



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 24 Meitheamh 2025

Tuesday, 24 June 2025

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

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

Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil

An Ceann Comhairle: Before we start proceedings, I break with tradition to extend a warm welcome to a very special cohort of young people. With the help of the Little Blue Heroes Foundation, we have four honorary gardaí looking in on us today from home and seven honorary gardaí present with us in the Gallery. Those looking in from home are Shane Hearne, Lennon Shanahan, Lucy O'Shea and Holly Carroll. Hopefully, we will greet them here another day. In the Gallery with us are Joey Moss, Hayden Smith Kirwan, Connell Dunne, Skyler Sheehan, Amelia Sexton, Jack Fitzgerald and Roisin Crowe, whom we met earlier. I thank them all for joining us today. I hope they are having a great day because they truly are an inspiration to us all. I also welcome all the other children and visitors in the Gallery. Finally, I must not forget to thank the adult gardaí who are accompanying the honorary gardaí.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Cuirim fáilte roimh na Little Blue Heroes. We are in very safe hands with outstanding people like them. I thank them for being here.

Households continue to be hammered left, right and centre by soaring prices with no let-up. With extortionate rent, big electricity and gas bills, high fuel prices, unaffordable childcare and runaway insurance premiums, prices are out of control. Workers and families are squeezed and forced to live week to week. They ask themselves when all of this will stop because they cannot keep up.

Nowhere is all of this clearer than when it comes to the weekly shop. A report published today by PwC found that 70% of Irish customers are extremely worried by the cost of food. This is just the latest in a series of reports confirming what people already know, which is that food prices are through the roof. Let us take a look at some of the basics. According to the CSO, in the past year alone, a pound of butter has gone up €1, a kilo of Irish cheddar cheese has gone up

57 cent and 2 l of milk has gone up 27 cent. Writing in *The Irish Times* last week, Conor Pope found that, according to figures provided to “Pricewatch”, a kilo of chicken that cost €4.99 in 2022 now costs €11. That is just crazy. Many households are paying €3,000 a year more in the supermarket than they were in 2021. It is little wonder that families are finding it harder and harder to put food on the table and, in some cases, are cutting back on basics. People now feel serious pressure and anxiety as they push their trolleys to the checkout.

In May 2023, the Taoiseach’s colleague the Minister of State, Deputy Neale Richmond, told the public that he had this situation under control. He puffed out his chest, called in the big supermarket chains and declared that they had just six weeks to get prices down. That was 110 weeks ago. Clearly the Minister of State failed to exert any real pressure on those retailers because he was duly and unceremoniously ignored and things have only gotten worse for customers at the checkouts. That was it. That single limp intervention was the entirety of the Government’s effort to tackle runaway food prices. The Government could not get the job done so it just walked away and left households to feel the pain.

It seems the Government’s latest plan is to do absolutely nothing, to stick its head in the sand and allow people to be ripped off week in and week out. So out of touch is the Taoiseach’s Government that it digs in and refuses to bring forward supports to help hard-pressed households deal with these out-of-control prices. Its message to workers and families under enormous pressure is that they are on their own.

Tá praghsanna bia tar éis ardú go hard na spéire. Tá imní ar theaghlaigh gach seachtain nuair a théann siad chun siopadóireachta. Caithfidh an Rialtas a ghníomhú chun daoine a chosaint ó na costais ollmhóra seo.

Was it all just bull and bluster when the Government called in the big supermarket chains two years ago? Will the Taoiseach do anything at all to tackle soaring food prices? How on earth is it that he refuses to consider any cost-of-living supports when people are under such pressure just to make ends meet?

The Taoiseach: I join with the Ceann Comhairle in welcoming our special guests from County Tipperary, our Little Blue Heroes, who have come to watch proceedings here in the Dáil. They had a busy morning. They had a Garda escort and were greeted by the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, Deputy Jim O’Callaghan, the Ceann Comhairle and Deputy Michael Murphy. I was delighted to attend the Little Blue Heroes ball in Killarney earlier this month. I thank the organisation and all those who support it for the extraordinary work they do for children and families. I pay a particularly warm tribute to An Garda Síochána. This entire charity emanated from a number of gardaí and retired gardaí. Their volunteerism and commitment are second to none. They reflect the degree to which An Garda Síochána is embedded in every community in this country. We are fortunate and thanks be to God An Garda Síochána is so embedded because it gives us the police force we have.

The Government is very conscious of price increases and the cost of living more generally. Even though inflation has fallen and is down to 2%, the bottom line is that the elevated level of inflation, arising out of the post-Covid situation and the war on Ukraine, has meant that food prices are very high. That is acknowledged.

We have provided substantial support over recent budgets, which were decried by the Opposition, with significant financial support to households and businesses. The Think-tank for

Action on Social Change, TASC, published its annual report today. It found that the temporary cost-of-living supports such as the pandemic unemployment payment, energy credits and lump-sum welfare payments played a critical role in reducing poverty risk among vulnerable households and that without those interventions Ireland's at-risk-of-poverty rate would have increased to 13% in 2022 and 14% in 2023. Instead it fell to 10.6% and 11.7%, respectively. The supports we brought in were effective for their time without any question.

We have made it clear that budget 2026 will focus on measures that are sustainable and maintainable in the long term, with a particular focus on child poverty, disability and, of course, housing. In addition to those cost-of-living measures we have brought in, last April we extended the VAT reduction to 9% on gas and electricity and maintained the reduction on others. That has benefited households by about €70 each for gas and €55 each for electricity. That is further supported by the 40% reduction in the renewable electricity public service obligation levy for 2025 and 2026 announced on 14 June by the Minister, Deputy O'Brien.

From 1 June, women will receive hormone replacement therapy, HRT, free of charge. From September 2025, free school books will be extended to all students in post-primary schools. That was a major measure that the Deputy ignored completely in her presentation. All primary schools are eligible for free hot school meals. These are significant measures that are long term and that have had a real benefit in terms of bringing down costs. Free public transport for children, including those aged five to eight, will be introduced later this year. We have also acted to shield workers from a higher tax burden by adjusting income tax credits and bands in successive budgets. We are a significant importer of energy and food produce and that has resulted in significant additional costs associated with transport, logistics and our small market size. The Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, has engaged with the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission to engage with the industry and provide an up-to-date assessment of it.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Some 70% of people are concerned about food prices. That is what I am raising with the Taoiseach. I gave him some examples earlier; let me give him some more CSO data. Over five years, the price of sugar has gone up by 54%; fillets of cod, 55%; pork sausages, 21%; lamb, 48%; and spaghetti, 46%. This is the reality people face every week when they go to the supermarket to do their shop. People tell us the kind of pressure that is putting on them and they rightly expect that the Government will intervene. I ask quite simply, in respect of people's grocery bills, their weekly shop, what does the Government propose to do? Was it just bluster or was it just performative two years ago when the Minister of State summoned in the big supermarket chains and told them what was what? Nothing changed. People are still to the pin of their collar. I would like the Taoiseach to be clear. What does he propose to do now in respect of soaring costs and prices that are causing real pressure for families across the country?

The Taoiseach: We will deal with this issue in the budget, but consumer price inflation, as measured by the European Union harmonised index of consumer prices, HICP index, has eased significantly over the past two years, with the annual inflation rate in May 2025 standing at 1.4% compared with 2% in May of last year. That is below the 2% target rate of inflation set by the ECB. In April, Ireland had the sixth lowest rate of inflation among the 27 EU countries, which is quite a remarkable outcome given the strength of domestic economic activity here *vis-à-vis* other European countries.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Does the Taoiseach do a weekly shop?

The Taoiseach: Additionally, with inflation expected to grow by 2% this year, nominal wage growth-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Obviously not.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Clearly he does not.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond without interruption.

The Taoiseach: -----is set to reach 5.5%. That will result in real wage growth of between 3% and 3.5% this year. When inflation was high, we did not have that to offset it. We now have it at significant levels. That is an effective way of dealing with this issue, in addition to the measures we will take in the budget to deal with that.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Does the Taoiseach do his weekly shop? No, he does not.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I give a warm welcome the Little Blue Heroes who are with us in Leinster House today or watching online. I commend the gardaí involved in the organisation. I hope they have a pleasant day with us.

This week, primary school children across the country will be released from school for their summer holidays. They will wave goodbye to teachers, SNAs and classrooms and put away their schoolbags and books until after the holidays but some children will have very little to look forward to this summer. The latest statistics on homelessness will be released on Friday. As it stands, in Ireland today, 4,775 children are recorded as homeless. This figure is likely to go up on Friday, as it has done consistently since a Fianna Fáil Minister lifted the eviction ban in 2023. Those children in homelessness face a very different prospect to their peers this summer. They do not have forever homes. Some entire families are sharing one room in a homeless hub, hotel or hostel. Their children have no room to play or grow. Their parents face an awful situation, often forced to make really difficult choices.

Yesterday, I visited a dog shelter. There, I heard from staff who told me about the anguish faced by families forced to give up beloved family pets because they are entering homelessness. I met one family dog and a litter of little puppies. Her owners were desperate to keep her but could not because they had received notice to quit. Dublin City Council anticipates that the cost of housing people in emergency accommodation will increase by €35 million this year. Spending has more than trebled in the past decade, which is demand driven. Spending on emergency accommodation is increasing because more people and, shamefully, more children are being left without a home. They have been failed by the State. They have been failed by this Government. The cost of that failure is more than just monetary. I think we are all aware of the immense human cost of families forced to give up pets, move into one room and of children whose lives are curtailed in this way. The consequences of allowing children to be left without a home are disastrous for the individual families and households and for our entire social order. The Government is not offering any prospect of hope to families facing notices to quit. Its policies are tolerating the intolerable. Notices of termination are the biggest driver of homelessness in Dublin, representing 32% of all those presenting as homeless in 2023 and 42% in 2024, a 10% increase in one year. The Government is offering nothing to families in this scenario. We in the Labour Party offered a homeless families Bill which would oblige authorities to prioritise the needs of children as members of families, not just treating them as dependents of homeless adults.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Eight years ago.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: There is a consensus across housing charities that this would make a difference to families. For years, successive housing Ministers have delayed on this Bill.

An Ceann Comhairle: Taoiseach to respond, please.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: When will the Government start treating child homelessness like the emergency it is?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this very important issue. I take issue with the term “released” from school. Children these days enjoy school and have very good experiences in our schools but they are going out to enjoy the summer holidays. Through many other avenues of government, we will endeavour to give supports to children throughout the summer holidays. More specifically, the issue of homelessness is key. A key strategy is to shorten the time any family experiences emergency accommodation and ensure they can receive social housing. We have built more social houses in the past four years than in the previous 40 years. The increase in building of social housing and the provision of social housing through other mechanisms has increased exponentially. That is a key way of dealing with homelessness. The housing first programme is also key. It was recommended strongly a number of years ago by the homeless agencies. There are now 1,000 tenancies for homeless people with complex health and social needs, with further significant numbers planned for 2025 and that is a very important intervention. We have no issue with examining the Labour Party’s legislation, although is the Deputy suggesting those who are perhaps on the list for eight or nine years? A balance always has to be struck between those on the homeless list *vis-à-vis* those who have been on the social list for quite considerable lengths of time and have an entitlement as a social house as well. What will be key is increasing the number of social houses we build and doing it consistently over the next decade and more. The building of social houses has already had an impact on the social housing lists in many cities and local authority areas and also on the issue of homelessness itself by reducing the length of time people experience in emergency accommodation.

An eviction ban would actually be regressive in terms of supply. Ultimately we need more supply of homes and housing. The Housing Commission made it clear the Oireachtas’s approach to the rental market over the past four years was too interventionist. That is what it more or less said. I am sorry; “reactive” might be the word the commission used. The result was a dampening of supply into the market, thereby exacerbating the situation. We cannot endorse policies that would make the supply situation much worse and by definition make the homelessness issue much worse. That needs to be acknowledged also.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: First, I should reassure the Taoiseach and any school staff watching that of course I was using the word “released” in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek fashion. Our schools are generally very happy places, children are generally very happy to receive an education and we have excellent school staff across the country.

On a more serious note, what I am hearing from the Taoiseach and his Government is nothing that offers any reassurance to families who wish to be realised from homelessness. That is the sad reality. The Taoiseach’s Government is offering no hope to people. The Labour Party put forward the homeless families Bill eight years ago. In that time the number of children in homelessness has almost doubled and there is no sense of urgency or ambition from Government. Maybe the Taoiseach should look back at his party’s past. In the 1960s Fianna Fáil en-

sured State intervention directly in the delivery of homes through the National Building Agency under Seán Lemass. There were lots of issues with that, but certainly there was no difficulty with having a State-led focus on delivery of homes, and that is what we in the Labour Party have called for. Let the State, through local authorities-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: -----and the LDA and a State-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy Bacik.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: -----construction company deliver homes again at the scale children in homelessness so desperately need.

The Taoiseach: Over the last five years since Fianna Fáil came back into government we have built close to 48,000 social houses - delivered. That is the most in 40 years. You would have to go back to the 1970s to get that level of social housing construction, but we need more because the population has increased. That is a factor in this. The composition of those presenting for homelessness and emergency accommodation has also changed. It is much more complex than perhaps the immediate understanding of the term or the experience of homelessness today. There is a European context to it which is very real now and there is a blurring of a lot of distinctions as well in terms of entitlements and so forth, so we have to be very clear-eyed about that. We are treating this as an emergency and as urgent and we are doing everything we can through local authorities-----

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

The Taoiseach: -----and through the approved housing bodies and those involved in the homelessness area to address this issue.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: I, too, welcome the Little Blue Heroes and the gardaí and commend everyone involved in that.

Listening to the Taoiseach’s answers I wonder does he get it at all. He was presented with the stark reality people face in terms of grocery prices and he rattled off a list of numbers and inflation rates rather than acknowledging the real difficulties people are facing when they do their weekly shop. I do not know if the Taoiseach even notices or acknowledges the problems people are facing. Some 70% of people are either very worried or extremely worried about food prices. Will the Taoiseach even acknowledge that? Many families are now spending an extra €3,000 per year on their grocery and shopping bills and prices are still increasing. Anyone doing their weekly shopping recently will have noticed prices again beginning to soar. Does the Taoiseach even acknowledge that reality for people? We are talking about parents who are working really hard all week, and who are going without meals so they can feed their children. We are talking about pensioners who have to leave items behind on the checkout that they can no longer afford. We are talking about families scrimping and saving just so they can get by. No one should be going hungry. No one should be having to skip meals to feed their children and no pensioner should be worried about keeping food on the table. We are talking about the basics here; what it costs just to survive in this country. Buying the essentials of milk, butter, pasta and bread now costs more than it ever has before. The level of stress and anxiety this is causing families is growing.

Soaring food prices are something the Government promised to address. It is now more than two years since the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, organised his meeting with grocery retailers to discuss runaway prices. What happened was that meeting was a talking shop convened for optics. He turned up, wagged his finger and everyone went home. Grocery prices are higher now than they ever have been, so if the Minister of State thinks that was a success it certainly has not been. We all have suspicions that we are being ripped off and price-gouged in this country when it comes to grocery prices, but there is no way to prove it because we do not have full transparency when it comes to supermarket profits.

People are handing more than €10 billion per year to supermarkets to buy food for their families, so why is there not full transparency about profits? Supermarket chains are not required to publish detailed and full accounts about their profits. Given that people have to buy food, there is no choice in this. Why is this not a requirement for all supermarket retailers and chains? There is a simple answer to this. He could act. I am asking him if he will act to require all supermarket chains and retailers to do this. I do not want diversionary answers here or distractions. It is a simple question. I want him to answer the question.

The Taoiseach: The question is?

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: Well, if the Taoiseach were listening, the question was whether is he going to act-----

The Taoiseach: Am I going to-----

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: -----to ensure all supermarket chains have to declare their profits in full detail.

The Taoiseach: First of all, I say to the Deputy that he has a tremendous habit of asserting what I said earlier, which of course I did not say at all.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: How would you know? You were not listening.

The Taoiseach: I did not rattle off any figures when I was answering Deputy McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Yes, you did.

Deputy Louise O’Reilly: You can hear him on the record.

The Taoiseach: I did not. What I said was, I outlined what TASC, the Think-tank for Action on Social Change, said in its publication today. That is not rattling off figures. It basically said that the short-term, once-off cost-of-living packages that we introduced had a very significant impact in helping people to deal with what has been the worst inflationary spiral since the 1970s, which we had after Covid and as a result of the energy crisis resulting from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Those things did happen and there was an inflationary spiral, which we are still experiencing. The Government interventions were probably the most significant across Europe in terms of scale and impact-----

Deputy Rory Hearne: Not true.

The Taoiseach: -----but they still did not go to meet the enormity of the increases people experienced at the time. Do not say I just rattled off figures. I did not.

Deputy Louise O’Reilly: You did.

The Taoiseach: I then went on to say that we had extended the VAT reduction to 9%, which we did. That is not rattling off figures. That is a fact, which has had some impact. I mentioned free-of-charge HRT coming in on 1 June.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: HRT is not a grocery.

The Taoiseach: I mentioned the extension of the free schoolbooks scheme to all students. If you have one income coming in, we all know that every September and every summer, schoolbooks, going back to school and the cost of schoolbooks was the bane of most parents' lives. That is gone, eliminated. The Deputies did not have the good grace to acknowledge that. I do not expect any acknowledgement, but they just ignored that and its impact on household budgets. St. Vincent de Paul has said this has had a significant impact on household budgets. The hot school meals programme has been significant in its impact on children generally, and particularly children from low-income and difficult circumstances where they may not get a meal on their way into school in the morning. The free public transport will be increased from five years to eight years. This is all expenditure that frees up people's income for other expenditure. We also passed legislation, the food ombudsman Bill, to deal with, engage with and give greater transparency to the entire continuum from producer to shelf in respect of supermarket prices and the income the primary producer gets for food in this country. That legislation was passed and is there. The food ombudsman has been established - it is a different title but it is essentially the same - to deal with the issues the Deputy raised in respect of transparency. That will have teeth.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The Taoiseach did rattle off a range of figures about inflation but did not acknowledge the real hardship people face in terms of grocery prices. I ask him to acknowledge that. Last week, his Government took the decision to lift the pay caps for senior high-paid bankers. Newspapers reported that means, for instance, the annual package of the head of AIB could go from €500,000 to €2 million. Those are the kinds of decisions the Government has taken that may have an immediate effect for people at the very high end of incomes. What has it done about grocery prices and ensuring full transparency on supermarket profits now - not something that is going to happen in the future? Why is there not full transparency now? When will the Taoiseach act on that? Does he acknowledge that the €3,000 per year extra on grocery prices that most households are paying is utterly unsustainable, and that action needs to be taken by the Government now to bring those prices down?

The Taoiseach: I did acknowledge, and have spoken a couple of times today about, the elevated level of grocery prices and the impact it is having on households. Please do not say I did not acknowledge it. I did. It is the Deputy's standard practice now to make assertions that are not true. Of course prices are impacting on families and households but the taxation measures we took last year in the budget benefited low-income workers and medium-income workers, through both the USC reduction, in particular, and the income tax reductions. We did it in previous budgets as well. Those are sustainable measures to help people cope with what has been an extraordinary period of growth in prices more generally. We had a significant impact on insurance reforms, which we worked and focused on over the past number of years.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Insurance is going up.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Insurance has gone up.

The Taoiseach: We are looking at every aspect of cost and price with a view to getting

prices down.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Does the Taoiseach keep track of even his own Bills?

The Taoiseach: I assure Deputy O’Callaghan that we understand fully the degree to which this is impacting on people, households and families, but we have taken very effective measures. They include ones that even the Social Democrats did not advocate for, such as free schoolbooks, notwithstanding the position that party adopts on so many issues.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I raise the problem people around the State have in accessing a GP or getting a GP to take them on. It is even more difficult for people who do not have a medical card. It is a huge problem. There is a shortage of locum doctors, which leads to problems for some GPs trying to take holidays or leave. The emergency departments of hospitals are clogged up with people who should be seen in a community care or primary care setting. Some go to emergency departments either because they cannot get a GP appointment or do not have a medical card and cannot afford a GP visit.

A recent Economic and Social Research, ESRI, report outlined that we need between 943 and 1,211 to cope with demand. That is just to stand still, not to improve the ratio of GPs per head of population. We know from several sources that the number of GPs per head of population is way too low and is completely out of sync with our European neighbours and other developed countries.

The Irish College of General Practitioners has stated that we have a huge deficit. It has identified several counties that have a chronic shortage, including County Laois. The Irish Medical Organisation, IMO, concurs and has highlighted this fact as well. The State has only 60% of the GPs per head of population that Germany and other EU states have. Some EU states are even more favourable than that. The IMO reckons one GP per 900 people is required to provide adequate community care. The World Health Organization says it is one per 1,000 population. In County Laois, the ratio is, on average, one GP per 1,600 population. Only 35 GPs out of 67 in the county take medical cards. At least 700 GPs are to retire between the years 2023 and 2026. There are not enough new GPs in training and in many cases, when they qualify they are faced with a choice of trying to establish a general practice or emigrating. Some emigrate because of the cost of trying to establish a practice, pay for premises, hire equipment, hire staff, etc., and the long hours. We have a chronic shortage due to the lack of forward planning by all Governments over the previous 20 years. Solutions are needed now.

We need a major ramp-up of directly employed, salaried GPs working in general practice. Last week, the Tánaiste said here he is in favour of this as well. Many of those trained GPs would be more likely to remain if they could work in a 35 to 40 hour week job, particularly a lot of women who are coming into it - more women are coming in and that is welcome - because, unfortunately, they tend to have more home and caring responsibilities. As a society, we have more work to do in that area. The number of training places needs to be increased substantially. When young GPs qualify, the HSE needs to actively recruit them and offer them permanent positions.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue of primary care and GP provision. Undoubtedly, in rural Ireland in particular and in some urban areas, over recent years there have been challenges accessing a GP and getting a GP. On the other hand, there have also been significant developments and growth, particularly in terms of the number of places at third level.

That has increased very significantly over the last two to three years. The work done by the then Minister, Stephen Donnelly, with the Tánaiste when he was Minister for higher education resulted in additional places in our colleges. It will take some time for those places to come through. We also secured additional post-graduate education places more generally. That is important.

We have 179 primary care centres in the country now, which is very significant, and 50 new ones have opened since 2020. On chronic disease, 95% of GPs are now signed up to the chronic disease management programme; there were more than 645,000 patient reviews by GPs in 2024; and 92% of patients with chronic diseases are now fully managed routinely in primary care and not attending hospital for managing their condition.

The number of new entrant GP training places has increased significantly in recent years and is up 350 for 2024. College and training places continue to grow and an additional 662 student places have been provided in the higher education sector on health-related courses overall this year academic year, which includes nursing and midwifery.

The growth is there within the third level colleges but the quality and nature of the work of GPs is changing. That work on chronic disease is essential for outcomes and for the community enhanced care programme. A lot of GPs speak very highly of its impact. Overall, our figures as a country on life expectancy are improving because of the stronger role of primary and community based care and the management of chronic disease, along with public health measures and better quality of work within acute hospital services. Our life expectancy is above 82 years of age. Our mortality fell by 11% over the decade 2014 to 2022. The mortality rate for all circulatory system diseases fell by 20% in that period, with heart disease and stroke falling by 28% and 37%, respectively. There is another perspective to our health narrative which rarely gets articulated.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I thank the Taoiseach for his reply. I acknowledge there are more training places but, as he correctly pointed out, it will take time for them to work through. The one thing we need to do better on is the retention of those who are coming out of courses. I have outlined to the Taoiseach about directly employing GPs, which the Tánaiste said he is in favour of. It was a key part of Sláintecare. We should remember it was agreed here in the Oireachtas nearly eight years ago. Primary care and community care are absolutely central to the implementation of Sláintecare and are the cornerstone of a public health system. We must try to do better on that if we are to improve things. There needs to be a big shift of healthcare from hospitals to primary care settings. Our hospital wards are overcrowded and our emergency departments are bulging. The best we can hope for, with the figures coming through at the moment, is to stand still. Standing still is not good enough and we have to do better. Life expectancy is becoming longer and we will have a lot more older people, including a lot more over-80s. We need to work better at this and try to have more directly employed GPs to supplement ordinary general practice ones in the State.

