenue available. The Taoiseach will represent our country at the UN two-state solution conference, which I think is next week.

One of the most practical things we should all be pushing for through our own political groupings in Europe is for a speedy review of the association agreement. There is no reason, in my view, in the wide earthly world why the European Commission should not be presenting options for member states to consider in terms of the breaches that have clearly taken place. That would be real, tangible action that Europe can and should take regarding the Israeli Government.

Deputy Duncan Smith: That is interesting. Is it the Tánaiste's hope or expectation that the Commission will bring some options to the Foreign Affairs Council meeting on Monday week?

The occupied territories Bill will be coming forward. I am sure the Tánaiste's attention has been drawn to the legal action that has been taken by a transnational group of lawyers against Airbnb due to its operation of services in the occupied territories. Senator Frances Black hosted a briefing in the audiovisual room on Tuesday morning. There was a very strong legal opinion that under the definition of trade we cannot separate goods and services. I am sure the Tánaiste's attention will have been drawn to that in the spirit of wanting to get this Bill right, and he knows our position in terms of including services in it. Again, this is all about bringing tangible sanctions against Israel for its actions. It was not lost on me, the Tánaiste or anyone else who heard it that the Palestinian people see allies all over the world. They mention Ireland and Algeria, and it should not be lost on anyone on either side of the House that our actions here make a difference to the Palestinian people.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is fair to say that we will be seeing continuity in Israel's pattern of behaviour. It is not surprising for an entity that engages in genocidal action. The shooting at Irish peacekeepers and diplomats was an absolute disgrace. We know the actions we need to take, whether it is the occupied territories Bill and the inclusion of services. I agree with the Tánaiste that the Commission needs to take action regarding the EU-Israel association agreement. All I can say is that it is a disgrace. We also have to find a way to ensure we are not facilitating the sale of Israeli war bonds by whatever means possible.

I have two questions. One of them relates to Seán Rooney. We have to do right by peacekeepers and make sure we do everything for them. I know there is a case at this point. The Tánaiste will not be shocked at the question I am going to ask now regarding Michael McNeela, who lost his life in Lebanon in 1989. His mother received the pension but when she died, his father, John, did not. I have spoken to the Tánaiste about it before. It is something that needs to be resolved. Discussions between the Tánaiste's Department and the Department of Social Protection were meant to take place about finding an interim solution, but the legislation needs to change.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Irish peacekeeping troops were fired on. It is not the first time; it has happened through the years with Israeli forces and their proxies in that area. The fact is this is not the first time. Is it true to say that the co-ordinates of the Irish troops are given to the so-called Israel Defense Forces, that the bunkers are not moved, and that they know where the peacekeepers have been for a long time? They know exactly where the troops are. They know

12 June 2025

exactly what they are doing regarding the attacks on these troops.

One of my colleagues made the point yesterday that the Israeli war bonds are facilitated by the Central Bank. The rounds that were fired at the Irish peacekeepers were possibly paid for by those war bonds. It highlights the challenges we are facing with regard to the conflict in that zone and what we need to do. We need to be more proactive on this issue.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Governor of the Central Bank outlined the legal and practical situation yesterday at the Oireachtas committee. Nobody wants to see anything happening that in any way provides any support, direct or indirect, to the Israeli Government's horrific actions and the genocidal activity. We have to operate within the laws of the land and the laws of Europe, but we continue to work our way through all issues.

Deputy Smith asked whether it was my hope or expectation, which is a fair question. It is certainly my request and the request of a number of European countries. I would think it is a legitimate expectation, but I do not yet know. The people of Ireland and Europe are watching on. They are looking at the European Union - I am a big fan of the European Union; it has been great for our country - as a major peace project. It is one of the most successful peace projects in the world. The majority of EU member states agreed to a review of an agreement, something Spain and Ireland had been seeking for more than three years. There is an onus on the EU now to maintain credibility by ensuring that review is swift and has clear consequences. We should see those actions. We need to see those actions quite quickly.

On the issue of services, as I have said before with regard to the occupied Palestinian territories, I am very supportive of the policy rationale for it. However, I have to get the law right. It is likely that the draft Bill will be for goods, as per the commitment in the programme for Government, but, to be very clear, as I have said to Senator Black, the Oireachtas committee will then scrutinise if it is possible to include services. I have also asked the Attorney General for updated advice regarding that to get advice external to my own Department's legal advice. I expect to receive that shortly.

I thank Deputy Ó Murchú for raising the case of Seán Rooney. I want to see every support possible provided to the Rooney family. We will work our way through all of those issues. I also want to see justice for Seán Rooney and his family. We will continue working in that regard.

I also thank Deputy Ó Murchú for raising the case of Michael McNeela. In fairness, he raised it with me long before anybody else ever did. I thank him for doing that. I heard Michael's father, John, on the radio, and you could not but be moved. I extend my deep sympathies to John on the loss of Michael. There is a legitimate policy question here. One would imagine this affects a very small number of people with very particular tragic circumstances. The engagement between my own Department and other Departments is ongoing. I do not want to say more than that until I make more progress, but I am very sympathetic and supportive to seeing whether action can be taken.

Air Corps

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mairéad Farrell): Bogfaimid ar aghaidh go Ceist Uimh. 11. Tá Ceist Uimh. 11 á tógáil le ceisteanna Uimh. 20, 23, 29, 34, 42, 62, 66 agus 79.

11. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence the urgent actions he and his Department will take to ensure that the 505 squadron at Casement Aerodrome at Baldonnell is fully staffed and will not be forced to continue to operate at 50% capacity and a reduced flying schedule; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29865/25]

20. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence if he is aware that it has been reported that the Air Corps is to end 24-hour operations and reduce its service to an 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., five-day week from June 2025, as a crisis in air traffic control has reached a critical point; and if he will ensure that this will not be the case and that operations will be remaining in place 24-7 yearly. [30316/25]

23. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence if he will address the impact of staffing shortages in the air traffic control unit at Baldonnell, which have resulted in the scaling back of operations to five-day coverage; if he is concerned that this reduction limits support to the Irish Coast Guard and restricts the ability to respond to crime, search and rescue, or emergency events outside of office hours; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30708/25]

29. **Deputy Cathy Bennett** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence the reason the Air Corps has reduced operations to a five-day work week. [31309/25]

34. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence his plans for recruitment of air traffic control staff at Baldonnell Aerodrome; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30989/25]

42. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence the measures that will be put in place to resume full-time flight operations at Casement Aerodrome as a matter of urgency. [30786/25]

62. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence for an update on plans to base Air Corps aircraft at Shannon Airport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31129/25]

66. **Deputy Cathy Bennett** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence when he was first apprised of the possibility of the Air Corps reducing its operational hours; if he received recommendations as to how the situation could be averted; and the actions he took to prevent the situation from arising. [31310/25]

79. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence the measures he is taking to ensure the Air Corps remains fully operational at Casement Aerodrome in Baldonnell; his plans to recruit air traffic controllers and other personnel; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30283/25]

Deputy Duncan Smith: What urgent actions will the Tánaiste and his Department take to ensure that the 505 squadron at Casement Aerodrome at Baldonnell is fully staffed and will not be forced to continue to operate at 50% capacity and at a reduced flying schedule?

Deputy Simon Harris: I propose to take Questions Nos. 11, 20, 23, 29, 34, 42, 62, 66 and 79 together.

I thank Deputy Smith for this question. It is a very important one on an important issue; it is a critical matter. I have already set out to the House a number of immediate steps that I have

taken to ensure the restricted air traffic control service operating in Baldonnell is restored to full service. In May, this issue was brought to the attention of my Department. It is a very frustrating issue, in many ways, because it shows how dependent we are on a very small number of people. I do not cast any aspersion on them; people are perfectly entitled to move and everything else, but it is a small number of people. If a certain number of people leave a service, the whole service finds itself at reduced capacity. We have got to move beyond that.

A request was made when I brought together the Chief of Staff, the head of the Air Corps and others that one of the practical measures the Government could take is to immediately introduce the service commitment scheme. There was a view, I think it is fair to say, from military leadership that this would be a significant and helpful step in ensuring the retention of people in the here and now to get the service back up and running to the 24-7 service that it needs. We took that decision on Tuesday at Cabinet. It is now a Government decision and it has been made. I have conveyed it to the Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces and they can now, I say respectfully, get on with it in terms of engaging with any individuals who may benefit. I know it is something that is recognised as significant by the Air Corps. This is just one of a number of things that need to happen because I think - and certainly hope - it will get us to a much better place. I hope it gets us to that place relatively rapidly.

There are clearly other things that need to happen, many of which are on the operational side as well. I have said very clearly to the leadership of the Defence Forces and my own leadership that we need to see a rolling series of updates on what they are doing in implementing the various recommendations. We have, as I said, introduced a service commitment scheme for air traffic control personnel. We have approved new promotion opportunities within the service. We are also open to the outsourcing of aspects of training provided. All of these individual actions are now in train and are aimed at ensuring that both existing personnel and those known to be considering leaving the service are actively incentivised to remain. These actions build on other specific measures that have already been initiated as regards recruitment. It is important now that we see that action.

It is unusual - and I hope this shows the sense of urgency we are attaching to this - to take these steps outside of a pay process or outside of local bargaining. Local bargaining was the route through which I think the Government and others would have originally envisaged these matters being considered. The fact that we have separated this from local bargaining highlights the critical nature of getting this matter resolved.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Indeed. The fact that this had to take place outside of collective agreements highlights how unusual it is, and I acknowledge the Tánaiste's action on this. However, the reason this has happened is underpinned by a structural issue in terms of our airfields in the Dublin region, specifically Weston aerodrome. *The Irish Times* has reported that we have been losing technicians to the privately owned Weston aerodrome, which operates the privately run Coast Guard service. A ten-year, €670 million public contract underpins Weston aerodrome. We now know that some Garda operations are taking place out of Weston and we are having a brain drain from our public service from Baldonnell into Weston. We are fighting an uphill battle because of that. We talked about manifestos earlier. As per our manifesto, we do not understand why a publicly run Coast Guard service cannot operate out of Baldonnell or Dublin Airport, as previously spoken about. That is the structural issue at play here.

Deputy Seán Crowe: It is of little good spending €2.5 billion on jet flight capability if we are operating on a nine-to-five, weekday basis. Can we have some assurance that full-time

flight operations at Casement will be brought back online at the earliest possible opportunity? Can we also have assurance that the air ambulance service is not affected?

Deputy Simon Harris: Yes and yes. Yes, the plan is to get the service back up and running on a 24-7 basis as quickly as possible. The exact timeline for that, to be blunt, depends on the individual conversations the Air Corps leadership is having with individual people in terms of air traffic control. Those conversations are under way and I am hoping for a readout with an update on that very shortly. There are provisions in place to ensure the continuance of the emergency air ambulance, which I think is based in Athlone, generally. I do not want to be pedantic because the service is not operating at full capacity in terms of hours, but it is operating from eight to eight as opposed to nine to five. Those are the current operational hours, with contingency arrangements in place outside of those hours as well.

Deputy Smith is correct. I will not get into the specifics around any individual commercial enterprise other than to say it is factually true to say there has been an increase in commercial activity in this area even since the 2021 report was carried out. We are operating in an environment where we have a global shortage of air traffic controllers and increased commercial competition for air traffic controllers. Those two factors were decisive in saying we need to go ahead with the service commitment scheme in the here and now to make sure that working in the Air Corps, as well as being a huge commitment to the security of our State and public service, is sustainable for people who have families, mortgages and lives like everybody else. We had an earlier question from Deputy Crowe on this. It raises a broader issue of those pinch points where there are specialist personnel who are significantly qualified, very happy to join the Air Corps and very proud to serve, but after a number of years other opportunities present themselves and, as per human nature, people will be attracted to them too. We will have to do a deep dive rather than play whack-a-mole such that it is this today and that tomorrow in terms of those pinch points around specialist personnel. I am considering bringing in external expertise to advise in that regard.

Deputy Duncan Smith: That is encouraging but, again, when commercial interests impact critical public services such as what should be operating out of Baldonnell, the State needs to act and look at those structural problems. One of them is the Coast Guard contract. It has been well debated here and in committee in the last Dáil and will be again. We have nearly €750 million of public funds helping to underpin a commercial enterprise at the expense of Baldonnell. That will need to be looked at. I accept, and I think the Tánaiste accepts, that this cannot be done in, as he put it, a whack-a-mole scenario; it has to be done strategically. This has highlighted a structural problem which needs to be resolved in the coming months and years.

Deputy Seán Crowe: One of the other TDs raised earlier the Garda helicopter. Again, for those of us who need the Garda helicopter - certainly, it is regularly used right across my constituency - I would be concerned about that. I do not know if the Minister has any influence in that regard, but if it is not going to operate at weekends, is there another site we could use for that? It is critical for supports in all sorts of ways. Whether it is a serious accident or a serious incident, the Garda helicopter is brought in. The idea that we would not be able to use it on the ground is simply appalling. I would be interested in the Minister's views on that.

Deputy Simon Harris: I agree with the point Deputy Smith makes about the need for that kind of structural, strategic look at those key pinch points, those personnel, and I take the point he makes about commercial activity.

12 June 2025

To Deputy Crowe's point, without over-commenting on it for a load of operational and security reasons, there are workarounds in place to ensure support for the Garda in terms of the Garda air support unit and our air ambulance situation. I assure the House that contingency planning is in place in this regard. The Government was asked by our military leadership to do something this week, that is, to provide the service commitment scheme. I was told that if we did, it would be quite impactful in getting the hours back up and running to where they need to be. We need that follow-through now as quickly as possible, and that is where my focus will be.

Question No. 12 taken with Question No. 8.

National Security

13. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence the role his Department will play in the preparation of a revised national security strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30994/25]

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: As the Tánaiste knows, the programme for Government committed to the development of a revised national security strategy, one that reflects the changing threats and geopolitical realities Ireland now faces. Progress has been made with the establishment of the national security council and secretariat, but five years on from the original commitment the full strategy remains outstanding. Can the Tánaiste outline the role his Department is playing in finalising this crucial work and when we can expect to see the draft strategy published?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Ó Cearúil for the question. As he rightly says, our programme for Government, *Securing Ireland's Future*, sets out a number of commitments relating to national security. It is probably the most robust programme for Government in terms of national security and the focus, quite rightly, on security and security defence infrastructure. It acknowledges that this is a time of geopolitical upheaval and challenges to democracy internationally, with threats and challenges arising from the rapidly changing geopolitical landscape across the world.

In this context, our Government will bring forward a number of measures relating to justice, defence, cybersecurity and central co-ordination, a review of our existing structures and a national security strategy. All are pieces of a puzzle with a view to enhancing further our national security.

The Taoiseach recently established the ministerial national security council, to which the Deputy alluded. As Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade and Defence, I and the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration are also members of that council. Both the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces have current roles and responsibilities relating to national security, including the fact that the Secretary General of the Department of Defence and the Chief of Staff are members of the National Security Committee and will attend meetings of the newly established ministerial security council. The ministerial council will ensure that at the highest level there is a structured, ongoing review of our strategic national security interests and systematised monitoring of progress with delivery on the Government's commitments in this area, including the delivery of our new national security strategy.

Our national security strategy will reflect the changing geopolitical landscape, notably the

altered security situation in Europe, and will ensure a whole-of-government approach to defence and deterrence. The preparation of that strategy is being co-ordinated by the national security secretariat in the Department of the Taoiseach, with inputs provided by a range of relevant stakeholders, including both my Departments; the Department of justice; the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment; our Defence Forces; the Garda; and the National Cyber Security Centre.

The preparation of a draft strategy covers a broad range of national security issues and it will include the implications of more recent security, defence and international developments and their related impacts, including the implementation of the Report of the Commission on the Defence Forces. The timeline is a matter for the Department of the Taoiseach, but I expect it to be later this year.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: As the Tánaiste is aware, the nature of national security has fundamentally changed. We are no longer talking solely about traditional military threats but, rather, hybrid threats, cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, energy security, technological vulnerability and foreign interference. The world has moved at pace, from the war in Ukraine and the instability in the Middle East and particularly in Gaza, right through to malign actors targeting critical infrastructure across Europe. Ireland still remains exposed. Our neutrality must not be mistaken for complacency. A small, open economy such as ours is deeply vulnerable to economic, technological and political shocks. However, we have strong foundations and it is important to get that across. We are not lame ducks. We have An Garda Síochána, the Defence Forces and an emerging intelligence capacity. These need to be fully integrated under the national security strategy, as the Tánaiste mentioned. We should not be simply reactive, but genuinely anticipatory and robust in our preparations.

Deputy Simon Harris: I agree with everything the Deputy has said. We face multiple and varied threats. This is not just Ireland but all other European countries as well. I was cheering inside when the Deputy said that neutrality cannot be used as an excuse for complacency. We all value military neutrality but sometimes when defence and security are mentioned in here, questions are raised about military neutrality. In fact, being militarily non-aligned and neutral, if anything, places a greater obligation on us to take our own defence and security seriously, because we are not in a military alliance that would allow us to rely on others to do so. That is why we have to step up spending on defence and security and also on justice and the infrastructure required by An Garda Síochána. As someone who has been in government for quite a long time now, I am really encouraged by the level of co-ordination we are seeing, the structures that are being put in place and the breaking down of silos, real and perceived. Today we are moving ahead with the national maritime security strategy, which is another piece. This recognises that Ireland is a small country geographically speaking in terms of land mass, but it has a vast ocean and has undersea cables and the like that need to be protected. Yes, we have a lot of work to do on this but we have strong foundations and we need to build on them in the time ahead. We will do so with the ministerial council on national security and our new national security strategy.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: The Tánaiste has outlined the issues quite succinctly and well. One thing to bear in mind as well is whether the strategy will incorporate external expertise to ensure that it reflects best international practice. That is not necessarily expertise from the private sector. We would be looking to our partners in Europe specifically, and then obviously to our Canadian and American partners, when it comes to the protection of deep-sea cables. Crucially, it will need to provide a clear national security doctrine that allows the State to protect itself across all domains, not just in traditional defence. The Tánaiste has outlined that it will do

so. It will not be single-faceted; it will be a multifaceted approach and it will be quite detailed. The illusion of security is not enough. As the Tánaiste mentioned, quite rightly, just because we are a neutral country does not mean we should not be able to defend ourselves. Resilience must be real, structured and forward-looking.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy is absolutely right. I can assure him that it will be all of those things and it will be multifaceted. Certain Departments have primacy in terms of their direct responsibility for the security of the State and the country. My Department and the Department of justice are obvious ones in that regard. However, all Departments and all agencies have a role to play. That is why I think it is so appropriate that this work is co-ordinated by the Department of the Taoiseach, the ministerial council on national security is chaired by the Taoiseach and the national security secretariat resides within the Department of the Taoiseach. That convening role and ability to pull everybody together on this is both welcome and necessary. I will seek a note for the Deputy on this. I assure him that seeking external expertise, particularly international experiences and how we can learn from other jurisdictions, is very much under way. I see this very clearly in my own Department with the issue of maritime security. We are looking at what other coastal nations have done and making sure we can learn from best practice.

Questions Nos. 14 to 16, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Defence Forces

17. **Deputy Peter ‘Chap’ Cleere** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence if he will report on his recent visit to Lebanon; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30835/25]

80. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence if he will outline any progress made recently in the case of a Defence Forces member who was killed on UN duty in Lebanon (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31241/25]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I raised earlier the issue of Seán Rooney. We know there is a legal case at this point. We have had many interactions on this and I think there is agreement across the House that we need to seek justice for Seán Rooney and his family. We also need to make sure that, through all the processes, what is learned is carried forward such that the absolute best protocols are carried out in the context of our Defence Forces.

On a question completely unrelated to the triple lock, it also means that at times we probably need to have straight conversations with the UN about its responsibility, even in providing information. I ask the Tánaiste to give an update on the Government’s interactions in trying to seek that justice and making sure all is done for Seán Rooney.

Deputy Simon Harris: I propose to take Questions Nos. 17 and 80 together.

The Government remains fully committed to seeking and securing justice for Seán Rooney, his family and for the men and women of Óglaigh na hÉireann who served with him with pride and distinction. During my recent visit to southern Lebanon, I conveyed this in very clear and blunt terms to the new Lebanese Government, its defence minister and its foreign affairs minister. I understand the issues in respect of the separation of powers and the independent judicial system but the Irish people have been long-standing supporters of the people of Lebanon. We

are proud to stand by the great people of Lebanon. We are proud to support Lebanon, its security and the very fragile peace there that we wish to uphold. However, we expect that, after the brutal murder of Private Seán Rooney, heaven and earth is moved to make sure that the perpetrators of this heinous crime are brought to justice. From my engagement with my Lebanese counterparts, who are new to government, I took that our message is understood and our depth of feeling is shared by them as well. I will be keeping in close contact with them and with our embassy presence in the region.

Without wanting to cut across any court proceedings or anything else, there is obviously an obligation on the United Nations as well to support the provision of information in every way possible to the Rooney family. Seán Rooney's family deserve answers and they deserve truth. I will be doing everything I possibly can to make sure we assist and support them in every practical way.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I welcome what the Tánaiste has said. I agree that heaven and earth needs to be moved to get justice for the family. I accept that we are now out of time and that I will get a written answer. I will follow up on this issue. I also ask the Tánaiste that we resolve the issue regarding John McNeela and the payment on the basis of Michael McNeela's sacrifice. That is the only right thing to do.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Special Educational Needs

85. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Education and Youth to outline, in the context of special education preparedness for September 2025, the number of children with special educational needs but currently without an appropriate school place for September 2025, and the plans to address this; the way in which special needs assistant, SNA, posts will be allocated to these children and all children with special educational needs in September 2025; if all schools with new special classes due to open in September have had their SNA allocation confirmed, for example; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [31563/25]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: With regard to special education preparedness for September 2025, how many children with special educational needs are currently without an appropriate school place for September 2025? What plans are there to address this? In what way will special needs assistant be allocated to these children and all children with special educational needs in September 2025? Have all schools with new special classes due to open in September had their SNA allocation confirmed, for example? I ask the Minister to make a statement on the matter.

Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Helen McEntee): Some 399 new special classes have been sanctioned so far for the 2025-26 school year. Of these, 287 are at primary level and 112 are at post-primary level, increasing the number of special classes by 103% since 2020. This means overall that there will be 3,700 special classes and 129 special schools in operation throughout the country. We will continue to build on that.

Just under 3,300 children and young people were identified to the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, under the new parents' notification process by mid-February 2025 as needing a special educational placement for the upcoming school term. Close to 4,000 places are being made available nationwide between the new provision being provided, through the normal movement of students from primary to post-primary and students finishing post-primary.

The work now is focused on ensuring that these children enrol in these available places. The vast majority of schools opening new special classes have opened for admissions. A small number have not but that is being addressed. The NCSE is engaging closely with the small number of schools to ensure they offer places as quickly as possible to the children seeking them. Schools were informed last week of their SNA allocations for this coming September, including for all new special classes. Special classes generally receive two SNAs per class. That is alongside their special education teacher and it is no different this year. Budget 2025 provided for 1,600 SNAs, the largest ever allocation in a single year, meaning there will be more than 23,100 in our schools in September, supporting our mainstream teachers as well as our special education teachers. It is the role of the NCSE to manage the allocations of SNAs across the country and to ensure that all of the additional SNAs provided for by this Government are allocated to support children with the highest level of need, so they get the highest level of support. It is important that we continue to meet this need across our education system. The programme for Government clearly commits to the recruitment of additional SNAs to provide greater support to students and schools. All SNAs and all new classes have been allocated and we want to build on that for next year.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I will drill down into those headline figures. They are figures which have been iterated for some time. My question was on the number of children with an identified recommendation that has been notified to the NCSE but who do not yet have an appropriate school place for September. Do we have that figure today? The Minister outlined that some schools have not yet opened up their offering and that is an issue in itself. Last year we were notified at the start of September that 126 children did not have a place. On Saturday there was a protest in Dublin and it was said 60 children did not have a place. There were an additional four children that Rachel Martin from FUSS Ireland and the equality in education campaign said did not have a place. My colleague, Deputy Daly, has identified five children in Murhur National School who do not have a sanctioned class or a place. Do we have that figure? If not, why not?

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and I have been meeting with the NCSE to make sure we are on top of the figures and understand where we are. As of yesterday, more than 92% of children have been allocated places or are in the process of that happening. Outside of Dublin, where there are still places to be allocated, there are pathways for every child. For example, in our county of Meath, there are no places to be allocated for primary or post-primary schools and, in terms of special school allocations, there are two but there are pathways for those two. We have an outline of all the counties and where there are larger numbers, there are clear pathways. The challenge we still have - I do not think anybody has denied this - is with Dublin. We have been working with the NCSE, which is engaging with all the schools. I thank it and acknowledge that a huge number of schools are taking on extra classrooms. Our special schools are expanding and providing greater levels of support than ever before but the need is greater than ever before. There is a huge body of work happening, looking at the need and making sure we have the required spaces and that they match up. Nobody wants children travelling for hours on end every day to get to school. Where schools

have been sanctioned and have not opened, they are being spoken to and engaged with regularly to make sure that happens. Every new classroom has been sanctioned since the end of April so there is no reason any school should not have opened its allocation process. We are working closely with schools. I appreciate it is not straightforward for some but it is important we get this done as early as possible. We do not want to be here in September not knowing where children are going.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The Minister will be before the committee and I, as well as all those in opposition, would appreciate detailed, regular updates between now and September on the progress being made. Headline figures tell one story but I hope, as we accommodate more children, we can get the detail on that.

I make the point again on the children in Dublin and the four children in Sligo. I can send on details. There are five children in Murhur National School, Moyvane, County Kerry. There is potential there to accommodate children. There is physical space but a classroom is not sanctioned, although there is demand for it.

I will ask a follow-up question. We have long got responses referring to more than 22,000 SNAs employed, plus 1,600 sanctioned in budget 2025. Now the Minister tells us there are 23,100. That is 500 short. She said in every response we got - I am sure this will be reflected by others - that more than 22,000 SNAs are employed in the system and 1,600 extra SNA posts were sanctioned in budget 2025. In her response to this question, she said 23,100 would be allocated for next year. There is a shortfall of 500. Can the Minister explain that?

Deputy Helen McEntee: On the children the Deputy mentioned, I will not be specific but that is why this process is important. If we do not know about a child and their needs, it is hard to identify and allocate support to them. For any child known to the NCSE in Kerry or anywhere, as far as I and the NCSE are concerned, there are places available and being provided. That is being worked through at the moment. The biggest challenge is in Dublin and we are trying to work through that.

The new system the Minister of State and I are putting in place will bring things forward. The NCSE has written to all schools and highlighted to parents that they should notify the NCSE by 1 October if their child will require a special education place or special education school for next year, so we can allocate those places by 31 December 2025. We are bringing everything forward by four months to make sure this time next year we are not still in this position talking about allocating children.

On SNA allocation, I will have to look at the figure in parliamentary questions the Deputy mentioned, but the figure I have is we will have 23,100-plus towards the end of this year. That includes the 1,600 extra. It is a significant increase, 30% more than we had five years ago. Adding that to the SET teachers we have, it is 44,000 extra supports in classrooms for the 79,000 teachers we have. It is a huge increase but we want to and will do more.

State Examinations

86. **Deputy Eoghan Kenny** asked the Minister for Education and Youth to outline her engagement with stakeholders, including trade unions representing teachers, regarding the proposed reforms for the leaving certificate, as of June 2025; and if she will make a statement on

the matter. [30862/25]

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I would appreciate if the Minister would outline her engagement with stakeholders, including trade unions representing teachers, regarding the proposed reforms to the leaving certificate, as of June 2025, given that last Friday the largest post-primary teacher union in Ireland voted strongly in favour of industrial action over the reforms proposed for September.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I will take it back to what we are discussing, and that is leaving certificate reform. It is important to stress we are living through a period of rapid change and it is essential that we equip children and young people with the skills and competencies they need to succeed and thrive in a changing world. That is a central purpose of senior cycle redevelopment, which builds on junior cycle reform which started to roll out in 2014. Senior cycle redevelopment will also spread the assessment load on students by reducing the focus on high-stakes terminal examinations. Our students are engaged in them at the moment and we wish continued success to all of them.

The introduction of the first tranche of new and revised leaving certificate subjects will take place in September 2025 as previously announced. The approach taken to the redevelopment has always been about collaboration and meaningful engagement with all our stakeholders since this process commenced. Last Friday was only a few days ago, but a huge amount of engagement took place prior to any vote. From December 2024 until early April, my officials met with both unions to discuss senior cycle redevelopment. About eight meetings happened in that regard. In April, I invited the TUI and the ASTI to engage in intensive discussions with my Department to develop a package of supports which could assist schools, teachers and students during the roll-out of the new senior cycle. I had two other engagements with the unions and attended their convention and congress.

Following the six meetings, which were part of the package of supports discussions, my Department and the unions concluded talks with the publication of the measures which were voted on recently. The unions voted on the package of measures and, subsequently, whether industrial action would take place, depending on that outcome. In parallel my officials have engaged with representatives of school management bodies, whose voices helped to inform the above discussions, as well as representatives of school leaders. My officials regularly engage with student representatives, including the ISSU, which I have also met a number of times, and with parent representatives, including the National Parents Council. I have met that body as well. There is also the senior cycle redevelopment partners' forum, which is chaired by former chief inspector, Dr. Harold Hislop, and is a representative stakeholder engagement group which underpins the necessary collaboration. All of these groups have been met significantly in the last while and that engagement will continue as we continue to roll this out.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I absolutely agree and the Labour Party agrees that reform of the leaving certificate curriculum is necessary. I say that also as a secondary school teacher whose subject, namely, business, will be rolled out in September. It has been just under a week since the vote. Has the Minister spoken to the general secretary of the ASTI since the vote last Friday? There has been an overwhelming majority from the ASTI. Some 68% do not agree with the support measures proposed by the Department and 67% of the 70% turnout of voters stated they are willing to go as far as industrial action to stop leaving certificate reform being implemented in September. This is a clear sign that those on the ground in our classrooms do not agree with leaving certificate reform. Surely the Minister can agree that teachers, who are not

in this Chamber and are not policymakers but are the ones teaching the students at the centre of this, do not agree with leaving certificate reform. Does the Minister accept that?

Deputy Helen McEntee: No, I do not. The Deputy said himself that teachers want leaving certificate reform. It is something they agree with. I point to the fact 73% of TUI members voted in favour of the measures. The ASTI and the TUI engaged very positively with my Department on this package of measures and asked for much of what is in this document. The vote was not on whether they support leaving certificate reform or otherwise; it was on whether they wanted additional supports to enact something they have already agreed to. Both the ASTI and the TUI as part of the public sector pay agreement which was negotiated and agreed in early 2024 signed up to co-operating with senior cycle redevelopment at that stage. A similar commitment is contained in the education sectoral plan, which was agreed in September 2024. All of what we have discussed are additional supports to protect them. To answer the Deputy's first question, my Department has written to both associations. I noted the outcome of the ballots of both the TUI and the ASTI and have restated that leaving certificate reform will go ahead. It is absolutely essential it does. I have restated that the package of supports which is still on the table for the ASTI is balanced and fair and was brought about by that positive engagement. That package is still there. I want to ensure that students and teachers benefit from those supports, which is something we all want to see happen.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: The Minister referred to the TUI. There is a complete divide between post-primary teachers throughout the country on whether or not they have the correct training and whether schools are fully resourced to roll out leaving certificate reform in a mere couple of months' time. I understand packages have been put forward to resource our schools, but we are talking about 100-year-old infrastructure. There are science laboratories that are not resourced and supported and an absence of lab technicians to support teachers. I understand that teachers across the country signed up to this but they were under the pretence that schools would be fully resourced and they would be properly trained. The majority of teachers have no training in AI. The Minister is standing over leaving certificate reform that is 100% going to support children of more affluent families. There is no denying that. They will have the opportunity to receive more grinds, go to external teachers and have better ICT equipment. Children in poor socioeconomic areas will not have those opportunities. Is the Minister willing to stand over that? I cannot believe she is.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Is the Deputy willing to stand over the current situation? It is already the case that students with more money can access grinds and better supports. What we are doing is actually making it fairer. I had a group meeting recently with people from across different divides, including a woman who works in Maynooth University and comes from a very difficult background where she was not encouraged to go to school or supported at home. She told me not to stop this reform as, for children most at risk of disadvantage, this takes away challenges such as not having supported exam time. These children might be better at practical things and would be better off getting support in classrooms. These are the people I am thinking of.

In respect of AI, it is here now. It a challenge. Students are sitting exams at the moment. We cannot say that no students have used AI in developing studies and things they can learn off and reproduce during an exam. Let us be honest, that can happen. What we need to do-----

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: The Minister is asking teachers to sign off on that.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I am saying we need to support teachers to embrace AI and we need to make sure they can deal with challenges when they arise. There is more work to do; I appreciate that.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: There is no indemnity for teachers.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Information is being provided and more work is being done. An AI committee will be set up and teachers will be part of it. It is very important we get this right. AI is here to stay and we need to make sure we benefit from it.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: The integrity of the exams will be lost.

School Curriculum

87. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Education and Youth if, in light of the deep concern regarding, among other things, the resourcing of schools, training of teachers and impact of artificial intelligence on the validity and authenticity of additional assessment components, and the related recent vote of rejection by the ASTI union, she will pause her accelerated plan for senior cycle redevelopment and re-engage with teachers and their representatives to ensure their concerns are addressed and the quality and integrity of the leaving certificate is maintained; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [31564/25]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: In light of the deep concern relating to, among other things, the resourcing of schools, training of teachers and impact of artificial intelligence on the validity and authenticity of additional assessment components, and the related recent vote of rejection by the ASTI union, will the Minister pause her accelerated plan for senior cycle redevelopment and re-engage with teachers and their representatives to ensure their concerns are addressed and the quality and integrity of the leaving certificate is maintained?

Deputy Helen McEntee: As has just been discussed, senior cycle redevelopment is about recognising and meeting the promise of education and enabling students to navigate the dynamic and ever-changing world around them by helping them to develop their talents, skills and understanding. Every child is different and has different abilities and, by bringing in these additional assessment components, we will make sure every child has the opportunity to show that. Senior cycle redevelopment will also reduce pressure on students by moving away from single exams worth 100% of the marks. It builds on a significant amount that has been done on additional assessment. There are 28 subjects in the established leaving certificate that already do this. I benefited from it when I studied art and music and know how positive it can be when a student is not solely focused on the 100% exam. I am sure many others here know that as well. I and many others believe pausing senior cycle redevelopment would not be in the interest of meeting that promise. That is why it was confirmed in April that the programme for redevelopment will proceed. Importantly, at that point I provided students entering fifth year in September, and their parents, with clarity and certainty. They have chosen their subjects and know what they are doing and that this change is taking place.

Senior cycle redevelopment is already under way. It is important to stress that. Students began to experience the changes from September 2022 when changes were made to the leaving certificate applied and vocational as well as the revised transition year programme statement, which is now in place. We are seeing record levels of transition year participation. Regarding

the school year just concluded, we know that students have been able to access modules at levels one and two of the senior cycle for the first time. These are children with additional educational needs and it is very welcome that we now have this for the first time. Both teacher unions have been heavily involved in the redevelopment programme from its outset and I am grateful to them for their intensive engagement, not only in recent months but through many years.

The Deputies referred to the ASTI ballot result but I point to the fact the TUI voted in favour of the planned support measures by a margin of 73% to 22%, while the ASTI members voted to reject the package. Senior cycle redevelopment has also been strongly supported by students, the National Parents Council, the Ombudsman for Children and many others.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: We need to separate some of the issues here. Nobody is arguing against senior cycle redevelopment. What is relevant is the approach. We need to be clear that the issue is the accelerated approach and the level of preparedness at school and departmental levels across the board to make these changes. The resourcing of schools is a very clear issue. The resources to adequately resource schools are not there and neither are the plans. It is the same with the training of staff.

I wish to focus on the issue of artificial intelligence. I firmly believe the impact of artificial intelligence has not been adequately assessed. The Minister stated students will have the opportunity to look at AI and then replicate it in an exam scenario. That is not the issue. Rather, it is that the actual AI material is presented as the student's own work. There is no scrutiny or oversight of that. Researchers from Deakin University stated, "Generative artificial intelligence ... increasingly allows students to complete assessment tasks without possessing the relevant knowledge or skills." That is a fundamental empirical piece. The issue here is the integrity and quality of the leaving certificate.

Deputy Helen McEntee: As to the Deputy's first point, I refer to the former Minister, Ruairí Quinn, who introduced junior cycle reform in the face of challenges. That work was followed up on by another former Minister, Jan O'Sullivan. Very soon after that, in 2016, leaving certificate reform started. This is not accelerated. It takes time and will be done on a phased basis.

On the supports, in the past six months alone, €20 million in additional funding has been provided specifically for science subjects, including agricultural science where we have increased that funding, and there will be more. I can commit to the Deputy that there will be more funding for our science labs to make sure they are up to scratch and that they have the supports and the resources they need. More training than ever for the leaving certificate is being provided. Papers are being provided earlier. There are more papers than there normally would be. Everything we can do is happening and if we need more training, I am saying now and have said it to the associations that we will provide that.

As to guidance, the point I was making is that in our current exams, a student can simply remember an essay and replicate it. That is not going to change. It is about understanding how we utilise the benefits of AI and teaching children how to use it. When they go in to the workforce, nobody will be telling them they cannot use it.

In summary, there are the measures to date, papers have been presented for AI, more work is being done and there is the AI advisory council. We need to keep working with teachers throughout all of this to make sure everybody benefits from what will be part of our daily lives.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Very real concerns have been articulated regarding the use of

AI. I made that point from the research in Deakin University. This week, at the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Artificial Intelligence, I asked the witnesses from Research Ireland how this impacts at third level. They said they have specifically changed their assessment process to ensure AI is not being presented as a student's own work. There are fundamental questions about authenticity, validity and equity that have to be considered. I do not think they have been adequately considered in respect of artificial intelligence. I appreciate the point the Minister is making in that it is here and we have to figure out ways to deal with it. However, to the point that it can be presented as students' own work and that they may give a false impression that they have skills or knowledge they do not have, it is about the integrity of the leaving certificate. I feel, as do others, that given the consideration of those facts, we all surely have the ambition to ensure the integrity and the quality of the leaving certificate is maintained.

Deputy Helen McEntee: The significant body of work being done with the inclusion of the TUI, the ASTI and all the representative groups is to make sure we produce the best leaving certificate possible to support students in the best way. We are not introducing 100% additional assessment components. There will still be, for the vast majority, 60% of an exam, which is still stressful enough but obviously it is not 100%. Twenty-eight subjects already have additional assessment components, so we are already grappling with AI. It is here and we need to make sure we are working with it, that we are understanding it and that we do not prevent change from happening because we do not know what will happen this time next year.

As to the request for a pause for a year, the technology we might have this time next year has not even been created yet. That is how quickly technology is moving. We cannot pause change because we are not sure what is coming down the tracks, but we do have to acknowledge it is a challenge. It is new, it is different. We need to make sure students are prepared for it and that they are learning and not just using technology that is not helping them. If we take a step back and look at what we are preparing young people for, it is not just the world but also working life. Companies and businesses with new ways of doing business are saying technology is part and parcel. It is going to be there, so we need to work with students in that regard. I fully accept we need to support teachers in this 100% along the way. Work is under way to make sure we have even more guidance and support. As this is rolled out, the AI advisory council will really help in that regard.

Special Educational Needs

88. **Deputy Jen Cummins** asked the Minister for Education and Youth her plans to redesignate special schools that cater to children with mild general learning disabilities. [30858/25]

Deputy Jen Cummins: I wish to ask about schools that cater for young people with mild general learning disabilities. I recently had the pleasure of visiting Scoil Eoin in Crumlin in my constituency and seeing the absolute care and love in that school for those students. I was really taken with how well they are provided with an excellent service for their education but also for their future. What will happen now with regard to this school having to broaden its admissions policy?

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I thank the Deputy for the question. The Government is committed to the provision of additional special school places for children with more complex educational needs. Over 300 new special school places are being provided for in the coming school year, 2025-26. Five

new special schools are being established in addition to 11 new special schools having opened over the past five years. Special school capacity is also being expanded in a number of special schools.

Along with providing additional special school capacity, the Department and the National Council for Special Education are considering that it may be necessary to look at the profile of our existing special schools. It is not the intention to exclude children who require special school places from accessing certain special school settings, but instead to work to ensure children with complex educational needs can apply to their own local school. The Deputy will agree that situations are arising where children with additional needs are travelling past special schools in their locality to attend special schools farther away. This is not fair on children or their families. This is down to the fact that children cannot apply for admission to their local special school simply because they do not meet the narrow designation of that specific school. This needs to be addressed and the Department is looking to engage with stakeholders in that regard. This is not a new departure. The National Council for Special Education reports that over half of these mild general learning disability special schools have been diversified, which means children with more complex needs can enrol in their local special school.

I thank the schools that have worked with us to broaden their designation. The Department will continue to support schools in this endeavour so that more special schools can better support children with complex needs in their local community. Approximately 30 of the 129 special schools were originally designated as schools for children with mild general learning disability. The establishment of these special schools predated the significant expansion of supports offered in mainstream schools through additional special education teachers and the resources of special needs assistants. I will come back in on that.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I accept there are children who will pass by special schools to go to other schools because there is no capacity for them in that school, whether that is because of the admissions policy or because of what they are catering for. Notwithstanding that, could we not as a country, seeing as we are quite rich, have schools that cater for mild general learning disabilities as well as schools that cater for more complex needs? Do we have to have catchall special schools? That is the phrase that is being used. Could we not have schools with expertise for those mild general learning disabilities and also schools that cater for more complex needs?

I have visited these schools. My party colleague Deputy Whitmore is working very closely with New Court special school in Bray and colleagues throughout the country are working with these schools. They provide excellence in education for those students who may not have the same opportunity in mainstream schools. I fear that if those children have to go back to mainstream, they may not thrive as well as they are in special schools. I understand completely that children should not be passing schools locally and I get the Minister of State's point in that regard, but could we not have both?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I take the point, but it is important that special schools, special classes and special places for children with additional needs are as local as possible to pupils' own communities. In various debates on special education, we constantly talk about people who are travelling long distances, be that in urban or rural Ireland, for those places. That is something we really are very serious about tackling.

On students with mild general learning disabilities, the experience over the past 20 years regarding mainstreaming is that a lot of it has been very successful. Yes, there are children whose

needs will not be met in mainstream schools and we want to ensure we have that for them. We want real engagement with stakeholders because many of the schools throughout the country, as the Deputy has mentioned, are doing extraordinary work. We want to continue that but we want serious engagement as well. It is also important that we accommodate children as locally as possible to their own community.

Deputy Jen Cummins: To that end, could we pause that for this September so that those schools can be engaged with further by the Department and the Ministers to allow them to negotiate a timeframe for those students who are already in the school but also for students coming in?

11 o'clock

I want to make clear I do not want to delay any child getting a school place for September. That is not my intention and I know it is not the intention of any of those schools because I accept we are in dire straits for those children. However, I am fearful for those children who are thriving in those schools as to what happens if they go back to mainstream schools or if we have children who are in mainstream schools who are not coping and would not have a place to be.

We cannot be experts in every aspect of education. When we have schools, which are expert at working with children and bringing them to the best of their ability educationally and socially, and all the other things that come with special schools and mainstream schools, we need to ensure that is protected.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: Most of the 30 mild general learning schools have worked extremely well with the National Council for Special Education over the past while to broaden their profile and to accept students with autism and more complex educational needs. Both the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and I have worked extraordinarily hard over the past number of months on making sure that we have a place for every child in September. That is a fundamental issue. We are trying to make sure that it is done early every year but in some of the information that we correlated over the past while, where there were some vacancies in some schools and children were travelling long distances away from those communities, if we are genuinely serious about making sure we have inclusivity, we have to tackle those issues and go under the bonnet to see what the challenges are and how we can make it more inclusive. I take the point on it but it is important we utilise every space available to make sure we have the most appropriate place for children. The schools have engaged. We will continue to engage with the stakeholders because we need everybody on board in relation to these projects.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as an gcúirt a thug sé ar Ghaelcholáiste Reachrann. Bhí gach duine an-sásta é a fheiceáil ansin. I thank Deputy Ó Muirí and the other TDs in Dublin Bay North for asking the Minister. It was good to see her there and the school was delighted that she visited.

The Department been speaking to the planning authorities and trying to expedite the building of this school. The Minister met all the teachers. It is important for the Irish language in north Dublin that this school building gets built. I thank the Minister again for her visit.

Deputy Helen McEntee: At the outset, I acknowledge the recent school visit. I was invited by the Deputy as well as Deputy Ó Muirí and others. It was important for me to visit the school. I have heard from the Deputies so often of the challenges the school faces but, in particular, how wonderful the school is. It was wonderful to meet with an príomhoide, Eimer Nic an Rí, agus

all the staff there and to have an opportunity to speak to them and to see how committed they are not only to the school but to the students. Many of the teachers are from my constituency and travel up and down. I got the full experience with the rain and jumping between prefabs, which I know they have to do on a daily basis. I am absolutely committed to supporting the development of this school, to making sure the students and teachers have the environment they need to be able to do even better and to build on the fantastic work that is already happening there.

As the Deputy will be aware, the programme for Government includes a commitment to expand opportunities for students to attend Gaelscoileanna and Gaelcholáistí. I believe the project to deliver the new 600-pupil building for the school supports this commitment.

As I said, I recently visited the school and saw first hand the importance of this planned building project. I know there have been many challenges along the way to get even to the point at which we are now, including the requirement for a new planning application. The new grant of the planning, which was received in December of 2023, with a number of conditions attached, has progressed and it has meant that we are in a situation where a design team is in place. I confirm my Department's staff is engaging intensively with the design team and with the patron throughout this entire process. My officials will be in contact with the school authority as soon as the design team completes its review. As I said to Deputies Heneghan and Ó Muirí when I visited last week, the intention is very much that come September, we will be able to issue the tender, that that process will start and, hopefully, early next year, we will be able to start putting boots on the ground, turning sods and making sure this building starts to happen.

The project will build on capital expenditure of €405 million, which was invested in Irish-medium schools between 2020 and 2024. I hope this is a strong demonstration of our commitment to Gaelscoileanna and choláistí across the country.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I welcome the fact the Minister stated she is committed. I thank all the TDs in Dublin Bay North for a unified push towards this. It is very important. The school has been waiting 25 years. It cannot wait 35 or 45 years. The students who are there now do not trust the system. I welcome the fact the Minister has committed to that and that it will go to tender by September. With all the pressure we can apply, is the Minister saying that construction will begin in Q1 to Q2 of 2026? If so, I thank the Minister from the bottom of my heart, on behalf of all the parents, students and people in north Dublin who are trying to access education through the medium of Irish.