The Taoiseach: The new programme in Galway will be specifically focused on rural GP medicine. A huge investment is going into primary care and this area.

Deputy Brian Stanley: A primary care centre for Portlaoise?

The Taoiseach: Practices in receipt of the rural supports receive the maximum rate of practice staff subsidies, significantly reducing possible staff costs for smaller practices. They also

receive the maximum rate of locum support for leave-taking. A new locum support initiative commenced in May, providing GPs in receipt of rural practice supports with access to a streamlined locum-sourcing service. The annual intake to the GP training scheme increased by approximately 80% from 2019 to 2024, with 350 new entrant training places made available from 2024. Three hundred and forty-six new entrants commenced training last year, representing a 21% increase on the previous year's intake, 286. We will continue to build on that. Recruitment of GPs from abroad commenced in 2023 under a joint HSE-ICGP international medical graduate rural GP programme. One hundred and eighteen of those GPs are currently in practice and an additional 18 have completed the two-year course.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

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

Tuesday's business shall be:

- Motion to Instruct the Committee on the Social Welfare (Bereaved Partner's Pension) Bill 2025 (*without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately*)

- Statements on Nursing Homes and Care for Older Persons (resumed) (*not to exceed 1 hour and 32 minutes*)

Tuesday's private members' business shall be Motion re Presidential Voting Rights, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Motion re Offences against the State (Amendment) Act 1998*

- Motion re Criminal Justice (Amendment) Act 2009*

* *Two separate motions to be debated together and to conclude within 3 hours and 32 mins*

- Mental Health Bill 2024 (Committee Stage, resumed, section 198) (*to be taken no earlier than 5 p.m. and if not previously concluded, to adjourn after 1 hour*)

- Finance (Local Property Tax and Other Provisions) (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Committee and remaining Stages) (*if not previously concluded, to conclude either at 10.44 p.m. or after 4 hours, whichever is the later*)

- Motions for Revised and Second Further Revised Estimates for Public Services 2025 [Votes 7 to 12, 14, 15, 17 to 22, 24, 27, 28, 31, 37 to 39, 43 and 44] (*back from Committee*) (*to be taken without debate, to be moved together and decided by one question and any division claimed to be taken immediately*)

Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Legislative and Structural Reforms to Accelerate Housing Delivery, selected by the Independent Technical Group.

Thursday's business shall be Criminal Justice (Terrorist Offences) (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Second Stage) (*if not previously concluded, to adjourn after 3 hours and 24 minutes*).

Thursday evening business shall be the Second Stage of the Transparency and Social Value in Public Procurement Bill 2024, sponsored by Deputy Mairéad Farrell.

Proposed Arrangements for this week's business:

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

1. the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders shall be modified to the extent that private members' business may be taken earlier than 6.12 p.m. and shall in any event be taken on the conclusion of the resumed Statements on Nursing Homes and Care for Older Persons, with consequential effect on the commencement times for the items following in the ordinary routine of business, namely, oral Parliamentary Questions to the Minister for Transport, and topical issues, and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil;

2. the proceedings on the Motion to Instruct the Committee on the Social Welfare (Bereaved Partner's Pension) Bill 2025 shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately; and

3. the resumed Statements on Nursing Homes and Care for Older Persons shall not exceed 1 hour and 32 minutes and the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:

(a) the speaking slots from the arrangements for the statements from Thursday, 12th June, 2025, shall be continued from the point at which they were adjourned;

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

(c) members may share time.

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

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

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

(b) any motions to be taken without debate shall be taken on the conclusion of proceedings on the Finance (Local Property Tax and Other Provisions) (Amendment) Bill 2025; and

(c) the weekly division time shall be taken on the conclusion of proceedings on any motions without debate, and the Dáil shall adjourn on the conclusion of the weekly division time;

2. the proceedings on the Motion re Offences against the State (Amendment) Act 1998 and the Motion re Criminal Justice (Amendment) Act 2009 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 3 hours and 32 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

(a) the two motions shall be debated together, with separate questions put on all

proceedings thereon;

(b) the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be in accordance with those contained in the table immediately below (to be read across, not down);

(c) where speeches conclude before the 3 hours and 22 minutes have elapsed and no other member is offering, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a speech in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes, whereupon proceedings shall be brought to a conclusion; and

(d) members may share time;

	Gov	SF	Lab	Gov	SF
Mins	35	25	15	15	5
	SD	Gov	SF	IPTG	Gov
Mins	15	15	5	12	15
	SF	ITG	Gov	SF	OM
Mins	5	12	15	5	8

3. the proceedings on the resumed Committee Stage of the Mental Health Bill 2024 shall be taken no earlier than 5 p.m. and shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted and stand adjourned after 1 hour and shall not be resumed on Wednesday;

4. the proceedings on Committee and remaining Stages of the Finance (Local Property Tax and Other Provisions) (Amendment) Bill 2025 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion either at 10.44 p.m. or after 4 hours, whichever is the later, by one question, which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Finance; and

5. the following arrangements shall apply to the proceedings on the Motions for Revised and Second Further Revised Estimates for Public Services [Votes 7 to 12, 14, 15, 17 to 22, 24, 27, 28, 31, 37 to 39, 43 and 44]:

(a) the motions shall be moved and decided together by one question which shall be put from the Chair;

(b) the proceedings thereon shall be taken without debate; and

(c) any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately.

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

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

(a) Questions to the Minister for Health pursuant to Standing Order 47(1) shall be taken as the first item of business followed by Questions to the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport; and

(b) topical issues may be taken earlier than 7.24 p.m. and shall in any event be taken on the adjournment of proceedings on Second Stage of the Criminal Justice (Terrorist Offences) (Amendment) Bill 2025, or where those proceedings conclude

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within the allotted time, on the conclusion thereof, with consequential effect on the commencement time for Second Stage of the Transparency and Social Value in Public Procurement Bill 2024 and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil; and

2. in relation to the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Criminal Justice (Terrorist Offences) (Amendment) Bill 2025, the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) subject to subparagraph (ii), the proceedings shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted and stand adjourned after 3 hours and 24 minutes and the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:

(i) the arrangements for the first speaking round shall be in accordance with those contained in the table immediately below (to be read across, not down);

(ii) where speeches conclude before the 3 hours and 24 minutes have elapsed and no other member is offering, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a speech in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and

(iii) members may share time; and

(b) the proceedings shall not be resumed on Thursday.

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the proposed arrangements for this week agreed to?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: No. As the Taoiseach knows, the victims of defective blocks in the west were not given 100% redress by the Government; however, the Government agreed nine months ago to increase the cap, but not for all homeowners. The Taoiseach said he would sort it out nine months ago. Hundreds of families are tens of thousands of euro short. They are struggling to make the final payments to builders, and builders are chasing those payments. Will the Taoiseach finally bring in the amendments to the legislation and sort this problem out once and for all?

Deputy Duncan Smith: Since the latest meeting of the Business Committee, we have seen the new rules from the US on J1 and other visas. The Taoiseach has described them as excessive, but does he have any words of comfort for the thousands of young Irish people who have to give over five years' worth of social media usernames? This is having a chilling impact on our young people and other applicants for visas. What is the Government going to do about that?

Deputy Gary Gannon: We woke up this morning to news that, finally, a proposal was going to the Cabinet on the implementation of the recommendations of the Dublin city task force. I thought this was brilliant and that perhaps now, after four press conferences and about two years, we would get some detail. I listened but we got a rehash of the same announcements that had been made three times at this point and absolutely nothing else. The city is in decline and needs leadership. We thought this was what the announcement was going to be about but it just seemed to be a useful press release for the Government. I ask that statements be put on the agenda to discuss the implementation of the task force recommendations.

The Taoiseach: I think the Deputy's initial instincts were correct. "Brilliant", he said.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach should note it is the Chief Whip who responds.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Is the Taoiseach interrupting again?

The Taoiseach: It is rare that an Opposition Deputy would say we were “brilliant” when we got out of bed first thing in the morning.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Over the weekend, the world’s biggest military power, under Trump, launched an unprovoked and illegal air assault on Iran. The Taoiseach has repeatedly refused to condemn this assault. I invite him again to condemn it now. We need to have a debate in this House on the US assault on Iran, the situation in the Middle East, and the imperative of defending our neutrality and ending the use of Shannon Airport by the US military.

Deputy Michael Collins: We need a discussion about education, school size, class sizes and the capitation grant. Many schools are under immense pressure. I have been requesting statements in the Dáil. We also need a discussion about immigration and migration with regard to Citywest. I would appreciate if we could find time this week to discuss those issues.

Deputy Mary Butler: As the Ceann Comhairle will be aware, since she was at the meeting last Thursday, the majority of issues on the Order of Business for this week were agreed. There was rolling dissent, which rolls over every week, but the majority were agreed. On the defective blocks, as Deputy Mac Lochlainn knows, legislation was agreed at Cabinet only two weeks ago. I have explained that to the Deputy. That is moving forward.

In response to Deputy Murphy, as indicated at the Business Committee last week, statements on the situation in the Middle East with the Tánaiste will be scheduled for three and a half hours next Wednesday. On the request from Deputy Collins for a debate on education and the capitation grant, we will be speaking to the Minister about it.

Deputy Gary Gannon: What about the task force?

Deputy Mary Butler: We will certainly look at that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the proposed arrangements for the week’s business agreed to?

Deputies: Not agreed.

Question put: “That the proposed arrangements for this week’s business be agreed to.”

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 87; Níl, 66; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Aird, William.</i>	<i>Ahern, Ciarán.</i>	
<i>Ardagh, Catherine.</i>	<i>Bacik, Ivana.</i>	
<i>Boland, Grace.</i>	<i>Bennett, Cathy.</i>	
<i>Brabazon, Tom.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Brennan, Shay.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Byrne, Joanna.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Butterly, Paula.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Buttimer, Jerry.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	

<i>Byrne, Malcolm.</i>	<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Michael.</i>	<i>Crowe, Seán.</i>	
<i>Callaghan, Catherine.</i>	<i>Cullinane, David.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Cummins, Jen.</i>	
<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	
<i>Carrigy, Micheál.</i>	<i>Devine, Máire.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Clendennen, John.</i>	<i>Farrelly, Aidan.</i>	
<i>Connolly, John.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Cooney, Joe.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Gibney, Sinéad.</i>	
<i>Cummins, John.</i>	<i>Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.</i>	
<i>Currie, Emer.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Daly, Martin.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Devlin, Cormac.</i>	<i>Hayes, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Dolan, Albert.</i>	<i>Hearne, Rory.</i>	
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>Kenny, Eoghan.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Seán.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Gallagher, Pat the Cope.</i>	<i>Lawless, Paul.</i>	
<i>Geoghegan, James.</i>	<i>Lawlor, George.</i>	
<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	<i>McDonald, Mary Lou.</i>	
<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	<i>McGettigan, Donna.</i>	
<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	<i>McGuinness, Conor D.</i>	
<i>Heneghan, Barry.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Higgins, Emer.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Keogh, Keira.</i>	<i>Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Richard.</i>	
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Robert.</i>	
<i>Martin, Micheál.</i>	<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>	
<i>Maxwell, David.</i>	<i>O'Hara, Louis.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>McCarthy, Noel.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	
<i>McCormack, Tony.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Séamus.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	

<i>McGreehan, Erin.</i>	<i>Quaide, Liam.</i>	
<i>McGuinness, John.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i>	<i>Rice, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Sheehan, Conor.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Marie.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Shane.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Michael.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>	<i>Wall, Mark.</i>	
<i>Neville, Joe.</i>	<i>Ward, Charles.</i>	
<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>	<i>Ward, Mark.</i>	
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>O'Connell, Maeve.</i>		
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>		
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>		
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>		
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>		
<i>O'Meara, Ryan.</i>		
<i>O'Shea, John Paul.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Christopher.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cearúil, Naoise.</i>		
<i>Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.</i>		
<i>Ó Muirí, Naoise.</i>		
<i>Richmond, Neale.</i>		
<i>Roche, Peter.</i>		
<i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Timmins, Edward.</i>		
<i>Toole, Gillian.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		
<i>Ward, Barry.</i>		

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

Question declared carried.

3 o'clock

An Ceann Comhairle: We move to Questions on Policy or Legislation. We have 73 applicants and 15 have been chosen. We will begin with Deputy McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Last week, the Government brought forward a plan, the net effect of which will be to cause rents to rise across the board. One particular group who will be affected by this are students. Having said initially the Government would have their backs, it is now clear it does not have their backs because those renting in the private sector will suffer, just like others, as landlords can seek market-rate rents. Now it has this plan for State-backed designated student accommodation. It seems it intends to pack students in like sardines in a can, with shared bedrooms, shared bathrooms, communal kitchens and so on and so forth. It will be lessor accommodation and still very high rents. What does the Government have against students? Why is it determined to put them and their families on the hook to be ripped off?

The Taoiseach: Ireland is number one in the world in terms of participation in third level education. That is the measure of this Government's commitment to students in third level education in terms of supporting students with reduced fees over the last number of years, improving the various maintenance and SUSI schemes for students, and building more accommodation, which is currently under construction in a whole range of programmes. We support students in this country; the statistics show that. In respect of the measures the Minister brought to Cabinet today, it is to develop a standardised design in relation to State-backed student accommodation. We need flexibility and choice in the range of accommodation that is on offer. There is significant State-backed student accommodation already built and in place and being built. Students use the existing rental market for rental accommodation also. The measures we brought in last week will strengthen protections for renters overall.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I have a very straightforward question. We understand that this morning the Tánaiste brought to Cabinet an outline of the replacement occupied territories Bill. We understand it will operate by merely amending the Customs Act and it appears this will close the door on banning the importation of services that are enriching those profiteering from genocide at a time when we know that 70% of Ireland's trade with Israel is in services. The original occupied territories Bill that had widespread support across the House - indeed, from Fianna Fáil originally as well - prohibited trade in both goods and services. It is a simple question. Will the Taoiseach be open to amending the Government Bill to ensure it covers trade in both goods and services?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy said 70% of services trade with Israel.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Of Ireland's trade with Israel, I understand. Trócaire said it.

The Taoiseach: The Bill only affects the occupied territories so I think the Deputy is conflating two different things there. The Tánaiste has asked the Attorney General for legal advice in respect of services. Obviously, there is a clear difference between services and goods in terms of tracking, tracing and manageability. It is quite a good Bill in terms of linking it to the customs legislation, which can make an offence under the Customs Act in terms of goods coming from the occupied territories. We will be the first country in Europe to introduce such an Act, and I think that is important. In addition to that, getting a European focus on the occupied territories, which we are now doing, with about nine other countries-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Never mind that. What about services?

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. I call Deputy Gibney.

The Taoiseach: -----in terms of asking if the European Union is compliant with the ICJ opinion in respect of the illegally occupied territories, and then the EU-Israel association agreement, where we are also pushing strongly.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: What about services? That was the question.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Speaking of which, Taoiseach, are you ashamed of the EU? I know I am. Its descent into moral turpitude has been both swift and shocking. Its silence on Gaza is deafening. No matter what depravity is committed by Israel, the EU refuses to act. No matter how high the death toll, no matter how many children are brutalised, no matter the mass murder, maiming, starvation and decimation, nothing has prompted any action. Israel's genocide has continued unimpeded and uninterrupted by the EU. It has not even managed to agree a joint criticism of Israel yet. A few days ago, I thought there might finally be some action. A review of the EU-Israel association agreement found that Israel was in breach of its human rights obligations but instead of suspending the agreement, the EU did nothing. The issue will be examined again next month and then, again, nothing will happen while people in Gaza continue to be slaughtered. In abandoning the people of Gaza, the EU has abandoned its own values. I am not sure why anyone would take its so-called commitments to human rights and international law seriously ever again. I am asking the Taoiseach: are you ashamed of the EU?

The Taoiseach: First of all, I would like to point out that the European Union is the single greatest donor to Palestine. It is an important point, although it never gets said.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: It is still Israel's biggest trading partner.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, I do not want a back and forth.

The Taoiseach: In real terms, the most effective contributor now to Gaza is the European Union.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: They are being slaughtered.

The Taoiseach: I am not happy with the fact that we cannot get unanimity across the 27 EU member states.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: It is in breach.

The Taoiseach: To abolish or put into abeyance the EU-Israel association agreement would require unanimity among the 27, and the Deputy knows that. About ten members-----

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: It is only the revocation of a privilege.

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

The Taoiseach: We have asked for a review. We asked over a year ago for a review. There may be opportunities to suspend elements of that agreement that would not require unanimity. That is being pursued by Ireland and other like-minded states in respect of this. The Deputy knows that countries like Germany, Hungary, Czechia and others have a long-standing historic position of support for Israel. I regret that, I disagree with it, but the European Union is an association of 27 member states.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: So that is it, is it?

Deputy Paul Murphy: Last year, the International Court of Justice held that all states are under an obligation to abstain from entering into economic or trade dealings and to prevent trade or investment relations with the occupied territories. There was no mention of an obligation just relating to goods. Instead, it was all trade and investment relations. The Government has in the past few months discovered some legal, or what it says is a legal, distinction between goods and services but has never laid that out. The Tánaiste this morning, when asked about the Bill, said it is important that every country uses every lever at its disposal but it is not clear why that lever would exclude services.

Will the Attorney General's advice be completed and published before the Bill is brought before the committee so we can actually see the legal basis on which the Government is saying that services need to be excluded? Will the Government at the committee set out in detail why it has an issue with the inclusion of services?

The Taoiseach: First of all, I anticipate that the advices will be available to the Government as the Bill is going through. There is a pre-legislative process and that will be the first instance of this. The Deputy-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: Will the Government lay the advice before the committee?

The Taoiseach: I am saying it will be available to the Government in terms of whether we can include it or not. The Government will make its position, based on that advice, clear to the committee before it concludes. The Bill is vastly improved from what it was. I pay tribute to Senator Black for her initiative on this issue and her constructive engagement with the Government.

Deputy Murphy is good at pontificating a lot but he has never condemned Hamas in this House for what it did on 7 October.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Taoiseach will not condemn the US.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Pathetic.

Deputy Michael Collins: Jennifer Marley is 88 years of age and has been living in rented accommodation-----

The Taoiseach: Sorry, Deputy McDonald, why is what I said pathetic?

An Ceann Comhairle: We must move on. I have called Deputy Collins.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is such a cheap shot.

Deputy Michael Collins: In fairness, I never interfere in anybody else's time for questions. I would appreciate if all Deputies would pay the same respect.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Collins is on his feet. I ask Deputies on both sides to allow him to speak.

Deputy Michael Collins: Jennifer Marley is 88 years of age and has been living in rented accommodation in Bantry for the past six years. She has received a notice to quit her rented home as the landlord wants to sell. We are frantically trying to get Jennifer a house she can call

her own as she is not suited to sheltered accommodation at 88 years of age.

Tomorrow, Independent Ireland will put forward a motion in the House calling for legislative action on infrastructure reform to accelerate housing delivery. We propose up to 23 measures in our motion to address the housing crisis, including everything from declaring a housing emergency to rewarding high-performing councils, in an attempt to ensure delivery for the people of Ireland and stop the empty talk.

The mess we are in now has left Jennifer Marley in Bantry facing an uncertain future, with the real prospect of being left without a roof over her head. She has told me I can show the House the picture of her I am holding in my hand. This woman, who is 88 years of age and part of the fabric of our community, must leave her home in a short few weeks. What hope - by which I mean real hope - will the Taoiseach give Jennifer today that she can be guaranteed to have a roof over her head in four weeks' time?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy has not spoken to me about this case before now. Perhaps he can send the details to me. I am not clear whether the local authority has been approached in respect of this case and whether Jennifer was on the social housing list. It should be very possible to accommodate an 88-year-old in a council house. I do not know the background but it seems to me there is an obvious solution.

Deputy Martin Daly: Ballinasloe is a proud town in the heart of Ireland, just off the M6, with huge untapped potential. Once home to major employers like Dubarry, Square D and A.T. Cross, Pobal and DEIS data now identify severe deprivation in the town, with intergenerational unemployment and educational inequality. Scoil an Chroí Naofa is waiting 20 years for redevelopment. Garbally College urgently needs refurbishment notwithstanding its imminent amalgamation with Ardscoil Mhuire.

Yet, Ballinasloe's spirit endures. Local businesses, clubs and groups like Ballinasloe Area Community Development, Youthreach and Ballinasloe Social Services work tirelessly, despite long-standing disadvantage. Will the Government commit to examine the case for a multi-agency task force across education, housing, youth and enterprise to tackle the chronic social deprivation that has affected Ballinasloe and made it one of the most deprived areas in the country?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue, which he has raised with me previously. I certainly am open to doing as he proposed. The Government would be very positively disposed to working on such a proposal.

Deputy William Aird: Will the Taoiseach commit to funding a community neurorehabilitation team for the midlands in budget 2026 in line with the programme for Government's commitment to complete the national roll-out of such teams? Community neurorehabilitation teams provide vital short-term intensive care, with access to services like physiotherapy, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and neuropsychology. These services are essential to prevent disability and promote recovery for people with neurological conditions.

A midlands team was promised in 2019 to serve adults with conditions such as Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis and rare neurological diseases. However, patients in County Laois remain at a serious disadvantage compared with regions where teams are already funded. Will the Taoiseach ensure the long-overdue team for the midlands is finally delivered in budget 2026?

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The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this very important issue. I fully subscribe to his analysis of the importance of this programme. I will liaise with the Minister for Health, who is sitting beside me, and other Ministers to see whether we can free up some resources to commence the development of a team in the midlands.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: The people of Monaghan and Cavan deserve adequate health services and care within their community. In 2002, the Taoiseach, as Minister for Health and Children, refused to give a commitment to protect emergency department services at Monaghan hospital at that crucial time. In 2009, the hospital's emergency department was closed for good. The minor injuries unit lacks basic equipment. As a result, people in Monaghan are referred to Cavan hospital, where they face double the waiting time they previously faced, which can be eight hours up to 24 hours.

Does the Taoiseach accept he was wrong to strip emergency department services from Monaghan hospital? Will he deliver the investment that is needed to address this failure and stop the backlogs that are happening in Cavan hospital?

The Taoiseach: First, I did not strip Monaghan hospital of anything. It was the North Eastern Health Board that was in place at the time.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Who was over that?

The Taoiseach: Sinn Féin had members on it. I cannot believe in one sense that the Deputy is back again at this-----

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I am going to keep at it.

An Ceann Comhairle: This is not a back-and-forth exchange. The Deputy should address her remarks through the Chair.

The Taoiseach: The thing that should unite us all is the safety of patients and the people who go through our hospitals.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: That is not happening. Monaghan hospital is waiting years for an emergency department.

An Ceann Comhairle: If the Deputy wants an answer, she had better stop talking.

The Taoiseach: Anybody who knows anything about emergency care knows the first thing to get right is the first response. We have dramatically transformed the quality of first responses in this country over the past 20-odd years. That is the first point.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: The Taoiseach needs to go to Cavan hospital, walk around it and see the people waiting in the emergency department.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Bennett, please. Do you wish to have your question answered?

The Taoiseach: Second, the quality of healthcare is key to any patient.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: I cannot compel an answer. What I can compel is an orderly ses-

sion.

The Taoiseach: What is very important is that the right care is made available at the right time for the patient to guarantee the best outcome.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is not happening.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: People are waiting two weeks for a transfer.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy wants to go back to worst outcomes and an era when we had very deficient medicine.

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, please. I have called Deputy Brabazon.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: The programme for Government contains a commitment to reduce class sizes to 19. Two schools in my constituency, Belgrove Infant Girls' School in Clontarf and Scoil Mhuire in Howth, have classes amalgamating due to falling numbers. This will result in pupil-teacher ratios of 35:1 in both classes. Can the Taoiseach expedite the programme to introduce the 19:1 ratio in these schools as soon as possible?

The Taoiseach: I would need the full background details. The ratio could be high in some classes but not in the entirety of the school in terms of how it organises its numbers. The Deputy indicated the numbers are declining in both schools. A question arises as to whether that is a permanent feature of the area. There are different approaches one can make to the Department in respect of whether it is possible to do something. If the numbers are going to increase again into the future, it might be possible to get a temporary stay in terms of teaching numbers. I will follow the matter up with the Minister.

Deputy Peter Roche: The Government committed in the men's health action plan 2024-28 to increase health literacy and raise public awareness of boys' and men's physical, mental and emotional health through a range of promotional activities. I welcome that the Minister for Health is in the Chamber. How much funding has been allocated to implement the actions in the plan? Is the Government confident the strategy is fully funded and resourced? Are any potential difficulties with the plan anticipated as we go forward?

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): It is very important that we have a focus on men's health, just as we have, correctly, had an emphasis on women's health. The funding is spread across a number of different streams. I will have to ask my officials to pull the information out for the Deputy and update him. I assure him this issue continues to be a priority for my Department.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: There are people in my constituency living in homes that are falling down around their ears. Their homes are literally falling apart. People are doing their best in terms of minor repairs to stop bits of the walls and roof from falling down. The Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022 allows for country councils to be admitted to the remediation scheme. My local authority, Fingal County Council, applied in September 2023. My understanding is that the Housing Agency report, which was the latest impediment identified by the Government to my constituents being admitted to the scheme, is now with the Minister for housing. The responses we get when we ask questions tell us that it will happen shortly, in the future or perhaps in a while. Will the Taoiseach engage with

the Minister for housing to ensure people can access this scheme? As I have said, their houses are literally falling down around their ears.

The Taoiseach: I will engage with the Minister for housing on the specifics. Is this a series of houses?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: It is a series of one-off houses. They are not all together. There is one block then a number of individual houses. I will provide the details to the Taoiseach's office.

The Taoiseach: I will talk to the Minister.

Deputy Charles Ward: I am sure the Taoiseach and the Minister for education are aware that Scoil Mhuire Milford in County Donegal is not fit for purpose. There are severe issues with the childrens' toilets in the current building. There is no green play area, denying children the opportunity for any meaningful physical activity. There is a severe lack of classroom space and, as a result, teachers are forced to teach in corridors and store rooms. There is a severe safety issue with the road, with the front gate opening out onto it. Many children have had near-misses. No form of refurbishment can address these issues. The school is simply too old. A new school building is required to ensure the children in Milford are able to receive a proper education and to develop in a safe environment. Will the Taoiseach commit to reviewing this situation to ensure Scoil Mhuire Milford is given the opportunity to build a new school? It has the land and is ready to go.

The Taoiseach: Again, I do not have the specifics or the background. Has the school applied? Is it in the process? It has applied.

Deputy Charles Ward: It is ready but it has been denied time and again.

The Taoiseach: That does not make sense. It is either in the system or it is not.

Deputy Charles Ward: It is in the system.

The Taoiseach: Is it at stage 1, stage 2 or stage 3?

Deputy Charles Ward: It is waiting.

An Ceann Comhairle: This is not a back and forth. I ask the Deputy to provide the details.

The Taoiseach: If the Deputy gives me the details, we may be able to progress the matter with the Minister. Has it been sanctioned?

Deputy Marie Sherlock: My question relates to Gaelscoil Choláiste Mhuire in Parnell Square. I ask the Taoiseach to make a personal intervention to get this building project done. This school is into its 23rd year of what was supposed to be temporary emergency accommodation. It spend a decade and a half trying to get its long-promised school project off the ground. Almost two years on from the sod being turned and two thirds into the construction works, the Department of Education and Youth has stopped those works. We are all left wondering what is going on.

I will give the Taoiseach some facts about the project. When problems in respect of the school building emerged last year, project managers were appointed by the Department. We were told not to worry, that all would be fine and that the project would be completed in 2025.

Department of Education and Youth officials then told us last November that it would probably be 2026 but that we would have a progress report after the election. The officials in the Department never sent that report. Requests for information are now outstanding for 33 days or more. We need specific information from the Taoiseach as to what is happening with this project.

The Taoiseach: I think the Deputy probably knows.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I genuinely do not.

An Ceann Comhairle: This is not a back and forth.

The Taoiseach: As the Deputy will know, this is a major project. The plan is to build a 16-classroom primary school on a very challenging brownfield site with modern multistorey facilities spanning Dominick Street, Dominick Place and Granby Row. Ongoing issues recently led to a temporary pause on construction. The contractor was formally notified on 23 May under the contract's suspension of works provision. This pause gives space for a conciliation process to conclude, allowing a clear path forward to be mapped out. The site is in an area of archaeological interest-----

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I am sorry but what is happening now?

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sorry but this is not a back and forth.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I appreciate that but I need to hear what is happening now.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy can correspond afterwards if she wishes to add further information.

The Taoiseach: It is an area of archaeological interest that involves a protect structure owned and occupied by Youth Work Ireland. A number of issues have arisen. These include issues with services on the site and electrical lines and services related to the adjacent Luas line, which had not been apparent until excavation began. There are issues with the foundations of an adjoining protected building, which need careful consideration. There is a whole load of issues here that need to be addressed.

An Ceann Comhairle: Clearly, there will be further interactions on this.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I will raise an issue I have highlighted here before. We know of the growing need and demand for co-educational Educate Together schools. One such school in my own constituency is Clonturk Community College in Dublin 9. It is a co-educational Educate Together school. It is a fantastic school with over 1,000 students. My eldest son attended the school and had a great experience there. However, the school is unfortunately stuck in temporary facilities that are unsuitable. For a number of years, the school has been promised a new building through the accelerated delivery programme but it has been left in limbo. There is no clear timeline or date for delivery. We are now at the end of the school year and the school community, parents, pupils and staff are facing into another year without confirmation of funding or progress made. The Department of Education and Youth and the Government are failing these children by not providing adequate and sufficient school facilities. They are also failing the wider community. There is great demand for this school in the wider constituency. When will Clonturk Community College get confirmation of funding and a commitment to timely delivery?

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The Taoiseach: Again, I will consult the Minister for Education and Youth. Progress has been made on the site. I obviously do not know the up-to-date position the Department has communicated to the school board but I will pursue it with the Minister.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: The Taoiseach stands before us shamefaced today to tell us that the occupied territories Bill will not include services. He does this on a day when 21 people were shot like moving targets at a fair as they queued up for food this morning. We are told that 56,000 people are now dead in the genocide. *The Lancet* tells us the figure is much higher, as does the Harvard database, which puts the figure at 377,000. We have had three judgments from the highest courts in the world, the ICJ and the ICC, including an arrest warrant for Netanyahu and a plausible genocide case. The Taoiseach stands here seven years after an occupied territories Bill was brought to these Houses and tells us barefacedly that he will not include services and is now going to look for advice from the Attorney General. Does the Taoiseach know how much trade there is with Israel as we speak? It has grown exponentially. Imports from Israel totalled €3.26 billion in 2024 while exports totalled €1.6 billion. The Taoiseach stands here today while the airports are being used to transport American weapons and shamefacedly refuses to do the most minimal thing possible, which is to include services.

The Taoiseach: First of all, I am not shamefaced.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: You should be.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: You should be.

The Taoiseach: I am not. That is all I will say for now.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Deputies to allow the Taoiseach to make his contribution.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy said a few things that are wildly inaccurate and wrong. She deliberately conflated trade with Israel with trade with the occupied territories, as did an earlier speaker. We need to be clear on what we are talking about. The occupied territories Bill is about the occupied territories.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I am fully clear what it is about.

The Taoiseach: You are not clear.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I am giving the Taoiseach the context, which is that a genocide is under way.

The Taoiseach: No sort of-----

Deputy Catherine Connolly: We are talking about a genocide.

The Taoiseach: I do not need----

An Ceann Comhairle: You were given the courtesy, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: Standard practice is not to afford members of Government the courtesy of being allowed to respond.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Then stop-----

The Taoiseach: I make no apologies for challenging the false assertions that have repeat-

edly been made in this house by those on the far left who are consistently trying to create-----

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Twenty-one individuals were shot.

An Ceann Comhairle: We will have an uninterrupted contribution, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: For examples, no airplanes are being facilitated to transport weaponry to Gaza or the Middle East. How dare people make the assertion that they are when they are not?

Deputy Catherine Connolly: The Government has checked and inspected them, has it?

The Taoiseach: I have condemned-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is happening in our airspace.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy said “airports”.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I will take out the “s” and say “airport”.

The Taoiseach: That was deliberate. People have said that publicly as well. Deliberate attempts to create a misleading narrative on all of this are being made all over the place. Ireland has done more on this issue than any other country within Europe but we unfortunately do not have the power to stop Israel. We want Israel to stop. We have asked Israel to stop. We have asked the European Union to create leverage. That is what we have done. The Deputy is shamefacedly always trying to blame others.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I actually blamed you.

The Taoiseach: She is trying to drive a wedge between the Irish people and Members of this House. That is wrong and regrettable.

Broadcasting (All Ireland Service) (Amendment) Bill 2025: First Stage

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Broadcasting Act 2009 to recognise the duty of national public service broadcasters and Coimisiún na Meán to proactively make efforts to ensure equal access to national public broadcasting services across the whole community of the island of Ireland.

Imagine you are a proud parent living in Ireland and your child, who has dedicated his or her whole life to training and preparing to excel in his or her sport, is about to do Ireland proud at the Olympic Games or to line out for the county i bPáirc an Chrócaigh for an all-Ireland final. Imagine turning on RTÉ to see the news in the lead-up to the big day, to catch the excitement gripping the nation about your child’s achievement and to watch the nation hold its breath. Imagine then your shame and anger when a blank screen appears and you are told that content is not available in your part of Ireland because, more than 100 years ago, the British drew a line across the country and, more than 100 years later, RTÉ imposes the same border.

My Sinn Féin colleague the MP for Newry and Armagh, Dáire Hughes, secured a U-turn from RTÉ in July of last year before Armagh athletes went on to win Olympic medals for Ireland and the Sam Maguire to boot, proving that RTÉ could have done more in the first instance.

Ach níor stop sé sin RTÉ. Lean sé ar aghaidh ag scaradh amach na Sé Chontae go rialta. Le déanaí, ní raibh fáil ag daoine ar an gcluiche sacair idir Éire agus Lucsamburg ar an teilifís coicís ó shin, agus tarlaíonn sé go rialta nach féidir le daoine páirt a ghlacadh i gcomórtais RTÉ, nó gearrtar amach san iomlán iad ón léarscáil atá ann. On occasion, RTÉ even erases the Six Counties from the map of Ireland that it displays on its screens. RTÉ cannot erase the North of Ireland. Our Constitution is very clear: it is the entitlement and birthright of every person born on the island of Ireland to be part of the Irish nation. Sinn Féin's Broadcasting (All-Ireland Service) (Amendment) Bill would require RTÉ to proactively make every effort to include the audiences in the North, and where barriers exist due to competing licensing rights, Coimisiún na Meán and the Minister would have a duty to work with others to achieve the 32-county access.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I thank my party colleague Aengus Ó Snodaigh for introducing this Bill, which he submitted to the Bills Office in the previous Dáil. He has done tremendous work on this Bill and the many others he has introduced to the House. I also welcome our party colleague the MP for Newry and Armagh, Dáire Hughes - he is here with us today - who raised the issue of geo-blocking last year and highlighted how unfair it was when RTÉ stopped broadcasts of its news bulletins in the North of Ireland, including news from the 2024 Olympic Games. Despite RTÉ News resuming broadcasting in the North, it was simply not good enough that RTÉ continued to geo-block coverage of team Ireland competing in the Olympic Games despite more than 30 northerners representing team Ireland, a 32-county team of competitors that did the entire nation proud. Up to today, the continued geo-blocking of RTÉ programming, including the broadcast of GAA and other sporting fixtures, is a source of deep frustration for so many people.

Sinn Féin is a 32-county party committed to the ending of partition and all the vestiges of partition, such as the North of Ireland not being properly represented on maps on our national broadcaster. The Broadcasting (All-Ireland Service) (Amendment) Bill before us would place an onus on RTÉ and TG4 as our national broadcasters to proactively make every reasonable effort to end the exclusion of audiences in the North from their services. These services range from the geo-blocking of programming, to access to audience competitions and the insulting exclusion of the North's Six Counties from maps depicting Ireland.

The RTÉ Public Service Broadcasting Charter outlines RTÉ's commitment to serving the needs of the entire community on the island of Ireland. This commitment is further reinforced by the Broadcasting Act 2009, which mandates that RTÉ make its services available to the whole community. RTÉ's guiding principles also emphasise its role in bringing Irish people together and providing programming of interest to all, including those in the North of Ireland. It is simply not good enough for RTÉ to say that there is a broadcasting rights issue and then just forgetting about our northern counties and the people there.

I understand there were discussions and meetings between the Irish and British Governments and broadcasters RTÉ and BBC to find a solution to geo-blocking of sporting events last year, and that is very welcome. Based on those meetings and agreeing with the concerns raised about geo-blocking, I hope that all in government will support this Bill as it moves through the various stages to passing and becoming an Act. If additions are needed, I am sure we can address them by way of amendment along the way, but one thing is certain, that the Bill is needed.

This Bill would put in legislation what is in our national broadcaster's guiding principles. It would build bridges with northern audiences and correct the wrongs that are a major source of annoyance to viewers in the North of Ireland.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

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

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Social Welfare (Bereaved Partner's Pension) Bill 2025: Instruction to Committee

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary): I move:

That it be an instruction to the Select Committee on Social Protection, Rural and Community Development on the Social Welfare (Bereaved Partner's Pension) Bill 2025, that pursuant to Standing Order 194, the Committee has power to make amendments to the Bill which are outside the scope of the existing provisions of the Bill to provide that:

— Invalidity Pension is a pension that must be applied for and obtained before pensionable age, and for the transfer of the small number of persons aged over 66 years who are currently in receipt of Invalidity Pension to State Pension (Contributory);

— a Social Welfare Inspector or an Authorised Officer of the Department of Social Protection may, at the behest and invitation of An Garda Síochána, participate in the interview of a detained suspect regarding offences under the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005 (as amended); and

— corrections be made to minor typographical errors relating to sections 142A and 197 of the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005 contained in Schedule 2 to the Family Courts Act 2024;

and to make other consequential amendments required to take account of the changes above.

Question put and agreed to.

An Bille um an gCeathrú Leasú is Tríocha ar an mBunreacht (Vótáil Uachtaráin) 2014: Tarchur chuig Roghchoiste [Comhaltaí Príobháideacha]

Thirty-fourth Amendment of the Constitution (Presidential Voting) Bill 2014: Referral to Select Committee [Private Members]

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Tairgim:

Go gcuirfear an Bille faoi bhráid an Roghchoiste um Thithíocht, Rialtas Áitiúil agus
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Oidhreacht de réir Bunordú 187.

I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage pursuant to Standing Order 187.

Cuireadh agus aontaíodh an cheist.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Industrial Relations

1. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the Labour Employer Economic Forum; and when it will next meet. [18694/25]

2. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the plenary meeting of the Labour Employer Economic Forum which he chaired on 4 April 2025. [19067/25]

3. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the Labour Employer Economic Forum; and when it will next meet. [32309/25]

4. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the Labour Employer Economic Forum; and when it will next meet. [32397/25]

5. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the Labour Employer Economic Forum; and when it will next meet. [33549/25]

6. **Deputy Shane Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the plenary meeting of the Labour Employer Economic Forum which he chaired on 4 April 2025. [33558/25]

7. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the plenary meeting of the Labour Employer Economic Forum which he chaired on 4 April 2025. [33561/25]

8. **Deputy Albert Dolan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the plenary meeting of the Labour Employer Economic Forum which he recently chaired. [33562/25]

9. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the Labour Employer Economic Forum; and when it will next meet. [33611/25]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 9, inclusive, together.

On 4 April, I chaired the first plenary meeting of the Labour Employer Economic Forum since the formation of the new Government. The LEEF is made up of representatives from the Government, employers and trade unions and provides for tripartite dialogue on economic and employment issues as they affect the labour market. The meeting discussed the latest economic and trade developments, in particular the challenges arising from the US decision to impose tariffs on imports from the European Union. The meeting was also briefed on the potential to

strengthen the all-island labour market for the benefit of employers and workers on the entire island. There were also updates on preparation of Ireland's action plan on the promotion of collective bargaining, on a number of broader labour market policy developments, and on remote and blended working policies. Finally, the meeting agreed to finalise a work programme for the LEEF for the period ahead and to re-establish a number of subgroups.

Alongside plenary meetings, the LEEF also meets in subgroup format, chaired by the relevant Minister. The recent plenary agreed to re-establishment of the following subgroups: enterprise and employment, chaired by the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment; apprenticeships, chaired by the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; early years, chaired by the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality; and pensions, chaired by the Minister for Social Protection. A shared island working group, chaired at official level, has also been re-established.

It was also agreed to re-establish subgroups on health and on housing, following further engagement with relevant Departments and LEEF partners on their respective agendas.

The date of the next meeting of the LEEF plenary has not yet been scheduled.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: The Labour Employer Economic Forum is an important opportunity for members of the trade union movement to make representations to the Government with regard to the labour market and the issues which impact it. Legislation has been put forward in this House with regard to the rights of pensioners, particularly pensioners of many State bodies, who after retiring have very little input into the changes to the pension scheme which may impact them. In some cases that relates to increases that may or may not be due, but also we have seen in other sectors changes to the very nature of the scheme itself. Under the auspices of the Labour Employer Economic Forum and the relationship he has with the trade union movement, will the Taoiseach examine ways that pensioners who have retired might have a greater input into the pension schemes which they have paid into over many years?

Deputy Paul Murphy: The number one issue facing many workers is housing, and the Government has repeatedly claimed both that it will both deliver new social homes and that the planning system is to blame for the lack of delivery so far. This month, however, funding for the delivery of almost 500 social homes has gone up in smoke. Almost 3,500 planned social homes, many with full planning permission, are in jeopardy now facing cost reviews. That is almost a third of the annual social housing delivery target. These public-private partnership deals have collapsed for one reason: private profit. The Government has claimed that the costs are now too high, but we knew they would be. They explicitly include provision for the developers to make a profit from the arrangement. Every cent of profit is a cost in excess of what is actually necessary to deliver housing. In light of the collapse of PPP bundle 3 and the reviews of bundles 4 to 7, will the Taoiseach finally abandon the failed policy of public-private partnership and fund councils to deliver bundle 3 as soon as possible?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I want to raise with the Taoiseach the issue of union busting and anti-union tactics by companies which are in receipt of huge State contracts and whether he thinks that is acceptable. One of the companies is one of the largest mechanical contractors in the State, Jones Engineering, which has a contract for the national children's hospital and potentially other State contracts. It has consistently been hostile to members joining the union of their choice, Unite, so much so that it has attached three senior shop stewards to High Court proceedings, subjecting them, potentially, to huge costs and damages. People have also

been subjected to unsolicited visits from people knocking on their doors and so on. Does the Taoiseach think these kinds of union-busting tactics are acceptable? Does he not think people working for companies doing State contracts should be entitled to join unions like Unite? Will he make a strong statement on the matter in relation to Jones Engineering?

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: The people of Waterford are being failed by this Government when it comes to jobs and investment. In the past five years, Waterford has received just a third of the number of IDA visits to Galway, Cork and Limerick. Even counties like Westmeath and Clare are getting more attention than Waterford. This is shown in the figures. Last year, Waterford gained just two new IDA-supported jobs. Over the past two decades, Cork averaged nearly 1,400 jobs created a year through the IDA, Galway 600, Limerick 300 and Waterford just 92. These figures come directly from replies to parliamentary questions I received this week. It is clear we are not seeing balanced regional development in the south east and Waterford; it is neglect. Will the Taoiseach finally admit the IDA strategy is failing in Waterford? Will he outline the steps that he, as Taoiseach and Head of Government, will take to address this imbalance?

Deputy Shane Moynihan: We have often discussed the importance of policymakers recognising the effort and energy that goes into running a business and sustaining high levels of employment. The plight of SMEs in particular has been raised on the floor of the Dáil, as has the need for policies to make sure we encourage and incentivise SMEs to scale up to be able to pursue research and innovation for their own benefit and for upskilling their wider workforce.

I also raise the importance of the all-island labour market. It was discussed at the recent meeting of the LEEF and the ESRI also conducted a study recently on it. Will the Taoiseach share his thoughts on how the Government intends to deal with the potential and real divergence in employment standards between the UK and the European Union that will manifest on the Border, in particular for smaller employers trying to employ people who may live on the other side of the Border? There are differing expectations regarding flexible and remote working. How can those expectations be aligned? Has work been done at North-South Ministerial Council level and in direct relationship with the Northern Ireland Executive?

Deputy Tony McCormack: I thank the Taoiseach for his update and welcome the reconvening of the Labour Employer Economic Forum under his chairmanship. It is clear the forum plays a vital role in bringing Government, employers and unions together, especially in times of uncertainty. As someone who engages regularly with small business owners and retailers across the country and in my county, Offaly, I welcome the recognition of the need to support sectors most exposed to global pressures. SMEs and retail businesses in our towns are the heart of our local economies. They create jobs, drive community life and have shown remarkable resilience in recent years. I am encouraged by the Taoiseach's commitment to ongoing dialogue. I ask that the specific needs of SMEs, especially in areas like staffing, digital transformation and access to supports, remain front and centre in the LEEF's upcoming work programme. This collaborative approach is the right one. I look forward to seeing practical outcomes that will make a real difference to businesses on the ground.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I appreciate the update on the Labour Employer Economic Forum. I wish to ask about a separate matter regarding multiple schools in my constituency which have been in contact with me in the past week. In Castlehackett, Esker, Annagh Hill, St. Oliver's special education school and Peterswell, national schools spread right across Galway East have raised significant concerns with me around SNA allocations and reviews. A lot of the schools

have had reviews and were recommended more SNA support. They have identified needs coming in in September. Is there a plan to ensure these schools are catered to come September?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I back up the comments of Deputy Moynihan. I have brought up previously with the Taoiseach the tax implications of remote working for companies and the impact that has on employees. Action needs to be taken to deal with that. On tariffs and engagement with unions and employers, what are the major issues and worries about what is coming down the line? What does the Government propose? What are the asks? I would like to think the Taoiseach is working alongside the Minister to deal with the apprenticeship issue. There is a fear regarding ETB settings that there will be a delay because of the shortfall in funding. There is a big hole of €40 million to €50 million. I submitted a Topical Issue with Deputy Cullinane about this. It needs to be on the agenda. There can be no delay.

I hope the Taoiseach is aware of the issue regarding the army pensions Act, which needs to be updated.

The Taoiseach: The question is about the LEEF.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I know. This relates to Michael McNeela, who was killed in 1989 on peacekeeping duties.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Deputy.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: His father was not able to receive the pension after the mother of Michael McNeela died.

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

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is with the Tánaiste at the minute. He seems supportive-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I would like to think the Taoiseach would also be and that this could be delivered.

The Taoiseach: I think Deputy McAuliffe was the first contributor. He raised pensioners' input into their pension issues. It has been an ongoing concern for pensioners generally across the economy, particularly for public sector pensioners or those in agencies and so forth. There is a sense that once they leave employment, they lack any real influence over their pensions in the future. I will raise that issue with the Minister for public expenditure, who governs pensions within the public service, and the Minister for Social Protection. There is a pensions ombudsman. A lot of frameworks that were not there in times past can help pensioners to access details about their pensions. It is a growing issue. Recently, the CIÉ pensions issue was resolved through good negotiations and the involvement of unions. That illustrates the degree to which unions can play a constructive role on behalf of workers in respect of their pensions.