Tá sé thar a bheith tábhachtach go bhfuil an deis ann do na daoine sin agus go bhfuil siad in ann an teanga dhúchasach agus gach rud a fheabhsú i mBaile Átha Cliath Thuaidh. Tá gach duine an-bhródúil as an nGaeilge ansin ach ní raibh an foirgneamh buan ann agus bhí sé sin drochbhéasach.

Deputy Helen McEntee: We have set out the timeline. As of yesterday, there is nothing to suggest there are any issues with the work under way between the design team, the school and my Department, which means, I believe, that come September, we will be able to issue the tender. From speaking to some of the teachers when I visited the school a few weeks ago, I know that is the biggest concern. They have got to certain points and it has gone backwards. We need to make sure that once we get to the tender stage come September, nothing stops it progressing and once that is awarded, works can start as quickly as possible.

From other projects that have progressed recently, the tender process will take a couple of

months. Once a builder is appointed, it often takes a bit of time to get everything in play and up and running, but I would expect that at the latest, all going according to plan, by the end of Q1 or, if not, early Q2, works should be able to start. As I said, as of yesterday, there was nothing to suggest there is anything preventing that from happening.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Tá sé deas é sin a chloisteáil. Tá mé thar a bheith sásta leis sin. It is important the children know that education through the medium of Irish is being taken seriously by the Government. In the previous Government, we saw a decrease in the number of children learning through the medium of Irish. It is something the Government needs to turn around. In the programme for Government, there are clear commitments to education through the medium of Irish and I like the way the Minister outlined them there. This is one of the most important things for me in my constituency but I would like to see this spread wider. I will not be so Dublin-centric. It is something the Department of Education and Youth can do, with more commitments and more construction of permanent buildings for Gaelscoileanna. In Dublin 2, 6, 4 and 8, they are looking for another Gaelscoil. I welcome the fact the Minister acknowledged that and I look forward to passing on the information to Gaelcholáiste Reachrann.

Deputy Helen McEntee: As I said, €405 million has been invested in Irish-medium schools in the past four years alone. It means there are now 248 Gaelscoileanna and 50 Gaelcholáistí across the country. I want to see that increase.

Work is currently under way in my Department to develop a new policy on Irish-medium education. This is outside of the Gaeltachtaí. A policy for the Gaeltacht was announced recently and by all accounts, it has had a positive impact. We want to build on that and put a similar structure in place. We have had a comprehensive public consultation process in this regard. A task force is due to be established under the policy to explore issues relating to the various different models of Irish-medium education provision. This will be a key element of supporting our programme for Government commitment to expand opportunities for students to attend Gaelscoileanna and Gaelcholáistí.

Specifically on the school, I acknowledge Deputies Heneghan and Ó Muirí and others who have campaigned and supported and done everything possible to make sure that this project can come to fruition. I hope I am there to be able to see it through and to make sure that commitment is followed through on. As of now, we are working on track and on time and I hope to be able to fulfil that.

Questions Nos. 89 and 90 taken with Written Answers.

Schools Building Projects

91. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education and Youth further to Parliamentary Question No. 105 of 29 April 2025, the status of the development of a school (details supplied), currently at stage 2(b); the timeline for the completion of the project; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [31299/25]

Deputy Catherine Connolly: My question on the status of the development of a school is specific. I have given the details. It is currently at stage 2(b). I would be grateful if the Minister could give me a more precise timeline for the completion of the project and more specific details.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: At the outset, I recognise this project has been ongoing for some time. The major building project for the school referred to by Deputy Connolly will provide a new 16-classroom primary school with additional classrooms for pupils with special education needs.

Following planning conditions imposed in 2018, a redesign was necessary. At that point, additional capacity was added to the school and subsequent planning was achieved in September 2023. The project is at an advanced stage of architectural planning, stage 2(b), detailed design, where the design team has secured all statutory applications and is preparing the suite of tender documents. The stage 2(b) submission was received by the Department in March 2025 for review by the multidisciplinary team. This is under way. Once this is complete, the next step will be a meeting of all stakeholders regarding the stage submission report. Since 2020, the Department has invested more than €6 billion in schools throughout the country under the national development plan, NDP, involving the completion of almost 1,400 school building projects.

The Government's support for this investment has delivered real benefits for school communities. A recent Government decision has approved €210 million in supplementary capital funding for the Department to support the provision of special education accommodation and meet school place needs. This brings the total capital allocation for 2025 for the Department to €1.6 billion.

As part of the NDP review process, the Department is engaging with the Department of public expenditure with respect to NDP allocations for the period 2026 to 2030. It is expected that there will be clarity on these allocations over the course of the summer, allowing the Department to plan its capital investment programme for the 2026 to 2030 period in line with prioritised needs and reflecting, as appropriate, wider Government priorities.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank the Minister of State. He clearly and honestly acknowledged that this has been going on for some time. Even if we take 2018 as the start, when it was redesigned, we are in the eighth year now in which this school has been in dire need of a new school. I know it is at stage 2(b) and the Minister of State has confirmed the submission was given to the Department in March of this year. Maybe he could tell me how long that process is going to take, when it will come out of that review process and how it will get into the next stage. Will he give me a timeline? Given the background and the extraordinary length of time it has taken, the school needs hope at this point. It has been patient but it needs a timeline for precisely when it will be completed.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: Yes, the submission has been with the Department since March. These reviews take time. I do not have a specific date for the Deputy but I will endeavour to get that information to her as a matter of priority. Both the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and I will follow up to ensure that it is done as speedily as possible. I will endeavour to come back to Deputy Connolly with that timeline and a report as to how the process is going through the Department.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I appreciate that hands-on approach and that the Minister of State is going to come back. However, he can imagine the frustration over such a length of time. The Minister of State said that this takes some time to review. What time roughly? Are we talking six months, three months, nine months? How many are in that? What is the difficulty? What is the delay? Maybe if he cannot come now, if he can do his best now and come

back to me in writing in relation to it, that would be very helpful to the school.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I will come back to the Deputy on it in writing. The documentation submitted in March, as I understand it, is quite a detailed document and involves a lot of work to make sure it is properly gone through. I give the Deputy a commitment that we will work to make sure it goes through the Department as speedily as possible, and we will come back to her in writing.

Question No. 92 taken with Written Answers.

Special Education Needs

93. **Deputy Albert Dolan** asked the Minister for Education and Youth when a decision will be made on the allocation of a special needs assistant, SNA, for a school (details supplied); when the subsequent appointment of the SNA will take place; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30791/25]

Deputy Albert Dolan: I am looking for an update on the status of a request for SNA support for Gurteen National School in County Galway. Gurteen has applied, gone through the process, had its review and was hopeful that over the Easter break it would have been able to interview people. Can I please get an update on the status of that application for SNA support?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy for the question. The Government is fully committed to supporting children with special educational needs to fulfil their full potential, and the programme for Government makes a number of commitments to deliver on this objective. The National Council for Special Education, NCSE, has responsibility for co-ordinating and advising on education provision for children with special educational needs, including the allocation of special needs assistants. The NCSE contacted all schools on 6 June to advise them of any changes to the SNA allocations for the coming school year, 2025-26.

In regard to Gurteen National School, I am pleased to confirm that the NCSE has advised me it has allocated one additional SNA to the school for the next school year, 2025-26. I am very much aware of the central role that SNAs play in the successful inclusion of students with additional needs and significant care needs in schools.

Looking back over the past 20 years at SNAs and the work they do, we should always compliment them because they really have made our education system more inclusive. They help to ensure that these students can access an education to enable them to achieve their best outcomes and reach their full potential. The number of SNAs available for allocation has continued to increase annually, resulting in a significant increase in the number of SNA posts employed by schools. Budget 2025 provided for 1,600 SNAs, the largest number ever allocated, which brings to over 23,000 the number of SNAs in our schools. The NCSE manages the allocation of SNAs to schools and it is the responsibility of the NCSE to ensure that these resources are allocated to the children with the greatest level of need.

Deputy Albert Dolan: That is fantastic news for Gurteen. I thank the Minister of State and the Minister for their commitment to special education. It is vital and the needs have to be met. The most important thing is that every child have a fair chance in school and get the support he or she needs to thrive.

I attended the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, INTO, briefing yesterday. Its proposal for special educational needs co-ordinators, SENCOs, in schools is a really worth considering. I have no further questions but I appreciate the update on Gurteen.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I take the point. I also met with the INTO yesterday in regard to its pre-budget submissions. It outlined the challenges in respect of SENCOs. The provision of special education has developed extraordinarily throughout the country over recent years. We have to pay tribute to school leadership and the school communities, be they teachers, SNAs or the other support people who make that possible. We have to look at how we are going to make it more inclusive and what better way we can structure the system to improve it. The Deputy's suggestion is certainly something that we will look at.

School Admissions

94. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Education and Youth the work being done to ensure appropriate primary and secondary school placements for all children for the 2025-26 academic year; if this work includes updating of admissions policies; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [31242/25]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: What work has been done to ensure appropriate primary and secondary school placements for all children? We know about the issue that has existed in regard to those with special needs. Can we ensure that everything is in place for the academic year 2025-26? We know the constant problems there have been, with parents having been put through the mincer, for want of a better term. We need to ensure we are looking after all our citizens properly.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Crowe also has a question on this issue.

Deputy Seán Crowe: My question is to do with placements but also displacements. Challenges in the school system include cases of schools having lost a teacher because the Ukrainian children were moved out of the school. This happened in two schools in my constituency. It is outside the control of the school. We are told there will be extra resources and supports for these children, but here is a school in my constituency that has lost a teacher because of outside factors. That is not covered under the circular in regard to school placement and so on. I have written to the Minister directly. I should have put down a question for today. I have learned that for the future. Is there any flexibility from the Department in regard to these matters? It is placement but it is also displacement.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: In respect of special classes and the huge issue of provision, the Government is totally committed to the provision of special classes and special needs places to allow children to grow to their full potential. Almost 400 special classes have been sanctioned for this year. Of these, 287 are at primary level and 112 are at post-primary level. In April of this year, the Department wrote to all schools opening new special classes requesting them to begin admissions processes without delay. The NCSE is engaging closely with schools and patron bodies to ensure that schools offer places to children seeking them as quickly as possible. The vast majority of schools opening new special classes have opened for admissions. The NCSE is engaging with a number of schools in Dublin to ensure the admission process is initiated as quickly as possible. Where these schools do not move to commence admissions processes, the NCSE will use the statutory powers under section 67 of the Education Act 1998

to direct schools to enrol children.

My Department recently wrote to all schools outlining the need for all schools to review their admissions policies to ensure these policies are in keeping with best practice and are facilitating those children who most need access to a special class placement. Schools should also ensure they are working closely with the NCSE to support the children known to the NCSE by mid-February 2025.

An appeal mechanism is available to schools in respect of appealing a decision that was made on the number of teachers in the school. I am not sure whether that process has been followed. The other thing I would say is that the Deputy might forward me the details. I do not have a document with me in respect of that particular school but I would be happy to follow it up.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Some of the complaints have been that in many cases, particularly when we are talking about secondary schools, we are aware of the children who are in primary school and coming into that age bracket. It is about making sure everybody is talking to everybody else to ensure the NCSE, the schools and the Department have the information. I agree that action did need to happen on school admissions policies. I have proposed legislation in respect of the fact that for kids with additional needs, there should be a two-year run-in. I know changes have happened. A two-year run-in would allow the school to prepare whatever resources are required and we would actually have those places on hand. That is an absolute necessity.

I am grateful that the Minister of State came back to me on Shelagh national school. It is a matter of making sure the second unit is put in place. We have to look again at school-based therapies. Is there a possibility of any timeline for this in respect of special schools, schools with units and then mainstream?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: There are a couple of things there. We understand the challenges that are ahead of us in terms of post-primary education because of the information we have at primary level. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, and myself are acutely aware of it and are working extremely hard on it. One of the things we agreed very early on was to bring back the date from 1 February to 1 October to give better planning. I take the Deputy's point. We had some challenges in respect of primary school because the NCSE or the Department had not been notified of children with additional needs. We are going to plan that better.

On the Deputy's own county of Louth, I think we have facilitated everybody who was requiring a place in Louth this year. An awful lot of great work has been done by the NCSE, the Department and the SENOs, and of course the school communities. The Government has made a decision and a memo was taken to the Government this week in respect of therapies within the schools. That is an ongoing discussion which has taken place over the last while at the Cabinet subcommittee on disability. They will be rolled out to the special schools this year. We have a lot of work done on that and an awful lot more that we will be doing over the next while.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I welcome the answer but I agree with the Minister of State that more work needs to be done. We are still being contacted by those who do not have places for next year. We need those cases sorted as soon as possible. It is not right. I would appreciate if the Minister of State could come back to me in writing with some more detail on the timeline for school-based therapies. I will be pushing this. On the common application system, it needs

not to be a common application system from the point of view of failure. It has to be about delivery. We know the issues that exist. I do not know if it is the Minister of State or the Minister, Deputy McEntee, who would need to deal with that but it is very hard not to deal with the issue.

Deputy Dolan spoke about the INTO and the necessity for SENCOs. I agree with him on that. The INTO has also spoken about the fact that the capitation funding is not cutting the mustard. We heard what the CPSMA said today along with the principals of Scoil Aonghusa, St. Joseph's CBS, Tullyallen NS and Scoil Naomh Feighín, all in Louth. Deputy Joanna Byrne has dealt with some of those issues previously. We are talking about schools that are almost running into the ground because they do not have funding. This is not funding for the extras; it is to keep the show on the road. It needs to be addressed.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: On the therapists within the schools, that is being rolled out from September into the special schools. The plan is for the special schools in the first instance and then on to the special classes. They will be great enablers to provide the best possible outcomes for children with additional needs throughout the education system. An awful lot of work has gone into it over the last while. I compliment the Minister, Deputy McEntee, as well as the previous Minister on their commitment and the work they have done over the last while. It is something we are very focused on. We want to make sure that it happens in a meaningful way and that it strengthens the education system going forward. This is a very important piece of work for the Government and for the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and myself to ensure it is done.

On the issues raised by the INTO yesterday, I did hear the commentary on the radio this morning. We are listening very carefully to all of the issues at school level. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, and I have been visiting schools around the country. We are getting information at every level on it. We will be working to ensure we do the right thing by schools and the school communities.

School Accommodation

95. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Education and Youth for an update on the application from a school to replace their 50-year-old prefabs (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30986/25]

Deputy Mark Ward: I am asking for an update on the application from St. Kevin's Community College in Clondalkin to replace their 50-year-old prefabs. These prefabs are old. They are not fit for purpose. They are not a good learning environment for pupils or a good working environment for teachers. I have health and safety concerns that I have reported to the appropriate authorities. When will these 50-year-old prefabs be replaced?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I am aware that my Department is in receipt of an application for capital funding under the additional school accommodation scheme from the school in question. The school applied in late 2024 for the additional school accommodation and for prefabs to be replaced. This is currently being assessed under the ASA scheme. This application seeks the replacement of accommodation that is 50 years old, as the Deputy said. I appreciate that this is an absolute priority for the school.

Since 2020, my Department has invested over €6 billion in our schools throughout the

12 June 2025

country under the national development plan, involving the completion of over 1,375 school building projects. We are supporting investment, including by way of supplementary capital funding, and it is delivering real benefits for school communities. A recent Government decision to approve €210 million in additional funding for my Department brings our allocation for this year to €1.6 billion.

As part of the NDP review process, all Departments, including my own, are currently engaging with the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation with respect to NDP allocations for the period 2026 to 2030. Like every Department, I want to build on the capital funding we have and try to increase it further. It is expected that there will be clarity on these allocations over the course of the summer period, and this will allow my Department to plan its capital investment programme for next year right up to 2030 in line with prioritised needs and reflecting, as appropriate, wider Government priorities. Maximising existing capacity in schools to meet needs is very important. The progression of prioritised individual projects to meet the most urgent needs in the 2026 to 2030 period that cannot be met through existing capacity - while there is a huge amount of projects already under way - across schools in the local area will be considered on a rolling basis from autumn onwards after the NDP allocations are finalised. In respect of this project, we have to see what the overall allocation is for next year, and how we fit all the projects into it including the school in question. The school will be considered in that context. I do not have a timeline for the Deputy but it is being assessed. It will come in at the end of the year and we will look at it the same way as other projects in this context.

Deputy Mark Ward: I am a former pupil of St. Kevin's Community College and have been working with the school for a long time - not just since 2024 - to get these prefabs replaced. The school and I have been receiving some contrasting information from the Department in the last months. In April, a communication referred to when the school had appointed a design team and the site presenting technical challenges, and that the Department was awaiting a decision from the school authority regarding how to proceed. The school was never asked to appoint a design team, so I do not know what that communication coming back was about. In May, the Department contacted me again and confirmed that the school's application was being considered by officials and that they had been in contact with the school authority in relation to the application. Yesterday, I got the response from the Department that the Minister has given me now in relation to the additional school accommodation scheme for St. Kevin's. The assessment has been completed. What was its outcome? The Minister said it is difficult to give a timeline, but 50 years is a long time to have prefabs *in situ*. I am pressing to see if we can get some sort of timeline to get these prefabs replaced.

Deputy Helen McEntee: If anything needs to be clarified with the school, we will make sure that is the case and where work needs to be done, we will ensure this is made clear to the school. What is happening now is that the assessment is taking place, but this is something that will have to be looked at as part of the 2026-2030 overall budget. We do not have that absolute figure at the moment, so my Department is engaging with the Department of the Minister, Deputy Chambers, as is every other Department, to see what a revised NDP allocation would look like. Once those figures are understood, that will enable me, working with the Department and, in particular, the buildings unit, to look at what projects can and will take place in the years ahead.

To outline the work being done in County Dublin alone now, construction projects worth €1.24 billion have happened in recent years. Some 302 projects were completed in those five

years. Currently, 51 projects are under construction. There are 18 modular projects at an advanced stage of delivery and 73 different projects at various stages of detailed design included. While I absolutely appreciate this is a priority for the school given the length of time involved, we must ensure given the scale and number of projects we are able to provide resources and supports to as many schools as possible with the budget we have and that is being worked through now.

Deputy Mark Ward: I first attended St. Kevin's 37 years ago and these prefabs were in situ when I went to school. It is a school in an extremely disadvantaged area, but one that often punches above its weight. In fact, the Taoiseach visited the school last year to see the award-winning DEIS Connect programme. I wonder whether he knew there were kids in 50-year-old prefabs out the back. As I said, I used these prefabs when I went to school. I have aged in the last 50 years and I can only imagine how much these prefabs have aged. I visited the school a few months ago. I do not say this lightly, but I was genuinely concerned about the health and safety of the pupils and their teachers. I walked across the floor and I genuinely thought it was going to give way. I reported this to the Health and Safety Authority. An investigation is ongoing. I genuinely think it is wrong that pupils today in my area are still using the same prefabs I used 37 years ago. Those prefabs were 15 years old when I used them 37 years ago and the pupils there are still using them.

The Minister said the assessment is taking place now, but the response I got yesterday stated it has been completed.

Deputy Helen McEntee: It has taken place-----

Deputy Mark Ward: Okay.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Yes.

Deputy Mark Ward: It has been completed. I am again going to press to see when these prefabs are going to be replaced. Will it be in the next six months, next year or the year after?

Deputy Helen McEntee: Looking at the budget we have, my priority is to do several things. First and foremost, it is to ensure we have the capacity for students starting school in September this year and beyond and that we are forward planning. We still have a growing school population. While we know it is levelling out, in primary school numbers, and particularly in certain areas in Dublin, these numbers are still increasing. It is the same in my county of Meath and in the surrounding areas like County Kildare. We will continue to have an increasing population in our post-primary schools and this fact must be front and centre when we are making building plans. The second priority after that is ensuring we are replacing old buildings and prefabs, especially those that are not fit for purpose and have been there for as long as the Deputy mentioned. As we are negotiating and working on what that budget looks like now, I cannot give the Deputy a timeline. I can say the priority is to ensure we have places for students, we have new buildings where we need them and we are replacing accommodation that is not fit for purpose. This is certainly a project that will be a part of that conversation. It did go in at the end of last year. Obviously we want projects to move as quickly as possible, but this one is in the early stages. As I said, though, the priorities are to ensure we are providing places while also ensuring that buildings that are not fit for purpose are also replaced.

Education Schemes

96. **Deputy Donna McGettigan** asked the Minister for Education and Youth to broaden the criteria to allow more schools to be classified as DEIS schools; and if she will ensure that schools, such as one in County Clare (details supplied) which takes in students from three DEIS schools, are classified as DEIS as a consequence. [30557/25]

Deputy Donna McGettigan: I acknowledge that there was an expansion of the DEIS programme in 2022. Given that we are in a cost-of-living crisis, will the Minister consider ordering another review and expansion of the programme? Will she also order a review of the qualification criteria with a view to broadening them out so more schools can be included in the programme? Can she also confirm that the period to appeal the 2022 expansion closed that year and will she consider an open-ended appeals process?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. Tackling educational disadvantage and, in particular, supporting students who are most at risk or in need of support to achieve their full potential is a priority for me, for the Minister of State and for this Government. The DEIS programme is a key policy of the Government to tackle concentrated educational disadvantage at school level. It provides a targeted range of supports and is additional to the universal supports provided to all schools, such as the introduction of free schoolbooks and free hot school meals. My Department invests over €180 million annually to provide additional supports to almost 1,200 schools in the DEIS programme and this supports approximately 260,000 students. One in four students is currently attending a DEIS school and getting those additional supports.

I am determined to close the performance gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools even further, because it has closed due to the introduction of this scheme, and to introduce more innovative solutions to tackle disadvantage. The programme itself has changed and opened up in the years since it was first introduced in September 2006. In 2017, it was extended to an additional 79 schools. It was then extended to 332 additional schools on top of that from September 2022. The Deputy mentioned that timeline. Included in those most recent expansions of the programme were the schools with the highest levels of concentrated disadvantage. This was identified through a refined DEIS identification model. Schools could not apply but essentially had it applied to them. I know some schools could appeal based on information that they felt had not been updated or that they had provided. Schools were not required to apply for inclusion, as I said. The detailed paper on the refined DEIS identification model is available on *gov.ie*. If we are to build on the expansion of the DEIS programme, and this is what we are doing now, I clearly said when I came into this Department that we wanted to introduce a new DEIS plan. It is in that context that any changes would potentially take place. I wish to ensure we have a programme that works for as many students as possible, is as targeted as possible and is applied in as fair a way as possible. Any changes to the application process or to the way it is applied that might allow newer schools in will have to be done as part of the new plan. It is intended that it will be published by the end of this year.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: Go raibh maith agat. Some secondary schools receive pupils from DEIS primary schools but they are not classified as DEIS schools themselves. In my constituency, St. Patrick's Comprehensive School is one of those schools that receives DEIS pupils. All of a sudden, there is a cliff edge for those pupils suddenly missing out on supports they badly need. These pupils are often from households suffering deprivation, so receiving

extra help with learning, subsidised schools meals and help with the cost of schoolbooks, etc., is essential for the entire family. Payment rates for the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance are slightly higher this year but a far cry from those of 2011. I urge the Minister to order a new review to ensure those schools turned down for this DEIS expansion are able to appeal and are able to apply again for inclusion in the DEIS programme. It is extremely unfair for those pupils coming from DEIS primary schools not to receive the same supports in their secondary schools.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy and appreciate the example she outlined. I know in some situations there may be two schools next to each other where one is included in DEIS and the other is not. Siblings from the same household might even be going to both schools. Because of the way the DEIS programme is applied now, it is based on the population in the school and it is possible to have differentiations. Even though students might be coming from three DEIS schools into another school, the overall make-up of the school may not hit the DEIS criteria or fit the bands or levels. I wish to ensure - it is difficult because there will always be somebody outside of the criteria that we have to put in place - that children in non-DEIS schools still get that support. This is really important in the context of the new DEIS plan, as is the case now.

We have several pilots under way that involve schools getting the home school liaison and school completion programmes even though they are not designated as DEIS schools. It is about expanding this out. Historically, we know there are schools that had those positions even before the DEIS programme was in place. There is one in Navan, where I recently met students. The only reason those students are still in school and doing their leaving certificate is because of those positions. I hope the new plan will create as fair a system and structure as possible and also ensure that where schools are not designated, and some of them will not be, they can still get those targeted supports directly to the students who need them.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: I welcome that. Hopefully, the expansion of this scheme will come in, especially for those in need and those in disadvantaged areas. We have seen a dramatic rise in the number of children in child poverty in the past year. It now exceeds 100,000 children, according to the Central Statistics Office. That is certain to mean that the deprivation profile of some of the schools that did not qualify in 2022 has deteriorated to the point where they may now qualify. While the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 pledged to reduce consistent poverty to 2%, it was at 3.6% in 2023 and has actually increased to 5% in the latest figures. These are households that our school pupils come from. It is no wonder, therefore, that child poverty has increased even more dramatically. According to the Child Poverty Monitor, the rate of consistent poverty among children has almost doubled, from 4% in 2023 to 8.5% in 2024. This shows the clear need for these schools to be brought in under DEIS.

Deputy Helen McEntee: More broadly, I wish to highlight that the child poverty unit established by my former colleague and our former Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, is still there in the Department of the Taoiseach. We continue to work together to look at ways in which we can support the most vulnerable. The DEIS programme is key to that. It is not just the new DEIS plan but also the DEIS plus scheme we have committed to in our programme for Government. Work is well under way in that regard. It is about ensuring we do everything possible to support those most acutely at risk, such as those suffering from intergenerational trauma and children who are not at school.

As well as building on DEIS plan that is being worked through the DEIS plus programme,

I have announced a number of measures to deal with absenteeism. If our children are not in school, we cannot give them the support and every opportunity they need. It is really important we build on the positive work that is being done. Overall, it is about getting the supports to the children who need them. We will continue to have designated schools, but we will also continue to have children in schools that are not part of a DEIS programme. We need to ensure those children receive the resources as well. I am absolutely committed to working with everyone to make sure that happens.

Early School Leavers

97. Deputy John Clendennen asked the Minister for Education and Youth the latest figures for school completion rates; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30703/25]

Deputy John Clendennen: Will the Minister provide an update on the latest figures for school completion rates?

Deputy Helen McEntee: The most recent figures available regarding school completion rates report on students who began their post-primary education in 2017. Of those students who entered first year in 2017, 90% sat the leaving certificate examination in 2022 or 2023. A total of 97.8% sat the junior certificate - now called the junior cycle - examination in 2020. While the latest retention rate to leaving certificate stage of 90% represents a decrease of one percentage point on the retention rate for the 2016 post-primary entry cohort, Ireland has one of the lowest rates of early school leavers in comparison with our European counterparts. Looking at the timelines, children who started in 2016 completed their leaving certificate or junior certificate during Covid times when there were no exams. Naturally, that led to a somewhat higher rate. A series of reports which record retention rate trends in post-primary schools over the past 26 years are available on the Department's website. Of course, ensuring children remain in school as long as possible to undertake the leaving certificate and junior certificate is a priority for all of us.

In addition to the universal supports available to schools, such as school guidance and well-being supports, there are targeted supports such as the school completion programme, which covers 783 schools with a total population in excess of 250,000 students, and the Traveller and Roma education strategy. I know from speaking to members of the Traveller and Roma communities recently that their focus is on the junior cycle rather than just the senior cycle, unfortunately. Those numbers are very challenging at the moment. We need to do everything we can to support those students, particularly those who are most at risk, in order that they stay at school and achieve the best they can. Those supports are a key part of our response to supporting those children. They work in tandem with other supports, including the home-school community liaison, HSCL, co-ordinators and the education welfare service under my Department's DEIS programme.

My Department, in conjunction with the Tusla education support service, TESS, is also undertaking a five-year plan to improve school attendance, as I mentioned. Those measures were introduced and announced recently. They are being rolled out. I wish to mention the Anseo programme, which is the new evidence-based framework to help schools analyse and respond to attendance data. This is central to everything we do. If we want children to stay in school to complete their exams, we need to make sure they are there in the first instance. That is feedback I am hearing strongly.

Deputy John Clendennen: I firmly believe the Minister has made great strides on the issue of school completion. Initiatives such as free school books, hot meals, transport and even the school clothing and footwear allowance announced this week are all helping to encourage more people to stay engaged in education. Youth services have an important role to play as well. Some of the initiatives Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board, LOETB, has rolled out in my constituency are making a difference. While Offaly has one of the lower levels of school completion rates, we only get one allocation due to us having a double-county ETB. Our allocation is one third of what some of the higher allocations are for ETBs throughout the country as a result. I ask the Minister to acknowledge the need for youth services to work in parallel with the education process in order to support those dropping out of school completion at an earlier time.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I fully agree. Our youth services have such an important role to play in supporting those who are most at risk and in dealing with issues of attendance and providing that support outside of school hours. When we talk about formal education, our youth services are the informal side of that in so many instances. That is why I welcome that the area of youth has now come into the same Department as education because there is a role for both areas to work hand in hand.

My Department, which now has responsibility for youth services, will be rolling out new funding streams for the UBU Your Place Your Space scheme. They are important supports put in place throughout the country and administered through the ETBs. Each ETB will be able to apply for those supports and resources when the scheme opens. Similar to the situation in Offaly and Laois, Louth and Meath Education and Training Board, LMETB, encompasses Louth and Meath and, therefore, only has one application and will have a similar challenge. It is about building up the capacity in each county over time. Obviously, if we can benefit one county in an initial year, we will try to make sure those resources are spread as far as possible.

I acknowledge the work many of our youth services and volunteers do. They play a significant role in supporting children outside of school hours. They often support those who are most vulnerable. They have a positive role to play when it comes to school completions, school attendance and supporting children overall.

Deputy John Clendennen: While we see an increase in the youth population in Offaly, we also see an increase in youth dependency rates. That is a call more than ever before to see this funding allocated where it is needed most. In the context of the Minister's previous role as Minister for Justice, if we can ensure this funding is allocated and effective, we mitigate the possibility of antisocial behaviour, mental health issues, substance misuse and criminality in general. It has an important role to play. We must look at what the likes of LOETB have done in recent times. It has proven to be so effective with limited budgets. We now need to see targeted measures across both counties, particularly in Offaly, to ensure we are doing this in an effective manner. I ask that, rather than looking at specific projects, we identify where geographically we need this and then we provide it on that basis in the months ahead.

Deputy Helen McEntee: In a lot of instances in the past, what happened with funding being provided was that we focused on specific projects because there had been specific needs in areas, whether they were related to drug abuse, crime, mental health or various different challenges that young people identified. What I want to ensure is that we are looking at the geographical spread. We know young people in rural areas are just as impacted as people in urban areas, although the issues might be different. The new programme and funding that will be

12 June 2025

announced will have a particular focus on geography to make sure we have that spread and that we are looking at counties and areas which might not have benefited to the tune or in the same way as some urban areas have in the past. That does not mean urban areas will be excluded. Obviously, it is about making sure everyone gets their fair share.

I reiterate, and I agree with the Deputy, that our youth organisations have such an important role to play in identifying and supporting young people at the earliest stages possible in order that it does not get to the extreme situation where young people are engaged with youth diversion programmes or the youth justice system. We must support them at the earliest stage possible. As Minister, I want to make sure I can do that through as many different streams as possible. There are a lot of different organisations across different counties and we want all of them to benefit.

Questions Nos. 98 and 99 taken with Written Answers.

School Facilities

100. Deputy Conor D. McGuinness asked the Minister for Education and Youth following her announcement that she will give €65 million in minor works and ICT funding for schools, if she will explain the rationale for providing the same minor works grant to all schools when older buildings need increased funds to be maintained; if older school buildings will receive increased minor works funding; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30148/25]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: On behalf of Deputy McGuinness, I ask the Minister to explain, following her announcement that she will give €65 million in minor works and ICT funding for schools, the rationale for providing the same minor works grant to all schools when older buildings need increased funds to be maintained and whether older schools buildings will receive increased minor works funding.

Deputy Helen McEntee: As part of the Government's ongoing commitment to supporting schools, I recently announced €65 million in minor works and ICT grants. This funding provides schools with flexibility to address small-scale infrastructure improvements and to invest in IT equipment and digital infrastructure.

The minor works grant is provided on a standard flat rate plus a *per capita* basis. This provides the most straightforward and consistent basis for provision of the grant funding to all eligible schools. This approach allows schools to plan and carry out essential maintenance and improvement works, based on their own identified priorities.

I recognise that some schools, particularly those in older buildings, may face more significant maintenance challenges. My Department is currently carrying out a national energy and condition survey of all schools. This is due for completion in 2026. The subsequent analysis of this data will help determine priorities going forward, including any potential future refinements to the minor works grant regime and provide a strengthened evidence base for an effective prioritisation of capital investment. This will form part of broader planning by my Department of capital investment in schools for the period 2026-30 in line with prioritised needs and reflecting, as appropriate, wider Government priorities, informed by NDP allocations once they are known.

In the interim, schools can engage with my Department through the relevant application-based capital schemes. I recently announced a new climate action summer works scheme and the application process for this scheme is currently open for all schools, with a closing date for receipt of applications of 30 June. I would say to schools if they are looking to apply to get it in by 30 June. The emergency works scheme also remains available as required to address very urgent issues.

A review is happening which will give a really good sense of the state our school buildings are in. We committed to a minor works grant in the programme for Government. If we can change, adapt or amend it so that the schools which need more funding through that grant get it, we will be able to do that once we have that information. However, it will be next year before we have all that information.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: There was very significant disappointment, which I raised in a Topical Issue with the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, on the day of the announcement that the overall funding for the ICT and minor works grants were down from €79 million last year to €65 million this year. All that related to the ICT funding. All this fits into the wider piece of funding for schools. There is a real issue around the increasing costs and the flatline of the overall capitation in particular. This morning the CPSMA said that in the last five years running costs have increased in the region of 70% but capitation funding is at 2008 levels. It has had unprecedented numbers of calls from schools in financial difficulty. This is a major concern. Yesterday, the INTO's pre-budget submission had an ask of an additional €75 per child in capitation funding.

Deputy Helen McEntee: To clarify on ICT, we gave a commitment as part of the overall strategy that we would provide €200 million to schools over the lifetime of the strategy. What had been provided to date was two amounts of €50 million but they were not exactly every year so they were spaced out. I want to make sure that every year schools get the grant, that they know they are getting it and how much. The €35 million is for this year. I want to make sure there is a further €35 million next year and the following year. Schools are telling me that they want to know they are getting it and how much they are getting. It is not a reduction and I want to make that clear to schools. The intention is very much that it be the same next year as opposed to the end of next year or into the year after.

I appreciate that schools are under pressure and that there are challenges for schools with increased costs as there are with any businesses, homes or any other body or organisation. That is why there have been increases in the budget in the last number of years. The capitation that was announced in the last week for the upcoming September has meant it has gone from €200 to €224 per student. I appreciate that is not what people are looking for and they want more. It is very much my intention, as set out in the programme for Government, to increase that even further in the upcoming budget negotiations. Obviously that has to be worked through.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: It is absolutely needed. This morning the CPSMA outlined results of its survey with an increase in insurance costs of one third, an increase in utility costs of 50%, an increase in cleaning costs of in excess of 80%. It is also clear the funding proposed for this year's budget will not match the increasing costs that schools face. There is an ask for a comprehensive assessment. I welcome the piece on energy costs but the same is needed for the overall running costs of schools. There is an ask from the CPSMA, and others I am sure, for an assessment of the real life running costs of schools. They argue that the supports being provided by the Government do not match those costs. The real impacts are on the school com-

munities which cannot go to the pockets of their parents. That has a real impact on educational disadvantage for those disadvantaged communities.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I want to stress that the Department is there and available to engage with schools. While we have seen an increase in the number of people coming to the FFSU it is not to the level that we are hearing more broadly. I encourage schools which may be in difficulty and having a challenging time ahead with their finances to engage with the Department.

The DEIS grants and status mean that students and schools get an increased rate for various things and increased supports but I appreciate that is often not enough. The commitment in the programme for Government is very clear. We will continue to increase capitation. In this month alone, the level for primary school will increase to €224 and will also increase for post-primary students to €386. That is an increase in primary alone of €30 million in the last year. My intention is to make sure in the years ahead we continue to increase that capitation. We also need to find ways in which we can save money for schools. For the 28 schools announced this week where over €80 million will be spent on retrofitting, that will help reduce their overall energy costs. That is why it is really important. The summer works scheme is focussing solely on environment and climate because that helps bring down the bills. We need to support schools in looking at insurance and other costs. That is something I am looking at currently.

Questions Nos. 101 to 109, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Educational Disadvantage

110. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Education and Youth the number of additional home school liaison officers and educational welfare officers her Department will provide to schools across the State for the 2025-26 academic year; the number of unfilled posts currently; the funding and recruitment processes she intends to provide to fill new and existing vacancies; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [31224/25]

Deputy Helen McEntee: The DEIS programme is a key policy of the Department to tackle concentrated educational disadvantage at school level. The Tusla education support service, TESS, is under the remit of my Department and has three strands: the statutory Educational Welfare Service, EWS, the home school community liaison scheme and the school completion programme. These all work extremely well and support a huge number of students every year.

The scheme is an important support under DEIS, promoting partnership between parents, teachers and community family support services. All DEIS urban primary and all DEIS post-primary schools are included in the scheme. It is delivered by 528 full-time home school liaison co-ordinators, who are teachers in these schools and assigned to these duties either in individual schools or in clusters of schools. None of those 528 posts are currently vacant. The primary role of the EWS is to ensure that every child either attends school regularly or otherwise receives a certain minimum education. Educational welfare officers are based throughout the country and work with children, young people and their families who are experiencing difficulty with school attendance. The main priority of the work is around the educational welfare of children and to ensure that concerns around attendance are addressed before attendance becomes a crisis issue. Currently there are 153 EWOs operating across the six Tusla regions, including 23 EWOs who provide services to the most vulnerable children, such as children in care, and five temporary

EWO posts allocated to trial innovative approaches to supporting attendance. I have met them. They are people who literally go out and stand outside children's bedroom doors to make sure they are supported to come in to school. They do really excellent work.

A national EWO recruitment campaign took place in February 2025 from which all vacant EWO posts are currently being filled. All of the posts are filled or being filled. The funding is there and we need to make sure they are in place where they are not as soon as possible.

Any increases to overall capacity will be considered in the context of the budgetary process in my Department. We have spoken a lot about the DEIS programme and a new DEIS plan. This is about making sure we keep what we have that works well. I cannot commend enough the work of the home school liaison co-ordinators, teams and the educational welfare officers. What we need is more of them and that is very much my intention.

12 o'clock

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: To conclude on that point in the interests of time, I agree entirely with the Minister that is where the focus needs to be. We talk about school completion and absenteeism. The work done by home school liaison officers and education and welfare officers is incredibly important and life changing for individuals and families. It is about breaking the cycle. The Minister will have the absolute and full support of this side of the House if there is an opportunity to expand those services and supports for children because they make such a difference.

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

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Message from Select Committee

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, and Taoiseach has completed its consideration of the Statute Law Revision Bill 2024 and has made no amendments thereto.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: We have all seen the news of the tragic plane crash in India of a flight on its way to London. All we can say at this time is that all of our thoughts are with all of those affected as we wait for news. It is shocking.

I also want to extend my condolences to Teachta Rose Conway-Walsh whose mother, Philomena Conway, passed away this morning. My thoughts are with Rose, all of her brothers and sisters and her whole family at this time. It is a difficult time for them. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a hanam.

Tá an Rialtas trína chéile ó thaobh tithíochta de agus é ag crúbaireacht thart ag iarraidh botúin mhóra sa phlean cíosa atá in ainm a bheith aige a cheartú. Tá neamhinniúlacht an Rialtais dochreidte. Is é an t-aon rud atá cinnte ná go rachaidh cíosanna atá ró-ard cheana féin in airde mar thoradh ar mholtaí an Rialtais. The spin surrounding the Government's chaotic proposals to reform the rental sector is unravelling day by day. The Government is at sixes and sevens, caught up in damage limitation and exercised because people can see right through what this plan is all about. It is about pushing up already extortionate rents even higher. As the Tánaiste knows, it will allow landlords to set the market rate for all new tenancies. The Tánaiste knows the Government is opening the gates to massive rent hikes for people who are already under serious pressure. The Government knows all of this.

After 1 March, renters will be hit with massive rent increases. This is especially true for young people who, by the very nature of their lives, whether for work or education, tend to move frequently. Young people, the generation which has already been shafted by your housing crisis, will be on the hook for even bigger rent hikes. We know students and their families are already desperate for affordable accommodation and will be absolutely fleeced when these changes kick in. In fact, the Irish Hospital Consultants Association, IHCA, issued a damning statement yesterday, warning that the Government's plan could impact essential healthcare staff, required to move during their training, finding affordable accommodation.

The madness of this plan is matched only by the incompetence of the Government's approach. It is a complete and utter botch job. On Tuesday, the Government told the media, through the Department, that rent pressure zones would come into effect on 1 March. Indeed, the Minister confirmed that on "Prime Time". That meant that tens of thousands of renters will face the prospect of massive rent hikes as landlords move to benefit before the changes kick in. These are the people who have already seen double-digit rent increases and will now be thrown to the wolves. They cannot take any more.

On top of that, the Government's clumsy approach runs the risk of landlords holding off putting properties back up for rent until the changes come in in March. In its haste to pander to big landlords and wealthy property funds, the Government wrote this on the back of an envelope and there was no consideration of the impact on renters. They were an afterthought. That is why we are in such a big mess. It is now panic stations from the Government. This morning, the Government is scrambling around like headless chickens trying to find a way to rush forward the changes to rent laws before the Dáil breaks for the summer. The incompetence is off the charts. It seems that the only real thought given to the plan was how to screw over renters. Fair play; the Government did that with five golden stars.

When will we see the legislation? Who are we to believe? Is it the Minister, who was on "Prime Time" and said it will not happen till March? Is it now the headless chicken approach that we read about, whereby the Government will try to rush this through before the summer recess? Does the Tánaiste accept that existing landlords, even in existing rent pressure zones, letting to new tenants after 1 March will be able to jack up rents as high as they wish for new tenants before they move in, whether that is students, trainee nurses or anybody else? With the Tánaiste simply admit that delivering higher rents for landlords and investors is what this plan is really about, because, without a doubt, that will be the outcome of what the Government has announced?

The Tánaiste: I join with Deputy Doherty in extending my sympathy to all of those caught up in the very tragic and horrific plane crash this morning. We think of all of them and their

families in what is an evolving story with, no doubt, more information to come.

I too want to extend my sympathies to the Deputy's colleague, Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh, on the loss of her mother. *Ar dheis Dé go raibh a hanam dílis.* We think of her at this time.

I thank Deputy Doherty for raising the important issues of rent, renters and housing supply. The Government took a number of decisions this week to extend rental supports and protections. Let us not forget that, prior to that decision, rent pressure zones were due to expire at the end of this year. Rental protections associated with that were due to disappear. The Government worked intensively to come up with a package that is balanced and provides an extension of the rent pressure zones. Many parts of the Deputy's county - I think the entire county - including Carndonagh, Buncrana, Lifford, Letterkenny, Milford, Glenties and Donegal town are not protected by rent pressure zones as of today. Under our proposal and the emergency legislation that we will bring forward next week, which I heard the Deputy's party leader say she will support, we will extend rent pressure zones to people living in Donegal and other parts of the country, including Carlow, Cavan, parts of Cork, Clare, Kerry, Laois, Leitrim, Longford, Mayo, Monaghan and elsewhere. We are extending rent pressure zones nationwide and we are also keeping, for existing tenants, the 2% rate.

It is important to recognise that the Government proposals did not fall from the sky. They are grounded in the Housing Agency's review of this matter. For those looking in at home, the Housing Agency is the body charged coming up with ideas and proposals as to how we can accelerate housing supply. That is what it is asked to do. We have published the report of the Housing Agency, which is a detailed document. I am sure Deputy Doherty has had the time to go through it. It outlined a number of findings, including how there has been evidence of meaningful price moderation due to the RPZs. It outlined how institutional investment has reduced considerably since 2023. It has also made a number of recommendations, including based on international literature review. It has come up with concerns around how we would actually go about reference rent and the challenges that would pose. Similar challenges were outlined by the ESRI. This is the latest measure to help to support renters.

The Deputy is continuing to misinform people. People in rental accommodation watching in today need to know that we have kept the RPZs for them and extended a protection that was due to end. People in the Deputy's county and in other counties who do not have the protection of RPZs need to know that next week we will bring forward legislation to extend those protections.

We also have to look at what we can do in regard to supply. The sons and daughters and other people who want to rent need more accommodation to be built. Therefore, we have taken a balanced approach that supports renters while also providing security, clarity and certainty for those who wish to invest in our country. Of course, this is the latest in a series of announcements to be made, which includes extending planning permissions, expanding exempted developments, extending the role of the Land Development Agency, the new national planning framework to have more zoned land and, very shortly, significant capital investment in water, wastewater and energy so that we can deliver that enabling infrastructure. All these measures need to be looked at in the round to try to get a functioning housing market that can get us to the 300,000 homes we need over the next number of years.

The measures in the package we have brought for this week are balanced. I was at the Cabinet meeting this week. It was always the intention that we would bring forward an initial Bill

to extend rent pressure zones and then further legislation which we can take the time to tease through in order to get this right in terms of what the new system looks like from March.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Does the Tánaiste really believe that guff and spin? We have had 14 years of Fine Gael in government and rents have never been higher. The Government is absolutely crucifying renters, and what it has done in its plan, when we cut through all of the spin, is that for every single new tenancy, and whether it is in Ardara or Drumcondra makes no difference, after 1 March the landlords will be able to set the price to whatever they want. Under existing law at present in a rent pressure zone this is not allowed. This is a charter for higher rents. This is charter for the vulture funds and for the property developers. It is benefiting landlords. They are the only people who will benefit. We know that tens of thousands of people move out of rental pressure zones.

The Tánaiste used to be the Minister for higher education. He mentioned Ardara, Letterkenny and Buncrana. What about the student who goes to rent a house in Drumcondra next year which is in a rent pressure zone? Will the landlord be able to jack up that price to whatever he wants before he lets the house? The answer is “yes” because what the Government has allowed is a free rein to every single landlord who lets a property out to a new tenant.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is the reality. The Tánaiste’s answer to sky-high rents is to push them even further. That is shameful.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please conclude, Deputy Doherty.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is why so many people feel that Ireland is no longer their home.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call the Tánaiste.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is why we have 100,000 people born in this country now living in Australia. The Government has made the situation worse.

Deputy Louise O’Reilly: Hear, hear.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Doherty is out of time.

The Tánaiste: The Government produced a series of measures this week that will extend for the very first time rent pressure zones to the constituency Deputy Doherty represents in Dáil Éireann. Do you not welcome that?