Deputy Murphy raised the PPPs. I presume and draw from my conclusions that he supports the decision not to go ahead with PPPs that were too expensive in terms of the cost per house. That is the decision the Minister for housing took when he looked at the figures that came in after tender. They were excessive and could not be justified at that stage.

Deputy Coppinger raised an issue. I cannot comment on any specific company. In Ireland,

we are working through the LEEF on a collective bargaining action plan. The directive on adequate minimum wages in the European Union was published in 2022. It was transposed by Ireland by 15 November 2024. Under Article 4, the directive aims to promote collective bargaining on wages in all member states. In addition, each member state with a collective bargaining coverage rate below a threshold of 80%, as in Ireland, shall provide a framework of enabling conditions for collective bargaining and establish an action plan to promote collective bargaining. A technical group was established with the Department of enterprise and social partners in 2023 to consider the possible content of Ireland's action plan. A public consultation was also held on the content of the action plan. That closed in May this year. The Department is now reviewing submissions. They will help to guide the finalisation of proposals, both legislative and administrative, which may be considered for inclusion in Ireland's action plan. It will be published by the end of 2025 in line with the requirements of the EU directive.

Deputy McGuinness raised the question of investment in Waterford. I have to disagree; I think there has been significant investment in Waterford over the past five years in particular. There is now a university in the south east, with a strong campus in Waterford benefiting from significant investment. Waterford University Hospital, likewise, has benefited from significant investment. The North Quays project in the urban regeneration and development fund has been a significant investment. On FDI, the IDA is focused on Waterford. Some good companies have located there, across life sciences and financial services, which is positive. You cannot just go on one year because in some years there could be a significant increase and in others there can be a lapse. An individual company could have a decline.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: The trend is over 20 years.

The Taoiseach: There is going to be a flow and a fluidity in this from year to year, but the overall picture of investment in the south east and in Waterford has been positive and will continue to be in terms of Government commitment to the county.

Deputy Moynihan raised the very important issue of SMEs, and that is covered by the LEEF. Divergence in employment standards and taxation issues between North and South were mentioned. We have more work to do under the shared island aegis in the context of cross-Border workers. The Minister for Finance has been engaging with the Minister for Finance in the Executive. The taxation issues are thorny and complex because they also relate to how cross-border taxation is dealt with in the European Union itself. It is a growing issue since the onset of remote working. Deputy Ó Murchú raised this as well. It is a continuing issue. The Minister for Finance is focused on it. It is something LEEF is concerned about. Supply chains are becoming more seamless between North and South and in some sectors like dairy and energy it is a seamless market or a continuum of trade and so on. It is therefore important we try to get some position that is advantageous to workers, but we do not necessarily want to distort the economy of either jurisdiction, especially the North, in terms of its labour force.

Deputy Dolan raised schools. Schools do not get considered by the LEEF. SNA allocations will obviously have to be fed through the National Council for Special Education, which makes recommendations. On the allocation of SNAs, the numbers have grown exponentially and there are about 20,000 SNAs in the system. I will alert the Minister for education to the Deputy's raising of these issues.

Deputy Ó Murchú raised the tariff and the Army pensions. Again, I will relay that to the Tánaiste. I dealt with remote working. The LEEF has considered that. It is very conscious of

the potential implications of tariffs on trade for employment. We have urged that we avoid a knee-jerk reaction. People were immediately looking for subsidies, which would have been the wrong thing because that situation has not unfolded yet. A lot depends on the nature of the trade deal between the European Union and the United States. I hope they reach a headline agreement before 8 July. I am hopeful they will and that the landing zone is one we can all live with, although it will be challenging and difficult for many companies, such as those in agrifood and general exports into the US. If there is a minimum floor of a tariff, that could be challenging for companies, so we will assess it in the round in terms of how we deal with it.

Cabinet Committees

10. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [18695/25]

11. **Deputy Martin Daly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [22200/25]

12. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [26977/25]

13. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [32398/25]

14. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [32436/25]

15. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [33550/25]

16. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [33563/25]

17. **Deputy Michael Cahill** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [33567/25]

18. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [33612/25]

19. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [33925/25]

20. **Deputy John Connolly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on health will next meet. [34058/25]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 10 to 20, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on health last met on 4 June 2025 and is due to meet again on 17 July 2025. It oversees implementation of programme for Government commitments in relation to health, receives detailed reports on identified policy areas and considers health reforms, including Sláintecare and the reform of public health and health system preparedness for future health threats. It also receives reports on programme for Government commitments in the areas

of mental health and drugs policy.

Path to Universal Healthcare: Sláintecare & Programme for Government 2025+, our latest Sláintecare strategy published last month, aims to forge the way towards accessible, affordable, high-quality, healthcare for the people when they need it and where they need it. We will continue to build our workforce through the recruitment of key roles, retention measures and additional college places for key disciplines. We have capacity to hire a further 6,105 whole-time equivalents, WTEs, to Department of Health-funded posts during the remainder of 2025. We will deliver faster access to care. Funding of €420 million has been allocated for the waiting list action plan 2025. We will continue to review capacity in emergency departments. We will increase the number of public-only consultants in emergency medicine and ensure more senior staff are rostered in emergency departments during weekends and public holidays for better decision-making. The construction of 297 new and replacement acute beds is expected to be completed in 2025. The surgical hub for south Dublin opened in February this year with additional hubs becoming operational later in 2025 and 2026. We will continue to invest in a healthier future with a national physical activity framework and action plan due to be published in 2025 and a new obesity policy and action plan to be published in 2026.

We are launching a new era of innovation and digital transformation in health. The national patient app has been rolled out, with additional features to be added later in the year. The national shared care record will be developed throughout the year and the electronic health record will also be progressed. Additional projects which are key to the increased digitalisation of the health service include a national system for electronic prescribing and remote health monitoring and virtual care solutions. In mental health we will continue to build the mental health workforce and infrastructure and support community-based services. In older people's services we will support people to live at home within their communities and strengthen the nursing home sector. The welfare of residents is at the forefront of Government's concerns. The forthcoming national policy on adult safeguarding for the health and social care sector, which is a programme for Government commitment, will set out how existing protections will be strengthened. This policy is near finalisation and will be brought to Government shortly.

All these commitments build on the investment and reforms undertaken over the past number of years, including the delivery of approximately 1,282 acute beds, an increased workforce of close to 30,000 since the start of 2020, more affordable healthcare through reductions in the drugs payment scheme threshold to €80, removal of hospital inpatient charges, extension of the eligibility for free GP cards for all children under eight and to all earning no more than the median income, State-funded IVF, free contraception for women aged 17 to 35 and free access to HRT therapies. From September 2021 to April 2025, there has been an almost 60% reduction in the number of people waiting longer than 12 months. Care is being delivered closer to home in 180 primary care centres through 96 community health networks, 27 community specialist teams for older persons and 26 community specialist teams for chronic disease are now operational. Some 23 community intervention teams are operational, with national coverage secured. The new regional structures within the HSE have been established with six new health regions and 20 integrated health areas. Health and social care services are planned and delivered around the specific needs of local populations and this leads to better co-ordination of care and access to services. We will continue to invest and reform.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: The Cabinet today approved the patient safety (licensing) Bill. It is long-awaited legislation and one we very much welcome, but will there be minimum staffing numbers in that critical legislation? The INMO has been campaigning on this for a long time.

On cervical cancer, I hosted the 221+ group last week. We saw reports at the weekend that cervical screening is still failing women. Three women have died of cancer and seven more have a positive diagnosis after smear tests were allegedly negligently misread between 2018 and 2021. I ask the Taoiseach about CervicalCheck and the actions the Cabinet health committee is taking to ensure it can provide assurance we can all be confident in the work it is undertaking.

Deputy Martin Daly: Would it be possible for the Minister for Health and her Department and the Government to reconsider their stance on the shingles vaccine given recent studies that show the administration of shingles vaccine in the elderly population has the added benefit of the reduction of the onset of dementia by about 20%? It is a significant additional piece of data published in *Nature* magazine and based on a study of the introduction of the vaccine in Wales. The shingles vaccine is now offered to all people aged over 60 in the UK, as well as in a number of other jurisdictions. This bit of data improves the cost-benefit analysis of the introduction of a shingles vaccine programme for elderly people.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Last week, Children's Health Ireland confirmed just 105 appointments have been offered so far to the children potentially affected by the scandal of unnecessary hip surgeries. Only 60 people have been seen so far out of a total of 2,259 children who had hip surgery since 2010 at Children's Health Ireland or the National Orthopaedic Hospital, Cappagh. At this rate it will take more than 20 years for every child to be assessed.

4 o'clock

To make matters worse, CHI has also confirmed that it is only conducting a once-off review to assess complications only and determine current clinical state. That means it will not provide answers to the 2,259 families on the question of whether their child's surgery was necessary in the first place. It will not provide answers to the question of whether those children were harmed or wronged by malpractice. There will be no transparency, no honesty and no accountability. Will the Government ensure that Children's Health Ireland gets to the real facts for these children and tells them straight whether their surgery was necessary?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: On the issue of children's health in this country, the Taoiseach gave a glowing introduction, but we have the ongoing scandals at CHI. The latest is no disclosure to parents of the failure of CHI to operate or give treatment to boys with undescended testes leading to potential infertility and cancer issues. Yet, that did not meet the threshold for disclosure. I do not have time in this interaction but does he agree that this is now systemic? It is not one thing here and one thing there. One of the issues parents have raised is the idea of a partial ratified independent scrutiny-type investigation prism where parents would have monitoring and oversight of experts because we will keep continuing down this road and eventually have to concede a public inquiry.

The Taoiseach also mentioned in his introduction the announcement of a move to a seven-day operation of the health service. That is all well and good, but there is a shortage of 1,000 beds. There is a shortage of thousands of staff. Staff will be spread over seven days, potentially leading to more mistakes, more bad treatment and more people lying on trolleys.

Deputy Máire Devine: In my first six months as a TD, I have been asked to intervene in four emergency mental health cases for constituents in Dublin South-Central. Three were for severe eating disorders where the patient's family feared for their survival if appropriate treatment was not provided immediately. The fourth acute patient simply sought a second medical

opinion but was discouraged by the HSE at every stage. In all cases, the patients and their families felt they were not being heard by treating physicians and the scenarios were so dire I had to involve a Minister of State's office to procure emergency mental health attention and specialist assessment for the patients. Patients with life-threatening illnesses are having difficulty obtaining appropriate care. I am asking for an update on specialists in the eating disorder section. Why is the HSE not adhering to its national consent policy and established case law to respect a patient's choice to seek a second opinion?

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Almost ten years ago the Taoiseach stood outside University Hospital Waterford with a billboard promising 24-7 cardiac care for Waterford and the south-east. Ten years on, the people of the south-east are still waiting. Cabinet approval was announced two months ago but since then there has been no detailed plan, timeline or staffing strategy. Announcements are cheap and it is delivery that matters. We have lost years waiting for that announcement and that go ahead. Without urgent action, lives remain at risk in Waterford and the wider south-east. Will the Taoiseach confirm if recruitment is completed, and when we will see a full implementation plan with timelines, staffing targets and guaranteed delivery of 24-7 cardiac care at UHW?

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: The Mazars report stated that the HSE has not been implementing the legal timelines for the reimbursement of medicines. I can refer to at least four studies commissioned in the past year that show legal timelines are not being adhered to. In February last year, the Irish Pharmaceutical Healthcare Association published a paper showing that 86% of all reimbursements did not adhere to the 180-day timeline as outlined in the legislation. The Taoiseach knows I am a long-term advocate for reform in this regard. I am asking that the HSE, its affiliates on the drugs group, the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics, NCPE, and others just implement the current legislation. Patients with unmet needs are waiting years for decisions in Ireland while the majority of our European counterparts wait months. Does the Taoiseach think, as per those reports, that the HSE and the NCPE are adhering to those guidelines? It is important that he clarifies that today.

Deputy Michael Cahill: The national immunisation programme should include a vaccination for shingles free of charge for all our citizens. A vaccine to prevent shingles would be of great benefit to the entire population but would particularly benefit older people who are more susceptible to viral disease. Shingles can be quite painful and debilitating and these effects are more pronounced in older people. The costs would be beyond the budget of many and as a public health issue, a nationwide free vaccination scheme would benefit the entire population. Given that it is available free of charge in Northern Ireland, it should also be available here. We must support and protect our most vulnerable, those with health issues and those getting on in years. I urge the Taoiseach to liaise with the Ministers for Health, Finance and public expenditure to introduce this vaccine as soon as possible.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I pay tribute to 15-year-old Kofi Owusu from Dundalk, County Louth, who lost his life after getting into difficulty swimming in Laytown, County Meath, last Friday. Our condolences go to his family, his friends and to the wider community. We have all heard the tributes from Redeemer Celtic and Tomás Sharkey in Coláiste Chú Chulainn, the school he attended. We have heard of his diligence, his leadership qualities and his friendship. A huge hole has been left by this. We are talking about somebody who was a spectacular footballer and basketball player but he sounded like an all-round really great kid. This happened just a couple of days following the death of Isobel McCluskey and highlights the dangers of swimming and water. We hope we have a good summer but there is an absolute necessity that

we do all we can with regard to information because we have had too many of these tragedies across Ireland.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I want to raise the poor state of healthcare for those suffering with allergies in this country. Many parents are forced to spend huge amounts to travel abroad to get their children the treatment they need. I spoke to a woman a few months ago who had to go to America for six weeks. She had to pay €8,000 for treatment. She was also out of work for six weeks and had to pay for accommodation. That is not unusual. A lot of families go to Britain or America to get oral immunotherapy in particular. This can take the form of a tablet like Palforzia, which contains a tiny amount of peanuts for those suffering from peanut allergies, or oral immunotherapy where people, mostly children, are consuming tiny amounts of the product they are allergic to in controlled environments and they build up resistance over time to have a less severe allergic reaction. The problem is that these are not available within the Irish health system and are not even covered by the treatment abroad scheme. Does the Taoiseach agree we need a multiyear national allergy strategy and that we need to offer oral immunotherapy in this country?

Deputy John Connolly: The healthcare sector is one sector of our public service that relies heavily on attracting and recruiting practitioners and staff internationally. In 2024, 6,000 of the 17,000 critical skills permits provided by the State were in the health or social work sectors, 5,031 of which were for nursing staff. In 2023, the OECD said that 54% of nurses working in Ireland had trained in other jurisdictions. The equivalent figure in the UK was 18%. I harbour a guess that many of them are probably Irish. I arrive at two conclusions from this. First, we are not training an adequate number of healthcare professionals, in particular practitioners and particularly nurses. Second, nurses particularly are choosing post qualification to seek opportunities in countries other than Ireland. Both of these conclusions need to be interrogated.

The Taoiseach: I will start with Deputy Sherlock's questions on the patient safety (licensing) Bill and cervical cancer screening. The patient safety (licensing) Bill came through Cabinet today and the Minister can go through the details with the Deputy in due course, in terms of specifics on safe numbers, safe staffing and so forth. A lot of it has been introduced without legislation in accordance with agreements. The Minister will continue to resource the cervical cancer programme and other cancer screening programmes. It is important to say screening programmes are the first stage. They are population screening programmes designed to intervene early and identify but they are not the ultimate in diagnostic approaches. If people present with symptoms, they may need more detailed diagnostic assessment. We have to get the balance right. The public needs very clear information on screening programmes and what they can achieve and on the importance of always consulting a GP or consultant. That is extremely important because there are limits to screening programmes. There are calls to expand the number of screening programmes in different areas. We have made a lot of progress on cervical cancer screening because of new technology and new methodology but we are open to improving further and engaging with the various groupings to see what issues have been identified as problematic and how they can be improved. I will talk to the Minister for Health about that.

Deputies Daly and Cahill raised the shingles vaccine. My understanding is it is a significantly expensive vaccine. I am struck by the research Deputy Daly cited regarding its impact on the risk of dementia. A figure as high as 20% is very significant. He said the research was published recently in *Nature* so I will talk to the Minister for Health about that. Generally, I am a supporter of vaccines. As a public health intervention, they have been extremely effective in the history of this country. People are not dying of what people died from 100 years ago any

more, primarily because of the successful introduction of vaccines to deal with a lot of infectious diseases. That is easily forgotten in modern discourse and debates. The Covid-19 vaccine was essential to society coming back to some degree of normality. Without that vaccine, we would still be in deep trouble. It is important to state that. I will go to the Minister in respect of that.

Deputy O'Rourke raised CHI. Every family must be told whether their child required surgery. There has to be complete transparency from CHI in respect of that. There has to be diligent follow-up with all concerned, as it declared. We will ensure that happens. I will talk to the Minister on engaging with CHI on that issue.

Deputy Coppinger raised CHI, again, and the issue relating to young boys. That is a very serious issue, which needs to be addressed transparently and comprehensively by CHI. The HSE and the Department of Health should be involved in respect of that issue. The Dickson report from 2017 on urology services in CHI proposed the consolidation of all paediatric urology services into a single, cohesive centre, the establishment of a multidisciplinary urology team and so forth. That key issue needs to be further examined in light of that report. The issues the Deputy has identified should have been disclosed earlier.

That is a very good agreement between the HSE and the unions. Healthcare staff numbers have risen enormously in the past four to five years with 30,000 extra. We cannot keep on saying, "Let's get another couple of thousand." There has to be a balance.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: There is a huge shortage.

The Taoiseach: There is not a huge shortage. Thousands of people have been recruited. Let us be straight about it. The seven-day use of hospitals is something that should happen. It should not be dependent on more and more staff. The assets were not being used. Expensive diagnostic equipment was not being used optimally and the hospitals themselves were not being used optimally when there were five-day, nine-to-five services. Productivity matters, as do new devices and new technology. We need a broader approach to get better value for money. We have invested hugely in health and that needs to be acknowledged. Productivity and value for money are also factors. We are recruiting a further 6,000 in 2025, in addition to the 30,000 that have been recruited. I accept the population is increasing and that will create demand for services. It has created a lot of demand for health services. The population is ageing, which is creating further demand for the health service. That deal is a good one and will lead to greater productivity in hospitals and health services.

On mental health issues, the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, has been doing significant work on eating disorders. Deputy Devine could talk to her about the specifics of the cases she has raised. We need more investment in eating disorder centres but we have had some. A lot of progress has been made in that respect.

Deputy McGuinness raised cardiac care. Much progress has been made in the past five years in respect of cath lab investment in Waterford. It has been incrementally building up. There has been quite good investment in the past two to three years. Now we will complete that in terms of 24-7 provision. That is a Government decision that has been taken and that will happen. Recruitment in healthcare takes time. It does not happen within two months but it will happen and that will be developed, as committed to by Government.

Deputy O'Sullivan raised the reimbursement of medication. More progress needs to be

made on the reimbursement of medicines. Quite a lot has been made. I met IPHA representatives who represent the pharmaceutical industry here. Understandably, it is promoting this but when I questioned IPHA members two years ago, they were more or less saying they had a good enough relationship with the national pharmacovigilance unit. As a country with a strong concentration of pharmaceutical companies and which produces some of the most effective medicines in the world, we should have a modern, up-to-date reimbursement process. However, that has implications for public expenditure. Progress has been made but we need to make more, and we need to meet the standards and European norms.

Deputy Cahill raised the shingles vaccine. I do not doubt the benefits but the expenditure would be significant. We need to bear that in mind.

I join Deputy Ó Murchú in offering sympathy to Kofi's family. It is heartbreaking that any young person so talented and with so much to offer in life should die in such circumstances. The Deputy mentioned Isobel McCluskey as well. The national emergency forum - there is a more precise title for it - did a lot of work on water safety in terms of swimming in rivers and in the sea over the past two years, and on prevention. One of the most effective interventions in healthcare is prevention. Public health messaging on accidents is a key dimension of that and is a factor in injuries and deaths. Our sympathies go to all in the community and the families affected.

Deputy Murphy raised the issue of allergies. We have multidisciplinary teams involved in allergy. I defer to medical and professional advice within our own system on the provision of oral immunology therapy. It is a complex area that takes a lot of building up of immunology. A lot of children have spent a lot of time with consultants so I am slightly worried. I am not an expert on this but I defer to proper, professional advice as to when such medicines could be accessed or used. I say to everybody out there to consult their GP and consultant in respect of the utilisation of any therapies in that regard.

Deputy Connolly mentioned nursing and 6,000 critical skills permits, of which I think he said 5,000 were in nursing. There are two ways of looking at it. A lot of young graduates travel and have been travelling for a long time in the medical world. There may be an issue of retention. Some come back to work in Ireland later on and there are huge specialties available to nurses in Ireland. There are huge programmes, including postgraduate programmes and specialist programmes. We have developed the likes of intensive care nursing and cardiac nursing very well with native talent. There has been phenomenal change in nursing in Ireland over the last 20 years, from the degree programmes to the postgraduate programmes. However, there is an issue of retention and retraining people and we have to be more innovative in terms of how we do that into the future and we then attract nurses from other jurisdictions into the country.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mark Wall): I thank the Taoiseach. I am informed the time for Taoiseach's Questions has finished so we will move on to statements on nursing homes and care for older persons. We will wait for the Minister of State to join us.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: In fairness, Chair, that is not fair. A lot of us were waiting here for questions and the Taoiseach took an inordinate amount of time to whither on with those answers. Do the same rules not apply to the Taoiseach as apply to everybody else in this House?

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: While we are waiting for the Minister of State, Chair.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mark Wall): That is what I have been informed

by the clerk.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We might continue, Chair. The Taoiseach has signalled a willingness to continue.

The Taoiseach: That is very unfair of Deputy Tóibín. He arrived late himself.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: In fairness, we get a minute. It is timed and we are told to stop. There was no umpiring of the time on this occasion at all.

The Taoiseach: I am normally very generous, Deputy. Come on. I am normally very generous.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mark Wall): I am told the rule is 45 minutes. The time is up so I have to proceed to the next item on the Order of Business, which is statements.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Normally, the time is split in a certain way to make sure the three groupings are taken in the 45 minutes.

The Taoiseach: In the first grouping, there were many questions answered. I accept there are several questions in the third grouping. A lot of people did not turn up at all at the beginning. It cuts each way. All of the Deputies wanted this session-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It should cut both ways. That is the point I am trying to make.

The Taoiseach: -----but the number of Deputies who were absent at the beginning of this session left me surprised.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I have a point of order. On the previous occasion when statements on nursing homes were taken, some of us waited until the very end of the night to get our slot. I hope that will be taken now.

Nursing Homes and Care for Older Persons: Statements (Resumed)

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister of State for being here. He is very much aware of the “RTÉ Investigates” programme and the work that was done by Aoife Hegarty and her team. It was an example of quality public service broadcasting. I know the Minister of State, like me and so many others, was appalled by what he saw on his screen. I know he wants to take action on foot of that. The Taoiseach said that when HIQA carries out particular actions, it should be in a position to press the button that will require the closure of certain nursing homes if they are not up to standard. I welcome that commitment. Unless the ultimate deterrent can be applied, that small minority which are flouting the rules will not respond.

It is important to note there are many quality nursing homes and centres that provide for the elderly within our communities and they are equally appalled by what has happened. In my own community in north Wexford, many of those who provide quality care were disgusted by what they saw on their screens. It is as important for those who are quality providers of care for the elderly that the rogue element within the sector is stamped out.

As the Minister of State knows, the bigger challenge is that we are all getting older and we are all living longer. Over the next 20 years, the population aged between 65-84 is projected

to increase by 65% and the population of those aged 85 and over will double. The fact that life expectancy in Ireland is now hitting 83 years of age is a major success. Those who regularly criticise aspects of the State should recognise that the fact we now have one of the best life expectancies of anywhere in the world is something we should be proud of as a society. However, we have to ensure older people get to live in dignity in later life and we also need to ensure that, insofar as possible, they can be healthy later on in life.

While it is important for us to talk about nursing homes and the sanction that needs to be levied against those errant nursing homes, we should also celebrate those who do a lot of good work in the sector. In particular, we should recognise those with qualifications in the sector. There is a broader debate around older people within society, though, and around how we design our societies to be able to ensure that older people can take part and be involved. We can learn from societies that have faced this challenge, such as Japan and Italy. I do not think we will be going to those extremes just yet but certainly their experiences of having larger older populations are very important to learn from.

An issue I want to refer to is the importance of trying to ensure we keep people healthy. If we can keep people out of hospitals and out of nursing homes, that is the best thing we can do. Part of that is about care in the community, but it is also about encouraging a lifestyle of health and fitness right through until older age. Once you get into your 30s, 40s or 50s, when you tend to become less active, it is critically important to keep up some level of physical activity in those stages of your life. The Minister of State will be aware that in budget 2025 the then Minister for Finance, Deputy Chambers, announced there would be a review around the concept of tax relief for gym membership, but also other incentives for people to be involved to ensure they remain healthy into older age. That is something I strongly support. There is a lot of wonderful work being done by the Active Ageing programme and others about keeping older people active within our communities. Too often, there is a danger - I say this respectfully - that we do not have a Department of Health but, rather, a Department of illness and sickness, and we do not spend a sufficient amount of time focusing on positive health promotion about ensuring how everybody, but older people in particular, can live independently in the community and live healthy lives.

I hope the Minister of State, in his response, can broaden this debate. Like so many others, I share the outrage at what we saw on the “RTÉ Investigates” programme. We cannot allow it to happen again and action needs to be taken against that minority.

Deputy David Cullinane: As was said, the first priority should be ensuring people are cared for in the home and in the community. The difficulty is that many older people are waiting for intensive home care packages. In the previous term and the previous programme for Government, the then Government promised a statutory home care scheme. It never the light of day. I am not sure when that will ever come. I suspect it has not come because we simply do not have the capacity in home helps, home care hours and home support hours to deliver it. At the moment, even without a statutory home care scheme, that is under pressure and people are waiting too long. I learned from the response to a parliamentary question I tabled some weeks back that there are people who have only partial hours or a portion of their hours even though they have been allocated more. Of course, the first priority is that people are cared for in the home. For people to be cared for in the home, however, we have to provide the supports to enable it to happen, particularly when there may be complex needs. However, there are circumstances in which, unfortunately, people need to be in residential care homes. That is just a fact of life.

Another fact is that, over the past 20 years, we have seen a drift away from public providers to private providers. We are aware that the ratio of public nursing home capacity to private nursing home capacity has turned on its head. Almost 80% of homes are now private. If that is not bad enough, family-run operators, or what were called “mom and pop operators” ran out of the market, having been bought up by funds that are now providing a service across multiple homes. We have heard from HIQA that there is an issue in this regard. The funds are complex legal entities with deep pockets that can end up out of the reach of regulation. I am referring not to the homes themselves but to the parent companies. We have also heard that regulations will need to be changed to deal with this. I accept that and believe HIQA has to be given the powers. Although the Minister correctly said at a meeting of the health committee last week that there are powers to fine nursing homes, cases need to go to court. HIQA itself should have the power to impose fines.

Before the Government moved on this, I was very supportive of the idea of HIQA being able to issue compliance orders and I worked with the authority on it. That is fine because we do not want the only option to be the deregistration and closure of a nursing home. We want to have various options along the way. There are not enough. There is a need for fines and penalties, particularly where there are instances of neglect and abuse of the kind we have noted in some nursing homes. It is quite extraordinary that while there were almost 200 allegations of abuse in one home, not one cent of a fine was paid. That is really upsetting for people.

I want to deal with an aspect of a HIQA report published yesterday that concerns my constituency. HIQA inspectors pointed out that omissions or errors in care delivery were leading to many problems. It is reported that in a County Waterford care centre, inspectors were not assured that the registered provider had taken all reasonable measures to protect residents from abuse. According to the report, some residents with a history of behaviours which were a known safeguarding risk to other residents had measures documented to mitigate the risk but these measures had not always been effective and failed to protect residents from abuse. It states this finding was evidenced by “the continuance of physical and verbal peer-to-peer abuse incidents by a number of residents in the centre”. This shows in black and white, or in very stark terms, that we need safeguarding legislation for adults. Although I might sound like a broken record, I have to keep making that point because, from all the crises in care centres, disability centres and nursing homes, and potentially also in homes, where there can be abuses of older people, we realise we need to have the very highest and most robust protections. Our aim has to be high-quality care. To achieve high-quality care, there cannot be any hiding places. There has to be mandatory reporting, an automatic legal right of entry for social care teams, and statutory safeguarding legislation so there will be real muscle and power. We have done this for children, and rightly so, and we now need to do it for adults as well. It is long overdue. It is all well and good that the Government is saying a policy review will go to the Cabinet but it does not cut the mustard with respect to safeguarding legislation. Again, I appeal to the Minister of State to prioritise this.

The health committee agreed today that I would become a rapporteur to consider what safeguarding legislation would look like. I hope that will be of use to the Minister of State as the Government prepares legislation.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I welcome that.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome this opportunity to address the issue of nursing homes. I am aware the Minister of State has taken an interest in it but there are major issues to be ad-

dressed. In this regard, I must raise the over-reliance on private nursing homes with him. It has increased. That 80% of nursing homes are now private has skewed things and left us at the mercy of the private sector. Unfortunately, some in the sector will abuse their position. We have seen terrifying examples of this in recent weeks.

The incidents of neglect and abuse have been well aired and I am not going to go over them again. I went over them previously in the Chamber. Despite the improvement plans and commitments given to both HIQA and the families, particularly regarding the residents in Portlaoise, they were not followed through on. The company in question breached the admission ban and continued to admit people after February even though it was told by HIQA not to. The time for change is long overdue.

I welcome the fact the issues at The Residence have been referred to An Garda Síochána. In this regard, HIQA has questions to answer. Whistleblowers' complaints were not acted on for two years. Not until we saw the RTÉ exposé did we start to become acquainted with these issues. There were 40 notifications of alleged abuse to HIQA in 18 months. What happened with those 40 notifications? What action was taken on them? There seems to have been very little. There was a five-month gap between some of the inspections in The Residence despite many problems piling up. There was no action taken on that. It is clear that improvement plans agreed with HIQA and the HSE were not acted on. That is simply not good enough while we are depending on these nursing homes. I met HIQA representatives on the issue of possible penalties. HIQA can halt admissions, prosecute and deregister, and it has a complaints system. Ultimately, cases can be filed with An Garda Síochána, as has happened in this case.

There is a report today on public nursing homes, one being in Mountmellick, County Laois. It is an old nursing home with a new wing being built onto it. If the Minister of State has any influence, he should push this on quicker. We need to get it opened. The nursing home received a glowing report. There were a few minor points here and there – nowhere will ever be perfect – but, overall, I could describe the report only as “glowing”. One resident told HIQA that there were so many activities that they had not time to get bored, and that people were very happy and content.

We must try to reduce dependency on nursing homes. Some people will have to go to a nursing home at some point, as most of us accept, although we hope it will never happen to us. Where we can at all support people at home, we must do it.

Portlaoise meals on wheels is starting up again. We have had no meals on wheels in Portlaoise for four years. Again, if the Minister of State has any influence, he should note the service will need funding. We have secured a kitchen and I have some involvement with the project. We need the service up and running and more supports for meals on wheels.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: The Deputy should write to me about that.

Deputy Brian Stanley: One proper meal per day can make a major difference.

There should be more home help staff and more flexibility in what they can do. There should be more public health nurses, who are fundamental in keeping people in their homes.

Deputy O'Donnell, as Minister of State, will agree that loneliness is killing people. This is not something the Government can sort on its own. Whatever we can do through voluntary organisations and society as a whole, we should do it. We should send out the message that we

need people to visit their elderly neighbours. I used to do it as a young person going to school. My mother used to send me to visit old people on my way home from school. If they needed kindling brought in for the fire, for example, I brought it in. It was just a matter of chatting to them for a few minutes.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I found the “RTÉ Investigates” programme horrifying, obviously, and very difficult to watch. It was clear that the older people were not being treated as human beings, with decency, dignity and respect. Instead, many were being treated simply as a burden – a burden for whom there were not enough gloves or incontinence pads. They were treated like sacks of meat thrown on the chair, as was the case with one man. It is clear that this is not unprecedented or really unexpected. Cost-cutting, staff shortages, elder abuse and the ripping off of vulnerable people are all inevitable when you hand over healthcare to faceless multinationals motivated only by profit.

SIPTU, ALONE and the INMO have all pointed to privatisation as being at the root of this scandal. The root is neoliberal Government policy implemented by successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments to outsource our care of older people to multinational corporations.

In the 1980s, three quarters of nursing homes were publicly owned and operated, but now the proportion is less than a fifth. Private, for-profit operators control 74% of our nursing home beds, and just ten investment funds in Ireland control 30% of our nursing home beds. This did not happen by accident. This is not something that unfortunately happened, that Micheál Martin and so on are very sad about. It was deliberate Government policy. As with private hospitals, the State provided private nursing homes with massive tax relief on capital expenditure and guaranteed them an income stream through Mary Harney’s so-called fair deal scheme. Income for private nursing homes through the fair deal scheme has ballooned. Total funding is now over €1.2 billion a year, 80% of which goes to private nursing homes. The fees are incredible.

At The Residence in Portlaoise, fees are upwards of €1,200 a week, but not satisfied with that, the abusive, money-grabbing multinational, Emeis, which runs The Residence, has also been ripping off elderly people and their families by illegally charging extra for essentials like medication, dressings and pressure-relieving mattresses to prevent bedsores. Incontinence wear costs up to €90 extra a month. A hip protector is €60 a month. If residents go into hospital, they have to pay for their own transport plus a staff charge of up to €45 an hour. How much of that do the carers see? Maybe a third or a half, with the rest going to the largest nursing home provider in the State. Families are charged €15 a week if they want to rent a sensor that alerts them if a patient falls out of a bed or a chair. Given the gross understaffing of The Residence, it looks like they would need it.

Incredibly, there is no legal minimum staff to resident ratio for nursing homes. Presumably, the private providers lobby to keep it that way because wages are their main cost. That is why nursing home carers are among the lowest paid and most overworked workers in the country. That is how much this Government, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, value older people. The stock response is to say that better regulation is needed. Yes, absolutely, it is. For years, care champions and others have been screaming about this and pushing for safeguarding legislation. This scandal should force the Government to act. Ultimately, we are not just talking about a few bad apples. This neglect and abuse is endemic in a system that is for profit. We have to end the privatisation and bring it back into public ownership.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Here we go again about nursing homes. A scandal has given

us cause to talk about nursing homes. All the details of that scandal have been outlined. I am not going to outline them again. It is bewildering that HIQA had a report on one of the homes, Beneavin, in November, and it was substantially compliant. That in itself is frightening. I looked to remember, because my memory is faulty, when we closed St. Francis Nursing Home in Galway. On the streets of Galway, in 2011, over a winter period, we gathered more than 20,000 signatures, begging the Health Service Executive not to close St. Francis Nursing Home. It ignored the people of Galway and the signatures, and it closed the nursing home. We managed to keep it open as a primary care centre. I am using that as an example.

Around that time, I travelled to Portlaoise too, where the HSE was closing a public nursing home in Deputy Fleming's constituency. I cannot remember what happened with that. We joined forces. That was back in 2010 and 2011, when we said the writing was on the wall with the closure of public nursing homes. That started earlier with Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats' philosophy, which I have repeatedly said knew the price of everything and the value of nothing, with the mantra that private is best. Every single Government policy went to ensuring that private was best, not for care but for profit-making, and that is what happened.

I have asked a number of questions about how many private nursing homes have had to be taken over since 2020 alone. I have counted 11 in Wicklow, Kerry, Galway, Galway, Kerry, Cork and so on. The private nursing homes get into trouble and then the public system has to send in staff in Oughterard in Galway and in Galway city, into private, for-profit companies which are unaccountable. We send in staff, which is ironic because there is a nursing home in Carraroe, which I have mentioned many times, that cannot get staff, and it has 13 beds, or somewhere between ten and 15 beds at any given time, i gcoílár na Gaeltachta, and the HSE says that there are no staff. Yet, when these private companies get into trouble, we seem to be able to send in staff no problem to take them over. I am not sure if we have learned anything or what the cost has been of looking after the private companies that got into trouble. We are all in receipt of the public accounts, which I will not read out. Absolutely harrowing correspondence arises from Covid, including how many died in nursing homes and how they were treated. This is 2025 and people are still trying to get documents and appealing to us.

Let us look at the percentages. Not even 20% are in public ownership. It is much less, as we know from the Public Accounts Committee. That 20% or less includes publicly-owned nursing homes plus voluntary bodies. I think it is as low as 14% or 15%. I know Galway has an excellent reputation, with Merlin Park and the St. Francis home when it was there. I despair sometimes at the forcefulness of a lobby group and Governments that back up the market when all of the facts tell you otherwise, when we just pursue one avenue and keep reducing public ownership of nursing homes until it is nothing. If we are to learn anything from this, rather than listing the scandals, perhaps we could have a change in policy from the Government.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. We are all quite rightly sickened with the recent "Prime Time" exposé about how certain nursing homes treated residents, the impact that has had on the families of the affected residents and also the impact that has on families who have people in nursing homes. My family has just gone through an agonising number of months, deciding whether nursing home care was the right care for my father. We arrived at that decision a number of weeks ago.

It is important that all families realise that this is not a universal problem, because there is serious worry. It is equally important that families know that when elder abuse happens and

there are failings in nursing homes, there has to be accountability and there have to be consequences for the firms and individuals who perpetrated abuse in these nursing homes. There needs to be accountability for the firms which are receiving €1.2 billion in State funds per annum to support the provision of care.

In the next decade, we will see the number of people over 65 increase by 50%. I agree with the previous speaker that the State needs to move away from the privatisation of care and care homes. My experience tells me that the vast majority of people do not want to live out the end of their days in care homes. They would rather remain in their home for as long as practically possible. Funding for public services in this area has increased in the last number of years, with additional home care hours and additional daycare centres, and people have seen the benefit, but much more needs to be done. We need to remove the 16-week waiting list to be assessed for home care services. We need to ensure that people who are approved for home care hours get them seven days a week, not five days a week. If you need care on a Monday, you are going to need it on a bank holiday Monday, a Saturday or a Sunday. We need to ensure that the daycare centres are expanded regardless of their geographical location.

The previous programme for Government committed to a statutory home care package. Why is there a delay? Can the Minister of State commit to that package being introduced as a priority by this Government? HIQA was established as a response to a previous exposé of elder abuse. Why was it not established on day one with adequate powers to fine private operators which are failing abysmally in their responsibility to their residents? Can we ensure that, out of this, we will see adequate powers in place for HIQA and that HIQA will concentrate on the provision of care, not the quality of building?

Deputy Michael Cahill: Since the airing of the “RTÉ Investigates” programme on national television, families feel terrified. They do not know what way to turn. My constituency office in Killarney, County Kerry, is inundated with queries about home care. Those queries are asking what is available to families to look after their loved ones at home. Many of these would be under extreme pressure to be able to cope at home but they are turning away from private nursing homes following the recent scandal. There is no doubt about that.

Regarding sanctions, penalties, suspensions, termination of contract, what has happened in that area? As the Minister of State will know, I raised the issue of the company involved coming before the Joint Committee on Health, that I am a member of. The company should be brought in. There is no doubt about that. At the end of the day, it is ultimately responsible for what has happened in both of those homes. Both homes were in receipt of millions of euro of taxpayers’ moneys. There should be accountability here. The idea of our elderly people being afraid of going into long-term care is frightening. It is a sad day and a sad reflection on our society in this day and age in 2025. The sad thing about it is that all other nursing homes are being tarnished because of this. There has to be accountability.

We have great community hospitals in Kerry. We have some of the very best. We have wonderful directors of nursing, matrons, nurses, doctors, carers, caterers, cleaners, etc., in places such as Cahirciveen Community Hospital, Valentia Island Community Hospital, St. Joseph’s nursing home in Killorglin, St. Columbanus home in Killarney, and the list goes on. I plead with the Minister of State to bring about accountability here and bring those responsible before us, particularly at the Joint Committee on Health as that would be a good starting point. I do not see any reason they should be allowed to refuse. I have seen that happening at the Committee of Public Accounts recently. That is another issue I have commented on publicly already. Anyone

invited in should be brought in.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I welcome the opportunity to speak in these statements. Like everyone, I was appalled by what I saw on the “RTÉ Investigates” programme. The flood of emails and phone calls that came in the following day from sons and daughters of elderly people who are in nursing home care, fearing that HIQA does not have eyes correctly on the situation in many scenarios. I agree with others that it has unfairly tarnished best-practice healthcare for older people. Sometimes the reaction to these things is rightly an outpouring of anger, frustration and huge upset, but sometimes that spills over into painting all with the one brush, which is not the case.

It is important that when HIQA identifies areas of non-compliance and neglect, it uses the ultimate nuclear option to shut down some of those facilities. I know that creates other huge problems for healthcare, such as where do the residents go and how do we provide for their needs? That is the ultimate sanction HIQA has over them. It should not be a roll-over after an inspection and that it will see how they have improved the next time. It needs to use the ultimate sanction sparingly, but in scenarios like this it should have been used.

As others have said, State-provided care, or the old county homes as people call them, such as St. Joseph’s in Ennis and St. Camillus’s in Limerick which a lot of people in my area would go to, provide quality care. The State should be more involved. In the previous Dáil, Milford hospice in Limerick, which is a cause and a hospital close to the Minister of State’s heart, my heart and the hearts of most people in the mid-west moved over to a section 38 organisation. That was transformative and incredible. It no longer has to go around shaking the biscuit tin, trying to collect money and holding fundraiser after fundraiser. It now has a direct line of funding that means it can get down to the real high quality care it provides. More of that needs to happen.

On staffing stability, as recruitment embargoes in various areas of the HSE begin to lift, there is a real fear in the voluntary not-for-profit nursing home sector that it will begin haemorrhaging some of the nurses brought in from overseas who will leave and migrate to the HSE, having gone through all the paperwork and rigamarole of bringing them in on visas and training them up to the highest standards of Irish healthcare. The Minister of State needs to have eyes on that scenario.

The Minister of State’s colleague, the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, has directed HIQA to look at the ESRI report when it examines the University Hospital Limerick capacity for emergency care. In light of that ESRI report, which overwhelmingly identifies the need for new hospital beds and new hospital environments, some of that data needs to be fed into nursing home care. Do we have enough nursing home beds and facilities, public and private, going forward? We already know what the answer will be. Let us see it and let it lead public policy. I wish the Minister of State well in his role during the lifetime of this Government.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: It is said a society should be judged on how it treats those who are most vulnerable. In this case, it is older people in our society. What we saw in the “RTÉ Investigates” programme was not care. It did not look like the dignity of older people had been looked after. We owe a debt of gratitude to “RTÉ Investigates” for shining a light on what happened in some settings and on the fear it is happening in others. What we saw was elder abuse. There is a natural fear in society it is happening in other locations. It is important to call out that a lot of the care settings are excellent, with excellent nurses, excellent care staff and excellent

management but there are a few bad apples, which is obvious.

We have seen how Tusla has operated in the past for the betterment of protecting young children, in particular. The establishment of an independent adult-safeguarding authority is warranted. This would focus primarily on looking at the safeguarding of older people, in particular vulnerable adults. This type of authority is something that could help in protecting those most vulnerable in society; those older people in nursing homes. What I am trying to do, rather than regurgitate the problems and the anger and frustration we all feel as a collective, is try to come up with some solutions. That is one solution I am proposing.

Another solution is a national register of care concerns and complaints. This would be a publicly accessible, anonymous database of serious complaints about different care homes throughout the country. It would be administered by HIQA. In that regard, it would give families a little more insight into what is happening in various care homes and, indeed, the decision-making process around what care home they are going to send their loved one to if they do have to come to that reality. I am proposing two solutions. One is around an independent adult-safeguarding authority similar to Tusla and the second is a national register of care concerns and complaints.

The important thing here is transparency so families and those vulnerable people in care homes know what is happening and have the full knowledge of what is happening. I will liaise with the Minister of State after this to see if either of those suggestions could be progressed.

Deputy Barry Ward: What we saw in the “RTÉ Investigates” programme was very upsetting. The notion that anybody entrusts the loved one in their family, who is arguably at the most vulnerable stage in their life, to a home and they are treated in the way we saw them being treated is frightening as much as it is upsetting. The reality is that I talk to people every day who are in a situation where an elderly parent or elderly relative needs the kind of care that means they have to go into a nursing home. We are asking them to put their trust in a system that is clearly deficient in terms of the safeguards and checks in place.

I have been contacted by a constituent and I want to read what she said about her father’s experience, albeit in a nursing home in County Wicklow, not in my constituency, but she lives in my constituency in Dún Laoghaire. She talks about the experience that he had towards the end of his life in that nursing home. What she has reported to me is quite shocking. She and her family were frequently ignored when they raised concerns with the nursing home about their father’s well-being.

5 o’clock

He had multiple urinary tract infections that went undiagnosed and untreated, meaning he was in significant discomfort, as well as the health risks this posed. His medication was not properly administered. He suffered from bed sores that were left untreated and not dealt with and we can imagine the pain and discomfort he would be in, lying in a bed and unable to help himself. The family raised concerns with the home and were repeatedly ignored. It was not until the family initiated legal action that they were listened to and interventions were taken by the staff in the care facility. The care facility failed to ensure he received proper food and water or that he consumed it. The staff failed to engage with the family about their father’s health. The care facility failed to adequately deal with the physiotherapy needs of their father as well. There were consistent patterns of neglect and a lack of care. Even in his final days, the family

struggled to get palliative care and painkillers to help their father. This is just one case, one constituent who emailed me. There are others and I have just chosen this from a number of emails.

What this brings home, and I know the Minister of State is alive to this and understands it, is the seriousness of this issue. I hope everybody in this Chamber reaches the age where they will need to rely on somebody and will need to rely on the care of people, so many of whom do such great work. I know, having dealt with carers in nursing homes, that they love the care they give to the elderly. We need to make sure every one of them does that, and where they do not and where they fall short, that there are consequences and, most importantly, action.

Deputy Máire Devine: I know of a mammy who retrained after having children and received a healthcare assistant qualification. She was delighted to get a position in Beneavin Manor. Her delight quickly turned to despair as she witnessed horrors beyond comprehension. Patients were taken to the toilet by staff and left for hours only to die there, and the times and manner of death were brushed over for families. There were many instances of vulnerable patients physically fighting among each other and staff were not trained in de-escalation. Sexual assaults between residents were never reported or addressed and, even more disturbing, staff members were caught engaging in sexual activity in a resident's room. Many staff members took drugs during shifts and even offered her some. Patients were underfed and would be starving and crying.

When she spoke out, management was very dismissive and considered her the enemy within. Her breaking point was when a gentleman was prematurely and unnecessarily placed in palliative care. This happened to several patients. Staff, during conversations with patients' families, pushed palliative care as a preferable option and, of course, family members listened to the experts.

HIQA was notified on multiple occasions about specific abuses, the lack of supplies and understaffing resulting in residents' mistreatment but did not act. Everything went swimmingly when HIQA visited, but the chaotic and neglectful norm would return. She left this job feeling very distressed and traumatised. She believes all three campuses should be shut down.

Everybody needs someone who has his or her back. There is no heart or compassion in this nursing home. It is still about the bottom line. We will all grow old, and this former staff member hopes divine justice will prevail for the many who passed away during her time in the care facility. We need to do something.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I, like so many others who watched that "Prime Time" programme, found it very disturbing and upsetting. Our older citizens who are in nursing homes deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. Frankly, there is no excuse for what we witnessed on our television screens. I cannot imagine the upset this programme generated for families across this State, with people wondering if their relative or friend was treated the very same way once visiting time was over.