Deputy Pearse Doherty: You gutted them.

The Tánaiste: Hang on a second. In Donegal today there is no rent pressure zone. In the proposals brought forward by the Minister, Deputy Browne, the rent pressure zones will be extended to Deputy Doherty’s constituency and we will bring forward legislation next week to do this. Deputy Doherty did not reference the changes in relation to no-fault evictions. He did not recognise the fact that rent pressure zones were due to expire in December were we not to take these measures.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Answer my question.

The Tánaiste: I will answer it and I will not be shouted down, thank you.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: What about the student in Drumcondra?

The Tánaiste: The only split and confusion that seems to be taking place in housing policy is in Sinn Féin. Mary Lou McDonald, Deputy Doherty's leader-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Answer the question.

The Tánaiste: Hang on a second.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please.

The Tánaiste: I am answering the question, thank you.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Give him a chance to answer.

The Tánaiste: Mary Lou McDonald said she is in favour of rent pressure zones.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Of course we are.

The Tánaiste: Eoin Ó Broin said he is not and that he is in favour of reference rent. Reference rent would see people's rents being pushed up.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Answer the question.

The Tánaiste: Mary Lou McDonald said she does not want institutional investment in Ireland.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Answer the question.

The Tánaiste: Eoin Ó Broin said he and Deputy Doherty meet them regularly. Sinn Féin is all over the place on housing. Its policy did not work so it does not have a housing policy now. All it has is noise and street activism. We will be taking specific measures to support students; do not worry we will, because we have their backs.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Answer the question.

The Tánaiste: We will expand the rent pressure zones and Sinn Féin needs to work out why it wants to bring in reference rents and push up rents and why it wanted to abolish the rent pressure zones. Shame.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Answer the question about the landlord in Drumcondra.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Sherlock. Resume your seat, Deputy Doherty.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Tánaiste does want to do it because he does want to tell the public that his plan is to push rents sky high.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Sherlock has the floor.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is the reality of it. The Tánaiste refuses to answer the question.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Sherlock, please.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Sky high rents.

Deputy Noel Grealish: Respect democracy.

The Tánaiste: You are in favour of reference rents.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: My thoughts are also with the loved ones of those on the flight from Ahmedabad to England. I have friends in Ahmedabad and we are very worried about them today. I also offer condolences on behalf of the Labour Party to Deputy Conway-Walsh on the loss of her mother.

One of the most difficult decisions a family will ever have to take is to put a loved one into a nursing home. This decision places enormous trust in strangers to treat that older person with the respect and dignity they deserve in the final years of their life. The brilliant investigative journalism by RTE last week showed very distressing scenes in Glasnevin and Portlaoise. In the week since then, all of the focus has been on the very serious failures in HIQA.

There are some good nursing homes out there, just as there are some good people in HIQA. What really worries me now is that the Government somehow believes that if HIQA tries harder, and if the adult safeguarding legislation is brought in to investigate individual complaints after those instances happen, then all will be fine. However, it will not. There are big questions for the Government now about the type of care we want for our older people in this country. Do we want a nursing home system where there is no minimum staffing level? These standards exist in the North and in other countries but they do not exist here. HIQA provides no guidance to nursing homes on safe staffing levels. Will providers whose chief motivation is profit, and there are many of them out there, ensure they have the right number of nurses and healthcare assistants on their premises? They will not.

The PWC report on nursing home staff in 2023 found the staff turnover of healthcare assistants in private nursing homes was as high as 54% in 2022. Even the childcare sector does not have staff turnover figures as high as that. Sitting in the Department of Health since 2022 is a report by a task force put together by the Department which recommends a living wage for all public and private sector nursing home staff. It recommends consideration of a pay agreement for the sector along with other important changes. What has happened since then? Nothing. Many of those workers are still on the minimum wage. Some providers are failing to pay the work permit minimums according to reports I am getting and there is huge frustration among the workers at being forced to work extremely long hours in the sector.

I have to ask the Tánaiste whether he is comfortable that the nursing home sector has become dominated by big business in Ireland. Is he comfortable with the fact that those to whom we are entrusting the care of our people are increasingly dominated by big business? Yesterday my party leader Deputy Bacik spoke of ten investment funds owning one third of all nursing home beds in Ireland. We know from the ESRI research that 20% of smaller private nursing homes closed between 2020 and 2022. We are seeing the growth of nursing homes driven by private equity-owned operators. The reality is that many are owned by what are called “opcos”. REITs, which pay no tax, have separate entities to operate them known as “opcos”. The reality is that smaller nursing homes are being crowded out. Does the Tánaiste want workers to be properly resourced, to be paid decently and to work in conditions in which they can provide the best possible care? Will he implement the recommendations of the 2022 report? Will he commit to the State playing a leading role in developing residential long-term care alongside smaller private nursing homes in this country?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Sherlock for highlighting this really important issue. The short answer is that I believe the State is too reliant on the private market when it comes to nursing home provision. This is why we established a commission of care. We need to look at the entire model of how we care for older people in this country. I also think the fact we have one statutory scheme as to how we care for older people, which is nursing homes, and we do not yet have a statutory scheme for home care, is another issue. I will commit with the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, to work constructively with Deputy Sherlock and her party on this issue. I will also ask that consideration be given to some of the issues Deputy Sherlock has referenced with regard to the 2022 report.

I want to make the point that we need to get the safeguarding legislation in place. This has been very apparent in what we have seen in recent days with RTÉ's very excellent work. The Minister will bring to Cabinet within the next month the adult safeguarding policy and seek Government permission to draft the safeguarding Bill. We will then work intensively and constructively with Members across the House to get the right piece of legislation passed in a timely manner. This is really important.

I have been reflecting on this. I fully accept that people work in very demanding environments but I also believe that what stems from what we have seen in our television screens in recent days are real questions of personal accountability. There are laws in our land today in relation to assault and how we conduct ourselves. I urge that a referral is made to An Garda Síochána with regard to the footage we saw. What I saw with my own two eyes were haunting scenes of people being, in my view, physically assaulted in their home. The Government has a responsibility to do things absolutely but so too do people who carry out those actions. There is a need for a Garda investigation into what we saw with regard to the individual actions of people in relation to that.

HIQA also has questions to answer and I welcome the fact that the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, is due to meet it, along with the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell. HIQA is good organisation in many ways. I have known HIQA for a long time and I think it has done good. There are good people in HIQA. There were serious shortcomings also in this regard and there can be no doubt about that. There are actions that should have been identified and acted upon at a much earlier stage.

Yes, we need to have a much broader discussion about the model of care we have for older people in this country. That work is under way. Of course pay and terms and conditions, just as Deputy Sherlock rightly says are factors in other sectors such as childcare, are factors in this also. We also need to get the legislative basis right. We need the safeguarding legislation. We also need to make sure that HIQA understands its role and has all the tools it needs. I also think we should look at statutory home care as an alternative legal basis for how we care for older people. These are the three areas where I would like to see action shortly.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: The Tánaiste was the Minister for Health when the report of the inquiry into private nursing homes was published in 2020, with regard to the failures that happened in nursing homes. The Tánaiste was the then Minister for Health who saw those very clear recommendations, which have not been implemented. We have a plethora of reports within the Department of Health post-pandemic, mainly stemming from 2020 to 2022, which have not been implemented.

There are hundreds of thousands of people out there who are looking to their future. We

know there will be half a million people over the age of 80 in 25 years' time. People in my constituency have three generations in a house and will have no choice but to go into a nursing home. We can have all the home care supports they want, but they will end up going into a nursing home when they get to a particular stage of their lives. They need to know that they will get the care they need. There is a pattern between Leas Cross, the failures in 2020 and what was revealed last week. In the Labour Party's view, it is the influence of big business with regard to how they have used nursing home care in this country to generate profits and not provide adequate care on the ground. The State needs to take a leading role in that regard.

The Tánaiste: I agree with Deputy Sherlock's earlier point that there are many good nursing homes in this country. There are many good public nursing homes and many good private nursing homes, big and small, throughout the country. I do not have an ideological view in that regard. I just want older people to have a choice in their care, I want their families to be supported in making those decisions and I want to know, whether it is a public or private nursing home, that everyone is safe and is being treated with dignity. I also believe we should be more ambitious about care in the community and that far too many people in Ireland go into a nursing home far too early. I can think of good examples of where we have housing alternatives in place and home care opportunities, but they are far too rare. That is why the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, became the first Minister of State with responsibility for older people ever, based between the Department of Health and the Department of housing, because we must get this model right.

There are also genuine, serious issues of personal accountability. There is no law, ideology or model of care that can excuse away, either in its existence or its absence, the conduct of people who decided to physically manhandle elderly people with dementia. I want them held accountable and the Garda to look at the matter.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: How important does the Tánaiste think the issue of gender-based violence is? The United Nations and the WHO say it is the greatest threat to the health of women and girls in the world. There has been a record number of calls to Women's Aid and a rise in calls to gardaí regarding gender-based violence. I am struggling to find one measure the Government has introduced in its six months.

Today, however, the Government had a chance to allow a Bill to progress that would actually deal with something very concrete, that survivors and therapists are very much behind and that the Tánaiste supported only a year ago, namely, the outlawing of counselling notes being accessed by defence teams in trials for gender-based violence. The Government has decided to delay my Bill, which will be discussed in the House later today, by a year. It is a very cynical measure and is something that will be noted by so many people. This is an unbelievably damaging and misogynistic practice for survivors. I will give the Tánaiste an example of what Sarah Grace said:

... in many ways I found my trial more traumatic than the attack itself. Can you imagine saying that? ... I would take the attack again before having to step foot back in that courtroom. The most heartbreaking obstacle of all was the seizure of my counselling [notes].

Is the Tánaiste listening to what survivors are saying about our legal system - that they would actually go through the attack again, rather than go through the legal system? One of the most egregious things mentioned by survivors is the fact that their therapy notes could be read by the perpetrator of the heinous crime against them. I will let that rest with the Tánaiste.

I have a Bill to outlaw it. I do not know what the Tánaiste's excuse is. We have been hearing from the Minister that it could be unconstitutional. However, evictions could not be banned until this week. Suddenly, that is not unconstitutional. Therapists will gather outside Leinster House later in support of my Bill. A total of 60 professionals wrote to the Ministers for Health and justice and the Minister of State with responsibility for mental health. This is a health issue, by the way, not just a mental health issue. Survivors of gendered violence are much more likely to have self-harmed, poor physical health, suicidal ideation and eating disorders. Therapy is the one avenue that could possibly help them work through those issues.

I spoke to one of the therapists who signed the letter on the phone yesterday, who told me a 15-year-old has dropped out of CAMHS because the teenager had heard in the media that therapy notes could be accessed in court. A survivor of child abuse is dropping out of therapy because of this. How long must we wait? Why would it take the Government a year to come up with a Bill in the first place? Why would the Government put a stop of a year on my Bill? People have waited. The then Minister, Deputy McEntee, said she would do it in 2023. The Tánaiste said it in the Dáil on 2 July 2024, as did the Taoiseach, Deputy Martin, but here we are again. We have a Bill to be debated in the Dáil but the Government will delay it.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Coppinger. First, I do not think that is a fair portrayal of the Government's record, Fine Gael's record or the Government's position regarding this issue. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, is sitting beside me and I challenge the Deputy to name any Minister who has done more-----

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: -----regarding domestic, sexual and gender-based violence than she has. She worked on a cross-party basis at every opportunity to make progress. The Deputy does not need to take my word for that; victims' groups and survivors' groups acknowledge that. I saw it with my own two eyes as well. Not every issue has to be partisan, or Government-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Not every issue has to be defensive either.

The Tánaiste: This is a very sensitive issue. I am just making the point that every time Deputy Coppinger stands up it does not have to be a case of the Government being a terrible bunch of people and that she is great. Sometimes, perhaps there are just some issues that are so important that we should actually work together to try to make progress on them.

The reason we are delaying the Deputy's Bill, to use her phrase, is not out of disrespect for her Bill; it is actually out of respect for what she is trying to do and in recognition of the fact that we have our own Bill. The Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, received Government approval to bring forward legislation in this area last month - in advance of the Deputy's Bill being tabled for discussion in this House - building on the Minister, Deputy McEntee's work to make sure that we rectify the exact issue she rightly highlighted.

I too have met victims. I am horrified; how can anyone not shudder when they hear what the Deputy said about the survivor of child abuse and the impact it has had on the survivor in accessing CAMHS. The Deputy is not wrong on this; this is a very serious issue that has a real chilling effect on victims and how our criminal justice system and courts system interact with them. It is our intention to legislate, or it is not just our intention in that the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, already has Government approval for the general scheme of the criminal law and civil law (miscellaneous provisions) Bill 2025. That is the vehicle through which we intend to

address this issue.

The Government will not vote down the Deputy's Bill because it is an honest effort to make progress on a very important issue. Therefore, we are saying that the Deputy's Bill will be read today and the Minister's Bill will be brought forward. Let us try to get progress on this on a cross-party basis and work together in this regard.

For the record of the House, there was an effort in 2017 to reform the law in this area and put in place a process through which the courts would assess the relevance of counselling record. I am not saying it is perfect; it is far from it, but my understanding is that this legislation has not operated in any manner or means as it was intended to. Therefore, we have listened very carefully to the views of victims and survivors. They have made clear that they felt compelled to agree to waive the disclosure hearing in order to not put a successful prosecution at risk or to risk delaying their trial. That is an appalling vista and was never the intention of the 2017 provision. Records are routinely being released. That was not the intention of the 2017 provision.

We are fully aware of the stress and revictimisation that the disclosure of personal records can have on survivors of sexual violence, including counselling records. We are not waiting for a year to do anything. The Minister has approval to draft this legislation. The Deputy will bring forward her legislation today and we will work constructively to pass a good, robust Bill as quickly as possible.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: There is an irony in the Tánaiste saying we should all work together when the Government is stopping my Bill. The Government could have allowed the Bill to progress. We could debate it and it could amend it on Committee Stage. The problem with the Bill the Minister seems to be talking about is that it will not exclude the potential for counselling notes to be admitted. That is the problem. The actual potential of having one's therapy notes accessed is what creates the trauma and is what is putting people off taking cases. The Government will not exclude that, which is the problem. The right to a fair trial is very important, but so is the right to actually pursue a case for a crime committed against a person. There is no evidential value in counselling notes.

I blame Éamon de Valera for many things, but I doubt counselling notes were at the top of his agenda when he inserted the Article dealing with fair trials in the Constitution. A lot was said about zero tolerance, but every single misogynistic practice I highlighted in this House in 2018 is still going on in the courts. Clothing, underwear, contraception and alcohol and drug intake can all still be used against a survivor in court. All the victim-blaming is still there. None of that has been dealt with by successive Governments since the "I Believe Her" marches, the Cork rape trial or the Belfast rape trial. That is the problem.

The Tánaiste: Let me be clear: domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is still an epidemic globally, including in Ireland. We are not immune to it. That is not to say that the work that has been undertaken has not brought about real assistance. I refer to the expansion of refuge places, the establishment of Cuan, record funding for groups working with people in this area and training now being in place, which is a key part of the zero-tolerance strategy. That includes training for people in the public service and for our courts system. Our courts system, however, is not where it needs to be. I think members of the Judiciary have recognised that too, and that is why we are changing the law, so on this issue I plead with the Deputy not to start telling people we are blocking her Bill and doing nothing for a year. That is called misinformation. It is called fake news. We are not blocking her Bill. We are passing a timed amendment

that means her Bill will move forward in 12 months if we have not got our act together, and we will get our act together. That is why the Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan, months before Deputy Coppinger’s Bill got permission to draft his own Bill. Victims and survivors do not care whose Bill it is; they care about action. This Government will take action to protect victims and to make sure we do it in a way that is compatible with our Constitution but protects victims and survivors in a way they are not today. That is what we will do, and we will get it right.

Deputy Michael Collins: This country is crying out for accountability from regulatory bodies as we stumble from one scandal to another. Last week, I attended a public meeting in Oranmore, Galway, with Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice and Councillor Declan Kelly and met with parents whose children had been scammed by a local orthodontist and neglected by the Dental Council of Ireland. These parents paid large sums upfront in 2022 for their children’s dental treatment only to find out they were being deceived. Some children were left with misaligned jaws, others with braces but no treatment plan, and some had to remove their braces themselves or with the help of others over the phone. One girl had a wire sticking into her mouth which her boyfriend eventually cut with clippers. These parents have faced significant challenges from the previous Government, the Dental Council and the former Minister for Health, with no solutions or support available. The Dental Council of Ireland is supposed to investigate the fitness of registered dentists to practise based on allegations of professional misconduct or unfitness due to physical or mental disability. According to the parents of these children, however, the Dental Council has done absolutely nothing to help them. These parents and children have been left over €2 million out of pocket, and children have been left with denture neglect at a very delicate age in their lives.

As regards another area of non-accountability, I recently raised twice in the Dáil with the Taoiseach during Leaders’ Questions the scam that is going on with certain financial advisers. On foot of that, I attended a meeting with the Central Bank and some of the people affected who have had their lives destroyed because of these financial advisers. I was informed at that meeting with the Central Bank that yes, the Central Bank regulates financial advisers but these financial advisers can sell unregulated products. The website of the Central Bank states that, as the regulator of financial service providers and markets in Ireland, the bank has to ensure that the best interests of consumers are protected. Where is the protection for those whom I know of who have lost over €200 million by the Central Bank?

The third area of non-compliance relates to the recent “RTÉ Investigates” documentary titled “Inside Ireland’s Nursing Homes”, which has uncovered serious concerns about the standards of care in several residential facilities run by Emeis Ireland, the country’s largest provider of private nursing homes. The documentary, which aired on 4 June 2025, revealed issues such as staff shortages, unsafe care practices and undignified treatment of residents. The investigation involved undercover researchers who documented multiple instances of neglect and poor care, including residents being left unsupervised, improper manual handling and inadequate responses to residents’ needs. Nursing homes in Ireland are regulated primarily by the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA. HIQA is responsible for inspecting and registering residential care services for older people, including both public and private nursing homes. It ensures that these facilities meet the required standards of care and safety. Where was HIQA? We are forever in the Dáil seeking facts after the events, with well-paid regulatory bodies showing absolutely no accountability. How does the Tánaiste suggest we hold these bodies accountable going forward?

The Tánaiste: There was quite a lot in that, so let me endeavour to get through it.

To start where the Deputy finished as regards the issue of accountability and the safety and well-being of people in our nursing homes, I reiterate that it is the intention of the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, along with the Minister of State, Kieran O'Donnell, to bring forward adult safeguarding policy proposals within the next month or so and to seek permission from the Government to draft the general scheme of safeguarding legislation. This is badly needed, it will make a big difference and I know it is something on which many experts and others who contributed to the RTÉ programme commented, including the acute need for it. It is a priority for the Government and we will make progress on that. The Minister will also meet with HIQA herself in the next week and there will be an opportunity, I am sure, for a full and frank exchange of views on this. The establishment of HIQA was an important step. There are good people at work in HIQA, and HIQA does a good job, but no organisation is beyond reproach or beyond questioning as to what happened in specific cases. There are legitimate questions that the Government will want to ask and explore with HIQA.

As regards the issue of dental legislation and the likes, I will need to be careful in one matter because I believe the case referred to in the article is perhaps before the courts and subject to *in camera* proceedings. That does not prohibit me from answering the broader point, which relates to the practice of dentistry and the reforms on which the Minister for Health intends to lead. My understanding is that dentistry is currently underpinned by a range of legislation, the Dentists Act 1985 being just one piece. The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, is committed to reviewing and updating that Act, and the continued protection of the public and high oral healthcare standards will be a priority in that regard. In the meantime, I am very pleased to say that the Minister signed a commencement order relating to certain provisions of the Regulated Professions (Health and Social Care) (Amendment) Act on 30 April 2025. I think they came into effect on 6 May of this year. That requires dentists to make statutory declarations as regards any disciplinary proceedings or any judicial proceedings in the State or in another jurisdiction which may directly or indirectly result in the dentist being prohibited or restricted from providing one or more kind of health or social care. It has also broadened the grounds for inquiry to include matters which might be declared by a dentist or where a dentist fails to comply with the declarations requirement. This important provision is intended to ensure that the Dental Council becomes aware much earlier. Reform of the Dentists Act is planned for and those new regulations are in place.

Finally, on the issue of regulation of financial advisers, I am pleased that the Central Bank of Ireland met with the Deputy and his constituents, as he says, I think in May of this year to discuss issues he has raised in this House and to advise on the roll-out. I think he and his constituents found that meeting to be helpful. We are very happy to engage with him constructively on any lacunae or areas where he believes there is a need for improvement from a regulatory or legislative perspective.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank the Tánaiste for his reply. He speaks about dental regulation, the Dentists Act and developments in 2024 or 2025. These people were hit hard in 2022. They have lost €2 million. How can any of them have confidence when we see the regulatory bodies fail the very people they are paid to protect? What does the Tánaiste say to the parents and children in their hundreds who are scammed out of their hard-earned money in Oranmore, Galway, to the tune of over €2 million, leaving these children in a shocking condition to the point, as I said earlier, of a young woman's boyfriend cutting the wire out of her mouth himself with some type of clippers? Since 2022, in spite of meetings with Ministers and others, the Dental Council has washed its hands and has walked away without a care in the world for the

damage, both mental and physical, done to these children. Will the Tánaiste step in here and meet with the Dental Council to hold it accountable, hold it to do what it is supposed to do for these people so something like this can never happen again and compensate these innocent people who have been scammed out of their hard-earned money?

The Tánaiste: I am very conscious of not wanting to say anything that cuts across any legal process or court process. I know the Deputy is as well. I will therefore refrain from going any further on that issue other than to reiterate that the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, who is here with us, is committed, as is the programme for Government, to reviewing the dental legislation more broadly for the reasons I have outlined. A number of regulations have been commenced recently, since the Minister took office, that became effective in May and that I think are positive developments in modernising the regulatory structures that underpin the work of our dentists.

On the issue of the Central Bank and financial advisers - I ran out of time a little the last time - we are eager to continue to engage on this. When it comes to the protection of retail investors, the Department of Finance and the Central Bank work in tandem. The Central Bank regulates firms that operate in Ireland, including those that provide investment advice and sell investment products. I would also flag the role of the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman. If, however, there are issues here, because we should always strive to do better, we are very happy to engage further on this.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Frankie Feighan: Our sincere condolences are with the families and friends of the victims of the tragic crash of the London-bound plane from western India this morning, with 240 persons on board. I also want to extend my condolences to Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh on the passing of her mother this morning.

It is my understanding that the proposal to provide phone pouches to schools across Ireland may not now proceed. Will the Tánaiste confirm if this is the case? If he can, will he clarify the €9 million allocated in the budget in 2025? The issue of the use of phones by students is a topic of wide debate and how young people might be protected from cyberbullying in the classroom setting. I admit it is challenging for school management. At least the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and the previous Minister, Deputy Foley, were prepared to tackle this issue and, more importantly, provide resources from the Department's budget to tackle it.

Some were very critical of this scheme at the time. However, we discovered that the government in Northern Ireland implemented the phone pouch scheme despite some opposition. It is clear that every school is different and must be enabled financially to implement its particular strategy on the curtailment of the use of smart phones during class time.

A survey in 2023 of more than 1,000 school students, conducted by Studyclix, reported that 83% of students were worried that they used their phones too much and 38% reported that they used their smartphone for more than four hours per day, with 60% of these using them for more than six hours. I hope the €9 million will be used under a dedicated fund to tackle mobile phone use or overuse in our secondary schools. Some schools may still want to purchase phone

pouches. They should still be able to access it. However, if other boards of management have other ideas, or a strategy, then it is important that the Government would allow for a degree of discretion and common sense.

This is a huge issue. Everyone, the boards of management, parents, teachers, principals and students, will work together to come up with a common-sense plan to address this very difficult issue.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising what he rightly says is a very important issue. I do not think any of us in our constituencies, communities or across the country have not heard from parents, teachers, boards of management, parents' associations and principals debating and grappling with this issue. Everything the Government wants to do in this space is actually about empowering parents, young people and school communities. My hometown of Greystones became one of the first parts of the country where the schools decided, of their own volition, to introduce a ban on smartphones in primary schools. It was really empowering because, all of a sudden, it removed the almost peer pressure of kids telling their parents they had to get a smartphone because someone else had one. All the parents came together and said they would not provide smartphones while their children were in primary school. This really took off and right around country now this has become the norm. The Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy Helen McEntee, has taken a number of important decisions on this issue.

I want to assure Deputy Feighan the Government and the Minister are committed to supporting the safe and ethical use of the Internet by children and young people. Guidance will soon be provided by circular to all schools on putting in place policies to ensure schools are mobile phone-free zones during the school day and to support student learning by helping them to disconnect, to learn and to make friends without the distractions that can arise from the use of mobile phones. Further guidance will be provided to post-primary schools outlining the terms, conditions and mechanisms for post-primary schools to apply for funding to enable them to purchase secure mobile phone storage solutions.

Funding of €9 million in total was allocated in the last budget for this measure. In the coming days, we will see a new procurement process published. This central procurement arrangement will be available to schools in the autumn of this year. This will not delay schools in applying for and accessing funding for phone-storage solutions. An application process will be open to post-primary schools soon and the issuing of funding will commence shortly thereafter.

Schools will now be able to apply for funding for whatever phone-storage solution works best for them. Examples include the pouches referred to by the Deputy, lockable boxes, cubby holes and drop off and collection at the school office. Whatever works best for the school can be implemented. The funding from the budget remains in place. A new procurement process will be published in the coming days and schools will be able to seek to apply to draw down funding and put in place the phone-storage solution that works best for them. This is a pragmatic and sensible way to proceed.

I think it will be welcomed by school principals, teachers, boards of management, and I believe, young people, in many cases. We need to build on this. Across Government, we need to look at what more we need to do to allow our children be children and to allow them to learn and be educated in a safe environment in which you hear the sounds and voices of young people laughing and talking to each other rather than doomscrolling on their phones during the day.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: This is a very important and sensitive initiative. I thank the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and the Minister, Deputy Foley, for listening to parents, teachers, principals and, most importantly, students. It is a pragmatic proposal. It is nice to see that, hopefully, the €9 million will be ringfenced to tackle this. As parents and, indeed, as politicians, we could take a leaf out of the students' book and put down our phones as well. Sometimes we spend far too much time listening to other people.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: We should get phone pouches for the Dáil.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: Maybe we could use them in our parliamentary party rooms. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, for his assistance.

The Tánaiste: I am not sure if the Deputy is proposing pouches for Dáil. It might slow down the dissemination of information from parliamentary party meetings to the fourth estate, which I am sure would significantly inconvenience some people.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: This is the kind of thing we have to listen to during Leaders' Questions.

The Tánaiste: The serious point the Deputy makes is entirely right. It is perfectly right that Deputy Feighan has a right to ask a question, Deputy Coppinger. That is how we work in this democracy. Our lads are elected too and they can ask questions in the Dáil. I thank Deputy Feighan for bringing up such an important issue that is on the minds of all parents around the country, the mental health and well-being of our young people.

In the time available to me, I want to return to the news of the horrific plane crash. Since we have spoken, it has become apparent that at least 30 people have died in a plane crash involving a plane from India that was heading towards our nearest neighbours in the UK, at Gatwick. I know the thoughts and prayers of everyone in this House are with all of those affected.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: This is shocking news emerging about the plane crash.

I want to deal with the issue of the cost of living. I was going to raise the issue of education and how some schools are under pressure to keep the lights on. However, I see the Fine Gael Parliamentary Party is more interested in the phone pouches. Let me just talk about electricity prices. Yesterday, we learned that there is a proposal to hike electricity prices again. This is serious because people are being fleeced right across the board. Irish people already pay some of the highest electricity prices in Europe. We pay €350 more than the European average. That is what you get after 14 years of Fine Gael in government. The Government wants to jack up prices even further. It wants to add another €83 on to that. This is money that comes out of people's pockets in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis.

Does the Tánaiste not listen to his constituents who tell him about their grocery bills going through the roof? Does he not hear that the number of children in consistent poverty has nearly doubled in a year? Does he not hear about schools pleading for funding to keep the lights on rather than asking for phone pouches? These price rises should not be going ahead. Instead, a cost-of-living package should be included in the budget. This should include a substantial amount for energy credits.

Will the Tánaiste ensure there is not a hike in electricity prices, as has been proposed? Instead, will he commit to bringing forward a cost-of-living package that will include electricity in recognition that after 14 years of Fine Gael in government, we pay among the highest electricity prices in Europe?

The Tánaiste: The only part of this island where phone pouches have been rolled out by a government is in Northern Ireland and where the First Minister is a member of Sinn Féin. I challenge the Deputy to talk to parents, principals and teachers in Donegal because they have been asking for support in relation phone use. If the Deputy does not recognise the challenges posed by social media and smartphones, that is on him.

Yes, I listen to my constituents when it comes to energy prices and yes, we will continue to support people with the cost of living. However, who I do not listen to when it comes to what to do about energy prices is Liz Truss which is exactly what Sinn Féin proposes, namely, to give taxpayers' money to subsidise energy companies with the cost. That is not the way the way to go. We provided significant assistance to people in regard to energy credits and we will continue to do so. However, what we will not do is adopt the policies of Liz Truss, which was a Sinn Féin proposal.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: We are not asking the Government to do that. Why will the Tánaiste not answer the question? Will he stop the increase? This is serious.

The Tánaiste: Yes, it is very serious.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Will the Government stop the increase?

The Tánaiste: What we will do is bring forward a budget with proposals to help people with the cost of living.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Will the Government stop the increase?

Deputy Mark Wall: I want to raise the issue of an email I received from my local authority last week regarding an email from the Department of housing saying that the local authority was not to proceed with 73 social homes and a community building under PPP bundle 3 at a site in Ardrew in my hometown of Athy. My understanding is that in this case the preferred bidder was selected as long ago as last October. The reply from the Department of housing told us that after careful consideration, the Department has decided not to go ahead with 486 homes under PPP bundle 3. There are over 800 people on the social housing waiting list in Athy alone. Can the Tánaiste give assurances to them that those 73 social homes and that community building will proceed as quickly as possible? It is not acceptable in this housing emergency to be left with 73 homes not proceeding. It is something the people of Athy and the people involved in the other four sites and 486 homes would like to know.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for bringing up this issue. I undertake to pass that on directly to the Minister for housing and ask him to look into the matter immediately with the local authority and come back to the Deputy directly on the issue. There is a housing emergency. We need to build homes and take every opportunity to do so. We will have a national development plan review next month which will significantly increase further investment in housing and housing-enabling infrastructure. I will ask the Minister, Deputy Browne, to look at the issue affecting the Deputy's constituents.

Deputy Jen Cummins: Many schools across the country are struggling to keep the lights on. That is not my opinion; that is fact. A new survey has highlighted the huge increase in the costs that schools are grappling with. In the past five years insurance costs have increased by one third, while utilities soared by 50% and cleaning costs by 80%. However, funding for schools has not gone up. The capitation grant they have is the same as 2008, nearly two decades ago. How are principals expected to pay costs for 2025 with 2008 budgets? A record number of schools are applying to the Department for financial assistance. Many schools still have to ask for voluntary contributions. Principals are spending all their time worrying about how they will pay the bills. It is causing a huge amount of stress and burnout. When will the Government increase the capitation grant to a sustainable level for schools to pay the bills, have a buffer for emergencies and enhance teaching and learning?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for bringing up this issue. The INTO has rightly highlighted the issue with the Deputy and colleagues across the House in recent days. Many of us have had the opportunity to hear directly from the INTO. The Deputy is right that real challenges are faced by our schools. It is objectively fair to say we have increased the education budget a lot. Much of the focus has been on reducing class sizes and on special education needs. We all support that but there is a legitimate issue around capitation and a sustainable level of funding. The Minister for education, Deputy McEntee, will consider all of this in advance of the budget due in October. She will meet and engage with the INTO and others in the run-up to it.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I send my sympathies to all affected by the crash in India. It is absolutely horrific.

Thousands of people are taking part in a march to Gaza today. They are trying to break the criminal blockade which is allowing thousands of people to starve, be killed and so on. It is something the Tánaiste commended when he spoke of doing anything that can be done to keep the eyes of the world on this when world leaders are clearly not doing enough. People who are going include health workers from this country, ordinary people who cannot watch any longer as this happens. I have been told the situation is very tense in Egypt, where they are gathering, and that 190 people have been detained, including three Irish people. They are apparently being deported. I ask, number one, for all TDs, particularly the Tánaiste as Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, to make contact with the Egyptian authorities and ask that these people be allowed safe passage. They are not doing anything wrong. I also ask that officials go to the airport to assist people there, where there seems to be particularly difficult situations. The Egyptian authorities, and those of the surrounding countries, do not have the right to stop people.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. I have been discussing this matter with my colleagues in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade today. We are monitoring the situation very closely. I have asked for an update from our embassy in Egypt and that our consular section keep me directly updated on these matters. The protection and well-being of any Irish citizen in any part of the world is something my Department and the Government takes extremely seriously and I will be keeping a close eye on this.

Deputy Michael Collins: Wellman International in Mullagh, County Cavan, a pioneer in fibre manufacturing since 1973, faces an uncertain future. The company was placed in examinership on 3 June. It has just 100 days to find an investor or buyer to save 217 highly skilled jobs that are vital to the communities of east Cavan and north Meath.

Local Independent Ireland councillor Shane P. O'Reilly, a strong advocate for the workers,

has raised serious concerns about management decisions and the lack of State support over the years. It is astonishing that a company which once recycled 4.5 billion bottles annually is not being utilised for the deposit return scheme when 80% of collected bottles are exported to mainland Europe. It is a clear missed opportunity by Enterprise Ireland and the IDA.

I urge the Tánaiste and the State to take immediate action. We do not need reviews or task forces. We need results with 92 days remaining. I will meet the employee committee at Mullagh alongside my Independent Ireland colleague, Councillor O'Reilly. We stand firmly behind them and will ensure the Government does not stand idly by. What will the Tánaiste and Government do to save this company and the 217 jobs at risk?

The Tánaiste: I appreciate why the Deputy raises this issue but there are two things I will not do. First, I will not interfere in any sort of judicial process around the status or examiner-ship of a company. The Leas-Cheann Comhairle surely would not allow me to do so under the rules of the House anyway. Second, I will not interfere in the awarding of State contracts. We know where that has got the body politic in the past. The awarding of State contracts is independent of the political process.

More broadly and from a policy perspective, we always want to support Irish companies and industry. I have heard reference to this company before in this House during a debate around the circular economy. State agencies including Enterprise Ireland are always available to meet any Irish company to discuss what supports can be put in place. I will ask the Minister for enterprise to link with the Deputy on that.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Deputy Cummins helpfully asked the question I was due to raise on school funding and I re-emphasise that point.

Given the news breaking on the plane crash in India, which I believe involves 169 Indian nationals, 45 Britons, seven Portuguese and a Canadian, will the Tánaiste as Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade do everything in his power to provide consular assistance to any Irish citizens and families that may be impacted and provide humanitarian aid from within the Department? There is a great degree of expertise in Ireland - not that we have a responsibility here but we should assist where we can. I appreciate this is still at a very early stage.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. He is right. I have been in the Chamber since the news emerged. I join the Deputy and everybody in extending the sympathies of the House and country to all those affected, to the people of India and to those likely to be affected in our nearest neighbour, the United Kingdom. My Department is actively monitoring the situation in real time. We stand ready to assist any citizen, though I am not aware of any citizen in relation to this. More broadly, from a humanitarian point of view, we are always eager to assist. The situation is very much evolving.

Deputy Keira Keogh: I join colleagues in extending sympathies to those who lost their lives in India and to Deputy Conway-Walsh on the loss of her mother.

Will the Tánaiste tell me what steps the Government is taking in relation to the effects social media is having on our under-16s? What meetings have happened with social media companies? This is an issue I campaigned vigorously on during the local and general elections. I think identity verification across the board would be welcome but, as a start for our under-16s, I am happy to see the Tánaiste has been talking about the impact of this issue on our young citizens in relation to bullying, self-esteem, etc. I like grassroots campaigns like that of Councillor

Fergal Nealon in Strandhill, where parents are joining a pact, but I also feel the Government has a responsibility to restrict social media for under-16s, along with education campaigns and engaging with social media companies.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I had the pleasure of meeting Councillor Nealon from Sligo yesterday and discussed this with him. I also met yesterday pupils from a school in Claremorris in the Deputy's constituency who were in the Dáil. When I bumped into them and asked if they had any questions, the first question they asked was what I would do about this idea of the social media ban. It was interesting to note the amount of them in favour of it. These were sixth-class students in Claremorris National School. It gave me a real insight into the pressure young people are feeling.

The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, has an online health task force in her Department to look at the health and well-being impacts of online and social media on young people. She met the chair of the task force this week and its interim report is due shortly. The Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, has asked his officials to examine international initiatives under way or being considered elsewhere to protect the safety of children.

I o'clock

My position is really clear on this. We live in a country where the digital age of consent is 16. Therefore, I do not believe we should be on social media in advance of that age. I heard the comments of President Macron in a similar vein this week. I have an open mind on how to enact these things. We have age verification structures that clearly do not work and industry would acknowledge that. We need to get serious about this. It is a ticking time bomb that is having a really detrimental impact on the health and well-being of our young people and often on their safety as well. The digital age of consent is 16 and I believe that should be applied in a very real way. The Government is considering how best to examine it.

Deputy Thomas Gould: In 2016 a new prison was opened in The Glen in Cork and the old prison was closed down. A commitment was made at the time by the Tánaiste's Government, which he was a Minister in, and by the Irish Prison Service that the old prison would not be reopened and would be used by the community for education and training, or maybe as a museum. The republican Thomas Kent was shot by firing squad there. There was supposed to be a community dividend. The Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, supported by the Taoiseach, recently announced that a new prison will go alongside the prison that was opened in 2016. Commitments were given to the community and they feel betrayed. I spoke to a lady yesterday who had a gang of young people in her garden at the weekend, in balaclavas and on scooters, throwing drugs over the wall. That is what the people up there are putting up with. This Government is talking about putting in a new prison. Why is it not being put on a greenfield site? If this Government, the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach are mad about prisons, why do they not put one in their constituency, in Greystones or in the Taoiseach's constituency? The people of The Glen, St. Luke's and Dillon's Cross have had enough of it. Commitments were made by this Government. I am asking the Tánaiste now whether he will honour the commitments that were made to the people of The Glen.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy may or may not be aware that there is a prison in my constituency.

Deputy Thomas Gould: In Greystones?

12 June 2025

The Tánaiste: Do not shout at me, please. The Deputy may or may not be aware that there is a prison in my constituency, Shelton Abbey. I have visited it many times.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Are there two of them there?

The Tánaiste: I do not know if the Deputy has visited any prisons recently. I have visited-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: There are two in The Glen.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Gould.

The Tánaiste: Can the Deputy please stop shouting? Just please stop shouting.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I am not shouting. I am just saying there are two prisons.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Gould.

The Tánaiste: I would like to be allowed to answer a very serious question. Thank you. Prison capacity is a very serious issue. There are far too many people out on the streets, causing chaos in communities, who need to be in prison.

Deputy Thomas Gould: That is fine.

The Tánaiste: They cannot be in prison unless we expand prison capacity. Our population has grown. I believe in alternatives to prison but there are some people who need to be behind bars. This House has passed laws to extend prison sentences but has not put in place the prison capacity to support those extensions. I have been Minister for justice. No Minister for justice wants to receive reports notifying him or her that people are being released from prison because there is not enough prison capacity. We need to fix this. The location of prisons is a matter for the Prison Service. The Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, has my full support in expediting the delivery of prison capacity and prison spaces. We need a new prison as well, by the way, to keep up with our population.

Deputy Thomas Gould: What about the promises that were made to the community? What about the promises that you and your Government made? They were promised in 2016. It is a residential area.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Gould, please. I understand that, but you will have to take it up in another way in the House.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: Yesterday there were protests outside the gates of Leinster House to raise awareness about Duchenne muscular dystrophy. Thankfully, the Minister of Health is here today. To be fair to the new Minister, since she assumed her role she has been very supportive in the area of rare diseases and I thank her for that. Duchenne muscular dystrophy is a very degenerative disease that affects boys predominantly. They deteriorate rapidly and many are lucky to survive beyond 20 years of age. A drug, Givinostat, that is available in the UK and Northern Ireland is not available here. I understand that EMA approval was only given for it last Friday, so it is very early in the process. In the programme for Government there are two commitments. There is a medium- to long-term commitment to review the reimbursement system, and I suggest that this should be done. I am glad that commitment was given in the programme for Government. There is also a reference to early access schemes. I am asking

that in the case of the 100 to 120 people nationwide who have Duchenne muscular dystrophy - they are predominantly boys - an early access scheme should be looked at. That can be done in the short term. I urge the Minister of Health to detail to the House what plans she has on that.

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I thank the Deputy for his ongoing engagement on this issue more broadly. He is right that the drug has been approved by the EMA. The next stage is that the drug company must make an application to the HSE. I checked this morning to see if that had happened. It has not happened yet. Perhaps it has happened in the period I have been in the House, but it had not happened when I checked. I will be watching it very closely. I have already spoken to the Secretary General of my Department and to the CEO of the HSE about this drug and the process it will go through. The Deputy is aware that we have increased capacity by 100% in managing the process within the HSE to make that faster. There are a number of Deputies in the House with a very strong interest in this. I am aware of the issues relating to early access and of the need to provide a system to enable that. That is the most updated position that I have. I will be watching very closely and working with Deputy O'Sullivan, and Deputy Aird who has raised this in a different context.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I am looking for an update on the progress of the N20-M20 Cork-Limerick motorway project. I emphasise the critical importance of its swift delivery to the people of Munster and the broader Irish economy. The case for immediate action on the N20-M20 project could not be clearer. The existing route is a relic of a bygone era, and is wholly inadequate for the demands of a modern economy. Every day that passes without progress on this motorway is another day that the commuters and families who pass through Mallow, Newtwopothouse, Buttevant, Ballyhea and Charleville endure the nightmare of heavy traffic thundering through their town and village centres. Lives are put at risk on a route that has well-documented safety deficiencies. The national development plan clearly identifies that the N20-M20 project is an essential piece of infrastructure. I hope that when the review of the national development plan is published, it will set out in black and white that we should proceed without any further delay on this vital project. I am looking for an update on the project, please.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy O'Shea for raising this important issue for his constituents. The N20 is a strategically important route. The proposed project aims to enhance regional accessibility, to improve the network, to connect the cities of Cork and Limerick, and to improve connections to west Cork and Kerry. It will really help to allow balanced regional growth and development. The N20-M20 Cork-Limerick project will provide much better connectivity between Ireland's second and third largest cities, as well as other towns along the route including Buttevant, Croom, Charleville, Mallow and Blarney. As the Deputy said, it will address safety deficiencies on the existing route. It will also deliver active travel infrastructure along the corridor. I am very supportive of this project, as I know the Deputy is. My understanding is that the scheme's preliminary business case is expected to be submitted to the Department of Transport in early 2026. I believe the Department allocated €4.5 million to Limerick City and County Council to progress the scheme during 2025. We will keep a close eye on this. The national development plan will provide an opportunity to accelerate funding for crucial infrastructure projects like this one.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: In July 2020 there were 2,112 children waiting on a first-time appointment with CAMHS. Of those, 747 had been waiting for over a year. According to the reply I received this morning to a parliamentary question, there are 4,554 children now waiting on a first-time appointment with CAMHS, of whom 763 have been waiting for over a year. This is an eye-watering increase of more than 200% in children waiting on a first-time appointment.

These are not just numbers. The Tánaiste knows this. They are not just numbers; they are children that have been identified as reaching the threshold for having severe or moderate mental health needs and they are in distress. Their parents are no longer wondering when their child will get treatment; they are now wondering if they will ever get treatment. My question is very simple. It has been two years since the CAMHS waiting list reached that threshold of 4,500 children waiting. What immediate action will the Government take today to, at least, address those who have been waiting over a year for a first-time appointment with CAMHS?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Clarke for raising this very important issue. After I leave the Chamber I will discuss it directly with the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, who has responsibility for mental health. There are a number of actions that the Minister of State is already working on. I want to say that funding is not and will not be a constraint to this. There are real challenges around recruitment, retention of services and, more broadly, reform of CAMHS services. I will ask the Minister of State specifically to come back to the Deputy on what more can be done in the here and now. Nobody wants to see a child or young person left in a significant state of distress. Those numbers are far too high.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: The Tánaiste has committed to bringing his version of an occupied territories Bill to the foreign affairs committee in June. Is it going to happen? We have only two sitting weeks left in June. That would mean, in order to meet his own timetable, the Tánaiste would have to bring the heads of the Bill to the Cabinet next Tuesday or the following Tuesday. Does the Tánaiste believe the heads of the Bill will be ready to meet his timeline? Linked to that, the Tánaiste recently asked the Attorney General to give his advice on the Government’s decision to omit services from the current Bill. Does the Tánaiste believe he will have that advice within that timeline to inform his own contribution to the pre-legislative scrutiny process?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. It is my intention to bring the general scheme next week. There is a very small chance it will go to the following week but it is my working assumption that I will get it to the Cabinet next week so, yes, I believe we will meet the timeline in June. I have been keeping in touch with the Chair of the foreign affairs committee, Deputy Lahart, about this. The Attorney General is doing that for me. I believe I will have that advice to help inform the PLS process. I probably will not have it in advance of the Bill going to Cabinet next week. It is likely that this Stage of the Bill will be published, as envisaged in the programme for Government, with goods. I reiterate that I want the PLS process to genuinely consider if the inclusion of services is possible from a legal point of view. We intend to bring the Bill forward next week, hopefully, and get it to the committee this month.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: The special long-Covid scheme for healthcare workers is due to end in two weeks’ time creating huge financial uncertainty for healthcare workers still suffering from long Covid. These workers were exposed to Covid in healthcare settings at the height of the pandemic when many others were told to remain at home. Some of these got Covid before PPE and vaccines were in place. They made a huge sacrifice and we owe them a debt of gratitude but it seems like the State is going to turn its back on them. These workers should not be facing another financial cliff edge. At the bare minimum, there must be an extension of the special scheme for healthcare workers. It would be deeply unfair to force these workers onto a basic, time-restricted sick pay scheme. Ultimately, a permanent solution must be found. It is time for the Government to work with unions to develop an appropriate long-term occupational illness scheme for this small group of workers. In the meantime, the very least that is required is another extension of the current scheme before the end of the month. What is the Govern-

ment going to do for these healthcare workers?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy. I recognise the extraordinary impact long Covid can have on people. It is my understanding that this scheme has been extended on a number of occasions and there is no proposal to extend it further. People are entitled to illness benefit but there is no proposal to extend the scheme further at this time.