I acknowledge the whistleblowers who came forward and reported their concerns. They should be commended. Unfortunately, this is not a new problem. We all remember the Leas Cross investigation 20 years ago and since then, numerous Governments have promised safeguarding legislation when it comes to this area. Safeguarding teams and social workers need a legal right of entry to residential facilities to ensure all appropriate measures are in place. It is an action I have long supported and one my party's spokesperson on health, Deputy Cullinane,

has long advocated for.

We simply cannot rely on private companies to deliver services in this area. The unfortunate reality is that these companies are concerned with profits. That is why we saw the complete lack of medical and sanitary supplies during the documentary. We often hear of staff being urged to penny-pinch to protect the company's profits. That is not how an organisation tasked with caring for vulnerable people should operate.

In the longer term, we need to see investment in the creation of public nursing homes and community beds. We need the establishment of an independent safeguarding authority. I want the same outcome as the Minister of State, namely, the very best standard of care for our older citizens. If we all work together constructively, we can ensure the scenes we saw on our TVs will never be repeated.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: As others have mentioned, the “RTÉ Investigates” programme highlighted the scandalous lack of proper care standards in two nursing homes. However, if people think such incidents in the modern age are confined to The Residence Portlaoise and Beneavin Manor in Glasnevin, they have another thing coming. We have all heard stories and, obviously, if they are not in the public domain, we cannot recount them. However, in this context I believe that HIQA, all related agencies and the system in general have failed families for too long.

To be constructive, I welcome the fact 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, hopefully before the summer recess. This will provide a framework for strengthening adult safeguarding structures, processes and supports.

The introduction of safeguarding legislation, if it is done properly, will set out some form of adequate safeguarding. Once the legislation is enacted, though, how will it be enforced? What additional actions will take place in terms of funding so that residents' needs are matched with profit maximisation in an increasingly corporate sector? We have heard references during this debate to the rise of investment funds. More than half of all nursing home needs in Ireland in 1990 were public but by 2023, only 16% of them were. The Geary Institute for Public Policy at UCD has highlighted that just ten investment funds now own one third of the nursing home beds in the State. This is a massive change, even from seven or eight years ago, when investment funds were essentially non-existent in the system. Ireland and the UK now have officially the most privatised sectors in Europe. Does this serve the residents, the families and, equally, the Irish taxpayer? With such private, profit-driven ownership now, the onus is on the State to provide a robust system of compliance. The ball is in the Government's court and it is not just about the legislation. It is about ensuring it can be adequately enforced.

Deputy Michael Collins: The recent “RTÉ Investigates” documentary “Inside Ireland's Nursing Homes”, which aired on 4 June, showed us all the terrible conditions in some nursing homes in the midlands and Dublin. We were all horrified and shocked by the programme and the way the most vulnerable in our society are being treated - by some. I do not want to tar everybody with the same brush. When we hear what is said in this House sometimes, and rightly so, in defence of innocent, elderly people being abused, it can seem as if staff in every nursing home are doing this, and they are not. I spoke to Mr. Tadhg Daly, CEO of Nursing Homes Ireland, at great length and he assured me there are great nursing homes out there. He does not need to tell me that because I have seen them. I have visited them. There is the Fairfield

Nursing Home in Drimoleague, Bushmount Nursing Home and CareChoice in Clonakilty and the Skibbereen Residential Care Centre. All of these are providing a fantastic service to people and the families love the service they are providing. We need to get the point across that while there are bad apples out there and they need to be weeded out, not everybody is a bad apple.

I call into question HIQA and the way it carries out its checks, given that this was not spotted previously. It gets to the point where elderly people are being treated inhumanely and that is something I would not stand for, but it has not stopped. We all know the crisis that it out there at the moment. I raised Perrott House in Skibbereen in the House with the Tánaiste last week. Families, who had people inside in Perrott House in Skibbereen, were told six or seven weeks ago that they are going to be moved. It is a mental health unit but it is for the elderly. They have had no communication since as to where they are going, whether they going long term, short term, being kept there or if they will they be able to return. The answers to simple questions are being refused to people. Basically, the families were rung and told not to be listening to Michael Collins in the Dáil at all. The families asked Perrott House what they were doing but were told “Sorry, we cannot tell you”. That is another type of abuse.

I also mention the old Aperee Living Bantry nursing home. That is a crisis situation. It was closed down and now is almost across the line. The liquidator has it sold but there is a problem with HIQA and the liquidator, whatever it is. However, 17 beds are available there to be delivered for the people. It is very important that this would be looked into immediately and that HIQA would be asked to sit down with the liquidator, tell him the issues and get on with the sale of the nursing home. These 17 beds are closed and they had been brought up to full standard so we could allow people in. I have people all over west Cork pleading with me for a bed. Good God, they are pleading with me for a bed in a nursing home and to think there are 17 there. It is just a little bit of paperwork. It is no longer anything to do with the condition because the home has been brought up to standard. The sale has been almost approved but there is something holding up getting it across the line and people are suffering. HIQA has to stand up here and say, “Okay, let us get this right. This is the problem here.” I have met HIQA officials but they are telling me due to GDPR that there are certain things they cannot tell me. The liquidator says he does not know what is going on so there is a problem. We need that resolved straight away in the old Aperee nursing home in Bantry so that we can have people guaranteed that they have safeguarded their homes going forward.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The report by “RTÉ Investigates” makes me sick to my stomach that this could happen. I look at the nursing homes around Limerick and other nursing homes I have visited. Through social events that we do, such as vintage events, we recreate lives of people who are in the nursing homes. We bring in some of the older stuff in to them and see what the nursing homes do. I have been at a lot of nursing homes and we have done this. None of the bigger nursing homes, those with 100 beds or that, do this. The community nursing homes, the smaller ones with 25 beds all the way up to 50 beds, have done this. What is that telling us? Are we getting to a point now where companies buy out nursing homes and are just asking how many people they can get in and how many they can look after? It is a money trail rather than a care trail. I was in a nursing home that gives excellent care but it was an older nursing home. HIQA officials came in and said one of the bedrooms was four inches too small for its standards. The person who was in the nursing home said, “It is perfect, I love it and I am happy there.” They had to remove the elderly person who was in that room, spend €20,000 to move a wall four inches because of HIQA standards, rather than going in and asking the person if it was acceptable to them, if they were happy there, if the nursing home was doing every-

thing in its power to protect them and if they were looking after them and all their care. HIQA officials did not ask that; they looked at a book and decided the room did not meet standards. The standard is the care of the patient. The standard is the smile on their faces when they see you coming in and they say you are welcome. We have gone into nursing homes that are going industrial. They push them in, pack as many as they can in, have a limited number of staff and provide the minimum amount of community spirit in the place. If there are too many people in one nursing home in one setting, it becomes institutionalised. In smaller settings, which are smaller nursing homes, people seem to be happier. Why do we not put a cap on numbers so that nursing homes cannot have any more than 25 people? If they do, they need to have a separate setting, even a separate floor or whatever they have to do. That is the community. The community is built around the people in there and the care is built up. Instead of “RTÉ Investigates” going in, let us see whether it works and whether people are happy in the settings they are in and rate a lot of the nursing homes that are providing excellent care. We could rate them on that, promote the good ones and weed out the bad ones.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I could not watch the level of abuse in the “RTÉ Investigates” documentary. I could not stomach the way elderly people were treated and abused. What we saw was a complete disregard for human life and human rights and it was very focused on economic profits in this regard. Profit does seem to have been the motivating factor in some of the abuses. This is clearly concerning, particularly in light of the fact that Government has moved away from public nursing homes to a place where this care is primarily in the hands of the private sector. The Minister of State has a major job of work to ensure that HIQA has teeth, that there are very clear regulations and consequences when actions such as these take place. Over recent weeks, we in Aontú have opposed the Order of Business because we wanted to discuss this very important issue. We very much welcome the debate. I also welcome the Minister of State’s contribution and his work in this regard. I want to see HIQA having teeth to address this. It is a fundamentally important way forward.

I also raise another issue. We saw during Covid, for example, the way nursing homes were abandoned. The entire sector was abandoned. We saw how elderly people were shipped out from hospitals by the National Treatment Purchase Fund into nursing homes. It caused a huge spread of Covid. We also saw how supplies, including PPE and oxygen that were meant to go to nursing homes, were actually intercepted by the HSE. These were meant to go to the people who were most vulnerable due to Covid and the HSE intercepted them and took those supplies to hospitals. That is a scandal that the Minister of State needs to investigate. We need that Covid inquiry. We need that Covid review to investigate this. By the way, “intercepted” is not my word; it is the word of the then Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, who stated that the HSE intercepted those supplies. One third of all Covid deaths happened in nursing homes. I commend the advocacy group Care Champions, which has emerged from these horrors to see justice and rights for those in the care system. It is a wonderful advocacy group and I hope the Minister of State will work with its representatives on this journey to ensure elderly people are treated with the dignity and respect they so desperately need.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: In recent weeks, distressing footage from “RTÉ Investigates” and “Prime Time” has brought into stark relief the vulnerability of many older people in residential care. What we saw was not just a breach of trust; it was a breach of decency. We must acknowledge that the vast majority of front-line staff in our nursing homes and community services do remarkable work. They care for our parents, grandparents and neighbours with compassion and dignity, often under huge pressure and without sufficient resources. However, the system

around them and above them must do better. We need to be clear: mistreatment or neglect of any older person in care is unacceptable and must be met with accountability. HIQA plays a vital role here. I support its work but regulation alone is not enough. If we are serious about ageing with dignity, we need to invest in the whole spectrum of care from supports to live at home longer to high-quality residential options when needed. That includes delivering on the statutory home care scheme, properly staffing our community nursing units and ensuring that the fair deal scheme remains sustainable and fair. Crucially, we must also recognise the need for more geriatric social workers. These professionals play a key and unique role in safeguarding older people, especially those living alone or in complex situations, yet their numbers are far too low. We need a national strategy to recruit, train and retain more of them.

Finally, while I echo the Government's commitment to the forthcoming adult safeguarding legislation, we cannot delay. We need a full statutory framework that gives older persons explicit legal protections in the community, in hospitals and in nursing homes alike. Our population is an ageing one and the ageing population is also growing, which is a success story in itself. However, it also demands that we act not only to regulate but to care.

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: We were all shocked by the recent "RTÉ Investigates" programme but it is important to put on record that this is not the case for the entire nursing home sector. Across the country, many nursing homes provide excellent service to our family members. We need to increase the support that we put into both public and private nursing homes.

I visit nursing homes on a regular basis in my county. A multi-million euro development is taking place on-campus at St. Joseph's Care Centre and there is also Laurel Lodge in Longford town, Thomond Lodge in Ballymahon and The Manor in Edgeworthstown. I have been in all of these centres in recent years and in two of them with my late mother, who passed away during Covid in St. Joseph's Care Centre, where she got nothing but the best of care. That is something that we as a family will always be grateful for. She was also in The Manor. I visit my Uncle Bernie monthly in Thomond Lodge. Overall, I can say, hand on heart, that the care being provided in all the nursing homes in my county is excellent and nothing short of that.

Nonetheless, we need to strengthen the sector. We need to increase funding for the fair deal scheme and ensure the waiting list does not exceed four weeks. We need to build more public nursing home beds, as at St. Joseph's in Longford. We need to provide a clear pathway for healthcare assistants, with better benefits. Ultimately, we need to invest in our older generation. We need to introduce the statutory homes scheme, which we have promised. We put it into the programme for Government and it is something we need to deliver on.

It is important to put on record the help and support of all those who work giving home help to elderly people throughout the country. The reality is that we do not have sufficient people to carry out that service and allow elderly people to stay in their own homes, where they are safer and more comfortable. That is why we need to address these issues. We need increased home help hours but also an increased number of staff to support those families who want to support their loved ones at home. As I said, the programme for government has been clear on the support we are going to give to persons in their elderly years and we need to deliver on that in the short term.

Deputy John McGuinness: We have been here before. We have expressed the same degree of disgust and anger at what we saw on the "RTÉ Investigates" television programme recently but we have not done anything in between times to make sure it does not happen

again. There is a lot that we could have done. For example, the community nursing homes are a great idea, as outlined by Deputy O'Donoghue earlier. We have them in Kilkenny at Thomastown, Castlecomer, Kilmoganny, Graiguenamanagh, Freshford and Callan. Why do we not fund them? Why do we not give them the money to have a proper community facility to look after the elderly in our communities? I have travelled to those different homes and I have to say I have always been impressed by the business model and by the level of care that those in the homes receive. Yet, we totally ignore that and we make them fight for every shilling or euro that they get.

Big business seems to be the favoured way of delivering nursing homes. It is not a good way because it is driven by profit where the profit is euro, whereas in the community setting, it is not euro but it is seeing the smile on the resident's face. That is what it is. It is about choice. The Government can have its big business model and it can also have a well-funded option in terms of community care. I urge the Minister to tip the balance in favour of community care.

I urge the Minister to tell the discharge nurses not to give the commitment that certain plans will be followed when the patient is taken home because they do not have the staff. They release the bed, the patient goes home and then the family have to carry the can fully. At the end of that, the person goes to a nursing home.

It is shocking the way recent Governments have behaved in that they have not recognised the true value of community homes. I remember during Covid that the Taiwanese funded a lot of the equipment that went to care homes throughout the country. That needs to be put on record, as does the issue of care champions and what they have done. Where is the Covid inquiry? We want to know what happened. That Covid inquiry is probably on the long finger somewhere and it needs to be addressed. It is not right that we would announce it and talk about it, and then not get into the detail of what happened to families and elderly people in the course of the Covid times. I ask that this also be looked at.

I ask for the focus to be taken away from private homes, that we would not support them and that we would be very critical and emphatic in our actions against them when they breach the rules.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I join with other Members in expressing my disgust and revulsion at what was exposed on "RTÉ Investigates". When we see scenes like that on television, we think of our own relatives and friends who spend time in nursing homes. It makes every family wonder about the care they are receiving. Of course, it has to be said that what we saw results in a stain on all nursing homes across the country. However, as we know, the vast majority provide excellent care and the staff and management working in them do their level best to provide humane and compassionate care for their residents. Unfortunately, what we saw on our television screens did not live up to that in any shape or form. What we saw was very undignified and inhumane treatment of people in their most vulnerable state in their senior years, when they should have been receiving compassionate, caring and dignified care from those charged with the responsibility to provide care.

HIQA has a lot of questions to answer in this regard. HIQA is an organisation with good resources and powers but, unfortunately, what we saw on RTÉ shows that the regulatory system is not working, or not to the extent that it should. Given the tactics that RTÉ used in exposing this, HIQA needs to look at those tactics in order to get under the bonnet of what is happening in our nursing homes so it can expose the true result of what is happening. It took RTÉ to do this.

What it did was outstanding work and it really exposed what we saw in regard to these nursing homes. I stress that, in my opinion, this is a minority across the country. At the same time, it should not be happening in any nursing home.

I have seen commentary regarding the need for the Government to step up resources in public and community nursing homes, and I fully support that. However, that is not the solution to this problem. There will always be private nursing homes. What we have to put in place is a good, robust regulatory system so all families across the country have confidence in the care that is provided for their senior family members. That is what is important. I hope that as a result of the good work that RTÉ did, this will be the ultimate outcome.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The recent “RTÉ Investigates” exposé was shocking and shameful and the sheer lack of compassion and respect shown to the residents in that programme was appalling. We can only imagine the pain they and their families suffered, as well as the worry it has caused to others as a result. I commend RTÉ, although it should not be up to RTÉ to expose these atrocities that are going on.

My first question to the Minister is this. What protections are in place to prevent companies that have legal cases against them in other EU member states from operating in our care sector and, indeed, in other care sectors? Was due diligence or anything whatsoever carried out? The failure in this regard is the first thing that is neglectful.

These shocking levels of neglect are the logical outworkings of commodification of care. What we have in this State is the profit model of care, which lends itself to large-scale operations driven by profit maximisation, as has been said. We must move away from the overdependence on this model. That is why, in Sinn Féin’s alternative budget each year, we allocate investment to providing more public nursing home and community beds. Our provision last year was 1,200 beds. I commend the family-run nursing homes, community nursing homes and the many other facilities, including in my county, which provide excellent care for elderly people in a compassionate and appropriate way. It beggars belief that the Government changed policy in this regard. There is a responsibility on both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael for the model we have. It did not just appear out of nowhere; it was Government policy.

It is no good Members opposite coming in here and commenting on the situation we are in when it was man-made by the Government. Community nursing homes and small, family-run nursing homes, and their staff, must be supported. Healthcare workers, nurses and other staff are too often faced with impossible situations that are not of their making. They do not make the decisions that lead to the lack of the most basic things required for human dignity, including pads, blankets and being taken to the bathroom, never mind provision of stimulation and joyful activities. Safe staffing levels should never be optional. Pay and conditions for many of these workers are abysmal for the level of responsibilities they have. Zero-hour contracts and the minimum wage are not conducive to the intensive care that needs to be provided for our most vulnerable. I support the calls for a Covid inquiry because it is the same healthcare workers who came face to face with the situation in nursing homes during the pandemic. We are still paying them the minimum wage or a little above. That is disgraceful.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: The State has a long, sorrowful and shameful history of failing those within its care. Women, especially mothers, and children have endured the brunt of that long, sorry history. Whether we are talking about survivors of institutional abuse or the degradation of babies’ organs; those responsible for delivering justice not only failed to deliver it but

actively sought to deny justice. What invariably follows exercises in the pursuit of justice are attempts to delay and defer. Actions taken are rarely done in an accountable way and never in a timely manner.

This is not the first scandal involving nursing homes. Twenty years ago, the Leas Cross scandal led to the establishment of HIQA. At that time, a Fine Gael TD remarked:

There is a growing sense that “Michéalitis” is continuing in the Department of Health and Children. Deputy Martin was the epitome of this affliction. He always had to have another report from another commission. The current Minister is acting in the same way on this important matter.

Micheál Martin is back in office, this time joined by Fine Gael, and it seems the affliction described now equally affects Ministers of both hues.

My predecessor as Sinn Féin TD for Cavan-Monaghan, Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin, had the measure of the Government of the day when he remarked: “The Fianna Fáil-Progressive Democrats partnership has had nearly a decade to get health policy right and it has failed miserably. At the root of this is the Government’s refusal to take a rights-based approach to healthcare.” The crux of the matter is, indeed, the failure to take a rights-based approach to healthcare, namely, the right to dignified, adequate care for all people in their later years. HIQA will have to account for itself but Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil must account for their absolute failure in this area, which has ensured the shameful scandals of the past continue, shamefully, to thrive in Ireland today.

Deputy Michael Lowry: For generations in Ireland, elderly people were mainly cared for in the family home. It was a given that younger family members committed themselves to caring for elderly parents and grandparents. Most homes throughout the country had three generations under the same roof. It was not always easy but it worked. It had to work because there were very few suitable alternatives available.

Ireland today bears little resemblance to the Ireland of those days. Life today is much more demanding. While home care for the elderly continues, financial pressures mean more couples need to have both partners working outside the home to meet their financial commitments. This makes providing full-time care for an elderly dependent family member in the home much more challenging. For many couples, giving up one job may mean losing the family home. As an elderly person’s needs increase, the time and effort required to meet them also increase. Eventually, tough decisions must be made to ensure the well-being of everyone is protected.

For some, that involves an elderly person entering a nursing home. This can be a difficult decision, particularly when the older person is happy in the family environment. However, mobility issues and medical dependencies may leave little option. Many elderly people, after consideration, are happy to move into a nursing home and enjoy the daily routine that is geared towards their needs. There are excellent nursing homes across the country providing top-class care. The standard of all nursing homes cannot be judged on the basis of one television programme.

Many more families would choose to continue caring for older relatives at home if it were financially possible and viable to do so and if the necessary supports were in place. Increasingly, more people are opting to become a family carer for an elderly relative. These family carers provide 24-7 support. They put their lives on hold to ensure their elderly loved ones can

remain in the comfort and familiar surroundings of their own homes and communities. They find themselves protecting the safety of the older person, learning to understand their individual needs, managing their medications, dealing with hygiene care and dietary needs, and arranging and accompanying the person to medical appointments. For the most part, they do this without organised suitable transport in place to assist them. Family carers are unsung heroes. They juggle an indeterminate number of tasks and are driven solely by care, love and the wish of their family member to remain living at home.

I strongly urge that the long-awaited adult safeguarding legislation due to be published by the Department be prioritised. The Bill will secure people's right to safety, dignity and respect. It must be subject to regular reviews and it must be widely publicised to make its objectives known and ensure its effectiveness.

Deputy Gillian Toole: Everybody here is ageing. We are here to represent older people and it is incumbent on us to act with a focus on solutions and a sense of urgency. Most people will, hopefully, age well at home with the necessary community and healthcare supports initiated by older person's councils through the Age Friendly Ireland initiatives. I think of Ita Healy and Barbara McCool in Meath, who are tireless champions for older people.

Some people, for a multitude of reasons, will require nursing home support. There are many excellent places in Meath East where caring, competent and empathetic teams look after residents. However, so much is based on trust. The questions that must be asked are whether residents are safe, if the care is excellent and how care can be improved and provided as close to home as possible.

Twenty years ago, the Leas Cross scandal had a significant impact, leading to the setting up of HIQA. Standards of care improved and robust inspection systems were established for a time. In August 2020, the report of the Covid-19 nursing homes expert panel made 86 recommendations, including a framework for safe staffing and skills mix. Whistleblowing GPs voiced their concerns. Marcus de Brún and others, now awaiting fitness to practise hearings at a time when we need GPs in communities, had their concerns ignored and were vilified. As of now, the framework is still in development and remains to be implemented.

Interdepartmental collaboration on this issue is most welcome. The forthcoming safeguarding legislation is to be commended. Private operators must uphold the highest standards of care. They can afford to invest in their people and facilities. HIQA must be adequately resourced and whistleblowers must be listened to. Forward planning for ageing well is critical. Life is precious and the later lives of those who built this country must be planned for, safeguarded and valued.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Everybody was shocked and disgusted at what we saw in the recent television programme but it is the tip of the iceberg as regards big business and what is going on with big conglomerates. I salute all the care workers and nurses in the small nursing homes in Carrick-on-Suir, Clonmel, Cahir, Cashel and Tipperary town. I salute them and the work they do. I challenge HIQA. It is not fit for purpose and has not been for a long time. It is the same with Tusla, which cannot even count the children in its care who have gone missing. HIQA is totally unfit for purpose. I saw how it bullied a nursing home in Carrick-on-Suir out of business some years ago by restricting the number of beds it could have open until it would do what HIQA wanted. Why can we not tackle this with the big conglomerates? There is fun and games going on here. I would say money or something else is changing hands. It is not accept-

able. We have made a commodity out of healthcare and that is totally unacceptable. We must dismantle HIQA and Tusla and set up some reasonable organisation that will look after people.

Deputy Carol Nolan: To call what we have seen revealed in some of our nursing homes a betrayal would be an understatement. It is brutality and the vicious erosion of trust. It is sickening to the core. I hope that each and every person who was seen abusing our elderly people will be arrested. I want to see their ability to ever work in such settings removed for life. These people who abuse our elderly are nothing short of animals engaged in the brutalisation of our loved ones. There must be no mercy shown to them and no excuses about regulatory failure must be offered. They are a stain on the good name of genuine nursing staff and all those nursing homes that cherish their residents. The signal must go out that, if you mistreat our elderly, you will be jailed and that, if you violate their dignity, you will answer for it before the courts and not just before some professional standards tribunal. People are fed up. We want accountability.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Like everyone else, I was horrified by the “Prime Time” exposé. We have great nursing homes both public and private in County Kerry. We have great staff. They are second to none and do their very best. I cannot understand why different rates are paid to public and private nursing homes. I cannot understand that. There is no better place for elderly people to age than at home. We should strive to bring more of that model in here. That is the model in places like Denmark. They are better off staying in their own homes for as long as possible. When that fails, they have to go to a nursing home because they need special care. There needs to be accountability but HIQA is apparently only looking at buildings, doors and windows and not at the people themselves. That is very important. Old people brought us to where we are today.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I thank all the Members. Some 40 Members spoke in this debate. People were very constructive. Like everyone else, I was shocked by the programme. It was wanton neglect and abuse. I thank the Members for their very constructive engagement.

I will attempt to cover the areas that people brought up. What we saw happening on the programme was pure wanton neglect and abuse of older people. It is as simple as that. We have to make the system better and more robust. How do we go about doing that? As HIQA itself has acknowledged, we have to look at whether the processes can be improved. Every system can be improved. That will involve looking at processes. There are things we can do like making reports in real time. At the moment, the reports that are published are historical. To make them up to date would be a very straightforward thing.

I also want to see the safeguarding legislation. The programme for Government commits to bringing a policy on safeguarding to Cabinet. That will include bringing forward safeguarding legislation. I am utterly committed to that. We are actively working on it. It is a priority for Government for the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and I to bring it to Cabinet and to put it in place. We also have to look at how we regulate the groups. The parent companies are not regulated by HIQA. We need to change that. That is a procedural thing.

I will refer to something that came up in many of the contributions. What we saw in the two nursing homes on the “RTÉ Investigates” programme was horrific but, while I commend RTÉ on the programme, there are an awful lot of very good nursing homes out there. People are delivering a great service in their communities.

Sláintecare came out of the health committee. It was a cross-party document adopted by Government. It was about bringing care back to the home. The programme for Government commits to bringing forward statutory home care. It is a priority for me as Minister of State. The first step is bringing forward legislation on home care providers. Such providers are not currently regulated. Thereafter, we must look at how we define statutory home care and then put a statutory home care scheme in place. This is something I am passionate about and that we are very much committed to. It has come up repeatedly. People prefer to live in their homes if at all possible. Nevertheless, there will always be a requirement for long-term residential care. We have to ensure we have a system in place that is properly regulated and that ultimately provides good safe care to older people.

A couple of other points came across as well. At the moment, HIQA goes to the District Court to impose fines on providers. We are very open to giving HIQA the power to impose fines directly. These are matters we will look at. We are considering all aspects. HIQA is also doing a review itself.

Deputies Barry Ward and Máire Devine brought up two cases. I ask them to report those cases. If people are being abused, they should report those cases to HIQA and the relevant authorities and nothing less. I welcome that the subjects of the RTÉ investigations have been referred to An Garda Síochána. I expect that the chief inspector in HIQA will use the full powers available to him. We have to ensure that what happened to older people here can never happen again.

One of the key elements of statutory home care is home care hours. We have significantly increased the funding in recent years. We have virtually doubled it. However, I take the point with regard to delivering an enhanced service. I have met with the HSE directly to see how we can speed up the provision of service to people who are on waiting lists. That is very important.

One of the other features that came across was the design of nursing home settings. The Department of Health has a body of work under way on the design of nursing home settings. I very much wish to progress that.

Deputy Toole brought up the issue of safe staffing. Apart from the safeguarding, there is work ongoing in the Department with regard to a safe staffing framework. We are due a final report very shortly. I very much want to work on and expedite that because it is very important. With regard to safeguarding, the health (adult safeguarding) Bill is on the legislative programme. We want to progress that.

One of the other items that many speakers brought up was the provision of community nursing home beds. We are undertaking a capacity review in respect of public nursing home beds. The programme for Government commits to increasing the number of public nursing home beds. We are working through and finalising a capacity review. I want to enhance the provision of community nursing home beds the length and breadth of Ireland.

We will always have a mixture of community, voluntary and private homes. That is why regulation is so important. It is also highly important to note that there is a very good standard of nursing home care across all sectors. What we saw in the programme was the complete opposite. It was pure neglect and abuse of older people. It is something that I feel very strongly about and that we cannot tolerate in any circumstance.

This has been very traumatic for the people in the two nursing homes and the wider nursing

home body and the very good and dedicated staff and providers elsewhere. What has to come out of this is a stronger, more robust system. We have to look at HIQA's current powers in respect of the day-to-day operation of nursing homes. It has publicly acknowledged that we need to review the process. How can we improve the system such that what happened, and what we saw on the "RTÉ Investigates" programme, never ever happens again? That is something we are committed to as a Government.

Furthermore, we have an ageing population, as people have said. That is something we should celebrate. People are living longer, but with that comes challenges. The Government in the past year set up the commission on care for older people. That is chaired by Alan Barrett and is due to report. The first element of its report will be about the existing services and whether they can be improved. That will include the provision of nursing home care. I met with the commission some time ago. I very much want to see the report and the commission's recommendations. Once the commission on care reports, a cross-departmental group will be established under the auspices of the commission to consider whether supports for positive ageing across the life course are fit for purpose and to develop a cost implementation for options to optimise these supports. The commission on care has a key role to play.

Following the programme, I had engagement with HIQA and the HSE in terms of their safeguarding teams. They have been into both nursing homes and they will engage with all nursing homes throughout the group. They have put directors of nursing into both nursing homes. Ultimately, out of this absolutely terrible situation for people in both these nursing homes, the Residence in Port Laoise and Beneavin Manor, we want to get a better system in terms of the regulation of nursing homes to ensure that all older people, wherever they are in a nursing home, get a standard of care they deserve. It is something that in my role as Minister of State with responsibility for older people, along with the Minister, Jennifer Carroll MacNeill, we are determined to achieve, with Members' help.

Presidential Voting Rights: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— the 1998 Good Friday Agreement recognises the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves, and be accepted as, Irish or British, or both; and

— the Fifth Report of the Convention on the Constitution - Amending the Constitution to give citizens resident outside the State the right to vote in Presidential elections at Irish embassies, or otherwise, published in November 2013, recommended that citizens resident outside the State should have the right to vote in Presidential elections;

further notes that:

— the Northern Ireland Assembly recently passed a motion to support extending the right to vote in Presidential elections to all Irish citizens resident on the island of Ireland; and

— the Thirty-Fourth Amendment of the Constitution (Presidential Voting) Bill 2014, passed second stage in the Dáil on 11th March, 2014, and is currently on the Dáil Business Digital Order Paper Website awaiting the Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage to schedule a time to allow it to progress at the Committee Stage; and

calls on the Government to:

— implement the recommendations of the Fifth Report of the Convention on the Constitution, and to extend voting rights in Presidential elections to all Irish citizens on the island of Ireland; and

— progress proposals that would extend the right to vote in Presidential elections to the diaspora.

The President of Ireland is President for all the people of Ireland. The Office of Uachtarán na hÉireann embodies the shared values, hopes and vision of our citizens, not just here in this State but in the North and indeed across the world. The President is President not just for the Twenty-six Counties but for the entire Irish nation, regardless of the separation imposed upon us by partition or by the scourges of famine, oppression and economic hardship that scattered generations to the four corners of the globe. It is a matter of some injustice and a violation of democracy that Irish citizens in the Six Counties and those living abroad are denied the right to vote for their Uachtarán. Every seven years, when the presidential election rolls around, Irish citizens from the North and those living overseas are told by the political establishment that they are less Irish, forced to accept second-class status, alienated from the nation to which they belong. The Sam Maguire currently resides in Armagh, yet the players who proudly lifted that historic cup last July in Croke Park, and indeed the supporters who cheered them on, will not be permitted to vote in November. You can be a champion of all Ireland yet be prevented from voting for the President of Ireland. You can also be a candidate for the Office of President but if you reside in Derry, as did Martin McGuinness, you are not allowed a vote. You can even win the election and become President of Ireland but because you are from Belfast, as was President Mary McAleese, you are barred from voting for yourself.

Citizens from all corners of Ireland who emigrated, many from generations who left due to economic turmoil in search of work, and young people today forced out because of the housing crisis love their country. They have a stake in its future. However, they too are denied their vote for President. It is this democratic exclusion that our Bill seeks to end by implementing the 2013 recommendation of the constitutional convention, a recommendation which states that citizens resident outside the State should have the right to vote in presidential elections. That was 12 years ago - delay. In 2014, our legislation providing for the extension of presidential voting rights passed Second Stage in the Dáil. That was 11 years ago - delay. A referendum had been set for May 2019 but it was postponed by the Government. That was six years ago - delay. For more than a decade, both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have promised to extend presidential voting rights but nothing has happened. The commitment has even been dropped from the current programme for Government.

This Government inertia cannot be allowed to continue. In May the Northern Assembly historically voted to support the extension of presidential voting rights to citizens in the North. That was a powerful democratic message, one which reaffirms the principle of equality enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement. The Government must now act on this positive momentum. I welcome that the Tánaiste has recently indicated that he is supportive of the principle

and his further commitment to engage with Government colleagues, including the Taoiseach, on this matter. Can the Minister of State tell the Dáil if those engagements have happened and what was the substance of them? Delay is no longer acceptable. It was never acceptable. What we need now, finally, is a clear timeline from the Government and a date for the holding of the referendum. Caithfear cead a thabhairt do shaoránaigh na hÉireann ó Thuaidh, agus iad siúd atá ina gcónaí thar lear, vóta a chaitheamh dá gcéad saoránach, dá nUachtarán. Caithfidh an Rialtas dáta a shocrú do reifreann.

6 o'clock

I look forward to the day when partition is ended and Ireland is united, when all Irish citizens at home and abroad are afforded their full democratic rights. Those barriers and the partitionist mindset that created them will not fall of their own accord. We must dismantle them piece by piece. The President of Ireland is a President for all the people of Ireland. November's election must be the last presidential election that excludes citizens in the North and those living abroad, who so deeply love this country.

Deputy Seán Crowe: The ability of Irish citizens, regardless of where they reside, to vote in presidential elections is an issue I have been working towards for quite some time. Gerry Adams and I cosponsored a Bill to that effect more than ten years ago. Tá bród orm go bhfuil mé fós ag leanúint leis an bhfeachtas. That Bill, the Thirty-fourth Amendment of the Constitution (Presidential Voting) Bill 2014, passed Second Stage and has been waiting for more than decade to be given committee time for a debate and progression through the Dáil. It has been so long that it would have to be the forty-first amendment to the Constitution if it were voted on by the Irish people tomorrow. The establishment parties fail to see Northerners in particular as Irish citizens. It is okay to have an Irish passport but heaven forbid people want to be politically active in the affairs of the nation. I recall campaigning alongside Martin McGuinness in 2011 when he could run for office but could not vote for himself. Former President Mary McAleese had a similar challenge.

The Government is reluctant to even acknowledge there are Irish citizens excluded by partition just 50 miles north of this Chamber. It continues to ignore the overwhelming support the 2013 constitutional convention in Dublin gave to extending the franchise to Irish citizens living in the North and abroad. Sinn Féin does not hold that narrow, partitionist and insular view of the world. Extending presidential voting rights to Irish citizens living in the Six Counties is a positive, natural outworking of the Good Friday Agreement. Ireland does not end 5 miles from Dundalk or at the shores of Lough Foyle. We respect and value our citizens in the North and those who have made the hard choice to leave the island, often due to economic necessity because of the economic policies of successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments. In May, the Assembly in the North backed those voting rights in a historic vote. The Dáil backed them on Second Stage more than ten years ago. In 1997, Fianna Fáil made a manifesto commitment to the diaspora that they would be granted voting rights. Until 2011, Fine Gael was even talking about reserving Seanad seats for candidates voted for specifically by the diaspora. Now is the time to follow through and give the diaspora a vote. The office of President is our face to the world. All of our citizens must be given the ability to choose who represents us. Surely it is long past time to treat all of our citizens as equals.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Where I live gives me a unique insight into the failure we have seen over the past decade. The Inishowen Peninsula has seen so many of our people emigrate, forced to go to England and the United States back in the day and more recently to

Australia, Canada and the Middle East. That is the story of my peninsula and my county. Just half an hour away is Derry city, an Irish city with Irish citizens who are deeply proud of their part in our country. The Fleadh Cheoil was there a few years ago. I think of all those from the North of Ireland who have won Olympic medals such as Michael Conlan, Wayne McCullough and Paddy Barnes in boxing, Daniel Wiffen who recently won gold and bronze medals in swimming and Rhys McClenaghan, who won a gold medal. We all cheered them on. They cannot vote for their President. The Minister of State is a rugby fan. When people go to a rugby game, Ireland players stand together but some of them cannot vote for their President. Some of the international hockey team cannot vote for their President if they are from the North of Ireland. Down, Tyrone and Armagh have been down in Croke Park and won the all-Ireland on our biggest day of the year but their players cannot vote for the President. Players from clubs from the North of Ireland that won the club championships in Gaelic football, hurling and camogie cannot vote. How long will this go on? It is outrageous. We ask the Government to bring in this legislation in line with the constitutional wishes of the assembly that gathered and for our people who are forced away to allow them to have this connection to elect a President. What an exciting opportunity that would be - a President for which all Irish citizens would have a stake. That is what we are asking for.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: In the North, there is an incredible situation in which Irish citizens who live on the island of Ireland have a Head of State in the President of Ireland but are unable to vote for that Head of State. These citizens feel there is an othering of them, that they are somehow different and not equal as Irish citizens who live in Ireland and have an Irish Head of State for whom they cannot vote. That mad thing is they can be candidates for Head of State. They can grow up all their lives in the North, become a candidate in the presidential election, win the Presidency but are not able to vote in that election. This is about a direct line for Irish citizens to their Head of State. They feel the Head of State represents all Irish citizens but they do not have that direct line. My colleague Deputy Seán Crowe mentioned this was passed by the Oireachtas but has not been enacted. There is a strong connection for all Irish citizens with the President of Ireland, no matter who that is. They are there for all Irish citizens. All Irish citizens should be able to vote. What is the downside of letting Irish citizens in the North vote for the Head of State who goes on to represent them? I know the Minister of State is interested in outreach to the unionist community. They could also vote for the Head of State if they want to.

Deputy Martin Kenny: My constituency runs along the border of Sligo-Leitrim into south Donegal. The people in Kiltyclogher and Cashel are the same people. People in some parts of Ireland do not understand that. They are related to each other. They are the same people in every way. Their farms straddle the Border. We all understand that yet this artificial division made on the island of Ireland almost 100 years ago now means people cannot vote for the Head of State in their own country. It is ridiculous. I recall after I was first elected in 2016, there was a debate about this. I think Enda Kenny was Taoiseach at the time. He said we were pushing an open door. I do not understand how pushing an open door can take ten years to open it. It does not seem logical. There has to be a recognition by the Government that this has to change quickly. A presidential election is coming up soon. There have been expressions of interest from citizens who live in the North already; there may be more. That is welcome. It is what we need to see. They cannot vote for themselves in this election. It has happened in the past. We need an absolute commitment from the Government tonight that this will be the last time there is a Presidential election in which people on all parts of this island are not able to vote for their President. We should also look internationally. We saw people living here from Brazil go to their embassy to vote in that election, as did people from the United States and Poland. Yet,

Irish people are denied that right. That must change now.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: Irish people living in the North can stand for the Presidency and serve as President, as Mary McAleese did, but cannot vote for the President if they live in the Six Counties. That unfairness is at the heart of this motion. We recently saw the Assembly support the call to extend voting rights to all of Ireland. The President is the representative of the Irish nation, and that nation does not just stop at an imaginary line that was dreamt up by the British and imposed on us over 100 years ago.

On the Border issue, I, like everybody else here, would like to see a united Ireland. It cannot just remain an aspiration in the far-off future. The Taoiseach said about a united Ireland that the structures will evolve in the fullness of time. I am sorry, but that is not good enough. We need to start to see actual work and planning to put the very clear proposals on the table for what a new, united Ireland would look like, so that the people North and South will know what they are voting on. I am sick of hearing some politicians and commentators in the media endlessly telling us that 50% plus one is not good enough when it comes to a referendum on Irish unity. These folks do not get to rewrite the Good Friday Agreement. This motion is practicable, it is workable and it should be supported and implemented.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The constitutional convention met in 2013 to consider the issue of voting rights for citizens living outside outside this State. A clear majority backed voting rights for citizens in presidential elections. Sinn Féin first tabled legislation to give effect to this recommendation in 2014. The Bill passed First and Second Stages and we have retabled it in every Dáil since. A motion on extending presidential voting rights was passed in the Northern Assembly earlier this year.

This is absolutely massive. This is the Government's cue to take action. Ignoring the clear views of the Assembly and the convention goes against the very spirit of the Good Friday Agreement. We will have a presidential election later this year, and those Irish citizens in the North who want to vote will be left out once again. The Government should not allow the disenfranchisement of a significant portion of the population of this island.

The President of Ireland is the President of all of Ireland. If you live in Balbriggan, you have a say and that is right, but if you go a few miles up the road to Newry, you are left out and disenfranchised. Likewise, if you go abroad, as the Minister of State does, you meet people who have been forced out by his Government's housing crisis. The Minister of State can shake his head, but he should ask them when he is next abroad and they will tell him why they have been forced out. When he speaks to them, they will tell him very clearly that they want the right to vote. They have a stake in what happens and they want to keep an eye on this island because most of them want to come home. The Government should end its delaying tactics, set a date for the referendum and let us work together so that all Irish citizens can have a vote for their President.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: The office of President is one of great symbolism and standing and our President is the representative of all the Irish people on the international stage. The Good Friday Agreement recognises the birthright of the people of the North of Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish, British or both, while the Irish diaspora around the world were and continue to be a driving force to encourage international support for Ireland. It is time for the Government to recognise their role, live up to the Good Friday Agreement and extend voting rights to all Irish citizens. It has been over ten years since the convention on the Con-

stitution issued its recommendation and eight years since the Government of the day agreed to hold a referendum to extend this right. This issue has been put on the long finger for too long and we must finally have a referendum to allow all Irish citizens to have their say on who represents them as President.

It is also time to begin preparations for constitutional change. Unity makes sense and will create new opportunities and new prosperity for all the people of the island of Ireland. The Government has a duty and a constitutional obligation to make preparations for unity. It is reckless for it to fail to plan for the future. The discussion on a united Ireland is gathering pace, yet constantly we hear from the Government that now is not the time. When will be the right time? The Government is behind the people on this and it needs to acknowledge the changing dynamics on this island. The Good Friday Agreement places the future constitutional position of Ireland in the hands of the people who share this island. There is an onus on all of us to create the debate and plan for a new, agreed, united, equal and inclusive Ireland. It is time the Government stepped up to the plate and began preparations for unity.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I really appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this debate. I can confirm the Government is of course not opposing this motion. From my time in this Chamber and before that in the Upper Chamber, I know we all share a long-standing desire to deepen the connections between Ireland and the global Irish, but especially on this island. I know there are very few of us in the Chamber who have not been touched by emigration.

I am going to use the ten minutes available to me to do three things, if that is okay with the Opposition. There will then be other speakers and my colleague the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, will conclude the debate. First, I will lay out a little of the work we are doing for the Irish abroad, because that is important to the House. Second, I would like to address the specific proposal here. Third, I will reply to a few of the points or questions, should the time allow for it.

One of the great privileges I have in my role as Minister of State with responsibility for the diaspora is the ability to travel and meet quite a number of our Irish abroad, as Deputy O'Reilly alluded to. It must be said Irish people emigrate for many reasons. Some indeed do so out of economic and housing necessity and the prospect of a better life, but many also wish to work or study abroad and experience life in another culture, which is what our friends in New Zealand call the overseas experience. We regularly hear the trope that everyone is leaving to go to Australia because of housing, but then you realise that rents and house prices are higher there, the waiting times greater and the cost much greater. It is important to provide actualities beyond rhetoric. Moreover, many of those who have moved abroad have had an extremely positive experience. I am always delighted to see the positive contributions our diaspora have made to their new communities, but there are also those who have not been so fortunate and we owe a real duty of care to those who are among the most marginalised and vulnerable. Our diaspora are not an homogenous group, nor is the experience of living abroad a linear one. There are many decisions involved in deciding to live abroad, whether you are getting ready to leave or just arriving in your new home, have settled for the long term or are thinking about returning home.

As the Minister of State responsible, I want to ensure the Government has supports in place to assist our diaspora no matter what stage someone is at on their journey. Essential to this work is the emigrant support programme. Since it began in 2004, the programme has granted over

€250 million to over 900 organisations in 51 countries and the budget for this year will again be almost €16.5 million. It is also important for me to make a brief reference to the changes in US immigration policy and the impact those are having on Irish communities there. Through the emigrant support programme and our missions in the US, we work with communities and the Coalition of Irish Immigration Centers to provide advice and assistance to those affected. In the past few months, I have had the opportunity to see the community care pillar of the programme in action in Coventry, Birmingham, Manchester, Warrington, Boston, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. I am sure many of the Deputies opposite will join me in paying tribute to our diplomats and colleagues who implement so many services in those sectors, which are so important to our Irish abroad.

The programme for Government makes a specific commitment to facilitate emigrants looking to return home. An area I am focused on is making it easier to exchange driving licences, which Deputy Guirke has been very outspoken on. I really welcome his contributions and hope we can continue to work together on this. Already the Government has been able to secure agreements with all the Australian states and seven Canadian provinces. I will work with every Deputy, but especially the Minister for Transport, as well as the Road Safety Authority, to ensure we secure that, much like when I was in a previous brief and we were able to launch a new company specifically offering motor insurance to those who have returned from abroad.

The new programme for Government also commits to delivering a new diaspora strategy. I am in the middle of doing the consultations for this. I have had seven in-person strategy meetings so far and there will be a meeting for Oireachtas Members tomorrow morning in Iveagh House. I look forward to seeing real, fruitful engagement.

I will respond to some of the specific points. I will not get to all of them but I will try my best. There was a mention from one Deputy - I think it was Deputy Crowe - of the notion in 2011 of reserving Seanad seats for the diaspora. That was followed up by the appointment to the Seanad of the late, great Billy Lawless, who I had the distinct honour to serve with along with then Senator Mac Lochlainn. He was a great voice for the Irish in America. Deputy Kenny spoke about international comparisons, and I will go into that because it is really important. We are talking today about votes for President. Votes for President is a straightforward proposal, for the Irish in this jurisdiction and across the island and for Irish citizens living abroad. However, when we start making comparisons with Brazil, Poland, France or Italy, it is important to keep it straight because those are jurisdictions that allow votes for those abroad for specific houses in parliament, or in the case of the United States, for taxpayers living abroad. This is where we will get into somewhere we have to provide clarity when talking about comparisons.

Deputies Mitchell and O'Hara also mentioned, parallel to this, the case for a united Ireland. Deputy McDonald and I have shared a couple of stages talking about this. I know she read the paper I wrote called "Towards a New Ireland". I am more than happy to join anyone of any party, and their supporters, to make sure we can achieve that. That has not changed in any instance. That is something on which we can hopefully all rise together and, in Deputy O'Reilly's words, work together on.

On the specific point, the Government has always recognised the commitment in the Good Friday Agreement that allows all the people of Northern Ireland to identify as Irish or British or both. I was pleased to see that not only was the issue of voting rights in presidential elections debated recently in the Northern Ireland Assembly but that a vote in the positive was passed. I support that. We have also been supportive of the work previously undertaken by the Conven-

tion on the Constitution, but we must be frank that the matter is not without challenges, even if these challenges are easily overcome. Operationally, a number of practical implementation issues will have to be addressed, including the establishment of online-based voter registration and the extension of postal voting. That is straightforward and there is no doubt we can do it in the modern age.