Deputy Tony McCormack: The capitation grant is no longer fit for purpose. I know it has been brought up in the House quite a lot, even earlier today, but I add my voice to that. I have met with the INTO and spoken to principals from Bracknagh National School, High Street National School in Belmont, Scoil Mhuire in Tullamore and the Offaly School of Special Education, to name but a few. Schools are under serious financial pressure just to meet basic running costs. Fundraising, which should be for extras like trips, equipment and enrichment of the school experience, is now being used to just keep the doors open. That is not sustainable and it is draining time and energy from teachers and school leaders who should be focused on their students. We need to review how we fund schools, not just to tweak the existing grant. It may be time for a new national plan rather than leaving it to the individual schools to sink or swim. Just because it is the way we have always done it does not mean it is the right way. Let us fix this for our schools and for our students.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy McCormack. I agree with the premise. All of us on the Government benches feel very strongly about this. There was very good engagement with the INTO by many of us in our constituencies and at the day it held this week in Buswells Hotel. I thank the INTO for the constructive way in which it has engaged with us. Obviously, all of these matters will be considered in the context of the budget but this Government is fully committed to education, supporting our schools, principals, teachers, and crucially, our children. I hope we can make more progress in these matters in the budget in October.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I have been grappling with why that recent “RTÉ Investigates” documentary bothered me, like others, so much. I think it is because those nursing homes failed to protect and uphold the dignity of some of our older and more vulnerable citizens. Each one of those people was somebody’s mam or dad, aunt or uncle or brother or sister. It could be the Tánaiste’s parents; it could be my parents. I say to those who are running those particular nursing homes that thanks to “RTÉ Investigates” we have seen what they are doing. We have seen it and it has been noted. There has been a fundamental failing in providing care. HIQA has been caught on the back foot in this situation. It should be on its toes. Does the Tánaiste agree HIQA has serious questions to answer here?

The Tánaiste: The Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and I are listening to Deputy Ó Muirí and he is so right. What has haunted me from the programme, and he has captured it very well, was the lack of basic humanity. Yes, there is more this Government needs to do and will do. The Minister, Deputy MacNeill, and the Minister of State, Deputy O’Donnell, are leading on this as regards safeguarding legislation and all of that. We will do it as a priority and we are taking it extraordinarily seriously. However, there is also just basic humanity. How can any human being do that to another human being? How can anyone take an elderly man and throw him on a bed like that, or hurtle someone with dementia down a corridor? It sickens all of us.

There are questions for HIQA to answer. I want to say that in a balanced way as HIQA has done a lot of good. It has been a positive development in our healthcare landscape. The way it

went into University Hospital Limerick is an example of robust examination. Nobody gets everything right but on this occasion there are legitimate questions. The Minister will be engaging and meeting with HIQA next week. We will continue to pursue this. No organisation is beyond reproach and it needs to reflect in this instance.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: As the Tánaiste will be aware, the basic necessities such as food, housing, energy, healthcare, rents and transportation have risen in price much faster than the average household income. This is placing enormous pressure on schools, teachers and parents to meet their very basic demands in our schools, particularly in my county of Wexford. The programme for Government states that the Government will increase the capitation grant to ensure schools can meet these costs, yet schools are funded to the same rates since 2009. Will the primary capitation grant be increased by €75 per pupil in the upcoming budget as recommended by the INTO? Schools and parents are straining to pay their basic bills and cover their costs.

The Tánaiste: I think the INTO will be very satisfied with its very effective campaign this week. I say that in all sincerity because it did have a very effective campaign this week and clearly met with so many TDs as it should in doing its job in highlighting the needs of its schools.

To reiterate the point I made earlier to Deputy Mythen, and on the concerns he raised regarding schools, in particular in Wexford, Government will look at how we better financially support our schools. We do not make specific announcements on how best we do that until the budget in October but education is a key part of our programme for Government and we are very committed to doing more and supporting our schools. There are legitimate issues which the INTO has highlighted this week. We will consider all of these in the context of the budget in October.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: This week, the UN special rapporteur on environmental issues has written to the Government and to the Chief State Solicitor's Office seeking urgent action in relation to court proceedings which order An Garda Síochána to hand over confidential complaints for use in a defamation case. He stated that the Chief State Solicitor must oppose that action. He has stated that it would imperil the right of citizens to confidentially engage with gardaí in the future. A citizen in Meath has challenged alleged environmental damage by a large quarry company but he has been hit with two SLAPP litigations and is threatened with three more. These litigations are not designed to be heard but they threaten financial ruin on the individual and they completely tie that individual up for years. The aim is to shut campaigners up. I have raised this with two previous Ministers for justice. Now that a UN special rapporteur has condemned the practice and has highlighted the damage it does to the wider justice system, will the Tánaiste demand that the Chief State Solicitor defend the justice system, or at the very least will the Minister for justice meet with the target of these SLAPP litigations?

The Tánaiste: I have got a bit of this today. Everybody does their best in representing their constituents but with the position I hold within Government I need to be conscious even if cases can be readily identified, even if not named. I do not want to comment on that but take that as read. I am not aware of the correspondence from the UN but I will make myself aware of it now the Deputy has brought it to my attention and I will inquire into that now.

More broadly, on the whole issue of SLAPP and the likes, the defamation Bill the Minister for justice is bringing forward will give consideration to these issues. I will ask the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, to consider the Deputy's comments and revert to him directly.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I join with other Members of the House in extending sympathy to our colleague, Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh, on the death of her mother. I am sure all Members would like to be associated with that. We also extend our sympathies to the families and all those affected by that air crash.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.18 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 1.57 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.18 p.m. and resumed at 1.57 p.m.

Fisheries: Statements

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Timmy Dooley): I thank the Deputies for seeking the opportunity for statements on fisheries. I am pleased to discuss the important issues concerned affecting the fisheries sector.

I wish to reassure the House that as Minister of State with responsibility for fisheries and the marine, I recognise the importance of maintaining a vibrant fishing sector, both for the communities that rely on it and, indeed, the wider economy. The Programme for Government 2025: Securing Ireland's Future reflects this approach by committing to securing a sustainable future for the fisheries sector while supporting coastal communities that rely on this activity for their livelihood. My appointment, as a dedicated Minister with responsibility across fisheries and the marine to co-ordinate and integrate these key policy areas, clearly demonstrates the commitment of the Government to this sector.

Our seas are a national asset that provide a wide range of commercial and societal benefits and through activities such as commercial fishing and aquaculture, but also through their contribution to transport, tourism, recreation, renewable energy and cultural heritage, also play a vital role in supporting marine life and biodiversity for a healthy planet. An important feature of my role in the Department relates to marine protected areas and I am anxious to progress with that. We can have that discussion on another day under the environment side of the Department that I addressed there.

Bord Iascaigh Mhara, BIM, business of seafood report 2024 offers a comprehensive assessment of the economic impact of the seafood sector. The report tells us that the Irish seafood industry is valued at €1.24 billion, an increase of 4% on 2023, it employs almost 8,000 people directly across fishing, aquaculture and processing, and a total of almost 17,000 people when indirect employment is included.

Fish landings in Ireland were valued at €461 million in 2024. While €325 million came from Irish vessels, €136 million came from non-Irish vessels. The report shows a value growth of 25% in the aquaculture sector which is also encouraging.

Within aquaculture, much of that increase is related to the increase in the value of the stock. I have noticed over the past number of years that there has been a reduction in the volume produced and I want to work with colleagues to try to ensure that we can get some of these production levels back up again which will be of benefit to our coastal communities and to the economy generally.

2 o'clock

These metrics clearly demonstrate the resilience of the sector despite significant challenge in recent years and its capacity to pivot and adjust to a changing environment. This progress would not be possible without strategic and well-targeted investment, both public and private, and through the seafood development programme, the Government is delivering essential support to strengthen competitiveness, sustainability and employment across the sector.

In addition, targeted supports, funded through the Brexit adjustment reserve, helped the sector to navigate the unprecedented challenge of Brexit. Total Government spend across the seafood sector over the five-year period 2020 to 2024 was in excess of €800 million. This included investment of almost €160 million in State-owned public marine infrastructure. This funded a comprehensive range of supports to mitigate the impacts of Brexit and enable the sector to adjust to operating post-Brexit. Many of these supports were the result of the recommendations of the seafood task force, to which industry representatives made a valuable contribution.

I do not underestimate in any way the impact that Brexit has had on the seafood sector. We had the opportunity this morning to have a discussion on the first occasion with the committee. I share the concerns of the sector. I fully recognise the very significant impact that it has on those in the catching and processing sectors and that will inform the work of the Department and myself and the Government over the years ahead.

More generally, funding for supports for the commercial seafood sector are provided under the Seafood Development Programme, SDP. That programme is co-funded by the Irish Government and the European Commission under the European Maritime Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund, EMFAF, 2021-2027. Schemes for industry under the SDP are primarily implemented by BIM. Bord Bia also provides funding to industry through that SDP to assist seafood processors to attend international trade shows and market-study visits to carry out consumer and market research. I had the pleasure to attend, along with 23 or 24 from that sector, a recent seafood fair in Barcelona. I am committed to continuing that effort, on behalf of the sector and the country, of attending those trade missions whenever they arise, notwithstanding the impact has on the work programme. The Department and I are committed to supporting the industry in every way possible.

Separately to the SDP, the Department also funds supports and services provided by Bord Bia to the agrifood sector, including seafood. These, in particular, marketing innovation, new product development, etc., are accessed by seafood processors. Funding supports are also provided to the commercial seafood sector by Enterprise Ireland and by Údarás na Gaeltachta. Fourteen schemes will be implemented by BIM this year on behalf of our Department, again under the SDP. The majority of these are co-funded under EMFAF and they are Exchequer funded, specifically, the fleet safety and marine tourism schemes.

Many Members will be aware that I have placed a heavy emphasis on personal engagement with the seafood sector since I took this role in February. So far, I have visited three State fishery harbours - Killybegs, Castletownbere and Ros an Mhíl - and some on more than one occasion. I have engaged directly with stakeholders across the board from the catching and aquaculture and processing sectors. I also intend to get to Howth, Dunmore East and Dingle before the end of the summer.

I have met with seafood representative groups, all recognised producer organisations and the National Inshore Fisheries Forum, NIFF, the fish co-operatives, processors and the aquaculturalists on two occasions. I was also delighted to attend the Skipper Expo, which was a great opportunity to meet with so many involved in this sector, to meet the wider community and supported processors at the Seafood Expo Global with Bord Bia.

During European Maritime Day in May, I had the pleasure of visiting Castletownbere again, with the Commissioner for Fisheries and Oceans, Professor Costas Kadis, where, together, we invited all the seafood representatives to join us for a joint meeting. The occasion also provided me with an opportunity to present the concerns of the sector in Ireland to the Commissioner. From subsequent engagement with him, I know that many of the points that were raised by the sector have certainly landed. I met him again on Sunday and Monday of this week, and he was regaling some of the concerns again. That was a useful encounter from his perspective.

The programme for Government commits to publish a five-year fisheries sector strategy that will include an examination of the processing sector and to continue to support and promote improvements in fisheries and aquaculture. To progress this, I have decided to engage a facilitator to work with seafood representative groups in order to identify and articulate issues, priorities and opportunities for the sector and these will be considered when I am setting up the terms of reference for the fisheries sector. I am grateful to Mr. Kieran Mulvey, who is well known to this House, who has agreed to work with us in the Department and with the sector to chart a roadmap on addressing these issues into the future and I will be engaging with the committee on this matter in due course.

One of the issues that is raised regularly is the demand that Ireland change the relative stability key for stocks that we fish. It is important to note that fishing opportunities are allocated among member states in such a way as to ensure relative stability of fishing activities of each member state to catch fish stocks or fishery. This is provided by Article 16 of the Common Fisheries Policy, CFP, regulation and is further explained in recitals at 35 and 37. The committee will be looking at this in due course.

The total allowable catches, TACs, are set annual for most stocks by the Council of Fisheries Ministers and for stocks that are shared and jointly managed with non-EU countries. These TACs are agreed with those non-EU countries. TACs are shared between EU countries in the form of national quotas for each stock and a different allocation percentage per EU country is applied for the sharing out of the quota. This fixed percentage is known as the relative stability key. The allocation of stocks between member states was established as a principle of the first CFP in 1983 and was based on average catch of each member state over a period of reference years. That is referred to as track record, which, I am sure, those of the Members who have an intimate knowledge of the sector are well aware of.

The only exception to this relates to The Hague preferences based on a special recognition agreement of the underdeveloped nature of the Irish fleet and the heavy control responsibility on us when Ireland joined the EU. The arrangement is a vehicle for a limited increase in the annual quotas for Irish fishermen and women. Any change the existing system of quota allocation would require a majority of member states to agree under the qualified majority voting, which Deputies will be aware. This would require other member states to give up existing quota shares. Any change to the relative stability would involve a loss for some other member states and, therefore, pose particular challenges in a qualified majority voting context.

Notwithstanding this, I will use every opportunity to seek additional access to quota for Irish fishing fleet where this is possible. For example, at the Fisheries Council in December 2023, Ireland secured additional mackerel quota share worth approximately €3 million annually for Ireland's fishing industry. This represents the first permanent increase in mackerel quota. This was a highly technical and contentious issue which centred on the allocation and distribution of an EU mackerel quota historically contingent on the existence of agreement with Norway. Denmark had been the sole holder of this quota. However, without an agreement on mackerel being in place between the EU and Norway, Ireland successfully argued that this quota could not be allocated to Denmark, as it had been in the past when it secured a proportion of the quota for its fishermen. In 2024, Ireland successfully invoked The Hague preferences for mackerel and this was the first time that it had successfully been invoked for this particular species.

There is a strong lobby among Irish fishermen for Ireland to receive an allocation of the EU's bluefin tuna quota. Ireland has a national quota for northern albacore tuna. Annual catch limits are set by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, ICCAT. Based on scientific advice, Ireland does not have a national quota for bluefin tuna. The available bluefin tuna quota is allocated each year by member states on based on, as I said earlier, the relative stability mechanism, as established in the late 1990s. At that time, Ireland did not have a track record of commercial fishing for bluefin tuna and, accordingly, did not receive a quota allocation. However, a small bluefin tuna by-catch quota is available to Ireland, primarily for use in our important northern albacore tuna fishery and the Celtic Sea herring fishery where there can be bluefin tuna by-catch.

In 2018, Ireland was successful for the first time in securing an agreement that allowed it to set up a catch-tag-release fishery to contribute to the collection of scientific data for the bluefin tuna stock. This catch-tag-release science-based fishery for authorised recreational angling vessels has been in place since 2019 and supports the collection of valuable data on the migratory patterns of bluefin tuna in Irish waters. This fishery is most beneficial to Ireland as it increase our knowledge of the behaviour and abundance of bluefin tuna while also providing a small, but valuable, tourism benefit to the peripheral coastal communities.

Ireland has made it clear to the EU member states and the European Commission that there is a case for an allocation of the EU's bluefin tuna quota to be made available to Ireland.

The case is supported by data collected in the catch, tag and release science-based fishery for authorised recreational angling vessels. Ireland has requested the opening of a discussion at EU level to progress Ireland's case. Ireland has made formal statements on the matter at numerous fishery councils in recent years. Opening up this issue is difficult as other member states are resistant to any discussion on amending relative stability for the stock. However, I repeat that any change to relative stability would involve a loss for some other member state and therefore poses particular challenges in a qualified majority voting context.

However, the case for a national quota for bluefin tuna is supported by the data collected in the catch, tag and release science-based fishery for authorised recreational angling vessels. I will continue to raise this matter at every available opportunity. In addition to the consultation I have endeavoured to carry out here at home, I am also working my way through meeting ministers with responsibility across fisheries and marine in member states where we can try to build alliances insofar as possible. I will continue that engagement. I know that the committee also has an interest in visiting Brussels or Strasbourg to assist in that endeavour.

A further matter I understand that Members wish to hear about today is the extension of the EU-UK trade agreement. As Members are aware, the adjustment period set out in the original EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement, TCA, runs from 1 January 2021 to 30 June 2026. During this time the TCA provides that EU and UK fishing vessels have reciprocal access to each other's waters. After 30 June 2026 the TCA provides that access shall be granted at a level and on conditions determined in the annual consultations. Ireland's perspective was that, given the number of fish stocks shared between the EU and the UK - over 80 stocks - it would not be feasible to negotiate and agree on access to waters and quotas on an annual basis. This kind of arm wrestle on access to EU waters every year would simply not provide our fishermen and women with the certainty they need to sustain their business. Notwithstanding the impact of Brexit, as I said, it is important to recognise that while this certainty does not resolve the problem of the loss, it does give some security in terms of investment by the sector.

Against this background it was also essential for Ireland to obtain the longest possible extension to access arrangements for UK waters and to avoid the prospect of any further transfers in the quota from the EU to the UK in exchange for this access. This was critically important for Ireland as we suffered, as I have said on many occasions, disproportionately on quota transfers in the TCA and we were determined not to lose one more fisherman.

When I entered this position the language from the UK side through all the diplomatic channels was that it was not going to continue to facilitate access to UK waters without further transfer of quota. I made it very clear on behalf of the Department and the Government that was not something we could countenance. We amplified that with our counterparts at Commission level because ultimately the decision was taken, as Members know, by Commissioner Šefčovič in discussions and negotiations with the British authorities.

The fisheries agreement reached last month sees an extension of 12 years for the *status quo*, to June 2038. This is significantly longer than the four years sought by the United Kingdom and, most importantly, did not involve the transfer of additional quota. If there had been no agreement on these arrangements at the summit, Ireland faced the possibility of losing access to UK waters altogether or the prospect of immense pressure on paying for access with quota transfers in annual negotiations. This would have been an unthinkable outcome from all our perspectives. The agreement to extend the reciprocal access for EU and UK vessels to fish in each other's waters for a period of 12 years with no change in existing quota share is to be welcomed in the main. In my view, it is the best possible outcome we could have achieved, given the circumstances in which this reset agreement was being negotiated. It is certainly a much better outcome than some of the other possibilities. It has delivered certainty for Ireland's fishermen and women to enable them to make sustainable long-term decisions for their business notwithstanding that was, of course, off a very difficult base that Brexit visited upon the sector. The significant time period covered by this agreement, up to June 2038, ensures that responsible and sustainable fishing practices as agreed between the EU and the UK will continue. This is welcome news for all the fishermen and women who work hard to ensure the long-term sustainability of shared stocks.

I also welcome the commitment announced by President von der Leyen and Prime Minister Starmer on 19 May to the negotiation of an SPS sanitary and phytosanitary area agreement between the EU and the UK. This will be based on dynamic alignment by the UK with food safety standards and rules at EU level. There are long-established and mutually beneficial trading relationships between food producers in Ireland and food businesses and retailers in the UK. The comprehensive SPS agreement envisaged will greatly reduce the administrative burden on

agrifood business exporting to the UK. It is important to note that the European Commission will negotiate with the UK on behalf of EU member states. The overall result maintains the strong strategic link between Ireland's food economy and the UK, and reflects the mutual importance of the fishing industry and coastal communities to the economies of both the UK and the EU. I believe the outcome reflects the strong co-operation and unity of purpose between the eight member states whose fisheries have been most impacted by Brexit, with support from the remaining member states and the Commission.

Another issue that is of interest today is Rockall. Deputy Mac Lochlainn and others have raised this issue with me here and elsewhere. Irish fishermen desire to return to fishing in the waters around Rockall, especially for squid. Rockall is a small uninhabited and uninhabitable rock located approximately 160 nautical miles west of the Scottish islands of St. Kilda and 230 nautical miles to the north west of Donegal. Ireland has not sought to claim sovereignty over Rockall. The UK claimed sovereignty over Rockall in 1955 and formally sought to annex it as part of Scotland under its 1972 Island of Rockall Act. The consistent position of successive Irish Governments is that Ireland does not recognise Britain's claim of sovereignty over Rockall. Accordingly, Ireland does not accept that a 12 nautical mile or 22 km territorial sea exists around Rockall. We understand that the UK takes a different view. That might not surprise us. In addition, Rockall and similar rocks and skerries have no significance for generating an exclusive economic zone or establishing legal claims to be the continental shelf. We believe this position is reflected in the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which provides at Article 121.3, "Rocks which cannot sustain human habitation or economic life of their own shall have no exclusive economic zone or continental shelf." I assure Members that reaching an agreement on issues relating to Rockall remains an important issue for the Government and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is in ongoing contact with relevant Scottish and UK authorities in this regard. This is an area on which I hope to contribute constructively in the months ahead. We are working on a programme of meetings with respective ministers in other European countries and in the UK. To that end, we will be meeting my counterpart in London on 6 July.

The last issue on which I wish to update the House today is the review of trawling activity inside the 6 nautical mile zone. The programme for Government commits to maintaining support for our important inshore fishing sector and promoting the sustainability of fish stocks. In December 2018 a transition period to a ban on vessels over 18 m trawling inshore waters inside the 6 nautical mile zone and baselines was announced. A significant part of the objective of this measure was to manage the fishing effort of sprat stocks which are primarily targeted within inshore waters. However, the measure was subject to extended legal proceedings, resulting in the measure being overturned in 2023. In February 2024 the then Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine held a public consultation on a review of trawling activity inside the 6 nautical mile zone and baselines. This consultation took place without prejudice. More than 5,500 submissions were received. These submissions, along with updated scientific and economic advice from the Irish Marine Institute and Bord Iascaigh Mhara are being used to inform a review of trawling activity inside the 6 nautical mile zones and baselines. All relevant issues will be carefully considered before a decision is taken. Given the history of litigation to this matter, it is critical that all of the necessary procedural and legal steps are taken before any final decision is made. I add that it is my hope and desire to try to have our position made known before the summer. I am conscious of all aspects to this and of the historical dimension to it in terms of decisions that have been taken previously. However, I am also mindful of the legal complexities and the burden that places on the Department and on the Government. I will inform the

House as soon as we are in a position to do so.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The Minister of State and I have had a number of engagements now in the Dáil and at the committee. I wish him well. That is a big understatement, actually. We have waited a long time for a dedicated Minister of State with responsibility for fisheries. It is vital that he does well for all of our fisheries and coastal communities. I am going to refer to a matter on the Dáil record. We had an exchange on it earlier at the committee. My colleague, Deputy Conor McGuinness, is Chair of the Oireachtas Committee on Fisheries and Maritime Affairs. We jointly launched our report into the survey which was carried out late last year. Hundreds of fishermen, workers and businesses in the seafood sector took part. It was a very representative survey around the coast. I am not shocked by the result, if I am being honest. For the Minister of State starting off with a good heart, as he is doing, it is important to be honest about the problems we have and to acknowledge that we have a profound crisis. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, some of which were touched on by the Minister of State, we have not been able to avail of the immense resource.

In recent days the Minister of State will have been with the Taoiseach at the UN conference on oceans. The Taoiseach talked about one of the greatest marine resources in the world and what it brings but we are not getting anywhere near the full value of it in so many ways. I want to focus particularly on fisheries today. We have some of the richest fishing waters in Europe, if not the world, surrounding us. We have territorial waters that are seven times our land mass. It was pointed out to me in recent days that if all that was put together, we would be one of the biggest countries in the European Union. This is a huge resource that we have. Some 90% of the people in that survey said they feel that the industry has declined over the last ten years. Although they had the option, not one respondent said the industry had significantly improved over ten years. That is damning. Some 90% said they would not encourage their children to continue. This is intergenerational work, handed down. There was a documentary on RTÉ recently, “Tarrac na Farraige”, which was beautiful but also tragic. We see this noble tradition at the heart of Irish culture that is just being allowed to wither. We have collectively failed as a country to get the full resource. We have to do so much better.

The Minister of State spoke about going to Europe and said that if we ask for bluefin tuna, somebody else has to give it up. Somebody else should not have got it in the first place. We have to have those honest conversations. These are our territorial waters. We have one of the most lucrative fish species in the world that gets fattened in our waters and is a predator fish. There is an armada of Japanese vessels catching them outside the 200 mile limit. Our guys can only catch and release; they can lift it and look at it but it has to be put back. It is derisory stuff. These are the conversations we need to have.

European people, no matter what country they are from, are decent just like us. They have a sense of fairness just like us and know what is fair and unfair. We have 12% of European waters and get less than 6% of the fish. We have to have a conversation about it. We have had to decommission our fleet while other countries are investing in their fleet right now. We touched on this earlier today in the committee. We have countries like Iceland, Norway and the Faroe Islands. I have great admiration for the people of those countries in many ways, and the seafood industry that has been built in Norway. I am an admirer of the Norwegian people. However, this is wrong. They have not followed the science. They have overfished mackerel. Mackerel is a migratory species which spawns off the west coast of Ireland and works its way up the Atlantic. It is a shared, precious resource which does not belong to any one country. One set of people whose country and territory is part of that collective space, collective waters,

overfished and ignored the science. Laws do not work unless everybody follows them equally. Here, the law-breakers were rewarded with trade deals with the European Union. The Union was telling one thing to our Irish communities. For God's sake, we have a young girl here in Ireland who had to go to Europe about the fact that she could not fish pollock any more. That is really contested. Our inshore and islands people were forced and told it is zero catch for pollock. They have to fish for crab and lobster. Pollock was a vital part of that system of fish they catch throughout the year. They are having to abide by the rules and suffer the setback, but when it comes to Norway, Iceland and the Faroes there is huge investment from European member states like Holland. Dutch multinationals have put massive money into those states to recklessly overfish and there is no price to pay. This is an injustice. These are the conversations we need to have at a European level.

The word "patriotism" is bandied around these days and it is abused. To me it is about looking at every other country. Nobody is better than us and nobody is worse than us. We are all equal here. We are asking for a fair share of the fish in our waters and a Government that stands by our people. I wish the Minister of State well. If he takes that path he will have no criticism from me.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: The Minister of State and I have had a number of engagements at the committee and at a number of different events. I echo Deputy Mac Lochlainn's wishes for him. I do not think I could wish more for success for him. This is crucial. Our industry and the coastal communities it sustains are facing existential crises. I really hope the Minister of State does well and succeeds, and that he can deliver on the items he has been raising over the last few months as he begins this role. The Government must finally give coastal communities the respect and support they deserve and bring an end to decades of neglect, mismanagement and policy failure in the fishing and maritime sectors.

The findings of Sinn Féin's fisheries and seafood survey are devastating and show the devastation. Sadly, as I mentioned earlier to the Minister of State, they are not surprising and nobody is shocked, no matter how shocking they actually are. Across the country we heard from fishermen and fisherwomen, processors, harbour workers, coastal communities and fishing families. The stories are truly heartbreaking. They speak of deep frustration and fear, not just about today but about the future. They do not believe this Government has their back. That is the truth of it. If we look at the events of recent decades, we cannot fault them for believing that. This was once a proud and thriving industry. It sustained whole communities for generations but what was handed down with pride is now being lost with despair. As Deputy Mac Lochlainn said, 90% of people engaging in fishing do not want their children to enter the industry. That is the most telling statistic in our report.

The Government tells us broadly that things are fine because BIM is issuing reports that tell us all is well in the industry. The Minister of State said he welcomed the certainty that the EU-Britain trade deal brings but certain loss is effectively what we have. It locks in the loss of 26% of Ireland's fishing opportunity and a financial hit of €800 million at current prices, doubtless to go up over the lifetime of the agreement. It is not certainty. I believe it is an act of surrender. We have an eighth of European fishing grounds and just 6% of the quota. Coastal communities that once depended on fishing, from Ros an Mhíl to Waterford, from Castletown to Greencastle, they know it. They are despondent, lack hope and have little faith in Government to change course.

I am asking the Minister of State to do three things. First, to recognise the true value of

Ireland's fishing industry, not just economically but socially and culturally. It is not just an economic sector, it is a way of life. The second thing I am asking the Minister of State to do is to show respect for those who go to sea. The fishers, crews, processors, harbour staff and families who work and live with the risk and hardship deserve support and not spin and hand-wringing, if we are being honest. The third thing I am asking the Minister of State to do is to assert Ireland's national interest in this area. Within the EU and every international forum, we must fight for fair treatment and fair quota share. We are an island nation with some of the richest waters in Europe and we should be treated accordingly. We should have the same right to benefit from our waters as other EU member states and, indeed, third countries.

In totality, we need an ambitious and assertive national fisheries policy. This means a fair share of quota for Irish vessels, serious investment in ports and harbour infrastructure, including local authority harbours like Cé Heilbhic, and a strategic attitude to seafood production and promotion. I am not talking about one-off grants but a long-term plan to rebuild the industry and the communities around it. We must also ensure that coastal and island communities are included and not excluded in the transition to offshore renewables. Marine spatial planning must respect fishing and not displace it. Above all, we need a change in culture and attitude at the heart of Government. The fishing industry and our maritime resource can no longer be treated as an afterthought.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Comhghairdeas leis an Aire Stáit as a ról nua agus go n-éirí leis sa phost. It is imperative, as ever, that we should consider the future of our seas, our environment, our oceans and our rivers and the biodiversity that lives in them. Last week, the Taoiseach attended the UN Ocean Conference in Nice in France. Its theme was accelerating action and mobilising all actions to conserve and sustainably use the ocean. After the event, the Taoiseach said he wants Ireland to be a leading nation in global maritime policy. Well, change comes from within and if the Taoiseach had spent any of his 30 plus years as a public representative engaging meaningfully with the climate, biodiversity and fisheries crises Ireland is currently facing, we might not be in such a state.

Here are the facts. Under Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments, half our rivers and lakes are in poor or bad ecological states according to the CSO. My county of Kildare has the lowest proportion of rivers in good or high ecological status. The River Rye in Leixlip is one that has been in poor ecological status and this is a river best known for its salmon spawning. There has been a gross loss of fish and other aquatic life because of pollution. There have been numerous fish kills even since I was elected to the Dáil. There is also the lack of protection from the Government through maritime legislation.

Ireland has committed to designating 30% of its waters as marine protected areas by 2030, of which at least 10% must be strictly protected areas to ensure the greatest benefit to nature, climate and coastal communities and sustainability. This provides us with an opportunity to reverse biodiversity loss and to strengthen the ecosystems of our oceans. This is why I am calling on the Government to fully implement the Common Fisheries Policy, which is critical for ensuring our seas remain productive and resilient. To not do so would be detrimental to every one of us.

The impact of the poor state of our waters is evident today. Only yesterday, representatives from Wexford County Council and the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, were before the climate committee due to the ecological disaster unfolding in one of Ireland's largest salt-water lagoons in Lady's Island Lake. Wexford County Council agreed this was a problem

it has known about for years but has not been given any help from the Government to address. This lake has been designated by the NPWS as a protected area for nature conservation yet nothing has been done by the Government to address the ecological disaster there 40 years after the issue was first identified. Representatives of Aquafact, an environmental monitoring group, were also before the committee yesterday. They told us that in Oughterard beside Lough Corrib in County Galway there used to be four hotels full of fishermen and fisherwomen to cater for the mayfly season. Only one of those hotels is currently in operation as the mayfly has died out on the Corrib.

Other issues extend to the Six Counties. It is imperative as part of our planning for a united Ireland that this Government acts immediately to address the biodiversity crisis across the island. Since Britain left the European Union, there has been little emphasis on cross-Border initiative when it comes to ecosystems and biodiversity loss. We and the people in the North are dependent on this Government to lead the way in ensuring marine protection right across the Thirty-two Counties on our island. The deterioration of our seas and the destruction of their biodiversity is also impacting the health of our rivers and the work of our fishermen and fisherwomen. Biodiversity loss will lead to job losses, as was clear in Oughterard, in our tourism industry. We must be clear about this. Not only will jobs be lost, but also lost will be a way of life for our fishers. It was very moving to listen to Deputy Mac Lochlainn talking about the fishermen and fisherwomen of County Donegal and how this way of life has been passed down through families. Marine protected areas and a Common Fisheries Policy will lead to economic viability for Ireland's fishing communities and to a healthier environment for us all.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I am thankful for the opportunity to speak on this issue that is vital not only for our coastal communities but to our national identity. I refer to the future of fishing in Ireland. Once the backbone of coastal communities, the fishing industry is now facing shrinking incomes, rising costs and dwindling fish stocks. At the same time, our oceans are coming under increasing pressure from overfishing, pollution and climate change. Marine life is disappearing faster than we can protect it and the health of the entire ecosystem is under serious threat. How do we balance this? How can we support the hard-working people who depend on the sea for their income to live and to feed their families while also ensuring the sea itself can be protected? The answer lies in striking the right balance between livelihoods and sustainability, tradition and innovation and economic needs and environmental responsibility.

Fishing is more than just a job in this country. It is a way of life passed down from generation to generation. For many Irish fishing families, the sea runs in their blood. Important skills learned and handed down, like how to read the tides, mend nets and respect the unpredictable mood of the sea, can get lost. It is a heritage, a tradition, a career and a vocation all rolled into one, but that legacy is now hanging in jeopardy. Despite our island being surrounded by some of the richest fishing waters on earth, the very people who have fished these waters for centuries are now being forced out of the industry. Why is this? It is because of a destructive combination of spiralling costs, suffocating regulations, a lack of political vision and meaningful support at home. Under the Common Fisheries Policy, Irish fishermen are allocated some of the smallest quotas in our own waters. Our fleets are effectively fishing under restriction in the waters they should be thriving in.

It is hard to overstate how demoralising this is for the men and women who live on the sea and rely on it for their livelihoods. Fishing has become increasingly unworkable. In recent years, we have seen a dramatic fall in the number of young people who want to pursue a career in fishing. Why would they want that path forward when it is so uncertain? Regulations pile

up and there are no incentives to get started. There is no clear vision for the industry and no support to help them to climb the ladder. Initiatives like the young fishers scheme have been introduced with good intentions, but we must ask ourselves if they work. The numbers would suggest otherwise. Since Brexit and the pandemic, many boats are simply being decommissioned and sold. The cost of owning and operating fishing boats today is spiralling out of control. Fuel, insurance and maintenance all add up. With quotas so low, many fishermen cannot even catch enough fish to cover their costs. They are living year-to-year and fighting just to stay afloat. Many of our experienced fishers are now nearing retirement. Their knowledge and skills, honed over decades, are at risk of being lost forever. With few young people entering the industry, the future of Irish fishing hangs in the balance.

We are an island nation with a renewable food source all around us. Fish is one of the most sustainable proteins on the planet. Yet instead of building a thriving modern industry, we are watching it fade because of bureaucracy, lack of promotion and the absence of meaningful leadership. There is no serious campaign to promote fishing as a viable and proud career choice. There is no roadmap to train young workers or to help them to afford a vessel. Instead, they face red tape, debt and instability, so it is no wonder so many of them are walking away or never considering the sector in the first place. From net to fork it is a constant struggle. Fishing communities love what they do and take pride in their work. While they want to comply with regulations, protect the marine environment and contribute to climate goals, they are swimming against the tide. We urgently need reform of the quota system. We need investment, apprenticeships and infrastructure that will allow fishing communities to survive and thrive. We need to recognise fishing as a strategic natural resource instead of an afterthought in EU negotiations. Above all, we must ensure the next generation sees a future in the industry. If we do not act soon, the question many fishing communities will ask, and are already asking, is whether there will still be a fishing industry in ten years. I feel there may not be.

Under the leadership of the former Minister of State with responsibility in this area, Senator Malcolm Noonan, the marine protected areas Bill was a vital step towards safeguarding Ireland's marine biodiversity and meeting our international obligations to protect 30% of our maritime area by 2030. This critical Bill seems to have stalled, however, in the agendas of both the previous Government and the current one. We need to advocate for its passage into legislation. We must recognise that strong enforcement protections for our seas are essential for ecological resilience and the long-term sustainability of Ireland's coastal communities and marine economy. I echo the calls of environmental organisations like FairSeas and coastal stakeholders who were in the audiovisual room on Tuesday. I urge the Government to prioritise this Bill and to ensure that, at the very least, the necessary tweaks will be made without further delay.

The science is clear and public support is strong. Ireland must act now to preserve our maritime ecosystems before it is too late. The Taoiseach stated this week while attending the third UN Ocean Conference that Ireland has an opportunity to become a leader in global protection. The European ocean pact sets out a framework for a bolder EU-wide commitment to restore the marine ecosystems, grow a sustainable blue economy, support coastal communities and strengthen science, security and diplomacy, but Ireland needs to create national legislation. Finalising and enacting the marine protected areas Bill are crucial steps towards protecting our future. We should stand fully behind it. We could champion this through our 2026 EU Presidency.

I fully support the Save our Sprat campaign, whose representatives were also present in the audiovisual room on Tuesday. The campaign calls for action to address the unregulated and

unsustainable exploitation of sprat in Irish inshore waters. Currently, approximately 30 trawlers are legally harvesting sprat, a forage fish that forms the foundation of the marine food chain, but no formal management plan or conservation measures are in place. Although this activity is technically legal, it is ecologically reckless. Sprat is a key prey species for whales, dolphins, seabirds and larger fish like cod and mackerel. Removing sprat on an industrial scale, especially so close to shore, threatens the balance of the entire marine ecosystem. This overfishing is driven in large part by demand from the salmon farming industry. Short-term gain must not come at long-term collapse. If we strip our seas of sprat, we risk cascading impacts on the food web, including the collapse of native fish stocks, biodiversity loss and the degradation of coastal livelihoods. Ireland urgently needs a science-based management plan for sprat to ensure ecosystems are protected rather than plundered. We can only support a sustainable fishing industry and protect marine biodiversity if we stop ignoring the ecological warning signs. In the face of climate change and ecological breakdown, we must act with urgency and courage. I call on the Government and the Minister of State to immediately introduce conservation measures for sprat, restrict industrial inshore trawling and ensure marine policy is guided by science and not short-term profits. We can restore our ocean health while supporting a sustainable fishing industry by working together for a manageable solution.

I highlight the work of my colleague and party leader, Deputy Bacik, on the Dublin Bay Bill. This legislation would go a long way in protecting biodiversity, enhancing water quality and restoring and regenerating amenities all along the coastline.

Deputy Barry Ward: I come from the constituency of Dún Laoghaire, which is not necessarily known for huge fishing fleets. We do, however, have a fishing fleet in Dún Laoghaire Harbour, made up of a number of trawlers. There are also a number of smaller fishermen based in small harbours, such as Bullock and Coliemore Harbours, who make their livelihoods from fishing. It would also be remiss of me not to mention the Dalkey Lobster Festival in August, which will celebrate the shellfish tradition in particular along the south-east coast of Dublin and the fishermen who make their livings from it.

I do not deny for a moment how difficult it is in this country to be a fisherman and to make a living from fishing, both for small-time fishing and for the large-scale trawlers, particularly on the west coast. It is a tough existence for the people involved and they deserve our support. You would think from listening to the debate and some of the contributors today, however, that this is all Europe's fault and that Europe is responsible for the fact that fishing is a difficult lifestyle. While it has admittedly become more difficult in recent times, we should be acknowledging in this forum the benefits we and the fishing industry have had from being part of the European Union. The future of that industry lies in conservation measures put in place through European law, which will prevent overfishing and ensure the sustainability of fish stocks in order that there will be fish to fish into the future.

Looking back at the Ireland of the late 1960s and early 1970s, before we joined what was then the European Economic Community, the level of investment at State level into fishing was negligible. There was simply not the support at State level for fishermen at that stage. It was only when we became part of the European Union that it changed. A Government report from 1970 shows that Irish exports of fish and fishery products were worth £2.7 million. Those products went to the UK and other European Union countries. Even accounting for inflation, that is a tiny level of export. Since becoming part of the European Union and the Common Fisheries Policy, that has changed. We can now say that Ireland's fishing industry has developed and that seafood valued at €595 million was exported in 2024 to the European Union, the United

Kingdom and more than 40 other countries across the world. The development of the industry under the European Union, therefore, has been enormous. While I am not saying there would not have been development anyway, what came with membership of the European bloc was both regulation that allowed for sustainability and investment from across the bloc through the Common Fisheries Policy.

As we moved into the 1980s and the 1990s, the level of overfishing had a massive impact on the sustainability of fishing stocks and what was available for fishermen to catch to make their living. It was only through a global effort, focused and led by the European Union through the Common Fisheries Policy, that we put in place measures that were essential for marine life and the preservation of those fish stocks, which was hugely important.

The rules are negotiated and agreed between member states. They are not diktats placed on us. Rather, they are the subject of negotiations over successive generations. They are put in place in a way that allows an industry to exist that otherwise would not if those rules and supports were not there. That is worthy of acknowledgement. The support measures protect the marine environment from threats such as overfishing, climate change and the dumping of plastics into our oceans.

Reform of the Common Fisheries Policy is ongoing. Obviously, that is necessary. I certainly would be interested in hearing anything the Minister of State has to say about his engagement with the Commission on how the Common Fisheries Policy can continue to be modified and updated to ensure it addresses the needs of fishermen in this jurisdiction, particularly Irish boats, and how we are going to protect our exclusive economic zone in that regard.

In a global context, there is a massive problem with the regulation of industrial-scale fishing, particularly in the south Atlantic Ocean. Those waters are largely unprotected, particularly from huge Chinese fishing outfits. They go to that part of the world and massively overfish, stripping the ocean of its resources, which has a knock-on effect throughout the oceans of the world. It is not limited to that area. That aspect lacks regulation and the European Union, in broad terms, needs to address it as part of the global community to ensure it is not allowed to continue.

In the context of quotas for stocks and so forth, there was a practice for a long time of fishermen overcatching fish, not necessarily deliberately, and ending up with more on board than they were entitled to catch. The solution to that was to dump the surplus stock overboard into the sea. These were dead fish that were perfectly good for consumption but because of a bureaucratic system it was not possible to land them without fines so fishermen understandably took the step of simply dumping them back in the sea. It is difficult in the modern context to imagine anything more wasteful than that. I appreciate that has been addressed and phased out by the CFP and that practice of throwing unwanted fish overboard, either because they are too small or the fisherman has exceeded the quota, and the introduction of the landing obligation are really positive steps both for the sustainability of fish stocks and ending the criminal and immoral waste of fish that were being dumped overboard.

The CFP has brought a lot of benefits. It has positioned Europe in a big way as a global leader against illegal fishing through international law enforcement which I referred to earlier in relation to the South Atlantic. We have a particular obligation as we enter an increasing climate crisis to look at this as a Union, as a block of countries, to make sure it is not allowed to continue unchecked.

Equally the dumping of plastics into the ocean is something that has been addressed very concretely. It is something we need to take responsibility for. We know the oceans are literally choking as a result of the amount of plastic that is floating around in them. There will always be an element of plastic in the ocean. We have now reached a stage where, to a large extent, we will not be able to address the large amount of plastic in the ocean but we can stop more plastic going in and we can put in place regulations to ensure we minimise the pollution of the oceans through plastic. Again, that is something that needs to be done by the European Union. Responsibility needs to be taken by the international community to ensure the law is enforced in that regard. Reducing that ocean plastic pollution by improving our port waste facilities is also part of that so that when fishermen come ashore, they have a place to dispose of the waste. We have to avoid the situation where it is either not managed properly and ends up in the sea or where there is no incentive for them to dispose of waste ashore. We need to facilitate them. It is not sufficient to say, “You may not do this”. We must facilitate them and make it as easy as possible to avoid that situation.

Equally, promoting quality seafood products through the common organisation of markets and ensuring fair competition regardless of product origin benefits all people involved in the fishing industry and everyone who relies on that industry for their livelihood, whether they are manning a boat or dealing with the product as it has landed and preparing it for sale and all the other ancillary industries that follow on from that at the end. All these regulatory measures are easily criticised but when looked at in the round, they are measures that will ensure there are fish to fish for generations to come. They are measures to ensure we have fish stocks that are sustainable into the future and that the quality of the product landed in Irish ports, be it Dún Laoghaire, Killybegs, Union Hall or wherever, is maintained.

The anti-pollution measures mean those fish will not be full of plastic which they end up in our food chain. These are really important measures. I want to put on record my support for the Common Fisheries Policy and for the steps forward it has taken. That is not to say it is perfect by any measure. It needs to be constantly under review and amended to make sure it does the job it has to do. Rather than just standing here and saying “woe is me” and it is all Europe’s fault. Let us acknowledge that the European Union has helped us enormously to take steps forward to make our fishing industry profitable, sustainable, healthy and one that will be there for future generations.

Other Members have done this but I want to ask about the marine protected areas Bill and for clarity about its current state. A reply to a parliamentary question in March told me the final stage of drafting was either largely complete or complete. I hope the Minister of State can clarify when we might see it in the House. I think we had made significant progress on it in the last Dáil. Some feel it has dropped off the agenda. Perhaps he can correct that notion and let us know where it is. It is another important key in the future sustainability of fishing in this country and a very important legislative instrument we can introduce.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I would like to do what my colleagues have done and wish the Minister of State well. He will hear a lot today about the issues that exist. Having dealt with stakeholders previously, I imagine he is aware of some of the critical issues impacting on those involved in the fishing and seafood industry, whether we are talking about those in Carlingford, Clogherhead or elsewhere in this State and beyond.

When we talk about farming, we always talk about the sustainability of the family farm. We need to talk about the sustainability of those employed and who earn their living from the

seafood and fishing industry but also those wider coastal communities. I do not think we are anywhere close to that now.

It is fair to say the European Union has been very beneficial to a lot of sectors, industries and the State as a whole but everybody saw the Common Fisheries Policy was one of the means by which this State bought its way into the European Union and, unfortunately, fishing communities have paid a price. We have to assess where we are now and move beyond that.

I commend the work done by Deputies McGuinness and Mac Lochlainn on the survey which engaged hundreds of those involved in the fishing industry. It is a vital piece of work. Deputy

Mac Lochlainn met fishermen throughout the country and he and I met fishermen in Clogherhead. The issues they have are across the board. I want to put the following on the record from the survey:

I am a fisherman from a fishing family involved in fishing and fish processing for over 100 years. I have 4 young children. I have a limited number of years left in this industry as it will soon be gone for good on our disastrous current course. I would love my children to be part of this industry/community/heritage that we have but are fast losing. To steer them towards fishing now would be to stifle them for the rest of their lives. It is frightening to see what bad politics and bad politics alone can do to a once thriving industry.

That is how a considerable number of people see it. We have made recommendations. One is a fish Ireland office, which would be based in Brussels. The issues relate to regulation, to the Department dealing with communities and those involved and to the agencies involved. A lot can be done.

The following question was asked: "Do you believe the Irish fishing industry is in a better state than it was 10 years ago?" The responses were as follows: 5.63% said somewhat worse while 92.96% said it was much worse. I will leave it at that.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: We had a very interesting conversation this morning at the fisheries committee. I welcomed this morning, and I welcome here, the fact that not only do we have a Minister of State with responsibility for fisheries and the marine but also a committee that is dedicated to it. I think it will make a big difference and, hopefully, we can work closely with the Minister of State to progress the many issues that will be coming our way.

I do not think anyone argues against the fact that as a shared and a dynamic resource that our fisheries need regulation and to be managed. That is cross-jurisdictional too. What has been clear for many years is that there must be a level of fairness within that system. I do not think anyone looking at how Europe divvies up the quota would say that Ireland has ever got its fair share of our resource and of those quotas. That is something that is very difficult to do but I would like to see the Minister and the Government push much harder for that, so our fishers have a fairer share of that shared resource.

There are also things we can do as a nation. We need to prioritise the smaller fishers and low impact fishers to assist them as much as we possibly can. They are probably the ones struggling the most, whether it is regulatory, political or, indeed, environmental pressures that we see impacting our fisheries at the moment. That is something I will be raising with the Minister of State.

12 June 2025

Today I will use my time to talk about a couple of issues. I come at this from the basis that in order for us to have a sustainable fishery where people can pass their skills, knowledge and vessels on to family members and know that they are handing them something valuable their children and grandchildren will want to be involved in, we have to make sure they are being treated in a sustainable manner.

3 o'clock

We need to do a large piece of work in Ireland because I do not think we have done that to date. In many instances, whether from a national or European perspective, there has been overfishing and a lack of management in different fisheries and stocks. We need to move away from that approach. The best way to do that is for us to take a holistic look at our waters and introduce the marine protected area legislation. That has to be key. That has to form the basis of all and any other policies coming after it. If we do not protect our environment and fish stocks and ensure there is a future for our environment and the marine, there will not be a future for fisheries or our coastal communities.

I said to the Minister of State earlier that I was pleased to receive a response from the Minister for housing that the marine protected areas Bill is at an advanced stage of drafting and it is intended to finalise the draft as soon as possible and seek Government approval to publish the Bill this year. That is very welcome. He went on to say that the draft Bill is intended to be a Bill in its own right and is not amending legislation. When I asked the Minister of State about this earlier, I am not sure whether his response was that the remit has not been transferred to him yet. He spoke about perhaps co-ordinating with the national DMAP process. I do not know what that could look like or what discussions there have been to date on that, but it is raising alarm bells for me. Similar to what I have said, the marine protected areas Bill has to be the basis of what we do and must inform DMAPs and other policies.

I hope it will be intensive. The plan was for it to be an intensive and robust, but also complex, piece of legislation. It is not a matter of simply drawing a few lines in our marine areas and territory and deciding that something is a marine protected area. It will have to involve regulations and enforcement. It also needs to be designed with a mind to what the environment needs and the environmental constraints. Ideally, marine protected legislation would be quite dynamic. It may not necessarily deal with one spot on a map but rather a particular current and the aquatic life that current upholds. That is what should be protected.

If the Bill is done well, and we need it to be done well, it will be a very complex piece of legislation. I am worried about being caught up with any other processes. There are risks with that. It would perhaps be worthwhile for the Minister of State to come back to the committee at some stage, assuming that the Chair and committee are in agreement. When he knows what he is thinking of doing, perhaps we could work that out and assess it because it would be important to have those discussions.

I also want to discuss sprat fishing. I acknowledge the work the Minister of State has done in this area. Whatever the outcome, I know he wants to make sure that is known before the summer and can inform the September fisheries. I have a number of concerns about this. From reading the documentation on the consultation from the Marine Institute, I noted one of the things it said was that even if we banned vessels above a certain size there is nothing to say that sprat would not be taken up by smaller vessels because there is no management. This is a species that, to date, no one valued. We do not value it from an ecological perspective, but there

is also no financial value on it. Only 2% is used for human consumption; most of it goes to fish food. As the fish was so undervalued or unrecognised, we ignored it.

The reality is that it is important for everything else that happens. Our fish, including cod or hake, feed on sprat. If we do not have sprat, we will not have cod. Similarly, if we do not have sprat we will not have seabirds, whales, dolphins or marine tourism. Recent media reports have stated that, unfortunately, Colin Barnes is pulling out of whale watching because of the impact of overfishing on marine mammals. It is fundamental and we need to start valuing it for the ecological services it provides. From that perspective, I understand that the Minister of State is awaiting the outcome of the consultation but will also take into account legal considerations.

In parallel with all of that, it would be very worthwhile to mandate the Marine Institute to start doing stock assessments and begin the process of determining the stock levels. We do not have a real understanding of that aspect of fishing. The Minister of State could mandate that pretty quickly. We need to start valuing this species.

A ban on boats over 18 m was mooted in 2018. The process is taking quite a while. We have seen considerable increases in fishing. There is a risk that we might have gone past that point and a more drastic approach may be needed on an interim basis in order to get this stock back up on its feet. There have been calls for a moratorium, rather than a ban, until the data is available. If the Minister of State wants to ensure the species is protected, in the absence of any data, monitoring or management, we need to take a precautionary approach. We need to be very risk averse. There is merit in considering a moratorium to see whether that is something we could be doing instead. It could be a short-term thing. Anything like this would need to be done while being cognisant of fishing groups and communities that have fished this species legally to date. Even they would understand and appreciate that if we do not manage this resource, this fishery will not continue and all of the other fisheries that rely on this fishery will not continue. I ask the Minister of State to examine that.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I ask for a copy of the Minister of State's opening speech. Nobody got a copy of it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Normally the speeches are given out before the statements start. We can get a copy delivered.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I wish the Minister of State the best of luck because, as I have always said, our fishing industry should be one of our greatest amenities and benefits to the State. I want to paint a picture of east Cork, where I am from, including Youghal, Goleen, Ballycotton, Cobh and the small ports in between of East Ferry, Whitegate and Aghada. I was struck by a piece on youghalonline.com in November 2024 which stated, referring to Youghal's lost fishing industry:

Youghal, once a bustling fishing port, has seen its industry dwindle to almost nothing. The once-bustling quayside, where fishermen unloaded their catch of salmon from the Blackwater River, is now a quiet reminder of a bygone era. Many of the pubs that were once the heart of the fishing community have also closed their doors. It seems that the fishermen themselves have become the endangered species.

I congratulate Deputies Mac Lochlainn, McGuinness and others on the survey. It is stark and unsurprising. The survey quotes one person who said they had been fishing for 30 years

and had never seen it so bad, and went on to say that fishermen are not going to survive if things stay the same and that Irish fishermen are being treated very badly. Another person said they have been fishing since they were 15 years of age and are now 50 years old and have never seen the industry in such a bad shape in all sectors. They commented that there is no political will to seriously help the industry, and sad to say, they will not be in it for much longer the way it is heading because it is hard pay the bills now with poor quotas.

I have listened to other speakers. As a young fellow, when I was 16, I worked in the fish plants. I remember we used to process our own fish here. This could be an industry worth billions, with the crossover between aquaculture, the landing of oysters, crushing oyster shells and mixing them in with hen feed to produce more calcium to benefit the eggshells, the by-products of this and the waste products that go into cat food and animal food. We are not processing.

It sickens me when I go to the likes of Ballycotton and I see a container lorry. The trawler comes in and offloads the boxes straight onto the forklift and they go into the back of the refrigerated truck and they are gone. It is ridiculous and I appeal to the Minister of State to work with everybody on this. This is one of the greatest assets we have in this country. What is happening here, on an island surrounded by water, is frightening. There is also the tourism aspect. Sprats were mentioned. I know of a man who has lost his business of whale watching and dolphin watching because the sprats are not coming and it is having a knock-on effect. As I have said, please let us all work together on this. It should be a win-win situation for everybody and in particular the families.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I reiterate what the previous speaker said about copies of the Minister of State's speech. It is very handy to have a copy of the speech and I looked for it. It is slipping in gradually with various Ministers whereby we do not get the speech. It is very useful to have it.

I want to use my time, as I have done repeatedly since 2018, to discuss this matter and I want to focus on sprats. The Government came up with a policy which, with my inexperienced eye, I thought was excellent. I praised the Government for it. It was with regard to introducing a policy that would ban bigger trawlers over 18 m within the 6-mile zone. Many reasons for this were set out, in terms of the damage being done to the ecology by overfishing, the importance for local fishers and local industry and the large spin-off effect. I could not have praised the Government more on it. There was a lead-in time for the big boys, as I called them, to get out.

What happened then was that when the policy was introduced, it was challenged. Over the last number of years the same speech has been given. I apologise to the Minister of State because I know he is new in the role. At the end of his speech he mentioned the legal challenges. I will come to those legal challenges now. There was still flexibility for the Government to act, certainly to make sure that bigger trawlers were not in the 6-mile zone. The challenge was taken to the High Court and then went to the Court of Appeal. On both occasions the plaintiffs failed - I want to make this clear - in what they put before the courts on every level. The High Court, however, found that the consultation process was faulty. On this one issue alone, the High Court had to hold the policy as null and void. It is worth reading the High Court case and the case in the Court of Appeal that set out clearly that the Government was perfectly entitled to introduce a policy. It set out the nature of that policy. It did not endorse it but it went as far as it could to endorse it by stating it could not interfere with a Government that brings in a policy ostensibly for all the right reasons but, unfortunately, with regard to one aspect which was the local consultation part locally, it was faulty.

This was appealed by both sides to the Court of Appeal and the case was finally heard on 10 March 2023. We went from 2018 to 10 March 2023. During that time there were detrimental consequences with regard to the overfishing of sprat. This is not just about sprat; it is about the consequences of the overfishing of sprat for ecology and for the whole rhythm of life in the water, about which the Minister of State spoke so eloquently earlier, as did the Taoiseach recently at a conference. Every September I and other colleagues are inundated with calls telling us that the big trawlers are in the water fishing unsustainably. Indeed, the catchment of sprat has increased. I have all of the figures but I will not read them out. They are on the record. This is what has happened in the meantime.

Let us look at 10 March 2023 when the Court of Appeal issued its decision striking down the policy directive. Why did it do so? This time it was struck down because the Government's failure to notify the EU and the UK prior to the introduction of the directive rendered the directive invalid. The Government and the Department, and whoever the responsible person was, made a mistake and failed to notify the EU and the UK in whatever procedure was required. This was not done and the policy was held null and void.

What is important is that the court did not hold with any of the arguments of the plaintiffs on the policy directive. The court concluded that the directive was a measure for the conservation and management of fish stocks within the meaning of the relevant articles. Importantly, it found that the policy was not discriminatory, had not been shown to be irrational and did not involve a disproportionate interference with the constitutional rights of the applicants, who were the plaintiffs who took the case. These were the owners of the bigger boats. It was not found to be irrational, disproportionate or discriminatory. The Court of Appeal, almost the highest court in the land, told us that none of the arguments on which the application was made were found to be valid, to put it in my own words, yet the policy was held at naught because of the failure of the Department and the Government to notify other parties. I am not here to highlight mistakes. I am here to highlight the consequence of that mistake, and not just of the mistake because there has been flexibility for the Government to act and it has not done so.

That was March 2023. It is now more than two years and three months since then and we still have no policy. I am now looking at my third Minister or Minister of State on this matter. I absolutely deplore the lack of action and the constantly repeated mantra that the courts held this up. Everybody is entitled to go to court, and certainly I will not criticise anyone who takes a case. Obviously it would be better if the court system was more efficient. Obviously there are not enough judges. On a different level, this has been rectified to a certain extent but it is inexplicable that two years and three months later, we still have no policy. The Minister of State is telling us positively that something will be done, hopefully by September, but I did not hear from him that a new policy has been put together and that the policy will be launched and a date for it. I do not hear anything like this being said.

There was no need for consultation but the Department did the right thing and went out and consulted. The court said that when the Department went out and consulted, it had a duty to do it properly. There was a nuanced difference between the High Court and the Court of Appeal. One said that the consultation locally and nationally had not been done, but the ultimate decision was on the fact that we did not tell the EU and the UK.

What has happened in the two years and three months since then? Where is the policy? Will the Minister of State tell us today about that policy? What has happened in the meantime? Every time I have raised this, which is frequently, I am told 5,500 comments were submitted

as opposed to 900 on the previous occasion. I realise the amount of work this takes but it does not take two and a half years, given that no court ever held against the policy. Exactly what we need to do is to conserve and the courts backed that up. How could it take this length of time?

Recently I was down in Bantry. I certainly was not in great humour because it took quite a long time to drive down there. I was at a public meeting that was well attended. It was packed. I would have thought there might have been 500 people there but the room was a bit smaller than that. It was well attended and there was absolute goodwill to do something for the environment and the ecosystem. Nobody was saying “not in my back garden”. Ample time was given to those who did not agree, who were a small few with vested interests. They were perfectly entitled to speak and they spoke. The concern at every level, and not only with regard to sprat, was palpable.

I have used up my time. There are many other things I would like to say about local fishing but I have used my time specifically because I have never had so many minutes to discuss this one particular issue and get some truth out on it. When will the policy be published? Where are we at precisely regarding the policy? Have we finished examining all the aighneachtaí that went in? When will we have the policy?

Deputy Johnny Mythen: The Taoiseach recently made a speech at the UN Oceans Conference in Nice. He said:

[In] ... supporting sustainable fishing, we will not only protect our marine environment but also preserve and strengthen all the special communities along our shores that call the coast their home.

These are fine words. However, in reality, our fishing industry is dying a slow death. Sinn Féin’s recent nationwide fisheries and seafood survey found that more than 63% of fishers described the Department of the marine’s engagement with the industry as “inadequate or not engaging at all”. As one fisherman said:

I’m fishing since I was 15 years of age, I’m now 50 ... I’ve never seen the industry in such bad shape [in] all sectors. There is no political will to seriously help the industry sad to say I won’t be in [this] much longer the way it is heading hard to pay the bills now with poor quotas that we have

Quota cuts on species such as mackerel and pollock are crippling the industry. Out of 12% of the Irish EU waters, Irish fishers only get approximately 5.6% of the quotas. Is this how the Government protects our special communities along our shores that call the coast their home? I think not. We are surrounded by some of the richest fishing waters in the world. We are an island. We must make the most of our natural maritime resources to benefit all our coastal communities and the nation as a whole.

Sinn Féin welcomes the re-establishment of the Minister of State with responsibility for fisheries and the marine. We wish the Minister of State every success in his new role, but we are also calling on him and his Department to establish fish Ireland office based in Brussels to represent the whole of the Irish fisheries industry, equivalent to the present strong Dutch representation that is there now. What is needed most is increased investment in maritime infrastructure, especially in places such as Kilmore Quay, Duncannon, Slade and Rosslare.

We need a strong voice for the fishers of Ireland, especially when Ireland will have the

European Presidency role in the latter half of 2026. We look forward to working with the Minister of State. Sinn Féin will continue to support our fishers to the hilt. The Minister of State mentioned that he was going to different fishing communities. I extend an invitation for him to visit Kilmore Quay.

Deputy Michael Collins: I welcome the Minister of State. This may be the first time we have been face to face. I appreciate his recent invitation to Castletownbere. Unfortunately, I was at another meeting and could not get there, but I will certainly meet him soon.

I listened to some of the Deputies speaking in the Chamber earlier. I do not like talking about Deputies when they are not present, but Deputy Ward - not in a bad sense - said it is not all Europe's fault. Maybe he is right; it is his own Government's fault and successive Governments' fault. Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil have literally turned their backs on Irish fishermen. That is a well-known fact. I will read out some of the reasons. I hope the Minister of State will turn this around, because if he does not, more and more people would be looking to decommission, but that scheme is gone. That was the best deal that came out of the last Government.

The previous Government gave everything away. Brexit came and we left Michel Barnier to do all the negotiations and he certainly looked after France and Spain. Ireland was a passenger - it was a trailer with no hook on it and it fell off along the way. It is so sad and unfortunate. I begged the Taoiseach to make sure we got right in there, but he was not listening. He told me there could never be a stand-alone Minister for fisheries and now we have one. Hey presto; we pressed a button and things can happen.

Recently I took up an invitation to go to Kilmore Quay, County Wexford. These fishermen stayed ashore especially to meet me to discuss the unfairness of the way in which they and their livelihoods are being treated. One of the big issues for them is that they fish black sole. They are only allowed 4% of the quota. Listen to this. Belgium, however, is allowed to fish around Irish waters for 80% of the black sole quota. It is an astonishing situation. It is bad enough that they have to put up with this shocking deal, but when they go out to fish other species and are not targeting black sole, it gets into their nets as it is so plentiful. It is not possible for them to try to fish for other species without black sole getting into their nets. They often catch black sole, which was not targeted for fishing. They have to dump it or bring it in for dumping, which is completely crazy. They are asking for an increase in their black sole quota under The Hague preferences. They are asking for The Hague preferences to be invoked. Will the Minister for the marine increase their black sole quotas? I would appreciate it if he addressed that.

While I was talking to these fisherman, who were complimentary about our Ceann Comhairle, Deputy Verona Murphy because she is from that area, they told me how angry they are at the cost of all of this. They are breaking the law if they bring in this black sole. If they log it, they are breaking the law. If it gets into their nets without being targeted, they are breaking the law as they have no quota. They want to fish legally and do not want to be branded as criminals. Can we have some common sense here and increase the black sole quota for them?

The maddening thing for anyone who was at this meeting was the idea that they can only fish 4% of the quota. It is astonishing. Belgian boats can fish all around them and are laughing at them. They told us that they are laughing at them with 80% of the quota.

I believe this was raised in the December quota meeting in 2024 and the Commission had a rabbit-out-of-the-hat suggestion that the Hague preferences should only be invoked when the

quotas fell to ten tonnes because of Brexit. The fishermen's calculation was that the Hague preferences falls below 190 tonnes. The Commission and the Department were supposed to investigate this and report back in January 2025, but, needless to say, the fishermen have not heard a word about.

On behalf of the fishermen of Kilmore Quay, will the Minister of State increase their black sole quota? Will he meet with them in Wexford? The Ceann Comhairle and I would appreciate it if he let us know if that was happening as it is hugely important. In fairness, the Minister of State has been meeting with people. I acknowledge that and can be fair where it is needed. I will also be speaking to our MEP, Ciaran Mullooly, to see whether he can come at it from the European side.

While in Kilmore Quay, the fishermen told me about their infrastructure. They are right about the piers and infrastructure in Ireland. They mentioned Kilmore Quay, Castletownbere, Donegal and Galway and they said that there is proper infrastructure and proper piers every 10 km in Newfoundland. We are in a situation where we are lucky to have four or five of them around the country while the others are begging for improvements.

Irish fishermen have been facing significant challenges due to the ongoing dispute over fishing rights around Rockall. The core issue stems from the UK's claim of a 12-mile exclusion zone around Rockall, which had led to Irish fishing vessels being banned from fishing in these waters since Brexit. This ban has had a substantial impact on the Irish fishing industry, particularly affecting the catch of species such as squid and haddock. Will the Minister of State give me an update on where this is at present?

In recent years, the population of bluefin tuna has exploded. Ireland had a previous track record of more than 2,000 tonnes per year when Michael Keating was sent to ICCAT as the Irish representative. We applied to ICCAT and now receive a quota. The Japanese fleet is fishing along the 200-mile international limit to freeze bluefin tuna for a demanding market in Japan. The carbon footprint in getting this fleet to Ireland would be massive, and their fishing practices are unregulated by any authorities. I was told that Japanese send planes to Ireland to track the bluefin tuna. Again, our Irish fishermen cannot fish for the fish in their own seas. It is scandalous.

I spoke about the mussel farm in Kinsale before and the opposition to it. The Minister of State needs to look at that along with the senior Minister. The licence was given despite serious information being missing. A licence was given for a 62-acre mussel farm off the coast of Kinsale, which is scandalous.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Irish fishermen have seen their sector gutted in recent years. Irish fishing rights have been handed, lock, stock and barrel, to other countries. Many countries are doing far better out of Irish waters than Irish fishermen. According to departmental projections, the Irish coastal share of fish will shrink by approximately 15% in the coming six years. The average reduction throughout the rest of Europe is 9.83%. Ireland's reduction significantly surpasses the loss of other countries. Indeed, Ireland has the highest loss along with Germany. What does that say about the ability of Irish Ministers to work on behalf of Irish fishermen in Europe? It is an incredible situation at the moment. Earlier this year, a trawler came into Killybegs with 750 tonnes of blue whiting that had been caught. The trawler was subject to a controlled weighing on the pier as part of that process. The monitoring process made the fish unfit for human consumption and the fish had to be sold for animal meal. That fish are being

weighed at piers is nonsense and is damaging the sector. The crisis is so profound that Irish fishers are now changing their boats' Irish flags for Spanish flags in order that they can increase their quota in their own country. Meanwhile, we see 20 to 50 trucks of Irish fish leave the country per week, and many of them are unchecked.

I will put this in perspective. As regards monkfish, France has 59% of the quota in Irish waters; Ireland has 7% of the quota. In haddock, Ireland has only 22% of the quota; France has 67% of the quota. In hake, Ireland has 6% of the quota; France has 45% of the quota. What is happening would be completely laughable if it were not so costly. Looking at sole, some fishing boats can catch only maybe a box a month while Belgium has the vast majority of the quota here in Ireland. It is beyond belief. It is farcical that fishermen and fisherwomen are thrown about their boats in the heaviest of weather and made do all this work but are treated differently from other fleets fishing in Irish waters. They are made to weigh on the pier and then weigh in the factory 200 yd up the road as well.

I wish the Minister of State luck in his role, but Ireland has been cursed with absolutely pathetic representation in the European Union. We have not been fighting our corner. The other countries are making fun of us for the lack of quota we have in our own waters. There has to be a change if rural and coastal communities are to survive.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Is é seo an chéad uair atá deis agam comhghairdeas a ghabháil leis an Aire Stáit as a phost agus a ról nua. Guím chuile rath air sa phost seo. Is í an fhírinne ná go dteastaíonn guth fíorláidir uainn. Teastaíonn sé ó na pobail atá ina gcónaí ar an gcósta agus ó na pobail ar fad a bhfuil baint acu leis an iascaireacht. Ní raibh an guth sin acu cheana agus is í sin an fhadhb a bhí ann i gcónaí. Caithfidh muid é sin a athrú. Tá súil agam go mbeidh an tAire Stáit in ann é sin a athrú. Tá a fhios agam go mbeidh sé i Ros an Mhíl amárach. Tá togra mór i gceist leis sin agus tá súil agam go mbeidh sé in ann é a bhrú ar aghaidh mar tá sé ag teastáil go géar.

Tá mé anseo chun labhairt ar an suirbhé a rinne mo chomhghleacaithe, na Teachtaí Pádraig Mac Lochlainn agus Conor McGuinness. Léiríonn an suirbhé, i bhfocail na bpobal iad féin, cé chomh deacair is atá sé a bheith ag iascaireacht faoi láthair. Dúirt duine amháin a ghlac páirt sa suirbhé:

I am a fisherman from a fishing family involved in fishing and [fish] processing for over 100 years. I have 4 young children. To steer them towards fishing now would be to stifle them for the rest of their lives. It is frightening to see what bad politics and bad politics alone can do to a once thriving industry.

Is dócha, nuair a bhreathnaíonn tíortha eile ar Éirinn, is é an rud a thagann chun cuimhne i gcónaí ná gur oileán muid. De bharr gur oileán muid, shílfeá go mbeadh muid agus na pobail in ann slí beatha a bhaint amach as an iascaireacht, as an gcósta agus as an bhfarraige sin. Mar gheall ar dhrochchinntí, áfach, ní féidir é sin a dhéanamh a thuilleadh. Dá bharr sin, teastaíonn guth láidir uainn. Nuair a bhreathnaíonn muid ar na figiúirí anseo ón dream a ghlac páirt sa suirbhé, dúirt 93% acu go bhfuil an iascaireacht níos measa anois sa Stát ná mar a bhí sé deich mbliain ó shin. Is rud mór é sin le rá. Tá roinnt acu a dúirt nach gcreideann siad go mbeidh a gcuid páistí in ann í a dhéanamh.

Ag breathnú ar an gcuóta, ní leor é. Feiceann muid go bhfuil na báid mhóra seo ag teacht ón Fhrainc agus ón Spáinn agus gur féidir leo siúd iasc a fháil ón fharraige atá mórthimpeall

orainn. Bíonn muid agus an tAontas Eorpach i gcónaí ag caint faoi athrú aeráide. Cé gur rud fiorthábhachtach é sin, ní dhéanann sé ciall ar bith go bhfuil na báid mhóra in ann teacht ón Fhrainc agus an Spáinn. Níl sé sin go maith don athrú aeráide. Tá siad in ann teacht anseo agus na hiasc ar fad sin a thógáil ón fharraige seo ach ní féidir leis na hÉireannaigh.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Timmy Dooley): I thank all the Deputies who contributed for their insights and helpful suggestions. I want to correct one matter. I indicated, I think, that I am to meet my UK counterpart on 5 July. I am reliably informed it is 9 July. I do not want anything to be missed on the record on that.

To the Sinn Féin Members who talked about their survey, that is a useful piece of work, and I can understand the sentiment many of the people express. I might not agree with some of the suggestions but I have indicated to the Deputies who prepared the survey that I will go through it in more detail. I am happy to have a dialogue with them on that.

The reality is that all the information or ideas do not reside on any one side of the House. I certainly do not suggest that I possess the divine right to develop policy alone. I will always take helpful views, from whatever quarter, that are to the benefit of the people we seek to represent. I assure the House of that. I have engaged with people, and people are engaging with me and setting out their stall. There is little doubt that the sector has been under pressure for quite some time because of global changes and impacts of overfishing through the years. The stocks are declining and climate change is having an impact, but there is no doubt that Brexit delivered a devastating blow to the sector more generally and has left the sector reeling. However, from my engagement not exclusively but generally, there is an obvious resilience there on the part of so many people who want to try to continue this industry notwithstanding the complications and the difficulties that are there. I want, insofar as I can, to support them in that. I set out earlier some of my ideas about trying to do a piece of facilitation work in the first instance to develop that strategy into the future and develop a roadmap to try to deliver insofar as we can to meet people's needs and expectations.

There was quite a bit of talk about bluefin tuna and the lack of quota we have. Some of that is historic, but there is a recognition that because of the changes in water conditions, more of that stock is moving into Irish waters. Of course, I will fight tooth and nail at every possible opportunity, with both the Commission and member states that have an interest in this, to try to get stock. I am conscious, however, that in order for us to get quota, somebody has to give it up. Whatever the historical conditions that existed when quotas were first apportioned, trying to win quota back is a difficulty. Deputy Tóibín in making his case referred to Irish waters, but the reality is that, outside the 12 nautical miles, that is considered European waters, so we do not have exclusivity there. That is part of an agreement that goes back to the 1970s. With the best will in the world, I do not want to indicate to anybody that I can necessarily change that context overnight, but whatever opportunity comes through the ether, I will be happy to engage.

Deputy Barry Ward and others talked about the CFP and the review or the reform. There is an evaluation under way by the Commission at the moment. The European Ocean Pact was launched on Monday of this week at the UN Ocean Conference in Nice. It sets out the potential for a possible reform. I assure the House that if that eventuality comes into play, together with the Department officials, I and other Ministers involved in various Departments will fight our damndest to get whatever additional quota we can in those contexts. However, I do not want to lead people to believe that just because there is going to be a reform there is somebody out there

waiting to hand over a portion of quota. I assure the House from my perspective, however, that it will not be for the want of engagement and networking. Others asked what our approach might be. It will be to consult as widely as possible, to engage with other member states, to lobby, to network and to make the case, as the industry did really well in Castletownbere when the Commissioner was invited there and we had that opportunity. It is that kind of work that plays out in the long term.

The question then is what might be done on a broader level to protect biodiversity. Ireland is a signatory to the UN Agreement on Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction. We are going to bring this through domestic legislation as it has to be transposed. We want to move on this because we have a shared responsibility to manage the seas that fall outside the national jurisdiction. I think it was Deputy Barry Ward who talked about the massive overfishing by fleets outside of European control that have access and have a destructive effect. As part of this, we are putting in place a governance programme to try to ensure that we maintain biodiversity, for the greater good of all.

Deputy Mythen talked about going to Kilmore Quay. I am happy to do that and I am happy to meet groups under the political representation. The Ceann Comhairle has been in touch with me on this issue, as has the Minister, Deputy James Browne. I will work with everyone on this issue. However, I make the point to Deputy Collins that I am not in a position to promise anything regarding giving quota for black sole to anyone or any entity. I can only engage with the sector and be as honest and upfront as I always am on these issues and what procedures and process can be undertaken to try to address an issue or how we deal with it. We are happy to do that.

Deputy Tóibín talked about the issue in Killybegs with the blue whiting that was processed for fishmeal. This issue has been raised with me on a number of occasions. I have met the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority, SFPA, and the fishing industry there. We have to have regulatory controls in place and these are done on a proportionate basis. There has to be a level of oversight because we have to convince the European Commission, in particular, that we have a regulatory regime in place that is fit for purpose. I am also conscious that technology is advancing. There is now a very significant number of cameras in place in the processing facilities in Killybegs. I understand that additional cameras would have to be put in place and we would have to get a designation of the entirety of the pier to be able to manage the process without certain checks at the shoreside on an ongoing basis. I am prepared to work with those in Killybegs to try to reduce the necessity for those checks, which do impact on the quality of the blue whiting. It is a very tender fish that can be easily damaged in the counting process in that equipment. When I visited, I saw at first hand the impact that is having. There is a medium- to long-term plan to address this and I hope we can do so.

I outlined where we are at on the issue of Rockall. We do not accept the British claim on Rockall. As it is not a habitable place, we do not believe there should be any economic zone around it. We believe that we have the backing of international legislation to justify that. There is ongoing diplomatic dialogue on this by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The Taoiseach and the Tánaiste have raised the matter with the British Prime Minister, Keir Starmer. When I am in London on 9 July I will raise the matter. It is my intention to also visit Scotland and other jurisdictions around Europe. This will have to be advanced on a bilateral basis. It would be very helpful to those who fish for squid in the seas around Rockall.

Deputy Connolly set out a very clear and impassioned plea regarding sprat fishing. An new

12 June 2025

process was undertaken. When a policy paper is being brought forward, a very clear process must be followed. Much of the process was undertaken before, and through to conclusion, and it was only lost on a very minor technicality in the courts. To go back again and create a policy paper, one must go through the process. That is why the consultation, to which some 5,500 people responded, had to take place. I do not want to say or do anything that might undermine the ultimate decision that will be taken. This may or may not require a memorandum to Government. The Department will be setting out a position on this very soon. I am hopeful that it will be in place before the summer. The passage of time from the original information that was gleaned from BIM and the Marine Institute required me to seek the most up-to-date legal, scientific and economic advice. I now have most of that information, which will allow us to make a decision very soon.

There were a lot of representations on the marine protected areas. The section dealing with the marine environment still resides in the Department of housing. I have no oversight or control in relation to it. My expectation is that it will transfer to the Department of climate very shortly and will fall under my remit there. I intend to work with the Department and on the marine planning side to try to advance, as quickly as possible, a regulatory regime on a legislative basis that will allow us to identify marine areas for protection. I have to be clear that the position taken by the previous Minister with responsibility for this will help to inform me, but not exclusively, in the decisions we will have to take. It is important that we begin the process and are in a position to meet our international obligations and commitments to ensure that we have 30% of the seas within our jurisdiction as marine protected areas by 2030. I am happy to come back and discuss that at any stage.

Nursing Homes and Care for Older Persons: Statements

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I welcome the opportunity to discuss nursing homes and the care of older people. To begin, I want to acknowledge the "RTÉ Investigates" programme that was broadcast on 4 June. This was a very hard-hitting and harrowing programme which highlighted a litany of poor care standards in two nursing homes, showing clear neglect and abuse of older people, namely, the Residence, Portlaoise, and Beneavin Manor in Glasnevin.

The welfare of the residents and their families was obviously at the forefront of my concerns following the RTÉ programme. I am very conscious of the impact this programme will have had on the residents, their families and the staff in the nursing homes featured in the broadcast. I am also conscious of the impact the programme will have had on the nursing home sector more generally. It is important to acknowledge the committed, compassionate and dedicated providers and care staff operating in nursing homes across the country. Like everyone else watching the programme, I was shocked and deeply concerned at the level of non-compliance with care standards in evidence from the distressing footage that was aired. In a subsequent RTÉ "Prime Time" programme broadcast this week, we also heard personal testimony from Paul Guy on behalf of the family of Audeon Guy, regarding the poor ongoing care that their father has been receiving in Beneavin Manor.

As Minister of State with responsibility for older people, I want to state categorically that poor care, mistreatment, neglect or any other form of abuse of any person living in a long-term

residential care centre is completely unacceptable. I expect the highest standards of care to be upheld for every resident in every nursing home across the country, and anything less than this standard will simply not be tolerated. The distressing footage aired during the “RTÉ Investigates” programme highlighted serious issues of non-compliance within these nursing homes. As the national independent regulator of nursing homes in Ireland, I 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. I met with HIQA on Wednesday, 4 June to discuss regulatory activity relating to the nursing homes featured in the “RTÉ Investigates” programme. At this meeting, HIQA’s chief inspector confirmed its continuous intensive engagements with the two nursing homes in question and committed to providing me with an update on progress this week. I assure the Members of the House that I, the Minister for Health and the Department of Health continue to closely monitor developments regarding both nursing homes. The welfare of residents and their families will remain our highest priority. The Minister will be meeting with HIQA shortly.

I have formally requested that HIQA furnish me with a comprehensive overview report of all of the nursing homes in the Emeis group. The chief inspector has committed to providing an interim report 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. HIQA has publicly acknowledged the importance of examining its processes and methodology. It is essential that these are continually being looked at for ways to improve the inspection and regulation of nursing homes.

On Tuesday of this week, I had a constructive engagement with representative bodies and stakeholders from the nursing home sector, with an immediate focus on delivering the highest quality care to the residents of nursing homes in Ireland. I want to be very clear that every nursing home resident deserves and should expect the highest standard of care at all times. To achieve this, it is paramount that registered providers of nursing homes adequately support their staff. Having effective governance and management arrangements in place ensures staff are equipped to deliver person-centred care to residents. That includes training and staffing.

I met with the HSE chief social worker and HSE staff and management from the two nursing regions where the two nursing homes are located yesterday. The HSE confirmed the directors of nursing from both local community support teams have been onsite in both nursing homes and continue to engage with them. A review of safeguarding concerns raised in respect of the two nursing homes is also ongoing. The HSE has confirmed it will be engaging with all nursing homes in the Emeis group over the coming week. With Department of Health officials, I also met HSE senior staff and management from the six health regions yesterday. This engagement was constructive and centred on supporting residents and staff in community nursing units across the country to deliver the highest quality of care.

I turn to adult safeguarding. I know there have been many calls since the “RTÉ Investigates” and “Prime Time” programmes aired for the introduction of adult safeguarding legislation. I also know that many Deputies have been calling for this legislation for much longer. I am on record as stating that the introduction of safeguarding legislation for the health and social care sector is a priority for me and the Minister for Health. The Department of Health, in collaboration with the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, is finalising an adult safeguarding policy for the health and social care sector. Our intention is to bring it to Government before the summer recess. This policy has been informed by research, stakeholder engagement and an extensive public consultation carried out last year. It has also been informed by the Law Re-

form Commission report from 2024 and the McIlroy review of adult safeguarding in the HSE, also published last year. The policy will provide a framework for strengthening adult safeguarding structures, processes and supports across our health and social care services, inclusive of the public, voluntary and private sectors. Importantly, it will commit to the introduction of safeguarding legislation in the sector and will set out, at a high level, proposed legislative provisions. The Government has included a health (adult safeguarding) Bill in its legislative programme to facilitate this and it is recognised that this will be an important development in protecting vulnerable adults from abuse. We look forward to engaging with Deputies on this important legislation over the coming period.

I want to be clear that legislation on its own cannot and will not address the failings in care we have witnessed in these two nursing homes. We must remember that we already have safeguarding requirements in legislation for nursing homes. The 2013 care and welfare regulations contain specific requirements in respect of adult safeguarding, including the following: the provider must have a safeguarding policy and must take all reasonable measures to protect residents from abuse; all incidents or allegations of abuse must be investigated by the person in charge and notified to the chief inspector and records kept; and staff must be trained in the detection and prevention of and responses to abuse. We also have national standards for safeguarding, which were developed jointly by HIQA and the Mental Health Commission.

This is not to say we do not need further legislative provisions. We will be bringing this legislation forward as a matter of priority. However, the distressing images we saw on “RTÉ Investigates” and “Prime Time” demand a fundamental change in culture, one in which poor care, poor practice and abusive and inappropriate behaviour are not tolerated, and one in which staff feel empowered and supported to call out poor practice and know exactly how to do this. The forthcoming policy on adult safeguarding for the sector will not only provide the framework for legislative change, but also for a wide-ranging reform programme across the sector to ensure that a culture of safeguarding and of intolerance for poor care is fostered and embedded at all levels.

Safeguarding in its widest interpretation is about safe services. We all have a fundamental right to feel safe, especially in the case of residents of nursing homes, in what is their home. As Minister of State with responsibility for older people I remain fully committed, working with the Minister for Health, to introducing this robust national policy on adult safeguarding for the health and social care sector, strengthening Ireland’s existing legal, policy, and operational safeguarding framework and driving necessary reforms to enhance protections within the health and social care sector.

Although engagement with our older population clearly indicates their preference to age in their own homes for as long as possible, it is recognised that care provided in long-term residential care settings will continue to be an important part of the continuum of care for older people. Across the country, nursing homes in the public, private and voluntary sectors play a vital role in the provision of long-term care and other services.

It is acknowledged that the nursing home sector has evolved in Ireland over the past 30 years from a predominantly State-led service to a situation today where approximately 80% of nursing home services are provided by the private sector. I am fully aware of the investment trends in the long-term residential care market, the growing consolidation of the sector and the complex investment and ownership structures that now exist. It is therefore important that all aspects of the nursing home sector are scrutinised over the coming period to ensure service

delivery and configuration meet the needs of service users in a sustainable and safe manner.

For those people who require long-term residential care, it is imperative we ensure they have access to safe, high-quality and regulated care services in a timely manner. Most people avail of this care through the nursing home support scheme, commonly known as fair deal. Fair deal was designed to protect and support vulnerable older people, to give them a home and to ensure equal access to nursing home care. It has given people the opportunity to live in a safe environment in a sector that holds to the highest standards of care. For those who avail of long-term residential care, it is critical this high standard of care continues to be provided in settings that meet their needs. The fair deal scheme will receive Government funding in excess of €1.2 billion this year.

The Government is also committed to continued investment in healthcare infrastructure which supports the highest quality care for our older population and to utilising planning and resource allocation measures as a lever to reduce regional inequalities in long-term residential care supply. This investment includes the ongoing community nursing unit programme, a major capital infrastructure programme which was launched to ensure that up to 90 of our public community nursing units and community hospitals would be refurbished or replaced in order to provide the best quality environments for our older people and to meet HIQA standards. A sum of €4 million was allocated in budget 2025 to staff and open 615 public community beds this year in capital projects that are coming to fruition through this programme.

The programme for Government commits to building more public nursing home beds and this is an absolute priority for me, the Minister for Health and the Government. The Department of Health, alongside the HSE, is developing a new public long-term residential care additional capacity plan, which will be published in 2025.

4 o'clock

This plan will be informed by an update of the 2018 health service capacity review, currently being undertaken by the Economic and Social Research Institute, which will identify future capacity needs in the sector. The ESRI report on older people's care will be published this month. It is also of paramount importance that the built environment and location of long-term residential care settings support high-quality care and positive experiences for our older population. The Department of Health is therefore committed to creating new design standards for long-term residential care settings for older people across all sectors.

The aim of the design guide is to describe and illustrate what good building design looks like for long-term residential care settings for older people, and to provide a common benchmark against which the standard of these settings can be measured. In December 2023, a public consultation on the draft design guide for long-term residential care settings for older people was launched, and a report on the public consultation reflecting the feedback received was published in January 2025. This is a matter I am working with my Department officials to progress as quickly as possible.

Earlier this year, I launched the nursing home residential premises upgrade scheme. This is a €10 million scheme that will support nursing homes to carry out structural works to improve compliance with standards published by HIQA under regulation 17, which concerns the nursing home premises itself. The maximum that can be claimed by an individual nursing home under this scheme is €25,000.

12 June 2025

I am aware that while our commitments in the programme for Government are ambitious and achievable, the scale of the demographic challenge ahead is significant. In this context, in March 2024, the Government established an independent commission on care for older people. The commission is charged with examining the provision of health and social care services and supports for older people and with making recommendations to the Government for their strategic development. Subsequently, a cross-departmental group will be established under the auspices of the commission to consider whether the supports for positive ageing across the life course are fit-for-purpose and to develop a costed implementation plan for options to optimise and implement these supports. The commission on care is due to publish its first report shortly.

The programme for Government 2025 pledges to publish, resource and implement a national action plan that will take account of the work of the commission on care to ensure that long-term care is timely, comprehensive, and affordable, and examine and enhance the mix of professional care options, including home care, community-based care, independent living options and long-term residential care facilities.

As all Members of this House will be aware, the Irish population is growing across all regions and age groups, with the most significant growth seen in the older age groups. The number of people aged 65 years and over is estimated to have risen by more than 40% between 2013 and 2023 and is expected to double again to 1.6 million by 2051. In 2020, it was also estimated that there were approximately 64,000 people living with dementia in Ireland. This number is expected to rise to 150,000 by 2045.

The improved health outcomes and extended life expectancy that have been achieved in recent decades must be acknowledged and celebrated. We all clearly recognise the benefits that our older population offers to society. Ageing populations will, however, present many healthcare, social, and economic challenges in the coming decades. Thoughtful preparation combining policy and institutional reforms, investment in capital infrastructure and technological innovation can enable this country to meet this challenge and take advantage of the real opportunities presented by demographic change.

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

Sláintecare is the most significant reform programme in Ireland's health sector and Sláintecare reforms are changing how health and social care services are provided. Sláintecare is focused on providing the right care, in the right place, and at the right time. Instead of relying on hospitals as the primary location of care, the focus is on providing more care in the community, or at home. This is also accompanied by a strong emphasis on prevention, which will help people stay healthier for longer, and reduce the number of people who would otherwise need medical care in an acute setting. The recently published Sláintecare 2025+ plan sets out an integrated and whole-of-system reform programme to be implemented over the period 2025-27 and is designed to respond to the demographic challenges that Ireland is facing. The plan builds on the progress made in implementing successive programme for Government and Sláintecare implementation strategies between 2018 and 2024. It is an ambitious and multifaceted programme designed to move Ireland towards a universal healthcare service. The 2025 programme for Government is dedicated, among other things, to the vision of creating a caring society, and commits to a range of actions that will advance a social care model which supports

older people to live full and independent lives in their own homes and communities, with the appropriate wraparound supports. It is incumbent on all of us to work collaboratively to realise this vision.

Home support is an essential service for thousands of people each day across the country and is highly valued by service users and their families. Since 2020, the Government has increased the budget for home support by more than 70%, from €487 million to €838 million in budget 2025. The delivery of home support hours is increasing year on year and will continue to do so as demand is expected to increase due to an ageing demographic and older people's wish to stay at home for as long as possible. The programme for Government commits to the design of a statutory home care scheme, which is an absolute key priority for me as Minister of State for older people. In the time I have been in this post, this is something I very much want to progress.

The Department of Health is progressing the development of a regulatory framework for providers of home support services to support this commitment. The new system of regulation for home support will ensure the public can be confident that the services provided are of a high standard and bring Ireland in line with best international practice. The legislation to be developed will regulate home support services in Ireland by establishing a system for registering providers of these services, under which it will be an offence to operate a service without being registered. Alongside this, HIQA is currently finalising draft national quality standards for submission to the Minister. The first step we must take in statutory home care is to bring in legislation to regulate home care providers. We then need to define what statutory home care is and look at a funding model. This is something I am absolutely committed to but the first step is to legislate for home care providers.

The programme for Government has a strong focus on community supports for older people, including day centres and meals on wheels. Day centres are a crucial part of social care provision in our communities that provide invaluable support for people who may, for any number of reasons, experience isolation and loneliness. Currently, day care services are provided across the country by private, voluntary and HSE-funded day care centres. Since its establishment, the meals on wheels service has also been an invaluable resource in helping older people in our communities to maintain their health and independence through the provision of healthy meals.

In line with Sláintecare priorities, the enhanced community care programme is a major reform programme. The objective of the programme is to deliver increased levels of healthcare, with service delivery reoriented towards general practice, primary care, and community-based services. The focus is on implementing end-to-end care pathways that will care for people at home and over time prevent referrals and admissions to acute hospitals where it is safe and appropriate to do so, enabling a "home first" approach. As part of the enhanced community care programme, the integrated care programme for older persons model aims to improve the quality of life for older people by providing access to integrated care and support that is planned around their needs and choices. These interventions support older people to live well in their own homes and communities without the need to access acute care settings. The integrated care programme for older persons seeks to ensure older people with complex care needs can access care quickly, at or near home, through care pathways specifically designed for them and targeting fragility, fall prevention, and dementia. The Department of Health and the HSE also support a number of complementary support co-ordination models which help our older population to age in place for as long as possible and reduce the rate of older people transferring to

long-term residential care.

The healthy age friendly homes programme is an innovative partnership between the local government sector through Age Friendly Ireland and Sláintecare. The programme commenced in 2021 and saw the introduction of a new person-centric, robust, support-co-ordination service that will enable older people to continue to live in their homes or in a home more suited to their needs and will help older people to live with a sense of independence, autonomy, and to feel part of their communities.

The HSE has also partnered with ALONE as part of the roll-out of the enhanced community care programme to develop a support co-ordination service. The focus of the service is to support older people to live independently at home for as long as possible by facilitating access to services including befriending, social prescribing and assistive technologies and by co-ordinating linkages to local community groups. These services support the enhanced community care model and facilitate the HSE to deliver a co-ordinated system of care, integrated around older people's needs.

The programme for Government 2025 also commits to a new all-of-government national housing plan to follow Housing for All. In my dual role as Minister of State with responsibilities for older people and housing, I am committed to a focus on housing options and choices for our older population in the context of the new housing plan. It is vital that we continue to increase the housing options available to older people and to facilitate the integration of supports in a more coherent way between the housing and health sectors. To this end, the Department of Health and the HSE, alongside the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, are supporting a housing with support demonstrator project in Inchicore, Dublin. This is a collaborative, cross-sectoral and cross-departmental project that recognises the need for a joined-up approach to addressing the critical issue of creating housing choice for our ageing population, enabling people with lower care needs to live independently for longer. It is the hope that this project will act as a pathfinder project for the future mainstreaming of this form of housing. I was pleased that this innovative housing project reached a milestone recently, with the first tenants receiving the keys to their new homes.

As I have stated, an ageing population means that the prevalence of dementia is increasing. I am committed to improving services for people with dementia and their families, and just over two years ago, in May 2023, the HSE published its new Model of Care for Dementia. The model of care sets out care pathways to advance timely diagnosis and post-diagnostic support and care for people living with dementia in Ireland and sets targets to achieve this goal. To support the implementation of this model of care, the Government has funded new specialist diagnostic memory services in locations around the country. Establishing these essential services will ensure there is timely access to both diagnosis and post-diagnostic supports and a reduction in waiting times. There has also been €19 million in new recurring investment in dementia services over the past five budgets and the Government is committed to continuing to invest in improving services for people with dementia.

This Government has also made specific commitments to improving dementia services in the 2025 programme for Government, and since my appointment as Minister of State with responsibility for older people, I have been working in earnest towards their implementation. In May, I was pleased to announce the implementation of one of the programme for Government commitments, the development of a national dementia registry for Ireland. The national dementia registry will provide us with vital data on many aspects of the care of people with

dementia. This was a top priority for representative groups and people with dementia. I am pleased we have been able to initiate the creation of that register, which will be hugely beneficial in addressing the needs of people with dementia. The Government will continue to build on the already substantive investment in dementia over the next five years.

My absolute focus over the lifetime of this Government will be on ensuring Ireland can genuinely call itself a great country in which to grow old. As Minister of State with responsibility for older people, I want to ensure our older population feel valued and respected and when health or social care services are required, that our older citizens receive the best care possible, whether in their own homes and communities or in long-term residential care settings. I also firmly reiterate that poor care, mistreatment or any other form of abuse of any person living in long-term residential care centres is wholly unacceptable and will not be tolerated. Every resident of a nursing home deserves dignity, respect and the highest standards of care. As Minister of State with responsibility for older people, I, the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and the Government are absolutely committed to ensuring everything possible is done to ensure the distressing scenes we witnessed in the recent “RTÉ Investigates” programme do not happen again in any nursing home in the country. We saw clear neglect, abuse and violations of basic human rights for older people. I want to restate and be clear that every nursing home resident deserves, and should expect, the highest standards of care. I cannot repeat that enough.

When this issue broke, like everyone else I watched the programme. My immediate reaction on seeing the wanton neglect was to reassure older people and to deal with the issue for the older people in the two nursing homes, namely, the Residence and Beneavin Manor. I rang Bernard Gloster after the programme was aired to ask that the HSE would put in safeguarding teams and direct its nurses into the two nursing homes. I had met representatives from HIQA earlier that day. The names of the two nursing homes had been released by RTÉ, so I immediately sought a meeting to ask the HIQA to continue with intensive engagement, provide a report by the end of this week, an interim report on the Emeis group overall and a final report next week. I had follow-up meetings with the nursing home sector to ensure it was reaching out to its members on the provision of safe care through nursing homes. I then met with representatives from the HSE and its community nursing home units and asked that they would do likewise in terms of reaching out to nursing homes and residents and regarding what is happening as we speak. I met with the HSE safeguarding teams and with the directors of nursing. I had meetings with them yesterday regarding their interaction.

What happened should not have happened. The issues in Portlaoise were identified in the two HIQA reports. The Beneavin report did not highlight that fact. These are questions I have put to HIQA, such as how this happened and why the compliance plans were not implemented. This is a basic process. Like everyone else, I have one concern above everything else - politics aside; I have been at this 20 years - and that is the care of older people. What we witnessed in the two nursing homes was unforgivable. No one should be treated in that way. We have to do whatever is required here. We have to get a system that provides reassurance to residents and their families regarding the delivery of safe healthcare the length and breadth of Ireland. We all know there are nursing homes delivering great care. There are great staff delivering great care. Once again, however, I go back to the key point. Older persons in nursing homes must be respected and cared for. What we saw in the “RTÉ Investigates” programme, and I commend the team on its work, was neglect and abuse of older people of such a magnitude that it can never happen again. In my role as Minister of State, working with my colleague the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and with the Government, I will be working night and day to ensure this is

rectified and never happens again.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: Last week, we witnessed highly distressing scenes of neglect and abuse at two Emeis-operated nursing homes in Dublin and Portlaoise. These were scenes the Government had long assured us were consigned to history. First and foremost, my thoughts are with the individuals and families affected. I hope counselling and health services have been made available immediately to them. If not, the Minister of State must ensure this is done today. I also commend Clare Doyle and the various whistleblowers who contributed to the unearthing of the abuse of the residents of the nursing homes. Clare's words were exceptionally powerful and deserve repeating. She said she felt as though she was having one of those dreams when something awful is happening and you are screaming into the abyss. She described it as feeling that desperate because she knew the real human suffering that was happening. She continued, "These are our parents, our aunts and our uncles. As a professional, I was shocked, I was angry. As a human being I was heartbroken."

These revelations of systematic institutional abuse at residential home care come 20 years after Leas Cross and ten years after Áras Attracta. In the intervening years, scandal after scandal has underlined the inadequacy of existing legislation, with a major gap in the law in the absence of an adult safeguarding Act and insufficient resourcing and empowerment of safeguarding teams. Emeis Ireland is the largest nursing home operator in the State. In recent years, it has expanded to more than 2,400 nursing room beds across the State. Astonishingly, the Government has allowed this to happen despite revelations of widespread abuse at the company's centres in France. HIQA has inspected multiple Emeis-run homes and has identified repeated non-compliance across its reports. Malnutrition was a feature echoed across the report and the RTÉ documentary clearly identified not only understaffing but gross misconduct and total disregard for individual care plans. The staff were not being governed properly and poor practice was clearly routine. Poor practice seems to be the standard that was expected and encouraged.

The residence in Portlaoise is only one example of how Emeis runs its nursing homes in Ireland. The residence has been inspected on multiple occasions by HIQA and on no measure in the latest report was it found to be fully compliant with regular standards. It was not only non-compliant but repeatedly non-compliant, with little evidence of even trying to improve its standards. HIQA found that the provider had failed to implement the compliance plan submitted following previous inspections and that the overall governance and management of the centre had deteriorated since the previous inspection. Most worryingly, staff were unaware that a resident at high risk of malnutrition had been reviewed by a dietitian in January and as a result, interventions to manage nutritional risks were not completed. In layman's terms, people at the home were suffering from starvation and neither management nor the owner seemed to care or even inform staff of changes to care plan. Malnutrition, to an ordinary person, is a major red flag. Food is a basic requirement for survival. Without that, what hope have you got? Yet, it seems nothing happened to stop this. There were no financial penalties or closures.

The RTÉ documentary made clear that care plans were not being used appropriately, if at all, and certainly were not being referenced when decisions were made on staffing and resourcing. HIQA found repeated failures to ensure that staff were appropriately trained and supervised and identified that records were not being managed in line with regulations. It even found that records relating to family complaints were not being documented. RTÉ revealed that Emeis was plámáising families with tales that it would improve services but nothing in practice was changing.

I am particularly taken by this quote from the CEO of Emeis: “Our jobs are profoundly human. Each of our gestures, each of our actions has a direct impact on the residents”. What were those impacts? They were bedsores, bruises, calls for help going unanswered, starvation, deprivation of liberty, a lack of dignity, a lack of respect and a lack of care. How did operator get away with it? Is it because the operator knows how to play the system to make sure that enough staff are around when there are inspectors or visitors but are then cut to a skeleton crew when nobody is watching? It seems to know what to say and when to say it but does something entirely different when it thinks no one is watching.

The problem at the heart of all of this is privatisation and the consolidation of nursing home care in large, multinational, for-profit corporations. Over the past few decades, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have gutted the public residential care sector in favour of private homes. More than 80% of residential care for older people is now provided by the private sector and this is rising every day. That is not a criticism of private nursing homes. There are many fantastic local centres run by honest people who provide top-quality care. There are many fantastic nursing homes around the country but there are far too many homes run like prisons, maximising profit instead of making sure they meet people’s needs. To even call what we saw last week prison-like conditions does these residents an injustice. These conditions are worse than prison and are a total deprivation of liberty. These are supposed to be people’s homes but what we saw was anything but a home. It could be any one of our loved ones suffering from it.

Deputy O’Donnell’s first job, as Minister of State responsible for older people, is to get safeguarding legislation done. The Government has been prioritising this for years but has done nothing. This legislation must establish an independent safeguarding authority with real powers and resources to act on individual clinical concerns. There must be mandatory reporting of concerns of abuse and neglect. HSE safeguarding teams should be brought under the remit of this authority and they need to be significantly expanded to do their job. Safeguarding teams and social workers must be given a legal right of entry and permitted to investigate concerns unannounced at any time, and where management and corporate leadership make decisions that lead to poor-quality care and the loss of the health or life of residents in the care of services they are responsible for, there must be accountability. There has to be accountability, not only at staff level but at organisational level. There are failures to govern safely, such as those identified in the “RTÉ Investigates” report. There must be a step change in investment in public nursing home capacity to reverse our over-reliance on the private sector.

The Minister of State must also engage with smaller operators and community homes to see what they need to stay viable in an increasingly complex sector. Care for older people, and for the Minister of State and me as we age, is in need of radical change. He should review the mandate of the commission on care and ensure it can future-proof the model of care for ageing and he must develop a comprehensive social care policy to support independent living.

Sinn Féin has proposed a home-first approach to care backed by a statutory home care scheme that forces the system to redirect resources to home care. It is essential that the Minister of State get the statutory home care legislation right. The current Bill before the House does not go anywhere near far enough. Home care must be prioritised. This will have profound implications for the nursing home sector as the complexity of people’s needs will rise. We must empower people to live full, independent lives, not only adding years to life but adding life to years. Last week, the Taoiseach defended the existing regulatory system. He said laws are in place to deal with this. Those laws are clearly not working, and everyone has been telling the Government for nearly 20 years that they are not enough.

In my previous role, I was a carer for 18 years. For 18 years, we gave the best of care. There are people who are cut out for these jobs; not everybody is made for them. On what I have read in the reports, in my previous role, when inspectors came in there were two of them for two days. We had three residents. We had care packs. It takes a long time to go through them. I would have had 100% faith in them until I read those reports. I have read the four reports. There was one person on one day for 24 patients. The final report involved two people for two days for 70 patients. That is not enough.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Older people, indeed, all of our vulnerable citizens, deserve to be treated with dignity and afforded the highest quality of care and the services that they need. What we saw, though, in the revelations in the “RTÉ Investigates” programme was appalling, showing shocking abuse and serious failures and neglect. I can only imagine how upsetting it was for the families of the people who were revealed to them in that programme, for others who had family members resident in those homes and, indeed, for anybody who had a relation in a nursing home to see such abuse and mistreatment.

What we saw was vulnerable people left without basic care as the homes had an inadequate supply of basic items such as bedsheets, towels, sanitary wipes and gloves. We saw others, quite disgracefully, being roughly handled. The company at the centre of these revelations, Emeis nursing homes, bears primary responsibility for what was exposed in the investigation. Emeis, of course, has to be held to account for how these vulnerable people were mistreated, but we also have to deal with fundamental failures and the abuses that were exposed and recognise that Government policy over recent decades has played a role in all of this. This is not the first scandal in an Irish nursing home. Indeed, much commentary is being made of the fact that 20 years ago the Leas Cross scandal led to the establishment of HIQA. I heard what the Minister of State said. Leaving politics aside, I accept that all Members of all parties will be equally disgusted. When he watched the programme, surely the Minister of State reflected on the specific, determined and protracted policy of privatisation of our nursing home care. The privatisation of the care of our most vulnerable citizens, regardless of whether it is elder care, home care or healthcare, is wrong. It does not work. The provision of such care should be something in which the State takes a leadership role.

I heard what the Minister of State said about older people in nursing homes needing to be treated with respect. That is absolutely right. The first step in treating our elderly with respect is to stop treating them as a commodity. When the Government privatises and, in particular, commercialises the provision of care, a profit motive is introduced. Serious questions have to be asked. We know that the move away from the public nursing home model has had a profound impact. Local family-run nursing homes are telling us they cannot survive financially. Has anyone questioned this question: if they cannot survive financially, how is it that multi-national institutions are able to come into Ireland, operate at such a large scale, and not only survive but be financially profitable? It is clear that corners have been and are being cut. We have to recognise that when you privatise a service, you have a race to the bottom. People who are on the minimum wage are caring for the most vulnerable people in society. People who were portrayed in that programme are on the minimum wage. Essentially, people who have an invaluable role in our society - caring for our elderly or other vulnerable citizens - are earning the same wage as a teenager on a summer job in a meat factory. There is something profoundly wrong with that situation. We cannot point to others without recognising that political decisions led to that scenario. We have to move away from the privatisation and commercialisation of our healthcare system, in the round. We need to start with the provision of care for elderly members

of our community who have contributed all their lives to our society.

I heard what the Minister of State said about the prioritisation of home care. I agree with him. Every person I know wants to grow old in their own home if that is at all possible. I am sure the Minister of State also knows that when families the length and breadth of this State try to do that for their families, they are met with obstacles from the State. If they want to care for their loved ones themselves, they are assessed for whether they can get some support on the basis of somebody else's income. The Government parties made a commitment to the abolition of the carer's allowance threshold, but we have not heard a single word about that since the general election. We also have the situation where those who need home help hours cannot get them. What has been happening within the home help system over the past two decades? Privatisation has been going on, with commercial companies providing a service that the State should be providing. I hope that Deputies from Government parties will reflect on the decisions that were made over the past number of decades and ensure we actually have the sea change that is required to ensure we will never again see scandals such as this.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: We all want the best for our elderly relatives when it comes to their care in the latter part of their lives. They have paid their taxes and contributed to the growth and prosperity of the country. The least they deserve is to have a life without worry or stress in their twilight years. Some parents are cared for by family members in their own homes or in the homes of their adult children, but when this is not possible such care is provided in nursing homes. While many elderly people can thrive in a nursing home and live a second life, the move to such a facility can be traumatic for others. The care home will understand this. A good care home will ensure that the transition from a family home to a nursing home is done with sensitivity and the greatest of care. A good nursing home will have a positive impact on the well-being and mental health of the elderly person as well as the family members who were unable to provide care in the home for their elderly relative. They can be assured that their parent will receive 24-7 care with daily living, assistance with personal care, eating and mobility, as well as medical care and supervision. A good nursing home offers peace of mind to families that their elderly relative is being cared for in a safe and supportive environment that allows them to live as independently as possible while receiving expert nursing care, rehabilitation and a range of social activities to promote engagement and social interaction including outings, entertainments and hobbies. It will have trained nurses providing specialised care, including wound care, administering medications and managing chronic conditions. It should also provide rehabilitation programmes to help residents to improve mobility.

A priority of nursing homes is to provide a safe and secure environment for the elderly resident. As Ireland has a growing elderly population, nursing homes form a crucial part of the healthcare system by providing long-term care for those who need it. When any part of this falls down, the impact will be traumatic for the residents and their families. Unfortunately, as we saw from the recent "RTÉ Investigates" programme, in nursing homes and in particular in Beneavin Manor in my constituency of Dublin North-West, the quality of care is not the same in every nursing home. The RTÉ report has raised important questions about the adequacy of care received in this particular nursing home. It is clear from the investigation that Beneavin Manor has failed in the provision of a quality care service to residents. The investigation has raised serious questions about whether residents' needs are being properly met.

A big problem with private nursing homes is the high turnover of staff which can also impact the staff-to-resident ratio. Staff can be overworked. If the nursing home is understaffed, it will struggle to provide personalised care, which can result in inadequate care for the resident.

A 2021 study found there was an average turnover rate of 27% among nursing home staff. However, private and voluntary nursing homes experienced even higher turnover rates of 38% for nurses and 54% for healthcare assistants. The many reasons for this high turnover of staff include low pay in the sector, poor training opportunities, lack of personal development or career progression and very challenging work-life balance in the sector. These factors impact on staff morale and have the knock-on effect of impacting on the care for the elderly resident.

The factors that contributed to the scandalous care of one particular resident in Beneavin Manor, whose story featured in the RTÉ investigation, are laid out in the HIQA report into the nursing home. This report raised concerns around the provision of care in the home and its risk management. It also highlighted the need to address issues relating to record management systems, such as contracts for services, food and nutrition, resident protection, information for residents, infection control and the use of restrictive practices.

Our vulnerable elderly citizens need to be protected. Over the years we have had too many nursing home scandals. It is also scandalous that we are still waiting for the enactment of the Adult Safeguarding Bill 2024, which will establish the national adult safeguarding authority. This Bill and the new authority will help to safeguard adults who are at risk of harm and abuse, provide mechanisms for reporting incidents and protect the rights of adults in vulnerable situations. We cannot rely on HIQA. There needs to be a mandatory reporting of abuse. Social care teams must have a legal right to entry to investigate complaints. Our senior citizens need to be protected. Families need to know that their elderly relatives are receiving the care and respect they deserve in their later years.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: In 2004 the *Sunday Independent* reported on the Rostrevor nursing home in Rathgar. It had obtained a report that was dated August 2000. That report described the facility as being dirty and grubby throughout. It referenced an elderly man being fed his meals on a commode. Further inspections revealed that health board recommendations had not been implemented. A frail elderly man was found cold and unkempt. The report said that there was little evidence of continence wear provision for clients. The indignity of this is hard to believe. Four months later, in 2001, ongoing breaches of nursing home regulations were found. The then south-western health board subsequently said that the threat of revocation of the licence was not pursued in 2001 because the issues had been addressed. However, nothing improved. In August 2004, the health board sought an injunction from the High Court to have the home closed. The owner, Therese Lipsett, was fined but the nursing home stayed open. I ask Deputies to bear in mind that Micheál Martin, the famous learner of all the lessons, was the health Minister at the time and throughout this. If we fast forward to 2011, when Fine Gael was in government with the Labour Party, we will see that HIQA brought the HSE into the same nursing home. All the lessons that were supposed to be learned were not. The *Irish Mail on Sunday* used the phrase “house of horrors” to describe the conditions. Nothing had changed. When that nursing home was closed down in 2011, I was asked to go there to give some advice to the workers because I was representing healthcare workers at the time. They were migrant workers. They were absolutely petrified. The residents had been taken off. They were the whistleblowers and they were left completely abandoned. Jesus Christ, Minister, when they described to me how they were told to behave, how they were instructed and how the instructions came from the top, I learned about what happens. That is why we are here to look to the Minister of State and the Government to show some leadership on this.

The first time Rostrevor and the Lipsetts, who are the owners, came to public attention was before Leas Cross. The second time was six years after Leas Cross. The latest “RTÉ Investi-

gates” programme is 20 years after Leas Cross, yet we see that very little is changing. The State gives these lucrative contracts to unvetted providers for emergency accommodation, and the provision of services for international protection applicants. You are making millionaires off the back of human misery and indignity, and poor treatment of our older and vulnerable people. You have been warned; it is not just the Opposition saying this. The ESRI told the Government very clearly. Brendan Walsh said:

Ireland is at an important juncture in establishing a sustainable long-term care system for older people. The COVID-19 pandemic had a terrible impact on LTRC residents and workers. But this period also saw large changes in supply, ownership, and financing, and the LTRC sector faces a number of challenges as it emerges from the pandemic.

He went on to say that the system is increasingly reliant on “a small number of profit-driven operators”. That is the problem. A small number of people are trying to make a profit off the withholding of incontinence wear from old people. I am struck by the indignity of it. They are making money by cutting corners on incontinence wear, staff and food in order to chase profit, and the Government is facilitating it. The Rostrevor nursing home revelations shocked everyone when they came to light. Micheál Martin was the Minister for Health and Children at the time, and he is the Taoiseach now. There is an unbroken pattern here. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have their hands and their fingerprints all over this because it is their policy.

I could not watch all of the “RTÉ Investigates” programme. I had to look away for some of it because it is heartbreaking. What is most heartbreaking of all is that this is not new. This is not news. This did not just happen. This has been happening for decades. I hope the Minister of State is true to his word today when he says that he is serious about tackling this issue. I hope he does that. He and his legacy will be measured against how elderly people are treated. He knows that people should be given a reasonable choice to stay at home if that is what they want to do. The Government does not give them a choice. It forces them into nursing homes and we see how they are treated. The Minister of State’s words are one thing but his actions will tell a lot.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I welcome that we are having this debate today but we should not be here. I give huge credit to the “RTÉ Investigates” team for putting together that programme. If HIQA had been doing its job, we would not have had to have it. Clare Doyle should not have had to take that enormous step on her part to tell the stories that had been relayed to her. I would argue that we need to hear more from her because I believe she has more to say. To the Guy family in Glasnevin and to the other families of the residents in Portlaoise and Glasnevin, I say that we are all extremely conscious that one of the most difficult decisions any family will ever take is to put a loved one into a nursing home. It is a decision that places enormous trust in strangers to treat that person with dignity and respect in their final years. We have seen a fundamental breach of that trust.

My very serious concern, as I said earlier, is that when all this dies down, the only focus for the Government is going to be ensuring that HIQA tries a bit harder and gets its act together and that we have the added safeguarding legislation. This is separate from the work on home care supports, which is a very important body of work that needs to happen. We will always need nursing homes in this country. If the figures prove correct, we will have more than half a million people over the age of 80 in 25 years’ time, including people living in rented accommodation or, as in my constituency, three generations living in a single home. We are going to need nursing homes and we have to get it right.

As I have been thinking about this over the last few days, two things have struck me. First, a raft of reports are sitting in the Minister of State's Department gathering dust. We have a report from 2022 on workforce planning. We have the pilot on staffing. We have the learnings from Covid from 2020. We have the guidelines from the start of this year on the maximum size of nursing home beds. They have all fallen off the bandwagon and off the agenda. There has been no prioritisation in government regarding this, and no action. That has to change. The other key feature is the overwhelming extent to which our State relies on the private sector. When we say "the private sector" we have to be careful, because it is a real mixed bag. It is true that 80% of nursing home care is within the private sector. As my party leader, Deputy Bacik, said yesterday, ten funds now control 30% of nursing home beds. Some 38% of all beds are controlled by large long-term residential companies and they are growing. In the 2000s, we saw the nursing home sector turbo-charged by the tax exemptions brought in by the Fianna Fáil Government starting in 1997 and continuing well into the 2000s. Now we are seeing that REITs are beginning to operate in the sector. They are able to go in as property companies, propcos, and buy up buildings or set up buildings, and then they have what is known as an opco to operate. There is a business model there that is designed to maximise profit, separate out liabilities and exposure, particularly with regard to accountability, and ultimately put our State and most crucially the elderly people in these facilities in an extraordinarily vulnerable position. The State and the Government over the last ten years have done little or nothing to ensure there is increased scrutiny over those facilities.

I was talking to a medical professional yesterday who has long years of service in the nursing home sector, and who has significant funds in the bank. He went to the bank to borrow to purchase a small nursing home in the south of this country. He could not get a loan and that nursing home is now in the hands of a conglomerate. That is happening across the country. There are small nursing home providers, many although not all of which do great work, and they need to make upgrades to their nursing homes. They are being refused funding. Then they find themselves in difficulty with HIQA and we see the closures on the scale we have seen over recent years. Approximately 20% of nursing homes closed between 2020 and 2022. There are fundamental decisions for this Government to make about what type of nursing home sector it wants in the future. In particular, does the Government want the small nursing home providers across the country or not? They are not getting support from the banks and they are certainly not getting support from the State. They would also hold a view with regard to HIQA that there have been kid gloves for the bigger operators and less so for them. That has to be teased out over time but it is certainly an allegation they would make. We have a growing set of market-driven and profit-driven nursing home operators and that has to change.

The key issue in all this is the impact on care. Earlier today I talked about the vast number of people in the private nursing home sector who are on the minimum wage, and the incredible turnover figures of 54% in 2022 among healthcare assistants. We are all talking about the turnover in the childcare sector and other sectors. I do not think the figure of 54% can be beaten across any other industry in the country. There is a reason for that, and it is how they are treated, the lack of resources and all the things we saw in that programme last Tuesday night. They are being deprived of resources, being made to work extremely long hours and getting paid a pittance. The reality is that this Government has report after report sitting there with regard to how we need to change pay if we are to improve quality. I wish to quote to the Minister of State the Report of the Strategic Workforce Advisory Group on Home Carers and Nursing Home Healthcare Assistants that his Department put together in September 2022. It has two important recommendations. The first is that "All private-sector and voluntary providers should be invited

to give a commitment to pay home-support workers and healthcare assistants, at a minimum, the National Living Wage”. The Minister of State’s Government has abandoned trying to go next or near a living wage for all workers. What has it done for healthcare assistants in nursing homes? I do not think I have ever heard a reference from this Government concerning this issue. The reality is the operators of the system need to be told they need to put a joint labour committee in place in co-operation with trade unions representing workers and ensure there are proper terms and conditions. The second key recommendation was that there should be “An appropriate mechanism to reach agreement ... in respect of pay and pensions” for the workers in the sector. It is within the power and the gift of the Minister of State to bring unions and those operators into a room and tell them they need to agree better terms and conditions.

The second key issue concerns minimum staffing levels. The reality is that we have minimum staffing levels in the North and in other countries but they do not exist here. HIQA has no requirements with regards to staffing levels. We can only imagine that ensuring sufficient staff are in place is not a priority for those operators that are purely profit driven. It is not a priority when the bottom line is to make a greater number of bucks. It is not a priority when ultimately there is a race to the bottom. We are talking about our loved ones here. We are talking about our older people who are very vulnerable and need respect, care and dignity. We are not talking about looking after tins of tomatoes or something else. We are talking about real people here and the State has reacted by not putting down minimum staffing requirements. The reality is that if we do not do so, we are going to continue to see these crises occurring time and time again.

There has been a pattern from Leas Cross to what was revealed about the private nursing homes and how many of them fell apart during the pandemic to what we saw on our screens last week. It is that private nursing homes have not found themselves well equipped to be able to deal with situations when a crisis hits. We again have reports from the Minister of State’s Department with recommendations as to how to better equip them in future. It is the State’s role to do it. Crucially as well, however, the State must take a leading role now. Is the Minister of State comfortable with the level of private sector provision of nursing home care in this country? Is he comfortable that we are entrusting the care of our loved ones - older people who need respect and dignity in this State - to very large operators whose sole motivation in many cases is profit? Is he comfortable that people are being paid the national minimum wage while looking after vulnerable people in this State? If he is not comfortable with this situation, we need to see action please. This is not just about HIQA, and it is not just about ensuring we get the home care support scheme in place; it is about ensuring the Government puts legislative provisions in place. I see that in the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) (No. 2) Act 2024 there is provision, I think it is in section 101B(3), for the Minister to prescribe that information be furnished by nursing homes and other centres to a chief inspector with regard to persons employed and details of employment. There have been no regulations in this respect and we need to see them as soon as possible.

Deputy Mark Wall: Go raibh maith agat. We have been here before. It has been 20 long years, as other Members said, since we saw the distressing footage of conditions at Leas Cross nursing home. Unfortunately, what we saw on the “RTÉ Investigates” programme replicated those horrific and dark days. I thank Aoife Hegarty, the “RTÉ Investigates” programme and, of course, Clare Doyle, the whistleblower, for exposing these abuses.

What we saw on the programme aired was simply elder abuse. Older people were manhandled, pushed around and, heartbreakingly, forgotten. It was tough watching for me to listen to

a loved one calling out for help and nobody answering. I cannot but imagine how the families of these people who had effectively lost their dignity in these homes must have felt when they saw the programme. The lack of basic medical equipment such as hoists, wipes, gloves or even clean bedsheets was alarming to say the least. What we saw in these programmes was simply profiteers more worried about profit and lining their pockets than caring about basic human dignity. The joy of the staff rewarded with four packets of wipes from a manager is an unwanted highlight from this investigation. The lack of gloves, incontinence pads and clean sheets was up there with the horrific treatment of our fellow human beings.

As I said, this is all about the bottom line for these companies. It is about how much profit these uncaring companies can milk out of our older and disabled population. As was said, 80% of Irish nursing homes are private or voluntary and just ten investment funds own one third of all the beds in the system. An influx of investment funds in recent years has left our country with the most privatised system of care in the EU. As my party leader said yesterday, some things have changed since Leas Cross. HIQA was set up to set standards, to inspect and to shut down non-compliant public and private nursing homes. Clearly, HIQA is failing in its duty and in my opinion and that of many other people, it is now not fit for purpose. I listened and watched the torment of the family of Audeon Guy. As so many families in their situation do, the first place they looked for information on somewhere to take care of their father was the HIQA report on the nursing home. They were failed in this report, which painted a picture for them that was far from the reality we all saw for their father in these programmes. Since last week, so many families have said that they rely on information from HIQA. The cases we saw last week showed families unwittingly putting their relatives in harm's way.

HIQA's practices must be urgently reviewed but is it best practice to ask HIQA to also conduct an independent review into all nursing homes? After all, it failed to identify glaring abuses of practice that some journalists and a carer with a camera found. Of course, they had the ambition to find those abuses. This would seem not to be an isolated incident. Since the first programme aired, my colleagues and I have had a growing number of complaints from family members from around the country. The simple fact concerning this profit-driven industry is that so many families tell me the only contact they receive from the nursing home is the letter demanding payment. There is nothing about the care for their mother, their father or their relation and what they are receiving.

An area raised by the Minister of State and one I wish to raise concerns those families who look after their father, mother or relation at home. Since the horrific programme aired last week, I have been contacted by a considerable number of people who take care of their loved ones in this way. They do so because they believe it is the best place for them. Many families are now looking to do likewise. As the Minister of State said, there is a serious cost in this regard. The Government needs to do more to help families in this situation. The Government should consider opening a fair deal-type system to families to provide care at home. It should look at making the housing adaption grants easier to obtain. Additionally, of course, as was said, it should abolish the means test for carers. This would allow a family member to receive some payment for the work they carry out.

I agree with what the Tánaiste said today when he stated in response to my colleague Deputy Sherlock that we are overdependent on private nursing homes in this country. We are seriously overdependent in this regard. We need to invest more in public nursing homes. I use this opportunity to once again highlight the magnificent care provided by the staff and management of St. Vincent's Hospital in my hometown of Athy. We are waiting on a new 92-bed hospital. I

welcome the progress made to date, but this is the type of care facility the Government needs to invest in and the State needs to look to in the future. We need proper staff levels and properly paid staff and we need to take care, as the Minister of State said, of older people once and for all. We cannot let what we saw continue.

Deputy William Aird: I am here today following the disturbing revelations uncovered by the “RTÉ Investigates” programme concerning the residential nursing home in Portlaoise.

5 o'clock

We must be absolutely clear that what was exposed was not just one failure in one private institution. Rather, it was a systemic failure of oversight, communication and, ultimately, duty. Frail and vulnerable old people were left in unacceptable conditions while warnings were ignored. Despite HIQA issuing poor reports over the past year, admissions to this facility continued. That raises immediate and serious questions. How many of these admissions came directly from local hospitals? Were local HSE managers, particularly community-based managers, aware of the severity of the situation? Why was there no communication between HIQA and the HSE? We must face a difficult truth. It appears the HSE has washed its hands of the responsibility of the clinical care of older people in private nursing homes. It appears that as soon as a person enters the private system, he or she vanishes from the radar of all public health infrastructure. That must end. We need to reassert HSE responsibility for the clinical care of all our older people in long-term care. The long-term care needs of older people must be overseen by the doctors and nurses in the HSE regardless of where they reside.

I wish to be clear that this is not an attack on the hardworking local staff working there, many of whom I know personally in Portlaoise. It is a call for structural change, which was already recommended by the Covid advisory group. At a national policy level, there are several immediate steps that must be taken. We must redouble our efforts to provide robust clinical oversight of the private nursing homes by the HSE and enact safeguarding legislation first proposed in 2017 without further delay. If a company director presides over neglect, he or she must be held accountable, up to and including criminal liability where appropriate. The safe staffing framework phase 3, which sets out the minimum staffing levels and skill mixes of nursing homes, must be implemented. The care of vulnerable older people should never be left to the mercy of profit-driven motives.

We must also rethink the infrastructure of residential care. Why are we still building massive institutional settings for older people when we have moved away from that model for people with disabilities or mental health conditions? The Department of Health has been sitting on draft design guidelines for smaller, homely, community-based nursing homes. These guidelines must be adopted and enforced. We must be honest about the consequences of continuing to favour large corporate homes. We must push for smaller community homes, which can be viable with proper supports. We must accelerate the introduction of the homecare legislation and the roll-out of the housing support grants. It is a must and needed immediately. The choice between limited home help and institutional care is not good enough. The Minister of State knows that. Older people deserve real options to live with dignity, independence and safety.

I have been a public representative in Portlaoise since 1979. When I was first elected, on my watch, we had the general hospital in Portlaoise, St. Vincent's community nursing unit, Abbeyleix community nursing unit, St. Brigid's hospital in Shaen and Mountmellick primary care centre. I have to say that I never received a complaint, not once. I served on the local health

committee, the Laois health committee, the Laois and Offaly health committee and the Laois Offaly, Longford and Westmeath committee. I always say it - and I would say it if he was sitting where the Minister of State is sitting today - that the Taoiseach of this country did one of the greatest things in banning smoking in public places. The worst thing he did, which was worse, was disbanding the health boards. I was a member of the health board when he disbanded it. Everyone, of all political persuasions and none, who was on the health board that day said it was the worst decision ever made. What has happened ever since? We have gone downwards and downwards with crisis after crisis. We have another crisis here today. That is why I am asking the Minister of State to go back, exactly as he has said in the Chamber today, and relook, rethink and ensure our older people are looked after.

There are things we can do immediately. We can have a look at the homecare packages. We can do that with immediate effect. I know 99% of the people I have represented all my life always wanted to look after their parents in their own home. That is always the first thing. We can do that. I am pleading with the Minister of State to please act on this. None of us want to have to look at what we have seen on the television the other night again.

I wish to say one thing for all the Members' attention. I was in attendance when the nursing home opened. If any Member would like to go to look at it, it is the most beautiful building, all decked out inside and everything. I never once thought I would come back and watch on television what was happening further up the corridor.

Deputy Paula Butterly: There is no doubt that everyone has come into the Chamber to talk about the RTÉ programme. As a daughter who had a father in residential care, and as a sister who has a 55-year old brother in residential care with Lewy body syndrome, I actually could not watch the programme. Like many people who have a parent or a member of the family in residential care, we are often overridden by guilt. Even when it is the best option for our loved ones, we often wonder whether it is the best solution or whether we could have done something more, such as getting more support at home or pulling an extra hour or two out of the day in order to help them stay at home. I missed the programme on the first evening and avoided watching it thereafter. I find it difficult to go to visit my brother. I had the opportunity to listen to the son of that gentleman in the RTÉ programme. He voiced so many concerns that I, my family members and so many other people think about every day when you have a person in a nursing home. What was on the paperwork did not match up to the actual care happening on a day-to-day basis. It caused me to reflect.

The Minister of State and I have spoken on this issue several times. As a former councillor and a TD, I am passionate that we find a system to the equivalent of the fair deal scheme which will allow our parents and loved ones to stay in their homes for as long as they possibly can and, hopefully, until the end of their days. This is fundamental. The statistics and facts back it up. The longer we can keep our loved ones in their home, the better they are for it. We, as loved ones, are the better for it as well. They are healthier, more mobile, and more stimulated. All the things a family can give to a loved one is missing in a nursing home, no matter how good it is. I urge that we find a system to keep our loved ones in the home. I urge the Minister of State to bring that about. I know he is working on a similar fair deal scheme to keep people in the home. It cannot be that difficult. I am a great believer that where there is a will, there is a way. We can and must do this. We cannot be here again in one year or in five years talking about another "RTÉ Investigates" programme because this is not the first time. We know that during Covid there were plenty of issues in nursing homes in County Louth. The Minister of State will be well aware of those issues. There are still questions to be answered.

We also must take care of rural areas in particular. I come from a rural area in County Louth. We have to find a fair deal scheme that is fair to farmers which allows them to have a better access to the actual scheme. We also have to look at the carers because the carers often provide an invaluable service. They do not become a carer but rather a friend to the family and to the person they are talking care of. Unfortunately, a bad road, pothole or laneway can mean the carers cannot get there because of the conditions of the road. Many of these carers are not paid appropriately. They do not get car allowances to do the mileage to go down country roads. Very often, simply because it takes longer for them to get there and back, they do not want to go to the rural areas because they can do three or four calls in the same time it takes to do one call in a rural area. We need to revisit what we are doing for the carers who have such a responsibility towards our loved ones. I ask the Minister of State to review that too.

Deputy Colm Burke: I can go back to 21 years ago when my legal office and another legal office identified a major discrepancy where over 80% of people's pensions were being deducted in public nursing homes. We identified that the health boards and the Department of Health did not have legislative powers to do that. As a result of that challenge, over in excess of €450 million had to be refunded to 20,000 families. That challenge subsequently led to the creation of the fair deal scheme. The whole idea of the fair deal scheme was that everyone would be treated equally first in regard to the financial payment and second in regards the care and support they would receive.

What we saw on "Prime Time Investigates" is not acceptable and must not be tolerated. All these are people who have worked, paid taxes and reared families. This is not the way to treat them in their final years. Management and owners have the prime responsibility. What we saw here was not the necessary care. Even care supports required for individuals were being rationed. This is not acceptable practice. We all have a part to play in the care of those who have gone before us in relation to how they and previous generations have built up this country and have contributed to our education system, to our local authorities and all the services we enjoy. They all played a part in that and it is important we give them their support when they need it. It is important we look at the whole issue of funding. For instance, at the moment, 80% of people in nursing homes are in private homes but they only get 60% of the funding whereas 20% are in public nursing homes which get 40% of the funding. In fact, the public nursing home receives €1,969 per bed per week where a private nursing home gets €1,206. Public is €1,969 and private is €1,206. That is a difference of €763. As well as the cost of staff and electricity that private nursing homes have to pay, they also pay commercial rates to local authorities as well as interest on loans that were taken out to build those nursing homes. Those are the costs they have. If we want to have an adequate system, we must provide adequate funding and make sure the staff employed in the private nursing homes are there in sufficient numbers and that they have adequate training and communication skills. It is so important for communicating with anyone who needs care, whether they are in a nursing home or hospital. They also need time to listen to those people they are caring for. Older people want to make sure they are being listened to. It is important we have the people with the necessary skills in relation to all the people they are caring for. It is also important we ensure there is adequate review of their medical needs and it is not a case of prescribing the same thing months after month without a proper review.

We need to make sure that is happening in our nursing homes and that the necessary support is provided. During Covid we were able to develop supports. It is an easy option for a nursing home to transfer someone into a hospital and take the burden off the nursing home. We set up teams from hospitals that would visit nursing homes. In one case of more than 350 people in

nursing homes, there was a review by a medical team from the hospital. Only 20 of the 350 had to be transferred into hospital. We need to develop that to give support to the nursing homes as well to make sure we have proper and comprehensive healthcare available in nursing homes rather than transferring people into hospitals. I will mention one last example of a 97-year-old man who was transferred to a hospital from a nursing home. He died four hours later. I do not think that is acceptable. Care should have been provided in the nursing home and the supports need to be given to the nursing homes so that they can provide that care.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I thank the Minister of State for his opening remarks. First, I commend the whistleblowers on this. I keep saying here that you get absolutely battered for helping people and telling the truth in this country. The Irish population is ageing and growing, which is associated with higher levels of ill health and greater demand on all types of health and social care services. This obviously poses great challenges but we in Sinn Féin believe we should see improved health as an opportunity as well as a challenge, celebrating and enabling the contribution older people make to our communities while building a health service that cares for us as we age. In the words of the Democratic Programme of the First Dáil, we are committed to the care and support of Ireland's older people "who shall not be regarded as a burden, but rather entitled to the Nation's gratitude and consideration". The footage shown on the "Prime Time Investigates" programme on Emeis nursing homes was far from showing our older people gratitude and consideration. It was shocking, disturbing and nothing short of abuse. Too many elderly people in our country are living in facilities that are underfunded, understaffed and under-regulated. When I saw the footage of a frail female resident with dementia, considered a serious fall risk, being left alone on the edge of her bed for seven minutes at night while confused and agitated and seeking a toilet break, I thought of my own 79-year-old mother and how angry and let down I would feel if that were her. Families are now lying awake at night wondering if their loved ones are safe, whether their basic needs are being met and if they are being treated with the compassion and respect they deserve. Families should be able to trust that facilities are meeting the standards our elders deserve.

Even with greatly enhanced home and community care for older people, many families still have to make the difficult decision to place their loved ones in a nursing home as they require full-time care. Given this, it is essential that people are supported in long-term residential care and that the highest standards are maintained. We need to ensure that safe, clean and dignified conditions are maintained in all our nursing homes. We cannot continue to rely on HIQA alone. Sinn Féin has long called for adult safeguarding legislation, mandatory reporting of abuse and a legal right of entry for social care teams to investigate complaints. The "Prime Time Investigates" programme proved just how critical those reforms are to prevent neglect and abuse. Sinn Féin calls on the Government to immediately enact the adult safeguarding legislation as this would provide a legal framework to support safeguarding, additional powers for social workers and relevant social care professionals and agencies separate from the HSE, which is empowered to oversee safeguarding policy and practices across the public and private sector and in the home. We need to legislate to provide the legal right of entry to any designated care centre for relevant social workers and social care professionals.

Nursing home staff are overworked and underpaid. They are doing their best and that is all they can do in their impossible circumstances. They deserve better training, fair wages and the resources necessary to provide high-quality care. Currently, they are being left without the most basic items such as bedsheets, towels, sanitary wipes and gloves. To add insult to injury, families face high costs to pay for this long-term care. There has been next to no investment in

public care homes. Over 70% of our nursing home capacity is now private. This was facilitated and enabled by successive Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil Governments and this is the result. When profit is prioritised over people, it is always the vulnerable who pay the price. In this instance, it was our older generations.

The privatisation of nursing home care cannot come at the expense of quality and care. We need to tip the balance back in favour of public capacity with robust regulations and the appropriate safeguarding and protection. If we do not do this, in the words of Professor David Robinson, a consultant geriatrician in St. James's Hospital, "This is going to shorten people's lives and the lives that they have will be more miserable because of the situation that they're in".

This is not a matter for tomorrow. This needs to be addressed urgently. The cost of inaction will be measured in human suffering. We owe our elders not only respect but our action. The Government has a responsibility to protect the most vulnerable in our society and I call on it to make elder care a national priority not next year, after the next crisis, but now.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: The "RTÉ Investigates" programme was shocking, disturbing and difficult viewing. Nobody in this country should be treated in that way. It is clear that the nursing homes in question were understaffed and under-resourced and patients were treated in an appalling manner.

What concerns me and many of us is that this is a repeat of the scandals of the past. What we are seeing is history repeating itself. We saw Leas Cross 20 years ago. Deputies have set out previous scandals. Time and time again we have had failure after failure. I wonder what lessons have been learned. I have absolutely no doubt we will be back here again talking about another scandal because there has been a lack of action for decades on these issues.

HIQA, which was set up in response to Leas Cross, has serious questions to answer on the credibility of its inspection reports. We need to review the powers and operation of HIQA and how and when inspections take place. It was clear from the RTÉ programme that a lot of issues happen at night, and there are questions about whether HIQA carries out inspections at night. That needs to be examined. HIQA needs to examine the minimum staffing requirements and put regulations and rules in place so that nursing homes are well staffed and resourced.

Ultimately, we have an issue with the model of care. There are serious issues with the for-profit model of elder care. International research shows us that there are worse outcomes compared with public and not-for-profit care homes. Over the past 35 years, in Ireland we have had an explosion of the for-profit nursing home care model. In 1990, 32% of nursing homes were private. By 2023, the figure was 81%. There has been a real shift. These are policy and Government decisions to shift from a public and not-for-profit model to a privatised model that is leading to poor outcomes for people.

Across the country, smaller and community based nursing homes have closed in villages and towns across the country. There are ten large investment funds which hold one third of nursing homes and, therefore, a huge amount of control over nursing homes in the State. In 2020, Leo Varadkar and the Tánaiste, Deputy Simon Harris, said that the model had to change. What has changed in the past four years? We now have the most privatised nursing home sector in all of Europe.

There have long been calls for safeguarding legislation. A Private Members' Bill was introduced in the Seanad in 2017, some eight years ago. There were calls for better protections

for vulnerable adults. In the meantime, the Law Reform Commission has published a report. Absolutely nothing has happened. There has been a failure on behalf of the Government to legislate, put basic protections in place and protect the most vulnerable adults. The HSE has a safeguarding policy, but that does not apply to private nursing homes. HSE social workers do not have the right to enter private nursing homes, an absolute scandal that needs to change. The Minister of State and Government have the power to make that change. The Government controls the legislative agenda and has the power to pass safeguarding legislation. We have waited far too long. There has been report after report on adult safeguarding and all of the other issues that need to change stacking up in the Department .

Ultimately, most older people want to remain in their home, and we know that. The Tánaiste, Deputy Simon Harris, said in 2017 that he would put this on a statutory footing. It was incredibly frustrating to listen to him say in the Dáil earlier that he is committed to putting legislation on a statutory footing, when he committed to it when he was Minister for Health in 2017. What kind of commitment is it if it takes eight years to do the very basics around home care?

We need a right to, and the regulation and funding of, home care. It seems to me that nothing is happening. As a result, we have the privatisation of nursing home care and people being moved towards nursing homes as the default because the home care system is not properly regulated or resourced and there is no rights-based approach, something which needs to change. In this House, we are constantly talking about productivity in other parts of our State. We need more productivity in this Parliament. We need legislation to be passed. We need a right to home care. We need safeguarding legislation.

I call on the Minister of State to give us a timeline and commitments today on when that key legislation will be passed. It is within the power of the Government to make the fundamental changes that would make a real difference and prevent these scandals happening again.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Growing old is a privilege, one which, it is to be hoped, many of us in the Chamber will be able to enjoy. In Ireland we have a lot to do in order to deal with our attitudes toward ageing and the way we treasure and nurture our older population. We should not infantilise them, as we did during Covid. When it comes to this issue around care, we need to offer choice. The reality is that we are all living longer and are healthier, and are also facing into much more complex healthcare plans for people as we age because of the demographic realities.

Choice, public care and prevention are the key elements we need to focus on this area. When we talk about choice, what we are saying is that older people should be facilitated into their older years and their families and communities should also be facilitated to allow them to make the choices they want to make in respect of their own health care. If that means remaining at home or living in facilitated environments or nursing homes, that spectrum of choice needs to be available to them.

In terms of public care, it is sad that we are seeing, as in so many areas, a trend towards privatisation. We heard earlier about the trend in direct provision where instead of building State-run centres there has been a reliance on private facilities. Similarly, in this area we have so much reliance on private providers when this is something the State should be providing. That is the vision of Sláintecare, in terms of healthcare and the public system, that we know we want to get to, namely, universal healthcare provision.

We are also missing a trick as a population and Government. We talk a lot about automation and the displacement of labour we will see through automation. The one sector that cannot be automated is care. We can never rely on robots and machines to provide care. Yet, we continue to undervalue care in our society. Of course, it is mostly carried out by women. I am referring to care roles in nursing homes, voluntary care roles in communities and families and teaching roles. They are all areas where, if we actually placed more value on them, we could invest in our future, future-proof our labour force and provide for the choice we want.

I want to talk about prevention because I come from the human rights space, where a lot of work goes into prevention. In 2017, when I was director of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, we discussed the ratification of the convention against torture and the implementation of a national preventative mechanism. We are still talking about that. Legislation has not been passed. That is something that can provide for the preventative mechanisms which will make sure that this does not happen because it goes beyond the remit of HIQA. It is a fantastic organisation in a lot of ways and there are really good people and structures in it, but it has been fighting constantly for an additional remit to allow it to do its job.

The optional protocol to the convention against torture and the national preventative mechanism, if properly implemented, would mean that this is prevented and never actually happens. HIQA would have better facilities for unannounced and unannounced visits. There would be mechanisms in each sector, meaning there would be an inspector of prisons in justice and HIQA for the healthcare and nursing home sectors, but they would be beefed up in terms of their strengths and powers. That is the legislation we need. Proposals have been in place for a decade but legislation has not been passed. That is something the Department should examine. What we need for older people is safety, security and certainty, and these are elements which can bring that about.

Deputy Rory Hearne: It is another scandal. It is another failure of our State to protect our most vulnerable. The failings of care that have been revealed in the “RTÉ Investigates” programme are horrifying. Vulnerable residents were left unsupervised, there was a lack of basic supplies and there was the rough handling of older people. One of the nursing homes featured is Beneavin Manor in my constituency of Dublin North-West. Members of the public throughout the constituency, and the country, who have family in nursing homes are distressed and worried. How can they trust that their loved ones are being cared for properly after seeing these failures?

Paul Guy, whose father was one of the residents highlighted in the “RTÉ Investigates” programme, reached out to me and I spoke to him today. Paul and his family described the shock and distress at seeing footage of their 80-year-old father being roughly handled at Beneavin Manor in Glasnevin. Paul said that no one should be handled like their father was, that these were human people who lost their dignity, and no one should have to go through that. The family had relied upon HIQA reports on Beneavin Manor for guidance in selecting a nursing home. The most recent publicly available HIQA inspection for Beneavin Manor dates from November 2024. It references residents being happy, inspectors finding the centre well managed and the quality and safety of the services provided being of a good standard. Clearly, as the “RTÉ Investigates” programme showed, this was not the reality for elderly people resident there such as Paul’s father.

Shockingly, Paul told me today that no one from HIQA had been in touch directly with him to give him an apology for how his father was treated. He and his family have not been given

the decency of an apology from HIQA and the State regarding their failures to protect his father and ensure he received adequate care and was protected from harm in a nursing home. Will the Minister of State and HIQA give him and his family the decency of an apology for the State's failure to safeguard his father?

Why does it take the airing of vulnerable adults being treated terribly on national television before we see action on this? The question is whether we will see action on this. The key issue Paul asked me to raise was that he wants to see immediate action from the Government, as set out by Safeguarding Ireland, to implement the framework for adult safeguarding, as published by the Law Reform Commission in April 2024, and to get the interagency working group up and running, with an appropriately skilled senior civil servant seconded to it, to implement and put in place a national safeguarding authority. Will the Minister of State commit to Paul and to the families affected to moving immediately to implement this?

Implementing this framework is the first step towards ensuring residents in care homes are protected. Ultimately, they are not being treated with the care or dignity they deserve and the Government has a responsibility to ensure this does not happen again. We still do not ensure that the delivery of care for the most vulnerable people in our society is done through a human rights approach, one that puts their dignity, and the State's responsibility to guarantee their safety and protection, central to service provision, whether it is children in State care, children in homelessness or adults who are resident in nursing homes. This is just not good enough.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I thank the Minister of State for his opening remarks. What has concerned me and many others since the airing of this damning and tragic show is that when I speak to those who are working in the sector, and when we speak to families, what I consistently hear is that this is the tip of the iceberg. The fear that is out there in the sector, among the staff and families, is about what we do not know. What is left to be found out about this? It is of real concern and the Minister of State knows this; he does not need me to tell him.

When we have broken policy, and when we have a broken system, then we cannot but expect to have a broken culture. What the show has done is put a magnifying glass on a severely fractured elder care sector and system. When we as a State allow our responsibility to be taken over by the private market, we run the gauntlet because what happens is that those whom we trust to care for our most vulnerable, who stand to make a significant profit from it, will treat it as a commodity.

What do we ask the Government to do? We are not going to overturn an 80% private system overnight. It is of incredible importance that robust policy and legislation be in place so that elderly people are not failed, staff in the sector are adequately trained and resourced, and when these situations arise, the bodies we trust in the State to react have the teeth to do so with meaning. It starts with fixing the broken policy and the broken legislation, so that we hope to improve the culture and no longer fail those vulnerable people in our society. It is about dignity and human rights. It is about our values.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Like many in the House, my heart was breaking when I watched the programme last Monday. The Beneavin nursing home is literally five minutes from where I live. There are neighbours and friends who have relatives in Beneavin nursing home. However difficult it was for any of us to watch the programme, I cannot imagine how difficult it was for them. I know many people could not bring themselves to watch the programme.

Having watched the programme, there is one area we have to call out very clearly, namely, those with direct responsibility for the neglect and lack of care. They are, in the first part, those people who carried out the acts. When someone is willing to close the door so his or her colleagues do not see that he or she is taking a shortcut, that person knows it is wrong. That person is closing the door. When people are filling out forms that are not correct, they know it is wrong and it is not professional for them to do so. There is a basic lack of decency and human compassion when this happens. There is a basic lack of supervision and management. When there are not sufficient supplies in a nursing home, including basic sheets and incontinence wear, there is a basic lack of management and procurement. The people who are responsible for this are directly responsible.

There is also a basic absence of culture. They say culture is the quickest form of management. Things can be acceptable and unacceptable. In organisations where culture is strong, things will be called out by work colleagues without a manager having to be in front of someone. It was very clear there was no ethos or culture of care in these nursing homes. I say this with great regret because I have been in them. I have seen the people being cared for. I had thought these places were good places for older people. Over the years, I have received many requests for people to get into the Beneavin nursing home because it was seen as a premium nursing home, accessible and providing care locally. This was because the HIQA reports were very positive for Beneavin, unlike Portlaoise. As a family who recently had a relative in nursing home care, I know HIQA reports are important to families when they are selecting a nursing home.

I spoke to a number of families this week, including those who had relatives directly on the broadcast, who were incredibly upset. I cannot tell the Minister of State how upset they were. There were families who were not featured in the broadcast who have great concern and have still received very few answers. There were also relatives who felt they had a positive experience in the home. I was very fearful of traumatising these people or opening up doubts in them, particularly the many people whose relatives had passed away. I spoke to three people this week who had concerns. One of these was a lady called Christine, whose relative featured in the programme. I spoke to a lady called Patricia, whose relative had passed away but had made a complaint to HIQA last year with regard to Beneavin. I also spoke to a lady called Phil. Each touched on things that are broken in the system.

This week, HIQA provided a briefing for the three TDs in the constituency. It was a useful briefing that provided insight. It acknowledged additional powers and resources, which were given to it last year, and that the inspection report was based on an unannounced inspection. With some reassurance, HIQA announced that there had been two visits by six inspectors in the three Beneavin nursing homes over the last week, but it has not yet contacted the relatives, which is really important. There is no trust in the provider anymore. HIQA needs to step in and explain what it explained to the three local TDs this week. We did not get any sensitive GDPR-related information, but we had contact and an opportunity to question it. Families are entitled to that too.

HIQA pointed out a number of worrying concerns too. There appears to be no baseline staffing ratio, as there is in the acute setting. There is no baseline education or training requirement. In a childcare setting, there is. Why is that not in place in a senior setting? HIQA also pointed out an area which alarmed me, namely, that there are three separate legal entities on the Beneavin site, all of which are under Emeis, but the holding company, which owns multiple legal entity providers, is not accountable to HIQA. That is an area the Minister of State should

be concerned about, particularly because the number of these have grown and there are large numbers of nursing homes under a single provider. We have to get around that issue.

I raise the amount of money going into these homes. The nursing home support scheme or fair deal scheme was a positive way of reducing the huge financial burden on many families. Families were paying thousands of euro, and the fair deal scheme prevented that. As a member of the Committee of Public Accounts, this is a procurement issue. We are procuring services from these providers. I understand that millions of euro was going into Beneavin alone every year. Somebody needs to stand over the delivery of that procurance. It is not about standards. Standards and HIQA are important, but if I am the customer procuring the service, I should also be responsible for ensuring that the service is delivered. There should be an independent standards authority. However, the HSE, the nursing home support scheme and, in essence, the Government, are the ones procuring this service. We have to make sure we are getting value for money. I am thinking of all those families.

The way we make this better is by improving what we have. I disagree with some Members of this House who said nothing has changed since Leas Cross. Any basic assessment of the framework would state that this is not true. We now have HIQA. As other Members have said, HIQA does much good work. The methodologies need to be examined. We need to talk more about the basic care and have a greater focus on it, but let us not run away from what happened here. An undercover camera captured what no inspector would ever see and captured behaviour that was effectively being hidden. The people directly responsible for carrying out those services, who manage those services and are paid to run those services are the ones responsible.

Deputy Martin Daly: Like the Minister of State and every Member in this House, I was deeply disturbed by the scenes broadcast on the recent “RTÉ Investigates” programme. While immediate and decisive action is required in those specific cases in Glasnevin and Portlaoise - and I fully support the Government’s commitment to that - this must also be a catalyst for wider reflection. How are we going to care for a growing population of older people, many of whom will require some level of support to live with dignity and independence? Our population is ageing rapidly. That is a mark of progress in public health, but it presents serious challenges. We must ensure that our care system is prepared, not just for immediate pressures, but for the longer term demands that will come with demographic change.

Many of our older people are living longer, more healthy, independent and productive lives, which is to be welcomed. However, when their living needs change, it must not be a binary choice of home or a nursing home. There are people in nursing homes today who would be better served by sheltered or supervised living in the community. It is essential that we get the regulatory framework right. I welcome that the Minister of State has met the chief inspector of HIQA and that he plans to appear before the health committee shortly. I also welcome the Government’s commitment to progressing safeguarding legislation while recognising existing protective legislation, policies and protocols.

While regulation is vital, it is only one part of the solution. Culture within care organisations is equally important; culture ultimately determines the quality of care experienced by patients. We know culture comes from the top down. What we saw in those recent reports was not simply individual misconduct, although such behaviour is inexcusable, but the product of a deeply healthy organisational culture, where management is driven primarily by profit, and staff are clearly undervalued, undermanaged and deprived of the most basic tools to do their job. In such an environment, it is inevitable that standards would degrade and that staff would become

demoralised, demotivated and disconnected. Culture is more difficult to measure, but we must find a way to do that.

We must find a way to financially sanction those private companies that do not manage those nursing homes properly. As a GP who has worked closely with more than ten nursing homes over the last three decades, including excellent, small, community-based homes such as Nightingale in Ahascragh, Oakwood in Roscommon, St. Francis in Kilkerrin and Mountbellew Nursing Home, I have seen the difference that a positive personal culture can make. Older people are living in their communities in those homes, often with contemporaries whom they know, and are cared for by staff whom they also know. Unfortunately, many of these smaller homes are now struggling to remain viable. I am told it takes a congregation of 70 people in a nursing home to make it profitable for private operators. In my area, two excellent homes closed, namely, Ballygar Nursing Home and Brideswell Nursing Home in Athlone. My own grandmother lived for two years and died in Ballygar Nursing Home. She was given excellent care. One of the most natural things in the world was that my children would wander in to visit and chat to her on their way home from school over those two years.

We have become too reliant on large, corporate and congregated settings, where that sense of community and personal connection is lost. I know the Minister of State and the Government are committed to increasing the provision of public nursing home places, especially for people living with dementia and Alzheimer's. However, we must look beyond institutional models. We need to build a continuum of care that enables older people to live in their homes and communities for as long as possible. We must also use smart technology to enable them to do so. Nursing home care should be the last resort, not the default option. That means being more ambitious about innovative care models, such as retirement villages, where independence is preserved and intermediate levels of support are provided. It also means addressing the current barriers to home care. Too often, where home care packages are approved, they cannot be delivered due to workforce shortages. We must look seriously at the terms and conditions for home care workers, and invest to make this a sustainable and respected career pathway.

I also urge that we examine closely the comparative cost of long-term institutional care with community-based and home care. In many cases, keeping a person at home is better for their well-being and is more cost-effective for the State. The older people we are speaking about today have contributed immensely to the life of this country. The least we owe them is a system of care that honours their dignity, respects their humanity and allows them to live with purpose and autonomy for as long as possible. I support the direction the Government is taking, but we must think more boldly and build a modern model of care that truly meets the needs of a changing Ireland.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Ceann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 39 and the name of the Member in each case:

Deputy Michael Collins - To discuss orthodontic services in Oranmore, County Galway.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss the need to expedite progress on the Killarney bypass.

12 June 2025

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman - To discuss the provision of an emergency works grant to Coolmine Community School, Dublin 15.

Deputy Mark Wall - To discuss the need to provide a school bus route from Kildare town to a school in the Curragh.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell - To discuss the need for investment in infrastructure in Conamara.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - To discuss plans to redesignate special schools in Wicklow.

The matters raised by Deputies Roderic O’Gorman, Mark Wall, Jennifer Whitmore and Mairéad Farrell have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Schools Refurbishment

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: It is a rainy day, and on rainy days staff in Coolmine Community School in my constituency, Dublin West, have to set out between 40 and 50 plastic buckets across the school to deal with water flowing into corridors, classrooms, toilets and offices. That water flows from over 100 leaks in the roof of the school. Coolmine is a big school, with almost a thousand pupils, and has provided top-class education for students across Dublin 15 for decades. It is, however, an old school. The building is now over 50 years old and is literally falling apart. I have known this school well over many years and have had the opportunity to visit it twice in the past six months. On the second occasion, it was raining and I saw a teacher trying to divert a rivulet of water coming in through a classroom ceiling away from the electrics for the white screen in that classroom. That is thousands of euro worth of damage risked in just one classroom, and the same thing is happening all across the school. Beyond the health and safety concerns to which these conditions give rise, there is the disruption to education whereby teachers are distracted by having to manage the inflow of water, and, in particular, the disruption to the normal, everyday activities of the school. Almost 1,000 students walk the corridors of the school every 40 minutes, and they literally have to navigate an obstacle course between all the buckets on the floors. TDs come in here and overstate matters. I am not overstating this. Each of the corridors has five, six or seven buckets laid across it just to collect the water.

The school’s management team, the principal and deputy principals, has been proactive and submitted an emergency works application for the roof in November. That is application No. 3484. They got a visit from the Department’s emergency works team in March. The Department thought about it and then asked the school for a full survey. That full survey is in and now the school is waiting to hear back from the Department in terms of the outcome. The roof is still leaking. Leaving certificate examinations are taking place today, but someone is probably putting out buckets in Coolmine right now. The school has complied with all the Department’s requests for documentation and has followed all the procedures for emergency works applications.

This is on the Department. The Department has not met its timelines in terms of the respons-

es it has given to the school management team. The state of the roof in Coolmine is known to the Department and to the Minister, Deputy McEntee. The Minister visited the school in February of this year. She contacted me earlier. I know she cannot be here to address this matter directly, and I appreciate her contacting me. I hope the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, has some good news for the students in Coolmine, the teachers, the other staff and the parents. I do not want to hear about lengthy assessments. I do not want to hear that the school has a load of follow-ups to bring through. I do not want to hear about the school having to go back to a previous contractor. I want the Minister of State to confirm to me that the school's emergency works application, No. 3484, has been granted and that it will have the opportunity to go rapidly to tender, get this work done, or as much of it as can be done, over the summer holidays, and be ready for students coming back in September.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I thank Deputy O'Gorman for raising this issue. He has painted a pretty bleak picture of the conditions at Coolmine school, which, as he stated, is quite a large school of 1,000 pupils. It is very concerning and disappointing in this day and age, when we have seen the level of investment in education and in capital works in particular, that a secondary school is experiencing that level of leakage. I can see Deputy O'Gorman is going through his copy of my response. Unfortunately, I do not have an official confirmation in terms of a grant, but hopefully I can give him an update as to where the grant stands.

I can confirm that the Department of Education and Youth is in receipt of a current application from the school for funding under the emergency works scheme for roof works, namely to replace the roof due to water ingress issues. The purpose of the emergency works scheme is to provide funding specifically for unforeseen emergencies or to provide funding to facilitate inclusion and access for pupils with special needs. It does so by ensuring the availability of funding for urgent works to those schools that are in need of resources as a result of an emergency situation. An emergency is deemed to be a situation which poses an immediate risk to health, life, property or the environment which is sudden, unforeseen and requires immediate action and, in the case of a school, if not corrected would prevent the school or part thereof from opening. The emergency works scheme operates on the basis of a minimal scope of works required to address the emergency situation. The scheme is intended to remedy an emergency situation and usually provides an interim measure until a permanent solution can be delivered under the summer works scheme, which deals with upgrade works to schools.

The original application proposed a scope of works seeking to replace the entire roof, which would be deemed an upgrade and not a minimal scope of works. Owing to the relatively recent installation of the roof in question, the school was advised to revert to the original design team to remedy the situation in the first instance. The original contractor repaired the three original leaks on foot of a leak detection test carried out in 2022. However, the condition of the roof had deteriorated further since the time of that test and water ingress issues persisted, as the Deputy has outlined.

On 19 March 2025, the Department Education and Youth conducted a site visit to assess the issues at play. The Department advised the school to obtain a new leak detection test. This report was received by the Department in the past two weeks and is undergoing technical review. Once this review has been completed, the emergency works team will engage with the principal of the school in respect of next steps.

As the Deputy may be aware, the Minister recently announced details of the climate action

12 June 2025

summer works scheme for 2026 onwards. The purpose of this scheme is to devolve funding to individual school authorities to undertake small-scale building works which ideally can be carried out during the summer months or at other times that avoid disrupting the operation of the school. The scheme will operate on a multi-annual basis for a number of categories, which could include the provision or upgrade of roofs. The new scheme opened for applications in early May 2025 and all applications must be received by this Department by 5.30 p.m. on 30 June 2025, when the applications window will close. Full details of the new scheme, including the circular and guidance documents for schools, can be found on the Department's website.

To come back to the immediacy of the Deputy's question and the urgency of the turnaround of the application that is with the Department, the report in terms of the new leak detection test was received in the past two weeks. That is a short enough window of time. I ask that the Deputy give the Department time to assess that report. I understand the urgency of a decision, especially when the leaving certificate is going on. I suppose the Deputy wants some type of affirmation that at least by the time we go back to school in September there will not be that level of leakage. I will stress the urgency of that to the Minister.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I thank the Minister of State for his response. The line, "The Department advised the school to obtain a new leak detection test", when there are a hundred buckets on the floor, is worthy of "Yes Minister". The school put in an application for an upgrade because it does need a new roof. It was then told, "No, you cannot go under that pathway; you have to go for an emergency works pathway." The school has now done that, which is why this delay has occurred. The Minister of State has told me in detail about the climate action summer works scheme. That is a great scheme - it is fantastic - but that is not relevant here because this is not a matter of energy saving or climate action; it is a matter of the roof leaking in a hundred places.

I do not feel that this issue is being addressed by the Department with the urgency that is required. I probably should have said earlier that I sat on the board of management of this school for about four and a half years, during which time it undertook some work on the roof. It was a massive job. Work of this nature means that classrooms are not available because of the noise and disturbance caused. Summer is the ideal time to do this work. If we are waiting for the Department to make up its mind, it has not even indicated that it will make up its mind. It will go back and tell the principal the next steps.

6 o'clock

If we eventually get a positive outcome from the Department, it is not looking like this will be decided any time soon. There is a bigger question about Coolmine and the need to do a complete rebuild. The building is more than 50 years old. It has been a great school but it is not fit for purpose for 1,000 students. This is something that I and other Deputies will raise with the Minister in the future. However, right now, I cannot stress enough the urgency of the Department coming back and getting an answer to the emergency works application by the school to allow this to proceed. I ask the Minister of State to press this with the Minister and the Department of Education and Youth.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: Yes, I will press this. There is also an opportunity for schools to apply for the climate action summer works scheme, although perhaps it does not apply to Coolmine. The emergency works scheme is obviously the right one. I take the Deputy's point about buckets. All we have to do is look at the number of buckets that are gathering water

at the moment to discover that there are leaks there. The leak detection test may highlight the exact seriousness of the problem and how much work is involved. It is not good enough in this day and age. There has been record investment in education on the capital side. New schools are being built and additional classrooms provided. There is a lot of construction work going on across the board. The fact that a school that educates more than 1,000 pupils is in this condition is very hard to stand over. I will press it with the Minister. I am hopeful for the Deputy and the students and parents that we will get a positive outcome on this. I will stress the urgency of it and I will come back to the Deputy as soon as I have any feedback.

School Transport

Deputy Mark Wall: It is more than 6 km from Kildare town to the Curragh Camp. No matter what road is taken, and even the motorway can be taken, there are no footpaths. The majority of the three or four routes are winding country roads, with little visibility and a lot of danger for anyone who might want to walk them. I will come back to this.

I want to discuss Curragh Community College. This is, and has always been, a fine school, but its time is coming to an end. Even the wonderful principal and the board of management say that the school is not fit for purpose. At present, there are a lot of dangers in the school. This school also has its buckets and its fire dangers, as has previously been discussed. I want to raise the issue of the need for a school bus from Kildare town to the Curragh for the next couple of years. Why I am raising this is that, thankfully, after a ten-year wait, a new secondary school, which will have the name of the Curragh Community College, is to be built in Kildare town. Planning permission was obtained this year and it is proceeding, according to replies I have received from the Minister for Education and Youth. There will be 300 students going from Kildare town, the Curragh and the surrounding areas to the Curragh Community College this September. The problem is that a lot of the students coming from Kildare town have no way of getting there. Many of their parents have been carpooling but that causes problems as well. As I said earlier, there are no footpaths on the roads leading to the college.

A new school is being built in Kildare town. Many of the pupils who will attend the school are already living in Kildare town. When the new school is built, students from The Plains, Melitta Road and other estates in the area will have to walk 200 yards to the new school. However, they are currently 6 km away. They have come to me and other public representatives in Kildare South and we have asked the Department to put on a school bus route in the interim while the new school is being built. Lo and behold, the reply we got was that the pupils were not going to their nearest school. How can they go to their nearest school? At the moment, the school that is there, Kildare Town Community School, is oversubscribed. The only option for many new students in Kildare town is to attend the Curragh Community College. This is the conundrum. This is the only possibility for them to get a secondary education. As I said, within two to three years, or however long the new building takes, they will be able to walk the 200 or 300 yards on safe footpaths to the new school. However, in the interim, they have been told that they are not attending their nearest school. I hope the Minister of State will have some good news for me. I ask him to provide a bus service for those students for the next two to three years so that the parents and the new pupils attending the Curragh Community College can actually get to the school for those couple of years while we wait for the new school building. I hope that the Department sees sense on this. It is a very sensible request by the parents of children attending the Curragh Community College.

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: I am responding on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, who has the privilege of taking over the issue of school transport, which he is absolutely delighted about. He is very reasonable and I know that he will give this consideration. On the Minister of State’s behalf, I welcome the opportunity to respond on this matter.

The school transport scheme is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education and Youth. Bus Éireann has advised that children residing in Kildare town are not eligible for the Curragh Community College as they are not attending their nearest post-primary school centre. They further advise that there is no existing service from Kildare town to this school. In cases where families have applied to attend their nearest schools with regard to ethos and language, and have been advised by the school authorities that these schools are full, the Department will consider if the pupil is eligible for the next nearest school. While the closest schools may be full to capacity at present, each family must supply evidence that an application for enrolment was made within the deadline specified by the schools and a letter from each of the school authorities confirming that the school was full. This information should be submitted to the school transport section of the Department of Education and Youth for consideration. Contact details for the section can be found on the Department’s website.

As the Deputy may be aware, a minimum of ten eligible children residing in a distinct locality, as determined by Bus Éireann, who have applied and paid or entered their medical card details, are required, before consideration may be given to the establishment or retention of school transport services, provided this can be done within reasonable cost limits.

The Bus Éireann family portal has now closed for applications and payments. Bus Éireann will now assess all applications and payments received and plan for routes and services for the 2025-2026 school year. Routes may be altered or extended depending on the number and location of eligible children who will be availing of school transport for the following school year.

Once routes have been finalised, Bus Éireann will assign tickets for each school transport service. Tickets will begin to issue in mid-July and will continue to issue during July and August. Families who are unsuccessful in obtaining a seat will be notified via email and a refund will issue. Payments or medical card details submitted after the deadline date will be deemed to be late. A late submission of payment or medical card details may mean that a seat is not available.

There is a job of work in terms of the Department assessing the levels of interest and applications that have come in. There is the specification requirement of ten eligible students to establish a route. I take the Deputy’s point regarding this specific case in the Kildare town and the Curragh. It is great for Kildare town that the new Curragh school will be built there. Perhaps a solution should be considered in the interim. The Minister of State’s door is open. If there needs to be a workaround or some type of interim solution, he will at least discuss this with the Deputy and work with the Department on it. I have set out the requirements for establishing new school bus routes.

Deputy Mark Wall: The good news is that at the moment we have 20 pupils, double Bus Éireann’s requirement. There is potentially another 12 students so 32 students could avail of this. These students are residing in Kildare town, some of them less than 500 yards away from the site of the very welcome, proposed new school that will be built over the next two to three years. That will accommodate 1,000 pupils. At the moment, almost 300 students are attending the Curragh Community College. I take on board what the Minister of State has said and I

will reach out to the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, again. We have the names. Some of the pupils and families are into their second or third year of trying to get this bus service. The numbers seem to suggest they have enough to request a bus under the guidelines the Minister of State referred to tonight and which I received previously from Bus Éireann. I hope common sense will prevail. This is an interim, short-term measure. We will prevent a number of cars travelling those 6 km if we can put on a school bus for those potentially 30 students. I will contact the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, again to ask him to reconsider. I will provide the names and everything the Minister of State has given me tonight. I ask the Minister of State to have a word with the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, to say exactly as I have said tonight, that this is a distinct possibility. I agree with the Minister of State that this is a special case. I have spoken before about special school buses. It is a yearly topic for me but this needs to happen for many people who will enjoy a purpose-built school less than 500 yards from their homes but it will not happen for two to three years. I hope the Department sees sense and provides that school transport.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I spoke in jest about the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, taking on the brief of school transport. He is very experienced in this. He has been around the block, was a backbencher for a while and battled in similar situations to the one the Deputy has presented. He understands the need for that but there are parameters and guidelines he has to work within. The requirement is for ten eligible students. One could present a case for 100 concessionary students. It is about whether that would suffice for establishing a new route. That will have to be worked out. Because it is an interim solution and many students will eventually go to the newly built school in Kildare, perhaps that is an angle that could be worked on. It is for the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and his Department to assess it. I would absolutely say the Deputy should build a case and bring it to him in terms of the numbers and demand that would be there for such a service. I thank the Deputy again for bringing this to the House.

Special Educational Needs

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I am sure the Minister of State is aware of the Department's plan to redesignate special schools so they no longer cater for children and students with mild learning disabilities. This will apply to approximately 30 schools across the country. I understand, in part, the rationale behind it. The Minister wants an inclusive model of education where children with mild learning disabilities can go to a mainstream school, and that will free up places in special schools for children with more complex needs. However, as is often the case with policies, there are unintended consequences and when you look on the ground, you see the policy does not fit and is not the right policy.

I bring the Minister of State's attention to a school in Bray in my constituency, New Court special school. It is a fabulous school. When you walk into it, there is a feeling of love, happiness and support. It has around 80 children, some with complex needs, but previously it primarily focused on children with mild learning disabilities. It provides a loving but individualised care and education model for the children. The children really thrived in that environment. Unfortunately, with these plans those children with mild learning disabilities will no longer be able to go to New Court and will have to go to their local mainstream school. Many of these children were in mainstream schools, could not thrive there and therefore ended up in New Court.

Also, I just do not think the one-size-fits-all model will work. I am worried for these children who find it difficult to keep up with the pace of a mainstream class. If they are put in to a mainstream school, are trying to keep up with their peers and are unable to do it, the stress, anxiety and not feeling part of the school will make life very difficult for them. Maybe it would work for some children but we need to look at the children's needs and ensure that we find a school environment that suits them and that there is choice for them and their families.

I know there are many children with complex needs who cannot get school places. That is a scandal we have seen happen year after year. However, we need to ensure those children are accommodated and children with mild learning disabilities are also accommodated and get special education if they require it. Rather than displacing one set of children with disabilities with another set of children with disabilities, we need to provide spaces for all these children in the settings best suited to them. The schools in my area have 1,000 students in them. I cannot imagine how difficult it would be for a child with a mild learning difficulty to go in and settle and fit into that kind of environment. It would be incredibly difficult. New Court is a school in my area so I am raising it but my colleague, Deputy Jen Cummins, has been raising the wider policy issue. I hope there is an opportunity for some flexibility in the policy.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I thank the Deputy. Her description of the special school in Bray mirrors my experience of visiting special schools in Cork and elsewhere. I have seen the improvements in these children's education, ability to cope and mental health. What they are able to do is incredible, especially when they have access to additional therapies. That is another part of what we are trying to do. I take that point but my understanding is the intention of the redesignation is not to narrow the scope but to broaden it in terms of who can be catered for in the schools. I will explain more in this response.

The Government is committed to the provision of additional special school places for children with more complex educational needs. Over 300 new special school places are being provided for the 2025-26 school year. Five new special schools are being established in addition to the 11 new special schools opened over the last few years. Special school capacity is also being expanded across a number of special schools. Along with providing additional special school capacity, the Department of Education and Youth and the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, consider that it is necessary to look at the profile of existing special schools. It is important to state that it is not the intention to exclude children who require a special school place from accessing certain special school settings, but instead to work to ensure children with complex educational needs can apply to their local special school.

There are situations currently arising where children with additional needs travel past special schools in their locality to attend a special school further away. This is not fair on the children or their families. It is down to the fact children cannot apply for admission to their local special school simply because they do not meet the narrow designation of that special school.

It is important to state that there is no strict timeline on redesignation being pursued. As indicated in Circular 0039/2025 published in recent weeks, the Department and the NCSE intend to commence work in this area in the coming school year. Any change to designation will proceed on a gradual phased basis and schools will be supported with training, supports and guidance by the NCSE. This is not a new departure. The NCSE reports that over half of these mild general learning disability special schools have since diversified, which means children with more complex needs can enrol in their local special school. A lot of work has been done by these schools to broaden their designation and the Department of Education and Youth will

continue to support schools in this endeavour so that more special schools can better support children with complex needs in their local community. Of the 129 special schools nationwide, approximately 30 were originally designated as schools for children with mild general learning disabilities. One of these is in County Wicklow and has just over 100 students enrolled.

I take the Deputy's point. It is not a one-size-fits-all. We all know of cases of children with mild learning disabilities who, you would think, might be more appropriately educated in a mainstream school, but it just does not fit. We have seen where they have excelled and done much better when they attend the special schools. I take that point. I do not think that is the intention of what is being done here. The intention is to cater for those children with more severe learning disabilities, stopping them from having to pass their local school and go further afield because their existing special school is at full capacity. That is the intention here. This is being rolled out on a phased basis and there is a lot of work to be done.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: My understanding is that children with mild learning disabilities will not be able to enrol in any special schools under this programme because they will not have the sign-off, approval or letter of eligibility from the NCSE. The plan is for all of those children to go to their local mainstream school. I absolutely agree that no child should have to travel for two hours to get to their special school or to get education. It is absolutely not acceptable. Every child should be able to be educated within the local community. We should increase the capacity of the special schools, rather than just moving children from a special school into a mainstream school and then putting other children into the special school. It is more of a displacement than an inclusion process. I do not know what level of conversation or consultation has been done with the mainstream schools. I imagine it would be very difficult mainstream schools to get the level of support needed to assist and help these children. These children will not be going into any of the autistic spectrum disorder, ASD, units or anything like that. They will be going straight into mainstream classes, but they will need supports. We have not seen in the policy or heard in any of the discussions how we are going to make sure those secondary schools have the actual supports they need. How are we going to make sure they have enough places? I am still dealing with children who do not have a school place for the coming September. Our educational welfare officer has disappeared and will not be back until September. There are children who still do not have a place in a mainstream school in the north Wicklow area for September. The mainstream schools in our area do not have capacity. I do not know where these children are going to go. Wherever they go, we need to make sure they have the supports they require. I ask the Minister of State to revise this and meet some of the schools.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I thank the Deputy for raising the question and for giving me the opportunity to reassure the House that the Department of Education and Youth and the NCSE are committed to ensuring all children can access an education suitable to their needs. The Department of Education and Youth continues to engage intensely with the NCSE on forward planning for new special provision to ensure every child has a place in an educational setting best fitted for their educational need. It is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Where a special school is deemed more appropriate, the options are being kept open in that regard.

The establishment of mild general learning disability, MGLD, special schools predated the significant expansion in the range of supports offered in mainstream schools through additional special education, teaching and special needs assistant resources, and through the rapid expansion in special class provision. There are now over 28,000 children being supported in special schools and classes, with the number of special classes increasing by 103% since 2020.

Examining the designation of special schools is not about limiting the options of any child; it is about creating options and ensuring that children with more complex needs are afforded the opportunity to attend their school with other local children. This means there will be a variety of different needs accommodated in the school, not just children with one particular need. In my previous response I made the point that the NCSE reports that over half of these mild general learning disability special schools have since diversified. Diversification is the key word. It is about ensuring that these schools that previously only catered for children with mild general learning disabilities will now cater for more. That is key.

Deputy Whitmore mentioned the level of consultation. The Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, is in the office next to me. He has spent a lot of time and is dedicated to consulting with the special schools but consulting with parents as well, which is really important. That is something that has happened. I am very sure I can stand over that statement with a fair degree of confidence. I totally accept the points raised and I will relate what was said here back to the Minister of State.

Energy Infrastructure

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: This is not a Topical Issue that I wanted to bring to the Dáil but it relates to an ongoing situation over a number of months. I am disappointed it had to get to this point. It is very clear that six months after Storm Bert and Storm Darragh, and five months after Storm Éowyn, there is no plan from the Government on how to deal with the infrastructural deficit that has had a huge impact across Connemara. I totally understand that we could not have anticipated the impact Storm Éowyn was going to have. The problem for people across Connemara is it was not something new. Storm Bert and Storm Darragh had a serious impact on that whole area. After Storm Darragh there were people without phone coverage and broadband for weeks, with limited, if any, contact from their network providers. What has the Government done in terms of engagement and direct contact with these companies recently? This is an ongoing issue. Has there been any accountability? What kind of accountability can the Government actually give?

The problem is that since Storm Éowyn there have been consistent power outages, even in May and June. I regularly hear on Raidió na Gaeltachta and from constituents about people who have no power for 12 hours at a time during the summer months. There have been consistent power outages. One woman who lives in the Ballyconneely area contacted me this week. Her power has gone ten times since October. It is not just her electricity; her water is impacted because the pump needs power to operate. She has no water when there is a power outage. It has happened ten times since October. After Storm Éowyn there were clear calls for generators to be put in place at those water pumps. Does the Minister of State know what the story is with that? Obviously, people being without water is a serious issue. That kind of thing cannot continue.

A family who live outside Oughterard, which is not far from Galway City, were in touch with me. They were 95 days without a phone line after Storm Éowyn. The most shocking of all was an email I got from a woman last Friday. She is trying to help her elderly neighbour. This man lives alone in a very rural part of Connemara and his phone line has only worked for three weeks since last November. The phone is a lifeline for somebody like that. We are talking about people who have panic buttons not being able to use the panic button or a phone. She

told me there are six houses on the road and an awful lot of elderly people living on that road, and their panic buttons are not working. She said on that same road during Storm Éowyn they had the following experience. The Minister of State will remember that in parts of Connemara TETRA was not working and one could not ring 999. Among these six houses there was a woman who needed an ambulance and oxygen. Her neighbours had to travel to get a mobile phone signal so they could ring an ambulance.

These really serious issues continue to affect an awful lot of people across Connemara but there does not seem to be any plan in place to fix them. Nobody expects it to happen overnight; it is clear there are basic infrastructural deficits. There does not seem to be a plan of action coming from the Government, however. We also have health centres that are still losing their phone lines. If a health centre does not have a phone line, there is no way of contacting the hospital or an ambulance in the case of a health emergency. At the time of Storm Éowyn there was a call for generators for these health centres and also for the provision of satellite phones.

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: The Deputy raised some specifics regarding the generator, phone outages, etc. I will endeavour to get the Department to come back to her on those points. The written response I have is quite lengthy. I hope it will set out the plan and answer the Deputy’s questions. I hope she has time to get to it.

With regard to the national development plan, in early April the Government agreed to commence the review process. Following this, my Department wrote to Departments to advise on the Government’s approach to improving our infrastructure through the review. As outlined in the programme for Government, energy is a critical priority for investment, alongside housing, water, transport and health digitalisation. The core focus of the review will be to ensure that supporting economic infrastructure can be prioritised to support the delivery of 300,000 additional homes and to boost our competitiveness.

I now move on to grid investment. Electricity is vital in daily life and customers need a dependable network to meet current and future needs. This is why investing in the network is key, investing for today and for the future. The Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, as an independent regulator, sanctions investment in the onshore electricity grid in five year cycles. More than €4 billion investment in the onshore electricity grid was approved for 2021 to 2025. Accelerating delivery of that investment is a priority for this Government and we have a working group under the accelerating renewable electricity task force tasked with doing just that.

Regarding planned grid Investment from 2026 to 2030, work has commenced on Price Review 6 which will see the CRU sanction the investment in the grid to 2030. A public consultation is expected from CRU by the end of June on its proposals under PR6. This will see major investment in the onshore electricity grid and represents a step change in grid development and investment, a process which will see further progressive scaling during the 2030s to meet future targets. These investments will start to deliver the building blocks on which we will expand our onshore grid out to 2050. The large-scale investment sought as part of PR6 will assist Ireland in maintaining a reliable and resilient electricity network to meet the needs of customers and society. This investment will deliver additional network capacity at all voltage levels, as well as allowing for significant investment in asset maintenance and replacement and measures to improve continuity of supply. Government supports all efforts to maximise the level of grid investment in 2026 to 2030 as part of the PR6 review and any further support sought through the NDP will be actively considered.

To deal with the disruptive events of storms and long-term impacts of climate change, as part of price review 6, ESB Networks is planning to implement a strategic approach to asset management to ensure that the investments are future-proofed and resilient. ESB Networks will also be part of a mutual association called NEWSAC, the North, East, West, South Area Consortium, which is composed of the electricity companies in Ireland and the UK. These companies provide mutual aid to support each other in the aftermath of storms. On 5 February, Cabinet requested that ESB Networks develop an Enhanced Winter 2025 Grid Resilience Plan as a key measure to be implemented in the lead up to winter 2025. The plan is to enhance the resilience of the grid in the most vulnerable locations for the upcoming winter. The ESB Networks Winter 2025 Grid Resilience Plan sets out actions across several key areas. These include the removal of hazards, post-storm inspection of the electricity network, forestry management, replenishment and expansion of stocks of materials and spares, and resourcing and innovation measures that will build resilience in the electricity network for the winter ahead.

Ensuring the climate resilience of communication networks in the immediate term and in preparation for longer term climate changes is a complex task which will require targeted investment. However, given the liberalised and privatised nature of the communication sector across both fixed and mobile networks, it is primarily for network operators to make the necessary investment to improve their networks' resilience. Storm Éowyn has drawn attention to the current readiness of networks to withstand severe weather events. The major cause of service outages in the aftermath of Storm Éowyn was the result of cascading impacts mainly emanating from the lack of electricity. I have a further response and will come back in.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Yes, the Minister of State was getting to the most interesting part there. I am happy with this response because I feel like something is being taken seriously. I understand the Minister of State is not over this particular Department but I will ask him to bring back a few things and also for a number of clarifications on this. There are a few interesting things. At the end of the day, I do not want this to continue happening in Connemara so I welcome anything that can be done and any kind of plan that can be put in place, especially given the vulnerability of people when they cannot contact their local health centre or the ambulance. The Minister of State said that given the liberalised and privatised nature of the communication sector across both fixed and mobile networks, it is primarily for network operators to make the necessary investment to improve their networks' resilience. The problem for an awful lot of people is they contact their network provider but it is doing absolutely nothing. What can we do to hold these network providers to account or get them to put that investment in? I am not sure that investment will happen and that is a key issue of concern for me.

Then the Minister of State referred to the need for power backup for mobile and fixed networks being informed by a prioritisation exercise, for both network assets and services, as well as the potential for other types of networks to temporally fill a service void, and the example given is using satellite services to provide emergency cover. Can we make sure those satellite services are in the health centres? Will the Minister of State bring that point back to the Minister and to the Department? Regarding the prioritisation exercise and another mention of prioritisation in the Minister of State's response, can we make sure in those most vulnerable areas that we are looking at updating the vulnerable customer list? That was an issue during Storm Éowyn. It was not really working. Can we also look at those areas that are really behind in that sense?

I will make one quick last point. The Minister of State stated that the average duration of power outage experienced in Ireland is usually far shorter and far less widespread. The problem

is in Connemara it is too regular an occurrence.

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: As Deputy Farrell rightly points out, I was just getting into the relevant section on Storm Éowyn so I will come back to that. As I was saying, the major cause of service outages in the aftermath of Storm Éowyn was the result of cascading impacts mainly emanating from the lack of electricity supply to power the network communication networks. Communication networks themselves suffered more limited direct damage. Loss of power was the key issue to cause loss of communication services in the aftermath of Storm Éowyn. As electronic communication networks and services are, by their very design, reliant on power at every component. The ESB Networks 2025 plan sets out the preparation for winter 2025 in the event of another storm such as Éowyn. Storm Éowyn did stand out on its own. I know the Deputy referenced other storms but this was peak in terms of previous experiences from an Irish context. There is some good stuff in the grid reliance plan such as removal of hazards, post-storm inspection of the electricity network, forestry management, replenishment and expansion of stock of materials and spares, and resourcing and innovation measures that will build resilience. However, the Deputy has also brought up some good points such as backup generation, rolling out those hubs that were very effective and these are points I will bring back to the Minister.

Criminal Law (Prohibition of the Disclosure of Counselling Records) Bill 2025: Second Stage [Private Members]

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

In starting the debate on my Bill today, I am thinking in particular of the family of Annie McCarrick who disappeared 33 years ago but only now is a man being arrested in relation to that crime. Obviously, women do not disappear; something has to happen to them. We recall many other women in the 1990s who just suddenly disappeared and the State was very slow to investigate in the way it should have. I also think of the family of Tina Satchwell. For many years, justice was denied to that family and Tina was maligned. These are cases that have come up only this week. I am also thinking of the family of a teenager who allegedly suffered a sexual assault in the Ballymena area and the disgraceful way racists are using that, the issue of gender-based violence, to be racist. These are pressing issues in society.

I begin by thanking the survivors in the Gallery and especially the therapists who have come here, some from Galway and all over the country, because they really wanted to make the point that they are deeply troubled at this law which compels them to break the client relationship and to break confidentiality and to go against everything therapy is meant to stand for in doing so. I really want to thank them. This week, 60 professionals wrote to the Ministers for Health and justice and made these points very strongly, which I will talk about shortly. We have to begin with the scale of violence against women, girls and LGBT+ people in the world. Women’s Aid has had a record number of disclosures, as have all of the rape crisis networks. We know that the police have had a huge increase in reported crime as well and we know that the WHO and the United Nations class gender-based violence as the biggest threat to the health of women and girls in the world today. Such is the importance of this issue.

Sexual violence and abuse are deeply traumatic for victims and survivors. I use the terms

interchangeably because not everybody wants to be classed as a victim or just as a survivor. For many, the impact can be wide-ranging and life-changing. Therapists have told me how, unfortunately, sexual violence is linked with eating disorders, self-harm, poor physical health, poor mental health, depression and, of course, suicidal ideation as well. Often therapy is the only avenue that people have to seek a way to try to cope and to deal with those issues. What the presence of being able to access somebody's counselling notes does is it completely disrupts that and they have to make a choice between seeking therapy for the horrific crime committed against them or going to court. It is one or the other. As I reported today, there is a teenager who has left the child and adolescent mental health service, CAMHS, because they heard in the media that this can happen to people and they had to decide they were not going to participate any further in it. That is a horrific situation and the Government should be moving might and main. In reality, it is a bizarre Bill to have to bring forward, particularly because we have an epidemic of gender-based violence.

It is estimated that 5% of people report their experience of sexual violence and only 14% of them ever get to court. Even then, the conviction rate is really low. What do we do? For those who brave those hurdles, we actually put them through a gauntlet of misogyny including things such as character references, victim blaming, what they wore, what contraception they used, if any, if they drank and if they took drugs. On top of it, their therapy notes - something to help them - can be seized by the defence. It is absolutely barbaric that we do this to survivors who go to the trouble of going to court. It is particularly cruel.

On First Stage, I mentioned some of what survivors have said about this experience but I will give the Minister of State some examples quickly. Sarah, a survivor of an incredibly violent attack, said that in so many ways she found her trial more traumatic than the attack. Can Members imagine saying that? She said she would take the attack again before having to set foot back in that courtroom. The Minister of State should let that rest with him that survivors are telling us this. The most heart-breaking obstacle of all, she said, was the seizure of her counselling records. After her body being violated, our courts of justice are allowing a second violation. In fact, they ordered a second violation of her mind. It was a brilliant way of describing this experience. Another survivor, Hazel, said that she worked to rebuild herself to get to know the new her. She talks about the benefit of counselling with the rape crisis team and then to find out that the perpetrator could know her thoughts, her fears, her shame and her turmoil shared during the safety of her counselling sessions. So many survivors have testified to this.

We have this phenomenon, which is to be welcomed, whereby survivors come out onto the court steps and wave their anonymity. They speak about their experience because they do not want it happening to somebody else.

Is the Government listening? What has changed in the past few years? We still have all of the rape myths, all the victim blaming going on by the Judiciary every day, and people not having their own autonomy and their own representation.

The way that this has worked in recent times is the onus is put on the victim to give their notes. Only the other day, I was told that the Garda basically said, "Hand them over because if you do not, it will delay your trial."

It is absolutely despicable the Government has decided that, rather than allowing this Bill progress and dealing with it as the Minister wants to on Committee Stage by putting whatever amendments, it has decided to put a year's block on this progress after it promising for years to

deal with this issue. Obviously, I cannot anticipate what the Minister of State will say as to how he defends that but it is indefensible because he could easily work with this Bill.

No evidence whatsoever is procured from a therapy note. Some of what I have heard is that this could be unconstitutional. The right to a fair trial is extremely important - something I would defend to the death - and it is strong in the Constitution. However, there is nothing of evidential value in a therapy note. That is the key point. Therapy notes are only being used, as misogynistic tropes, as a way to undermine the complainant, to demean them, to worry them and to demean their character as well - to find a nugget in there.

I spoke to some therapists beforehand. They were making the point that a person, particularly somebody who was abused as a child or who may have got into a certain situation, could end up in counselling saying, "I blame myself." That would be seized upon by the defence. The Minister of State knows it would and yet we are allowing that to be done. People can blame themselves for ending up - and also because it is often a way of dealing with the situation that they are partly to blame. These are the ways that counselling notes can be abused.

I have spoken to representatives from the rape crisis centres as well. One of the points they made is, how is this even allowed? These are third-party notes. They are not even the notes of the person who is making the complaint. We do not know how reliable a therapist could even be as to what those notes are. The truth is that there is no other reason for this. We know that there has been an escalation in requests for these notes. It is clearly related to the fact that the defence sees the possibility because we know that misogyny is rife in society, among juries and in the Judiciary, and they know that if they can find something it can be a way of strengthening the defence's case.

In the US, there is therapist-and-client privilege so that if somebody goes in, it is a safe space for them to talk. That is the way it should be in Ireland or it should be certainly similar. What else is counselling but this? We need a similar situation here. The Supreme Court made a judgment recently which strengthened the idea that there is no requirement for these notes to be used in gender-based violence trials.

The other point that is made is that this would be unconstitutional and we cannot allow this go through. The Constitution has a right to privacy. It has a right to health. If we even say that there is a conflict of rights, why are all of the rights being given in one way? I am very confident on this if the Minister drafted a good piece of legislation and if somebody challenged that, then fine, let us have a referendum. In fact, most people are horrified when you explain this to them. They do not even know that this exists in our courts.

As I have said, more than 60 therapists, and professionals, psychotherapists, psychologists and psychiatrists in many different fields, have written this week. The Psychology Society of Ireland is adopting this now as its policy. The RCSI is looking at the exclusion of counselling notes also being part of its policy. The Irish Council for Psychotherapy is also. I welcome that the people who are trying to heal those who have been damaged by gender-based violence are taking this.

This is a health issue. The cost to the health service, by the way, of allowing people not have therapy is very high.

Now is the time to completely eliminate this. The Minister indicated that he may get rid of the waiver and introduce a very high bar for these notes to be accessed and that there would

have to be a hearing. That is not good enough. The mere fact that their counselling notes could be accessed is enough to deter people from seeking counselling and going to court and enough to cause real fear, particularly where there is a relationship with coercive control, intimate partner violence or child sexual abuse. It is not enough to try to have this halfway house. We have to rebalance this in favour of those who are victims of gender-based violence.

For the past couple of years, Simon Harris, Micheál Martin and Helen McEntee have said that this should be outlawed. Suddenly, they then changed their position to saying it should be amended. Sometimes, one has to stand up to the Judiciary or whoever is telling us otherwise and say there is no evidential value in this. No one has ever given me one example of where a therapy note was vital to somebody's right to a trial.

We have an epidemic of gender-based violence. We can recite all the figures repeatedly. We know what an explosive issue this is in society. We just have to look at what is happening in the North right now, where people have been able to use such an emotive issue to stir up hatred against minorities. At a time when we are urging people to come forward and speak out, we are assailing them with a gauntlet of misogyny. Our legal system is highly patriarchal and rooted in the idea of male entitlement to women's bodies. It reinforces that with the likes of the idea of counselling notes being used. The Minister could make a name for himself and be the first Minister to take this off the agenda. It would be a positive thing that he could do to deal with gender-based violence, something that the Government has promised for so long. He could not just go along with the easy option, as we know this issue is going to arise again and again, as happened with repeal and the X case. If one tries to find the easiest thing to do, the issue will not go away.

It is shameful that the Government has taken this position in the face of what is such a pressing issue. I will certainly urge all parties and TDs to reject the Government amendment.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. I call on the Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan, to move the amendment.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "That" and substitute the following:

"Dáil Éireann resolves that the Criminal Law (Prohibition of the Disclosure of Counselling Records) Bill 2025, be deemed to be read a second time this day twelve months, to allow for consideration by the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration to consider and bring forward provisions relating to Counselling Records."

I know Deputy Coppinger is disappointed that this is the approach the Government has taken. I will explain the rationale behind it because she has set out eloquently and represented the voices of victims and professionals in terms of the difficulties that are experienced when it comes to counselling notes and their use in court. She has pointed out the distress, anxiety and severe trauma that has caused to women in particular who have experienced gender-based violence. I commend her on that and on raising the issue, bringing it before the Dáil and ensuring it is discussed.

The reason we are taking this decision is based on the advice that the Bill, as it stands, is unlikely to withstand a constitutional challenge. When a Minister is given that advice, he or she

has to act on it and be guided by it. That is why we are going with the 12-month amendment. We do not want a situation where, unintentionally, we cause the balance to come down on the side of the accused. I certainly do not believe that would be an appropriate measure.

I will set out the approach that the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, is taking. He is taking the matter seriously. It is something that he is already working on in terms of trying to find a method or solution to ensure that victims do not experience that trauma, as the Deputy has rightly pointed out.

The Criminal Law (Prohibition of the Disclosure of Counselling Records) Bill 2025 aims to delete subsection 19A of the Criminal Evidence Act 1992 and replace it with measures providing that the content of counselling records shall not be disclosed in criminal proceedings for a relevant offence; a competent person shall not disclose counselling records in criminal proceedings for a relevant offence; neither the existing nor content of counselling records shall be requested for disclosure in criminal proceedings for a relevant offence. A relevant offence comprises sexual offences, coercive control offences and offences involving the physical, emotional, sexual or mental abuse of one person by another within a close, intimate or family relationship.

The Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, and I are fully aware of the distress and revictimisation that disclosure of personal records, including counselling records, can have on survivors of sexual violence. One of the most difficult things that this House has to do is to resolve issues around conflicting constitutional rights. The disclosure of counselling records is a complex and highly sensitive balancing of individuals' rights. On the one hand, there is the victim's right to personal privacy and, on the other, the accused person's right to a fair trial. It is our duty to ensure that these constitutional rights are appropriately balanced.

This Bill, in its current form, seeks to prohibit the disclosure of counselling records in criminal proceedings. However, in the criminal domain, the prosecution has a general duty of advanced disclosure that is based on the common law, Article 38.1 of the Constitution, Article 47 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights. It is essential for the purpose of a fair trial that the prosecution disclose all relevant material within its possession, power or procurement to the defence. A blanket ban on the disclosure of counselling records is not compatible with the Constitution and is unlikely to withstand a constitutional challenge, as I have already pointed out.

The Attorney General's office points out that the constitutional right to trial in due course of law entails a duty upon the prosecution authorities to ensure that appropriate disclosure takes place of matters that may help the defence or damage the prosecution in any criminal prosecution, meaning that appropriate disclosure is a bedrock of a procedurally fair and just process of prosecution. The Attorney General's office advises that this Bill creates an absolute carve-out for counselling records, which almost inevitably breaches Article 38.1. Elevating the rights of a victim of an alleged sexual offence in this way inevitably comes at the cost of defence rights and trial in due course of law. In the event of such a challenge, it appears highly probable that this proposed amendment would result in a finding of constitutional invalidity.

I reassure the Deputy that the Government intends to address the serious issues raised in the House. For this reason, we are tabling a timed amendment to this Private Members' business.

The law in this area was substantially reformed in 2017 by the insertion of section 19A

into the Criminal Evidence Act 1992, which was drafted with the intention of ensuring an appropriate balance between an accused person's rights to a fair trial and a complainant's rights to privacy. Section 19A permits an accused person to make an application to the court for the disclosure of counselling records but it also allows the victim to object to the disclosure of those counselling records. If a victim objects to the disclosure, the judge will examine the counselling records and decide whether there is relevant information to be disclosed to the defence. The victim is legally represented at this disclosure hearing and, under the law, is entitled to have a solicitor or barrister, engaged by the Legal Aid Board, to act on the victim's behalf.

Even where a court orders disclosure, it may impose any condition it considers necessary in the interest of justice and to protect the privacy of any person. These include a condition that part of the record be redacted; that the record not be disclosed to any other person without leave of the court; that no copies be made of it; that the record be viewed only at the offices of the court; that the record be returned to the holder; and that it be used solely for the purposes of the criminal proceedings.

Similarly, if a victim does not object to the disclosure of counselling records, the disclosure is still made under strict conditions. The prosecution requires undertakings from the defence as to how the records will be held and used. For example, the records may not be copied or distributed to anybody else, they may be consulted only in certain settings and they must all be returned to the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions.

Regrettably, it appears that section 19A has not operated in practice as intended. Victims have felt compelled to agree to waive the disclosure hearing in order not to put a successful prosecution at risk or risk delaying their trials, and their records are routinely being released. This is not good enough and we are taking steps to address it.

As the Deputies will be aware, the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, recently secured Government approval for the drafting of the general scheme of the criminal law and civil law (miscellaneous provisions) Bill 2025. The general scheme includes measures to amend section 19A by requiring that a disclosure hearing take place in all cases, removing the provision that allows for this to be waived. This will ensure that the original intention of the legislation will apply, mandating the court to assess the relevance of any counselling record through a judicial process.

7 o'clock

Consideration is also being given to further strengthening section 19A by amending it to provide that disclosure of counselling records shall only be made where there would otherwise be a real risk of an unfair trial.

The effect of these changes would be very beneficial. It would mean that if a person accused of an offence wanted access to counselling notes there would have to be a hearing in advance of the trial to determine whether he or she was entitled to them. The judge would have to look at them. There would not be an opportunity for a complainant to say that he or she would waive their right to object. A judge would also only say that the notes had to be disclosed to an accused in circumstances where the judge thought a fair trial would not be possible if they were not disclosed. This approach is a targeted recalibration of the existing legislation, enhancing protections for victims while protecting the accused's constitutional right to a fair trial.

I would like to conclude by reiterating this Government's commitment to protecting vulnerable victims and to assure the Deputies of our dedication to this objective. Combatting do-

mestic, sexual, and gender-based violence is a core priority for this Government. At the heart of our efforts is the zero tolerance strategy, a comprehensive plan to shift societal attitudes, strengthen protections, and ensure survivors receive the justice and support they deserve. The Government is fully committed to implementing this strategy for 2022 to 2026, with a new national strategy set for 2027 to 2030. Zero tolerance means no form of abuse - physical, emotional, sexual, or coercive - will ever be ignored, excused, or accepted. It is about real change, not just in our laws but in our attitudes, institutions, and communities.

One of our key priorities is guaranteeing safe refuge and accommodation in every region of the country. The zero tolerance strategy commits to doubling the number of refuge spaces by the end of 2026. No one should ever feel they have nowhere to turn. Survivors deserve safe, supportive environments where they can rebuild their lives. Cuan, the statutory DSGBV agency, is working closely with front-line service providers, local authorities, the Department of housing, and the Housing Agency to accelerate the delivery of domestic violence refuges. We are investing in services to ensure that survivors can access the help they need, when and where they need it.

Under budget 2025, funding to tackle DSGBV has increased to €70 million. Since 2020, funding for these services has tripled. The Government has also increased funding for Cuan to almost €67 million, strengthening the resources needed to implement the zero tolerance strategy effectively. We recognise that DSGBV has a profound impact on children. That is why the Cabinet has approved legislation that will remove guardianship rights from those convicted of killing their partner or the other parent of their child. This should not be treated as a private legal dispute, it is a child protection issue that belongs firmly in the realm of public law. This legislation delivers on the programme for Government commitment to review guardianship rights in such cases and aligns with key recommendations from the study on familicide and domestic and family violence death reviews.

Our work to protect survivors does not stop here. We are working with An Garda Síochána to ensure that individuals can be informed of serious risks if their new partner has a history of domestic violence. This is about protecting individuals from harm, a matter that requires a careful, comprehensive legal approach to balance privacy with protection. We are dedicated to working with all relevant stakeholders to develop practical and effective solutions. While responding to violence is essential, prevention is equally critical. We must build a society based on respect, equality, and mutual understanding, starting with education. We are introducing new, age-appropriate educational programmes in schools focused on respect, consent, and healthy relationships. Young people must understand acceptable behaviour and feel empowered to challenge harmful attitudes.

Engaging men and boys is also crucial. We are working to challenge harmful gender stereotypes and promote positive models of masculinity to help break cycles of violence. We have made important strides in raising awareness. The responsibility for leading this work has moved to Cuan, who are at the forefront of these efforts. Their “Hardest Stories” campaign was recently launched, a powerful initiative breaking the silence around DSGBV and ensuring survivors feel heard, valued, and believed. Moving forward, we will continue to support these campaigns and ensure our work aligns with the Government’s broader priorities. We are fully committed to implementing practical, effective solutions that provide real protection and support for those who need it most. A zero-tolerance approach to DSGBV means addressing not just the violence itself, but the conditions that enable it. However, the work is far from over. We will not stop until every survivor has the safety, support, and justice they deserve.

12 June 2025

I reiterate to Deputy Coppinger that there is broad agreement on what her Bill is trying to achieve. The Minister has received legal advice that this Bill would not withstand a constitutional challenge. That is something the Minister has to take seriously. He is working on a method and solution to address this serious and worthy issue.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I thank Deputy Coppinger for this important Bill and acknowledge all the people in the Gallery. There is something deeply broken in how we treat survivors of sexual violence in this country. I am not just talking about the underfunded services or the months-long waiting lists, although they are a part of it. I am talking about what happens when somebody does everything we ask of them, when they survive, report and stand in a courtroom and tell their story. Then we tell them their private counselling notes, pages filled with their most intimate thoughts, fears and memories, might be handed over to the very people who are trying to tear their credibility apart. A Cheann Comhairle, the absolute antithesis of justice is the retraumatising of its victims. This is retraumatising by design. It is State-sanctioned cruelty. That is why I support Deputy Coppinger's Bill today.

Right now we allow defence teams in sexual offence cases to apply for access to survivors' therapy records, where people speak the unspeakable and finally try to process the violence inflicted upon them, where trust and safety are supposed to exist. We have decided that is fair game in a courtroom. We call ourselves a country that supports victims and believes in a trauma-informed system but those are just words in a press release if we cannot do the most basic thing, namely, protect the private thoughts of someone who has been violated. We do not subpoena someone's confession to a priest or demand to see the notes of a TD's therapist, but a rape survivor, apparently her words, feelings and her mind are available for dissection if it helps get someone off the hook. We tell women to report and to trust the system, and then we betray that trust in the most personal, invasive way possible.

We only have to listen to survivors like Hazel Behan and so many others who have spoken about the terror of knowing their words, written in a safe room, could be weaponised against them in court. It is State violence in another form. This Bill simply says "enough". It says we do not care more about the defence strategy than we do about someone's right to seek help and privacy. It says that counselling records are not evidence, they are sacred. I know some will raise concern about the issue of a fair trial but let us be honest. What is fair about a trial where the burden of proof is on the victim to prove what happened to him or her, and that makes such people hand over every page of their inner life just to be believed? What is fair about putting trauma on public display while the accused sit shielded by the presumption of innocence? There is this idea that the system is balanced. It is not. It is clearly tilted against survivors and anyone who does not come into the courtroom with power already in their back pocket. This Bill does not tip the scales too far the other way. It simply tries to make the balance a little less cruel.

Let us not pretend this is radical. It is by no means revolutionary. It is catching up to what survivors have asked for over and over again. This is us finally hearing what they have been saying, that their healing should never become part of someone else's defence. The real tragedy is that this even needs to be said, but it does. If we believe victims, then we should and must protect them, not just in posters or during awareness week but in legislation, in courtrooms and in every decision we make. I support the Bill and urge all Members to do so. We must stand with survivors to protect their right to heal in peace and finally say we will not turn their pain into someone else's legal strategy.

Deputy Máire Devine: Céad míle fáilte to all those in the Gallery, who are back again. I thank sincerely an Teachta Copping for bringing this Bill to the Dáil on Second Stage. Her dedication to survivors is quite clear in the legislation she authors and this should be recognised. I cannot say the same for the Government. To block this proposal is unsettling and one questions why. Due process, yes indeed, but as many of us will outline, due process can be achieved without tearing and ripping apart people's, in this case mostly women's and girls', private thoughts and private spaces. Why is the Minister of State saying that a well worded, well researched and well overdue Bill needs to wait at least another 12 months? As Sinn Féin's junior spokesperson on domestic and gender violence, I meet with many survivors who are all highly critical of the practice and legality of their counselling session notes being used in court settings. They universally described feeling violated and revictimised by the seizure of their private thoughts via their therapy notes. One woman whose abuser pleaded guilty immediately upon his arrest still had to wait two years before his sentencing hearings, and her counselling notes during those two years could have been subject to use in sentencing, even though there would be no trial. It does not make sense. There is no requirement that survivors be notified of their use so this woman would have been unexpectedly confronted by this in a sentencing hearing and the preparator gaining access to her intimate thoughts via those notes. She was so afraid of this likelihood that she decided to forgo seeking therapy all together until after the sentencing. She told me she felt severe retraumatisation by the justice system.

These survivors are often subject to victim blaming tactics from defence lawyers and allowing access to counselling notes further perpetuates this practice. Survivors need to feel secure that their healing journey is truly private and that therapy is a safe space for them to be completely honest, raw and open. This is the entire point of therapy. No one can progress without that total honesty to themselves in a safe space. As a psychiatric nurse, I know the pathway when I am referring constituents who come to me with this trauma. Recently a teenager, just gone 18, had trauma for several years in the context of being groomed for violation. Anyhow, we will not go into that here. I was telling her the pathway to counselling, what she should expect and all that sort of stuff but in the back of my mind there was always the niggle regarding whether I might be sending her down a road that could be more traumatic than what she had been talking to me about. I am very protective of her yet I know she needs to offload in a very safe space, to be, as I said, herself and to be able to speak freely. In the back of my mind, though, is this niggle about whether I might be allowing the perpetrator further sadistic-type gratification if he, and it usually is a he, were to get hold of such counselling notes. It is a question that makes me pause sometimes, and I should not have to do it and neither should any of the victims who seek help to survive. It is long overdue that we would eradicate the fear our justice system is imposing on brave survivors. Let us recognise counselling notes as a private and therapeutic space rather than as evidence.

The Minister of State outlined the violence against women and girls and so much that needs to be done, including so much legislation, by this Government and us as legislators. Deputy Copping has given the Government an almost perfect Bill. We are here to discuss it, amend it and do what needs doing to it, but we are not here to wait 12 months for it to happen. We need Valerie's law, Jennie's law, and child protection, but again we have been waiting and waiting. In the meantime, I am getting updates from Factiva every Monday of every case where a woman or a girl has been attacked or where there has been sentencing. It is growing in volume. Every Monday on Factiva, I am getting pages and pages of it. The service searches the Internet, the courts and everything. This type of crime just seems to be growing.

The attitude of young men is quite frightening. There is also the attitude of the contagion taking place, as we said about Ballymena and Larne, and about our own places in Dublin, including in Dublin 8, where young men are on the rampage. We need them by our side, as was said. We need men and boys too. There has to be more we can do in this regard, but it all seems to be waiting and waiting. I do not think we, them, boys, men, girls and women, have that time. I urge the Minister of State, therefore, to complete these actions sooner. It is a question of respect and care. Do we as a society actually respect survivors who often risk everything to come forward to seek justice? Do we care about the welfare of our fellow human beings? If we decide we do respect survivors and do care for them and for our society, we must ban the use of counselling notes in court settings in a robust manner that can withstand legal challenge.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this issue. I commend Deputy Coppinger on again highlighting this issue by bringing it here to the floor of the Dáil and, more importantly, by bringing forward this legislation because legislative change is required in this area. I acknowledge that the Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan, has recognised this to the point that he has said he plans to deal with this issue as part of the criminal law and civil law (miscellaneous provisions) Bill 2025, which the justice committee I chair will be shortly conducting pre-legislative scrutiny of. I have some fears, though, due to the remarks by the Minister of State. What the Government has done very well is set out what the problems may be in terms of a potential constitutional challenge. It has done this without actually dealing with the problems or setting out any of the resolutions. In fact, the Government has just said there is a problem and it is not going to deal with it at all. That is very regrettable.

It is also regrettable that rather than allowing this Bill proceed to Committee Stage, the Government has tabled a delaying amendment. It is bemusing because usually the Government puts forward an amendment proposing a delay of nine months. It is often known as the pregnancy amendment clause. The Government recognises it would be too crass to even suggest that so it is a 12-month delay on that basis. That is regrettable because I reiterate as the chair of the Oireachtas committee that will deal with this issue that we would welcome debates to address the issues the Government has said exist. That would be the most appropriate mechanism and forum for addressing any challenges that might present. This is because - and it has been said but it needs to be repeated - victims of rape and sexual violence have been very clear that the disclosure of counselling notes has been doubly traumatising for them. Very commendably, many victims have spoken about this publicly. They have waived their anonymity to set out in stark terms what the impact of this provision in law has meant for them. As legislators, we have an obligation to listen, hear and, more importantly, to act because clearly this is not an easy thing to do. It is a measure of the anger and frustration of the victims at how the disclosure of counselling notes has left them feeling.

Victims and survivors have spoken of it as a second violation, soul destroying and an invasion of privacy. For victims, the idea that their private counselling notes, where they talk about what happened to them, would be read to the perpetrator, the defence team, the prosecution and, even to be quite frank about it, the judge, significantly compounds the trauma they have experienced. Even without this provision, we should note that many victims and survivors are reluctant to even come forward and report what has happened to them because they often feel they are the ones who will be put on trial. The disclosure of counselling notes for many just simply confirms their fears about how the justice system treats victims of rape and sexual assault. To be fair to others, they have spoken about how they have not got counselling because they did not want to have their personal notes disclosed to the perpetrators and to the court. This then

delays their ability to rebuild their lives and work through the violence and trauma they have experienced. We need to understand this as legislators. We are being told there is a provision in our law that creates a situation where some victims either do not go to the counselling they need or do not go to court. This is a very big deal and we cannot just brush it off legally here.

I was struck by the argument regarding the value counselling notes could bring to a trial. It is not the victim's words; rather, it is the counsellor's record and, often, his or her views.

To go off on a tangent, I dealt with a family once whose young teenager was misdiagnosed by every health professional as having an eating disorder. Throughout the process, no one believed the child did not have an eating disorder. The child actually had a physical condition that was resulting in a loss of weight. Subsequently, the family received all the medical records and details through freedom of information requests. As part of that, the psychologists who the family met in hospital wrote in their notes to the effect that the child and family were in denial, etc. Imagine something like that being handed to a judge. In that instance, the psychologist involved was entirely wrong. In a defence team's hands, however, those notes would be used to destroy a legitimate case. We need to be mindful of that. We also need to be mindful that the majority of counsellors, psychologists and psychiatrists are good at their job and play a good and important role. They are telling us clearly that this, in their professional opinion, is dangerous and that there are implications as to it having a particular impact.

I welcome the visitors to Dáil Éireann, including those from the professions who deal with this issue at the coalface. Usually, we say to people in the Public Gallery that although they are welcome, they should not have to be here. In this instance, however, those present should be coming to the Oireachtas. We should be bringing them here to get their perspective on the experiences of the people they see in counselling sessions relating to the criminal justice system in order that we can learn and ensure we make the system better. It is virtually indisputable that we need to strengthen the entire justice system when it comes to the support it offers to victims and survivors, both in the context of the experience of dealing with the policing system and the Courts Service and the supports that are provided through the legal process and afterwards.

All of this needs to be premised on ensuring that the process does not add to the trauma. This should be the starting point when we are dealing with victims of any crime, but particularly cases of sexual assault, rape and gender-based violence. We must end the lengthy delays for rape and sexual assault cases that are forcing people to put their whole lives on hold for long periods. We have to improve communications and protections for victims and survivors when perpetrators are released, which is often a difficult and anxious time for many. This is just not considered in the law at all.

To speak on behalf of the members of the Joint Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, we have been clear that we wish to see some of the campaigners who have courageously spoken out on this issue, including the solicitors who have been proactive in respect of it, to be part of our pre-legislative scrutiny of the Minister's legislation. The greatest travesty would be if the Minister brings forward a legislative change that goes through the Houses, which can take time, and then, at the end, Deputy Coppinger ends up having to redraft her Bill and bring it back before the Dáil because the meaning of the Minister's legislation, in the context of the Judiciary, meant little difference to those people who have sent us a clear message that the system needs to change profoundly.

We have been given a challenge that tests all of our words, both Government and Opposi-

tion, and particularly those of the male Members of this House. While we have said that there will be zero tolerance, a sea change and so forth, we now have an opportunity whereby we can prove all of our utterances right. I appeal to the Minister of State, the senior Minister and all members of the Government to ensure that we do not waste this opportunity.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I welcome those in the Public Gallery to Dáil Éireann. I am sure Deputy Coppinger will agree that the reason we are all here is thanks to the activism and the loud voices of the people who are in the Gallery, as well as those who, unfortunately, were not able to be here today. I thank the Deputy for bringing forward this Bill. Hers has been an incredibly strong voice on this issue in the Chamber. This is the type of issue she has championed and continues to champion.

It is really horrific when we consider what we are talking about and what this Bill is trying to rectify. It is incredibly difficult, if I am honest, to put into words what I wish to say. I decided to speak to a friend of mine who is a therapist. She understands the practicalities of this issue and the impact it is having on her work and the people she meets. She told me that it takes such strength for people to come to therapy in the first place. No matter the issue a person is going to therapy about, it takes a huge amount of courage and strength to go to there. While it may be becoming more common in this State, it is a relatively new thing. In a situation where rape has occurred, it is particularly difficult to go to therapy and speak to someone. She also told me that the therapy is based on the concept of confidentiality. That has long been the fundamental concept of therapy. How can someone heal properly and fully if they feel they cannot speak fully about the experiences and their detrimental impact on their mental health? If people feel they cannot express themselves and outline their experiences in full, it slows the therapy process and can derail it entirely.

My friend also told me that it has a serious impact on the bond a therapist can have with the person attending therapy. That also has a huge impact if people believe that in going to therapy, their deepest thoughts, feelings, emotions and experiences can then be read out in court. It completely retraumatises a person if their deepest thoughts, experiences and emotions can be read out in court. I am sure the Minister of State can think of an experience where he has shared his deepest feelings and thoughts with a friend or family member, thoughts that are deeply traumatic. Imagine then that friend or family member taking notes that could be subsequently read out in a courtroom full of strangers. I hope he fundamentally agrees that such a situation would be extremely difficult, especially when we are talking about cases involving rape.

My friend told me that hearing those experiences and one's own words coming back can put a person physically and emotionally back in the place they were in. This has severe effects on their mental health and can set them back severely. There can be a deep feeling of isolation as a result. That is something we could all comprehend if we were in such a position. My friend also mentioned, as did my colleague Deputy Carthy and, potentially, others, that the real fear is that people will not go to court or that they will not go to therapy in order to get the benefit they need from doing so.

How easy is it to have ordinary medical records read out in court? In that light, why is it allowed in the case of psychological notes? I think it was an Teachta Coppinger who said earlier that this means it is clearly not a safe place for a client, even though that is what it is supposed to be.

There are often things in politics that you know will take a lot of time to sort, and you might

ask if there will be a real-life impact, but this is a Bill that will have a real-life impact on many people into future generations. I just cannot believe that the Government is not looking to progress this Bill. To be fair to Deputy Coppinger, she said that if the Bill needs to go through committee - obviously it needs to pass through Committee Stage - and be amended, so be it. The Government has armies of civil servants who can go through a piece of legislation and see how it can be amended. It is extremely regrettable that when we have the power to change things, this power would not be used. It is particularly shameful when we have a Gallery full of people who have used their voices loudly and clearly on this matter. In addition to those who are here, there are hundreds of people who could not make it here today. That we are here in this Chamber and not acting on it is an absolute disgrace.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Ar dtús, ba mhaith liom an Bille seo a mholadh don Teach. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta Coppinger as ucht é a chur faoi bhráid na Dála.

I would also like to welcome all of those in the Gallery who made the journey to Leinster House today to hear the debate on this very important legislation. I met a couple of people I know outside, including a constituent who is a therapist and a proud advocate and member of Therapists Against Harm. I also met a survivor of sexual assault who is here with her mam. All three of them are women. All those women and their comrades are very welcome to their Dáil here tonight.

Right now, the situation in our courts is that survivors of rape and sexual abuse can have their private counselling notes dragged into court and read by the very person who sexually abused them. The Minister of State should think about that. After surviving something so deeply personal, so violating, they are being told to hand over the most vulnerable parts of themselves - their inner thoughts and fears - again, and for what? To be doubted and humiliated and for those facts to be dissected again. Counselling and therapy is something that is very intimate and personal. It is supposed to be a safe place where people can communicate their anxieties, fears and hopes. In the context of someone having to endure the horrifying and traumatic experience of sexual assault, people feel this is the only place where they can be truly honest and candid about their experiences and feelings. When you are sitting there in the counselling room, the only person your therapist cares about is you. Most victims of sexual abuse are women. Women are mainly the empaths and the carers in society. We are mummies, sisters and daughters. We are always thinking about how the attack that happened to us affected our families and our friends.

It is unbelievable to have a place where you do not have to worry about what other people think, and where you are not judged. When it is just you and the counsellor, you can be your complete and honest self. You know that how you are expressing yourself might upset people you love, so the therapy session is a place where you are fully safe, where your guard can come down and where you do not have to worry. It is the first time that many women feel the worries of the world are off their shoulders. The Minister of State would be surprised if he knew how many women he knows have suffered some kind of a sexual attack in various degrees but he does not know that about them. It is absolutely shameful to think that people would then be told that their trust will be completely betrayed. Nobody should have any access to those sessions and to those notes. The idea that the perpetrator can read someone's personal private counselling notes, where they talk about the trauma they have endured, is extremely unsettling for many women. We have heard how so many of them believe that this means reliving what they have already suffered through. The women who are here tonight have taken the brave decision to wave their anonymity specifically to campaign for change in relation to the disclo-

sure of counselling notes, and I commend them. Now is the time for us, as their legislators and representatives in the Dáil, to support them.

I acknowledge that Deputy Carthy, as Chair of the justice committee, has made it clear that Sinn Féin wants the voices of victims and campaigners to be at the heart of the pre-legislative scrutiny process. This Bill can go through. It may not happen in a year, even without the one-year delay. It will take at least that for the hearings and the pre-legislative scrutiny. The Minister can have his team of lawyers working on his own Bill if that is what he wants.

It is imperative that this Bill protects victims of rape and sexual assault from further trauma during the legal process to secure justice for those affected. Counselling is a place for healing. These sessions must not be used as courtroom ammunition. The right to a fair trial is critical. An Teachta Coppinger has said that she would fight to the death for the right to a fair trial but that fairness does not mean we turn a blind eye to power imbalance. It does not mean survivors should have to choose between seeking help and seeking justice. We can and we must protect both justice and dignity. We need a judicial system that works for survivors, not against them. I know the Minister is working on his own Bill but he should be prepared to listen to an Teachta Coppinger and to the witnesses that Deputy Carthy has said he intends to invite to the justice committee for pre-legislative scrutiny.

The purpose of this Bill is to right a wrong. When I was outside the Dáil earlier, one of the survivors said that when the Constitution was written they were not thinking about women at all. This is an opportunity to right a wrong that is in the Constitution if the Minister of State says that this Bill is unconstitutional. I ask him to listen to the women he works with and the women in his life. Blocking this Bill is just more of the power imbalance. As an Teachta Coppinger said, the notes of the therapist are actually hearsay. This is third-person or third-party information. It should not be before any court of law.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome our guests in the Gallery. I know that some of them have spoken out publicly about this. Sometimes, that is not very easy to do. I welcome the fact that they are here. Hopefully, with their support and that of others we can get legislation in place. I hope it is this Bill. I hope we do not have to wait for 12 months or two years or any longer, because this is overdue. I thank Deputy Coppinger for bringing forward the Criminal Law (Prohibition of the Disclosure of Counselling Records) Bill 2025. The Bill is very welcome and way overdue because of the sheer number of serious cases of rape and murder that are being prosecuted through the courts. We have had the Satchwell case in recent weeks. Today we have new steps being taken with the investigation into the case of Annie McCarrick. We know of other cases of missing persons, such as JoJo Dullard. Numerous people over the years have been raped and murdered. We need to start getting to grips with it as a society.

As the previous speaker said, this is about righting a wrong. These people, mainly women, go through a trauma and then they go through a trial. Victims have told me how difficult that was for them, with the adversarial nature of it. The courtroom is a very adversarial place. Some Members of the House are lawyers. I am not but I have witnessed some court cases. It is a very adversarial place to be and can be very difficult, particularly around sensitive issues like this, with abuse or rape. There were victims of abuse in institutions, including a lot of young men. We have had the awful rape of and violence against women. A lot of that has happened within marriage, partnerships and what is termed the family home.

When this was first discussed in recent years, in my innocence as a layperson I could not be-

lieve counselling notes would be dragged up in court and a person humiliated and traumatised. It is shocking. I could not understand and fathom it.

I have been contacted by women and a couple of men who have asked me to support the Bill. Some have told me their stories, which are shocking. One young man, who I will call Damien, is an alleged victim of serious sexual abuse as a child. He went for counselling, which helped him. In many cases, counselling prevents people from engaging in self-harm or ending their lives. The case involving him and others will come to court in the next year or two. The thought of the counselling notes being read out in court is shocking. It is absolutely terrible.

We cannot have counselling without confidentiality. That is the only way it can happen. We are retraumatising victims through the disclosure of counselling notes during the trial process. Counselling has to be a safe space, but once notes are disclosed, that is compromised. People will either not go to counselling or will not disclose everything. That is a fact. I certainly would not. If I were a victim, I would not go near counselling if I thought my counselling notes would be used in court. It is absolutely shocking. The disclosure of counselling notes or records completely undermines the whole basis of the process and can only be used to browbeat victims in court. I see defence in court doing that. The importance of the privacy of counselling for recovery and saving lives cannot be overstated. Anything else will deter victims.

The Minister of State said the Office of the Attorney General pointed out there is a constitutional right to a trial in due course of law and there is a duty on the prosecution to ensure the appropriate disclosures take place. This is not an appropriate disclosure. I would like to see that tested in court. I do not think any sane person could argue in favour of that. I would like to see somebody put forward the argument that this is an appropriate disclosure. What is appropriate about disclosing counselling notes? These are the victim's notes and the trial is about the perpetrator being on trial, not about the victim being on trial. I would like that tested in a court of law.

The previous Minister, the Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy McEntee, promised, as I recall, to right this wrong. That has not happened. A lot of progress has been made. Legislation has been passed to give protection to victims. As I said, victims are predominantly women. For example, Coco's Law contains serious penalties, and rightly so, for anybody who thinks of sharing what could be classed as intimate images. It is mainly men who do it, but women may also do it. That law is important and I welcome that we now have it in place.

As I said, the previous Minister said she would address this. It is in the programme for Government. The Minister of State has said the Government wants to delay the Bill for a year. What is wrong with letting it go to Committee Stage, where it can be amended, and trusting the House to fix it, along with the parliamentary legal team, the Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers? What is to stop us from doing that?. This is an excuse to bat this back.

The Government needs to be more open. The Government often asks the Opposition for our solutions. Here is a solution being put forward to right a wrong, as was said earlier. The Government should be more open. We need to get away from the belief that, because something is not a Government Bill, the Government will not support it. Sometimes the Government brings forward stuff that is positive and the Opposition supports it. It needs to work both ways. I hope we can have a speedy passage of legislation to deal with this.

On gender-based and domestic violence, the Minister of State mentioned that one of the key

priorities of the Government is guaranteeing safe refuge and accommodation in every region in the country. He referred to zero tolerance. I agree with him. I do not think anybody would disagree with him. I live in a county where there is no refuge. I did not have as many grey hairs on my head when I first started talking about this issue. I have lost count of the number of Ministers I have raised this with. We need refuges in the nine counties that do not have them. In my county, Laois, people who are victims of domestic violence and their children have to be shipped off 60, 70 or 80 miles to Longford, Limerick or somewhere, in many cases, which is scandalous. They are away from their families and children are away from school. They are away from their GP and family support. We cannot continue doing this. We have to be able to do things more quickly.

We have to go through a lot of jigs and reels to get anything moving. It is like moving a glacier and is the one thing that is frustrating in this country. I realise we have to do things right and I am not talking about doing things in a slapdash manner, but it takes significant time to move things. It is like rolling a huge stone up the top of the hill and, every time you are nearly at the top, the stone pushes you halfway back down and you have to start all over again. Those centres need to be in place. I ask the Minister of State to bring this matter back to Government. The Cabinet needs to fast-track refuge provision.

I have spoken to the county council about a refuge. Councillor Caroline Dwane Stanley has raised this issue consistently at county council level. We need to get this moving. In the case of Laois, a site has been selected and, as far as I know, the money has been approved. We need to get things moving. Heads need to be knocked together.

We cannot have victims of abuse being shipped off with their young children, in many cases 60, 70 or 80 miles away from everything. It makes life worse for them. Not having anywhere to go stops people from leaving abusive situations. Sometimes people go back to a situation. I saw that happen with somebody in my extended family, a second cousin, who kept returning and we could not understand why. I understand now because it was the 1970s and there was nowhere for the person to go. It is now 2025 and we still do not have refuges. We need to fix that.

Let the Bill go through, amend it on Committee Stage and get on with getting the legislation in place. We should give this priority. The promissory note was passed here one night when we sat until, I recall, 5 o'clock in the morning to bail out the banks. Bailing out the banks might have been important, but this is more important in terms of sorting out people's lives and helping them.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I thank Deputy Coppinger once again for raising this important issue and all Members of the House who contributed to the discussion. I assure Deputies that I have listened very carefully to their contributions and will convey their views to the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan.

Violence against women is an epidemic in our society. We are all aware of the chilling statistics. One in every two women has experienced sexual violence, according to the 2022 sexual violence study by the CSO. These crimes are pervasive and under-reported and demand a societal response. I empathise with the aims of the Private Members' Bill. Those who seek counselling after a sexual violation are seeking healing and a safe space to recover from their trauma. Criminal trials are difficult for victims, and the use of their personal counselling notes in such trials can be extremely distressing. This Government is determined to create a victim-

centred justice system where survivors can feel safe and supported throughout the process.

However, a blanket ban on the use of counselling notes is not the solution. Banning the disclosure of counselling records entirely would mean challenges to convictions. Convictions would be overturned if the courts were to find the accused's right to a fair trial had been compromised. The Attorney General has advised that the proposal is unlikely to survive constitutional challenge. All of this would undermine the interests of the victims.

It is for this reason the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, intends to press forward with targeted amendments to section 19A. These amendments would be brought before the House in due course for discussion with Members. It is for this reason the Government is putting forward the timed amendment which I moved earlier. This will allow the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, to consider and bring forward provisions relating to counselling records. As I have already outlined, these provisions will ensure that counselling notes are only used in criminal trials where this is absolutely necessary. This will balance the right of the victim to privacy with the right of the accused to a fair trial. It is a difficult but necessary balancing of rights, which we are called upon as legislators to undertake.

I did not do so earlier, and I want to acknowledge those in the Gallery who are sitting above me. They include counsellors, professionals and survivors. I want to say to them that we do not make this amendment lightly. I know there are survivors here who clearly have met with many Deputies and shared their experiences. There are also counsellors. What is clearly coming across from the debate today is that there is a fear that counsellors will not be able to do their job in an effective way if this practice continues. This is why the Minister is looking at a method and a way to address this.

I thank the Members for their contributions. They were very heartfelt and informative. Because of their discussions with survivors, they have outlined the stress and trauma they feel, especially when the perpetrator has an opportunity to go through their deepest thoughts in the counselling notes. That must be absolutely chilling for survivors. Deputy Cronin mentioned the safe space that survivors should find themselves in when they go to these counselling sessions and how effective they can be. Obviously, this element of our law creates difficulty with regard to the session being the safe space that it should be. I appreciate this. Deputy Stanley made a point on the provision of refuges nationwide. His is not the only county, I would imagine, with the experience he outlined but the intention is absolutely there to ensure there are refuges throughout the country.

This particular Bill has been deemed challenging from a constitutional point of view. I want to read from my script because this is not dismissing it, it is the Minister taking the advice of the Attorney General, which is something he is compelled to do. It states, "The Attorney General's Office advises that this Bill creates an absolute carve-out for counselling records which almost inevitably breaches Article 38.1". We speak about letting it go to Committee Stage for amendments. The Bill carves out counselling, which is deemed unconstitutional.

I want Members and those in the Gallery to know that the Minister and the Department are dedicated to trying to resolve this issue. I know the Minister has met some survivor organisations and absolutely intends to meet more. This will be the case. I appreciate the comments from Members in particular and the feedback, and I will feed that back to the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: We should register that it is poor the Minister is not here himself. No offence to the Minister of State but it is also poor that he is not even in the area of justice. He is in the Department of heritage and housing, I believe. This does not send a good message.

What the Minister of State has read out is even more disappointing than I thought it was going to be. Listen to what the Minister is saying; he is saying that “Elevating the rights of a victim of an alleged sexual offence in this way inevitably comes at the cost of defence rights and trial in due course of law.” Elevating the rights of a victim costs the defence? I have had the suspicion all along that this Minister is really not getting it and is really not that particularly interested in gender-based violence but is more focused on migration and chartered flights and all of that. This is barrister speak. One of the problems we have is that the Minister is soaked in the courts system. Inevitably, he will go along with what has always been the way.

The other thing that is particularly scary is the part of the speech which states, “It is essential for the purpose of a fair trial that the prosecution disclose all relevant material within its possession, power or procurement to the defence.” Obviously we all agree that all relevant materials should be being handed over. Counselling notes are not relevant material. This is the point we are making. To have these things just regurgitated back shows there is no development whatsoever in Fianna Fáil or the Government on the issue of violence against women and gender non-conforming people; it really does.

We have to say it is brilliant we have therapists here. It is brilliant we have had such activism on this issue. This has to be the start of a movement. We have to learn the lesson that any time anything has ever changed it has never come from within the system; it has always been through pressure from outside, through movements and grassroots campaigns, as we saw with repeal, marriage equality, gender recognition, the water charges and the defeating of austerity measures.

The Minister of State spoke about balance in his speech. What balance? Gender-based violence is practically a non-prosecuted crime. If we add up the statistics, the reporting is so minuscule and then there is the attrition rate of people who drop out while they wait the four to five years for their case to come to court. They go through all the barriers, and there are so many barriers that we cannot even imagine, and they get through them, and then potentially their therapy can be used. It is an non-prosecuted crime. There is no balance to be rejigged towards the defence. It is really bad to hear these tropes again and again.

The Minister of State said we cannot have a blanket ban. Why not? These things should not even be in the equation. The Minister of State spoke about putting it into the hands of a judge. Why should it be in the hands of judge? We have seen many judges come out with dreadful rulings. Let us talk real. We saw Natasha O’Brien. She wanted to come this evening but because of the debate being put back until later she could not do so. She was ready to be here tonight. Natasha O’Brien had to speak out about the judge after her case.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: No, that is a fact. The idea that judges are always right and should have arbitration on this is not right. I do not agree with giving all power to a judge.

I thank the Sinn Féin Deputies who have stayed and contributed to the debate on a Thursday evening. It is a pity there were not more parties. How many more women and people, because we had male victims in the Gallery when First Stage of the Bill was taken, will have to suf-

fer this during the year we are waiting for the Minister? A year is a disgrace. Why would the Government put a stop on my Bill for a year? It shows it is not serious about moving on this quickly, as has already been said.

I do not accept that our Constitution is such a problem to everything because I do not think therapy notes were in any way ever considered. As I have said, up until this week, a ban on evictions was unconstitutional. It was done during the pandemic and now it can be extended in rent pressure zones. I want to give an example. Jacqueline, the sister of Clodagh Hawe, has written a book. In this book she writes about her sister and her nephews, who were the victims of the most heinous crime. According to her, a priest had a lot of information about the crime because he had had private conversations with the perpetrator. That priest was never compelled by anyone, any court, any garda or whoever, to disclose that information. Never; which was very upsetting for the family. That is not unconstitutional but somebody's private therapy notes are. By the way, they are third-party so how are they relevant? There are so many ways that, if the Minister and the Government had any political will, they could make this be ruled out of order. The priest is grand and he will be left at it but the victim of a crime has to give full disclosure.

This is extremely disappointing. There is a shameful record in this country of dealing with gender-based violence. I know the Minister of State spent a lot of the speech outlining all of the great things he says the Government has done but when we boil it down people still have to wait years for a trial.

8 o'clock

They then have to run the gauntlet of victim-blaming. They do not have their own independent representation. Character references and all sorts can be wheeled up, all of which are completely traumatising. We have just seen this week how this State has not taken violence against women seriously, even in how it looks for missing women. That has to never happen again, that women are missing for 30 years and that a disappearance is then upgraded to a murder trial. The record in this country of dealing with women, from mother and baby homes to institutions and through victim-blaming in courts has been horrendous.

The chair of the justice committee has appealed to the Government to allow this to go forward in order that we can bring the therapists in and hear what they have to say, as opposed to having them caged behind the glass of the Public Gallery. We should question them and listen to their experience of having to operate under this law. We should bring in survivors and organisations who have views. We should bring in the Judiciary as well. I would be very interested in hearing why it thinks this is so necessary to maintain.

Let this Bill go forward. Let it go to Committee Stage. The justice committee is only waiting to act on this. If the Government does not let the Bill proceed, is it planning any legislation at all regarding gender-based violence? It does not seem to be a priority whatsoever. The Government's attitude is pedestrian. It is extremely disappointing that people have had to campaign and campaign. Any survivor with whom I have spoken and has heard this Bill is blocked is shocked. They are absolutely and utterly shocked and very disappointed. Even if they accepted that there were issues with it, they would have thought it would have gone forward and moved to the next Stage, where those things can be addressed.

I thank all the people who have come here from around the country. Keep lobbying your

12 June 2025

TDs all week to not accept this. Let people vote and have a free vote on a matter of conscience. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael TDs stood in this Chamber a year ago after survivors testified and said that this should be outlawed - we know they agree with what I am saying. Please keep the pressure on TDs until we get change. We will fight to ensure that no person has to go through this misogyny in our courts system ever again.

Amendment put.

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time next week.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 8.03 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 17 Meitheamh 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 8.03 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 17 June 2025.