However, there is something I have a real fear about, and it is not in any way to diminish the commitment. In order to achieve this, it does not really matter what any of us says in this Chamber this evening or what the vote is on a motion that is not being opposed by the Government. It will require constitutional change. What is as important as having the discussion is that we do not underestimate the challenge constitutional change brings. One charge often raised in this debate is that we do not favour an extended electorate because we do not like the result it would deliver. I firmly believe, as I am sure all Deputies do, that approaching the matter with such a mindset would be undemocratic. I said this in the Seanad eight years ago in response to a similar Sinn Féin motion. I think it was the then Senator Ó Donnghaile who looked me square in the eyes and tell me to tell him what I thought. I have no hesitation saying, like my predecessor Ciarán Cannon, who was in ministerial chair in the Seanad, that I fundamentally believe in expanding the presidential franchise to all Irish citizens, regardless of where they live on this island or around the world, but we have to win that debate. This is the challenge before us this evening. How do we win that debate? To be frank, we have had two referendums in the past 12 to 14 months that most people in this Chamber backed, and we got a fair kicking on them. I am not looking to point fingers at any Deputy. I am just providing reflection.

This referendum was proposed in 2019 and then Covid hit. We have to be cognisant of what winning this referendum will require, as with a further referendum in due course that I look forward to campaign alongside Deputy O'Hara and others in. We have to be cognisant of what the electorate will be putting at us in the debate. I absolutely agree with the point Deputy Mitchell made about commentators and others in the media and possibly in these Houses who deliberately pursued a disinformation campaign about what Sinn Féin is trying to achieve with this motion and what the Government is trying to achieve with this policy, going back to the diaspora strategy launched by the then Minister of State, Ciarán Cannon. This is something that requires thoughtful and considered debate, and I am absolutely committed to working with every Member of this House to further this so that we can name a date for referendum.

Deputy McDonald asked me what conversations have been had with the Taoiseach and Tánaiste. I am not privy to the exact nature, as she will understand, but I know that conversation is ongoing, and there is a commitment at Cabinet level, as the Tánaiste has alluded to, to make sure this can be reflected on by Government so that we can put a question to the people. I hope people will agree, and take this at face value, that first and foremost it must be a question we could win, because we can all stand here and use this as an issue to bring up whatever we want. Deputy Kenny knows that I know the Border as well as anyone, as the proud son of a Cavan woman and a Cavan man. However, I want to win this debate. I want to win this debate because it is the right thing to do. We absolutely can win it, but much like a question on unification it is not simply about naming the date. It is about formulating a campaign. It is about presenting a very clear question to the people that will show what happens if they vote for this. It will show how people will be facilitated to vote and how we will capture the citizens abroad. I say to Deputy McDonald, trying to be collegiate and work in a positive agreement on this, that this is how we can work together to get this delivered. We are not opposing this motion and we are committing tonight to work with all Members of this House, of all parties

and none, to deliver this.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We are not splitting the atom either.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: More than a decade ago, a citizens' assembly gave a clear recommendation to change the Constitution to give citizens outside the State the right to vote in presidential elections. Tugadh comhartha soiléir. Vótáil 78% de bhaill an choinbhinsiúin ar son cearta a thabhairt d'Éireannaigh atá ina gcónaí lasmuigh den Sé Chontae is Fíche. Sinn Féin promptly brought forward legislation that would give legal effect to this recommendation. The Government parties were all ears. We heard that they were open and were listening but year after year and Government after Government, we have seen no movement. Ní dhearna siad faic. Mar sin, ní féidir a rá go raibh siad ag éisteacht. I call on the Government to put an end to the foot-dragging, heed the advice of the citizens' assembly, support our motion and enact legislation.

It is absolutely nonsensical that Irish citizens in the North cannot vote for Uachtarán na hÉireann. These people are no less Irish than you or I. They have Irish passports and they have contested and held presidential office, but they have been left behind by successive Governments since the foundation of the Free State, notably by Fianna Fáil, which still has the nerve to claim itself republican in the face of this blatant discrimination. Níl ciall ná réasún leis seo. How can we credibly call this person the President of Ireland when citizens from six of this island's counties do not have their voices heard? Anuraidh, d'ardaigh fear as Ard Mhacha Corn Sam Maguire i gcomórtas ar a dtugann muid the all-Ireland final. Bhí an tUachtarán Mícheál D. Ó hUigín i láthair ach ní bheadh cead ag an bhfear sin ná ag aon duine ó na Sé Chontae a bhuann craobh na hÉireann vótáil le haghaidh Uachtarán na hÉireann. Mar a deir Martin McGuinness, the people of Ireland are not partitionists. Tá sé ag éirí náireach dúinn mar Stát. Agus muid ag obair i dtreo Éire aontaithe agus Éire do chách, ba chóir go dtógaimis an chéim seo agus é sin a chur i gceart. Tiocfaidh ár lá.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I am delighted the Government is not opposing this motion. I thank my party for bringing this motion to extend voting rights in presidential elections to all citizens on the island of Ireland and to progress that same right to our diaspora, often aptly referred to as the children of the far-flung, as in the book by Geraldine O'Connell. I believe citizenship should have no borders. Once a person holds an Irish passport, even if they do not reside in our country, they should be entitled to vote in a presidential election. The history of our country is far too blemished with stories of deportation, the stain of migration and forced emigration.

Times have changed since the 17th century. With modern technology, citizens abroad can now remain involved with their communities at home and are well versed in what is going on in the communities they were born into. They feel deeply connected to their place of birth and should be given the right to vote in presidential elections. In fact, the Northern Ireland Assembly recently passed a motion supporting that same principled right to be offered to all citizens on the island of Ireland, while the citizens' assembly's fifth report on the Irish Constitution proposed to extend the presidential vote to our diaspora.

I believe citizens on this island and beyond deserve to be able to vote in the presidential election because, when it comes down to brass tacks, it is still their beloved homeland. To be denied that right is a denial of their identity and their birthright. What is often forgotten about and pushed aside is the global financial investment our diaspora pours back into our country.

It is time to hold a referendum on presidential voting rights for citizens on this island, to up the discourse on Irish unity and to fulfil the terms of the Good Friday Agreement on holding a Border poll. I hope all Deputies will see the merits in this motion and support the voting rights of our citizens at home and abroad.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: I welcome the Minister of State's work on reciprocal driving licenses. I know he is committed to it, so I thank him for that. Sinn Féin has long called for the extension of voting rights in presidential elections to all on the island. It is about equality and shared identity as Irish people. In 2013, the constitutional convention recommended that Irish citizens living outside the State should have the right to vote in presidential elections. Since then, there have been repeated calls and efforts to make this a reality. Sinn Féin introduced legislation in the Dáil in 2015 to enact this change, reflecting widespread political support and the clear will of ordinary citizens, yet despite these commitments, successive Governments have repeatedly delayed action. This has left Irish citizens in the North once again feeling abandoned by the Government in the South. We all know that someone in the North can stand for election as President of Ireland. If they can run for office, then it is only fair that they should have the right to vote in presidential elections. This is about equality and recognising those in the North that identify as Irish. Next weekend we have the All-Ireland football quarter-finals. Players from two of those teams, Armagh and Tyrone, are not able to vote in the presidential election, yet all those players are as Irish as anyone here.

Multiple Bills have been introduced to amend the Constitution and extend voting rights, but they have lapsed, first in January 2020 and then in November 2024, due to dissolution of the Dáil and political inaction. Former Taoiseach Leo Varadkar said last week he hoped Irish citizens around the world, including in the North, would be able to vote in presidential elections in seven years' time. Let us make that happen. Speaking to *Irish News* last week, Leo Varadkar also said that a 50%+1 majority is enough for the reunification of Ireland. It is time for the Irish Government to set up a citizens' assembly on unity and help plan a referendum. We all look forward to the unification of our country.

The recent vote on the issue by Stormont was a watershed moment. As a result, the Government must act now and the presidential election later this year should be the last that excludes some Irish citizens across our Thirty-two Counties from voting.

Deputy Pat Buckley: Presidential voting rights for all citizens of Ireland has always been high on the agenda for Sinn Féin. We strongly believe all Irish citizens resident on the island of Ireland should have the right to vote in our presidential elections. The President represents all the people of Ireland and it is only right that all citizens on this island be allowed to vote for their first citizen, their Uachtarán. Successive polls have shown the majority of Irish people support voting rights in presidential elections being extended to all Irish citizens. There is clear and undeniable momentum towards extending voting rights and enhancing the democratic rights of Irish citizens. This would be a positive step and would strengthen and enrich our democratic process.

It is a glaring anomaly that an Irish citizen living in the Six Counties can stand for election as, and be elected as, President but cannot vote to elect a President. This is an insult to the 1.8 million-plus Irish citizens living in the Six Counties, who have historically been denied participation in the life of their own nation by the historic and undemocratic injustice of partition. It is now 12 years since the constitutional convention in Dublin voted overwhelmingly to extend voting rights and nine years since Fine Gael reaffirmed its commitment to holding a referendum

to make the necessary changes to the Constitution. Disappointingly, no progress whatsoever has been made since. We cannot allow this to continue. We need to grant a voice to all Irish citizens and ensure they are no longer excluded from voting to elect their President. November's election must be the last presidential election that excludes Irish citizens in the Six Counties.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: Everyone in this House opposes partition, or at least they pay lip service to that position. Partition was a disaster for our country and the sooner it is ended, the better. That is the viewpoint from which we should approach this debate on presidential voting rights. Irish citizens are denied the right to vote for the President simply because they live in the North. This seriously undermines their fundamental rights - rights this House is supposed to protect and uphold. It arises from the forced partition of our country and the imposition of a Border by the British Government of the day. However, continuation of the denial of Irish citizens' rights is happening under this Government. It is way past time to end it.

To put this in perspective, if I were to stand in a presidential election, many of my family members and friends in the North would not be able to vote for me. This is nothing new. When Martin McGuinness stood in the presidential election of 2011, he raised the issue repeatedly. Mary McAleese was elected President in 1997 and represented the entire Irish nation despite the fact that Irish citizens in her hometown of Belfast had no say in her election. This is not an academic question but an issue that has arisen in real life in presidential elections for decades and nothing has been done about it.

The fifth report of the convention on the Constitution formally recommended extending voting rights to Irish citizens in the North in November 2013. Despite supportive statements from Government parties, almost 12 years on nothing has changed. In May, the Stormont Assembly passed a motion supporting the call for the extension of presidential voting rights to citizens in the North. This would have been unthinkable a short while ago and indicates the strength of the momentum for change. It is well past time for the Government to call a referendum to enact the expressed will of the people, North and South.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I think it is the first time I have addressed the Minister of State in the Chamber. I congratulate him on his appointment and wish him the best of luck with it. The Labour Party has long supported the extension of the voting franchise. We feel it goes to the heart of our democracy. I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this motion, which we will support. Many proposals on voting rights, especially for our diaspora, have come before this House. That is particularly linked to a history of emigration. The right to vote in elections to Dáil Éireann is outlined in Article 16 of the Constitution and is open to all citizens over 18 and other persons as determined by law. They must also be ordinarily resident in Ireland and registered to vote. The right to vote in presidential elections is determined by Article 12 of the Constitution and delimited to citizens eligible to vote in Dáil elections. It is our view that it should be legally possible to extend the franchise to recent emigrants without a referendum. It should also be extended to EU citizens living here. These are two issues I will return to.

The broader issue, as outlined in this motion, arises for citizens living abroad who have never lived here, particularly those living in Northern Ireland. When the Labour Party was in government, it established the convention on the Constitution in 2012. One of the key issues it addressed was voting rights for citizens resident outside of the State. Many of the reports of the convention were acted on but this is a key outstanding issue. The fifth report of the constitutional convention, published in November 2013, recommended that citizens resident outside the State have the right to vote in presidential elections. During the Second Stage debate on a

Sinn Féin Bill proposing a constitutional amendment on this issue over a decade ago, in March 2015, my colleague, Deputy Nash, responded for the Government of the time. The Bill was not opposed then either. It was noted during a debate, as it has been today, that a large number of practical and policy issues need to be addressed before the extension of the franchise and the holding of any referendum. It is incredible that ten years on, nothing has been done to advance this, despite a commitment to act.

The debate at that time did not occur in a vacuum. There was a renewed focus on emigration. Irish young people were once again having to leave their homes in the country to find jobs and advance their careers, due to an economic crash caused by Fianna Fáil. There was also renewed focus on our diaspora as we sought to boost our economic recovery by tapping into our global network to aid the creation of new jobs and attract new investment.

The Fine Gael minority Government, supported by Fianna Fáil from 2016 to 2020, committed to holding a referendum on extending the franchise in presidential elections to citizens living abroad. Enda Kenny confirmed his intention to hold that referendum during his St. Patrick's Day trip in 2017. The then Taoiseach Leo Varadkar announced in 2019 the decision to postpone the holding of the referendum at the upcoming local and European elections until later that year. Nothing more ever came of it.

Labour supports the holding of a referendum on this matter but we would warn that extensive and detailed planning work is required before it could happen, if any lessons are to be learned from our recent votes. In particular, arrangements for the registration of new voters in the North and for voting by those citizens would have to be workable and robust. Other considerations arising include the method of voting, cost and resource needs and the security of the ballot. The standard practice in other countries of using postal voting, in-person registration or voting in embassies would not necessarily be practical at all of the North. In-person voting would likely need to be facilitated there.

Other questions that will need to be addressed include whether the right should be restricted to those born on the island of Ireland, all those with citizenship or those with a passport. We would support citizenship as a condition for eligibility. There is, however, a real risk referendum could be defeated by fearmongering or the inverse of the American slogan of "No taxation without representation", particularly if there was a failure to prepare. Such an outcome would send a negative message about the future of island and about efforts to achieve a united Ireland. There is also the possibility that giving our diaspora a vote only in the presidential election could be seen as tokenistic. However, in our view it would be a hugely symbolic measure and another step towards unity.

The convention debate and the report that followed addressed many of these legal and practical issues, but that was nearly 12 years ago. A welcome first step would be the establishment of a special Oireachtas committee to tease out these issues and make substantive policy recommendations. There is cross-party consensus on the principle of extending the franchise for presidential elections but, as we saw with the repeal referendum, holding committee hearings in advance makes a substantial impact on informing the public debate.

I listened to the Minister of State's remarks earlier and he asked how do we win this debate? Rushing a constitutional amendment, as happened last year - there were substantial hearings on the wording but without heed to the considered recommendations of the Oireachtas committees concerned - was certainly one reason we lost that. The follow on impact on public policy from

a referendum loss in this regard would be a recipe for disaster. As I said, we call for that special Oireachtas committee which would allow for the nuts and bolts of how voting would work to be outlined and considered and provide a roadmap for implementation. As I said at the start of my contribution, whatever one's view on a referendum, we already have scope within the Constitution to look at extending the franchise.

Ireland has long ignored the rights of our citizens who have emigrated to participate in our elections and severely restricted the ability of people to use postal votes. These are key issues that must and should be resolved in advance of any referendum. Many of these will be researched by the recently established Electoral Commission and the Labour Party made substantial proposals on these issues when the legislation for that was passed by the Oireachtas. It is welcome that the research programme of the Electoral Commission will look at postal voting this year and residency voting next year. This work would dovetail well with that of a special committee established to look at extending the franchise for presidential elections.

A key first step is to clean up the electoral register as it stands and so improve the security of our votes. There are 11 local authorities with more people registered to vote than the eligible population for their area. The Electoral Commission has made substantial recommendations to address this but it will be 2026 before we see real progress and it must be completed before the 2029 local and European elections.

If the Minister wants to take real tangible action in the meantime, I urge him to start with supporting those living outside the State for short periods to vote in our elections. I am sure we all encountered people in the recent general election, and local elections, who were unable to vote because they were outside the country. The home to vote movement during the repeal and marriage equality referendums should have inspired us, long ago, to change our outdated laws.

Of 27 EU states, Ireland is one of three that does not extend suffrage to recent emigrants beyond 18 months; those three being Ireland, Malta and Cyprus. Currently, Irish citizens can vote in Irish elections for up to 18 months after leaving Ireland, if they intend to return in the same period. It had been previously proposed by the then Minister of State with responsibility for the diaspora, Jimmy Deenihan, to extend this period to three years. Notably, a Private Members' Bill from the Labour Party, proposed by Deputy Gerry O'Sullivan in 1991, proposed that emigrants from Ireland should have the right to vote for up to 15 years after becoming non-resident. It was defeated at the time by just four votes. It was introduced as part of the campaign at that time to extend the franchise to emigrants.

Providing a vote for recent emigrants would not be technically difficult. Their vote would be located in the constituency where they were resident and on the register before they left. Their vote would issue by postal ballot. It would be a trial run for extending the presidential franchise to all citizens and ensure we get our postal voting system right. Of course, we could also look at technology if we wanted to adapt to the 21st century, although our experiment with electronic voting has made that a taboo subject since.

The commission has also made recommendations on waiving the charges imposed on persons applying for the postal vote because of illness, disability or other medical certification. It should be much easier to get a postal vote. Compared to many other countries, Ireland makes it very hard to vote. You must be on the register and show up on the day between 7 a.m. and 10 p.m. Even the United States has early voting. This is something we would like to see facilitated.

The Labour Party has also long supported the lowering of the voting age to 16. This is a measure that could be implemented before the 2029 local and European elections. We also believe that the Electoral Commission should research the extension of voting rights for Dáil elections to all long-term residents living in Ireland for more than five years. British citizens can vote in our Dáil elections but EU citizens who have been living here for decades are barred from doing so unless they take up citizenship. While most EU countries allow their citizens living abroad to vote in their elections, there is a strong case for seeking agreement on a European level for complimentary voting rights for Irish citizens living in other EU countries and *vice versa*. That would allow those who live and work in another EU country to take part in the democratic decisions that most influence their lives.

In conclusion, there is substantial work under way by the Electoral Commission on various reforms and research on potential changes, but unless there is political will to change the way we hold our elections from the Government, nothing will change. We believe a special committee should be established to report on how the presidential franchise would be extended to all citizens. We want it to make recommendations on the nuts and bolts of that process and to then hold a referendum to change our Constitution, as the constitutional convention decided conclusively to do 12 years ago.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion. Molaim Sinn Féin as ucht an rúin seo a chur os comhair na Dála. Caithfimid, i gcomhthéacs an ullmhaithe d'athrú bunreachtúil, smaoineamh anois faoin gcaoi a bhfuil muid ag caitheamh le saoránaigh na hÉireann ó Thuaidh.

We in the Social Democrats support the extension of the franchise for the presidential election to both recent emigrants and to those Irish people living in Northern Ireland. We support a united Ireland. As the Good Friday Agreement recognises the birthright of people in the North, and as the constitutional convention recommended - as we have heard - the extension of the vote to those people, we feel this motion goes some way to addressing that.

Irish people in the Six Counties feel ignored. At times, they feel invisible and this is one way we can show they are valued and they are seen by us in Dáil Éireann. However, there are some points which we need to consider in the context of this motion and the broader debate and that is what I will use my time on today. Specifically, there are huge flaws in our electoral register which need to be addressed in order to make this, or indeed any big changes like this, workable. Requiring citizens on this island who we know reside here to register is, in itself, disenfranchising. We also cannot forget that in this discussion, due to the twenty-seventh amendment, some people who are born here and who have spent their whole lives here are not entitled to vote in anything beyond local elections. Finally, I make the point that extending this particular franchise should not indicate in any way that the presidential election itself does not matter.

There are flaws within the electoral register we need to address to make the extension of the franchise workable. Obviously, the establishment of an Coimisiún Toghcháin and the work it has done to date is very welcome but we know there is a huge workload for it to deal with to get to where we need to be. Duplication of registrations on county registers and between counties is an issue, with no system for accounting for death and emigration. We have a disjointed system, handled by local authorities which do not have the resources or the systems to manage some of these gaps in the register. They need better resourcing and better logistical support, which will inform this key pillar of our democracy. The commission has taken huge steps in making it easier to register and to check and update details but there is a huge amount more that

needs to be done.

Requiring citizens on this island who we know reside here to register is, in itself, disenfranchising. Every barrier between a citizen and a ballot box is another attempt to exclude. I understand there has to be verification mechanisms and I understand the importance of the integrity of elections, but we are an outlier with our need to take the step to register to vote. The deadlines around that registration are also an issue. All of that curbs people's ability to participate in our democracy and I believe it is something we have to address.

We then come to those who are born here, live here and who cannot vote because Article 2 of our Constitution states: "It is the entitlement and birthright of every person born in the island of Ireland, which includes its islands and seas, to be part of the Irish Nation.". Despite this, some people who are born here, have spent their whole lives here and who know no other home cannot vote in presidential elections or general elections because their parents are not Irish. We celebrate the new Irish, we are grateful for their contributions but we will not include them, just as we celebrate Irish citizens in the North who we do not include. All of this happens despite the Twenty-seventh amendment allowing for us to extend these people citizenship as their birthright, as we have heard from other speakers. When we talk about the principles of franchise, they must flow from that principle laid down in Article 2 - an Irish nation which is inclusive where, no matter your background, if this your home, you belong here.

An extension of franchise should not indicate that the presidential election does not matter. Sometimes we hear this commentary that the role of the President is not important anyway and that it is a figurehead position with little function. That argument undermines key principles of how our State is structured because the role of the President speaks to our separation of powers and how important it is to build in those checks and balances. The President is the guardian of Bunreacht na hÉireann and she or he is the representative of the Irish people. The office of Uachtarán na hÉireann represents who we are, who we want to be and what message we wish to send to the world. In the past 30 years, we have seen how powerful that voice can be for all Irish people in the South and North, and indeed across the world. Therefore, this is not a signal of a vote granted in a meaningless election but something that is important and that sees us embark on a journey towards enfranchisement.

We must consider all elements of the Good Friday Agreement. When we base our discussion on this, we also need to address any concerns over cross-community engagement, which is crucial, and legal clarity over jurisdiction.

We support this motion. As a graduate of Ulster University and somebody with a network that spans our internal border, I feel very strongly about this issue. There is so much ignorance in the South about the experience of people in Northern Ireland, who really do feel invisible and discounted by Dáil Éireann at times. The motion goes some way towards addressing that invisibility, so I welcome it.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I thank Sinn Féin for introducing the motion. I welcome the fact that the Government is not opposing it.

Extending presidential voting rights to Irish citizens living in the North should never be seen as a radical demand. It represents a necessary and overdue recognition of the promises made in the Good Friday Agreement. That agreement was not just about ending conflict; rather, it was a commitment to a shared and equal future. It recognised that people in the North have a right

to identify as Irish or British, or both, and to have that identity respected by the institutions of this island. However, respect is not just about words because it is also about access, voice and recognising Irish citizens in the North should have the same right to choose their Head of State as those living in counties Cork, Kerry or Dublin.

If we believe in a 32-county republic, as I do, we cannot pretend Irishness ends at a border. We cannot ask people in the North to believe in the republic without offering them a role in shaping it. Of course, the Presidency is largely symbolic, but symbols do matter, especially in post-conflict societies. A vote in a presidential election is not just about choosing a figurehead; it is also about stating clearly that citizens belong, that their voice counts and that their citizenship is real. This debate should go further, however, because what we are really being asked to consider is not just votes but a vision – a vision concerning the question of what it would mean to reimagine a modern, shared 32-county Irish republic, one that lives up to its word in its name. It would mean a country where public services reflect public values, where housing is not just a source of misery and a word followed by “crisis”, where healthcare is not a privilege, where schools are inclusive and where opportunity is not tied to income or background. A republic like that will not be built overnight; it will take hard choices and honest conversations in communities the length and breadth of the island. Giving citizens in the North the right to vote for the President would be one small step in this direction and would send a clear message that this island belongs to us all. I support the motion not as a gesture but as part of a wider commitment to a fairer, united Ireland – one built not on rhetoric but on rights and the daily work of making this Republic one truly worthy of that name.

Much of the conversation is about a shared island and a united Ireland. We have from previous taoisigh some interventions that I find interesting and welcome. This is a really exciting conversation. We do not have enough reimagining of what exactly a 32-county modern republic would look like. We should do more of this in this Chamber and start to work towards it. It should not be when we feel confident enough to have it. There is great potential associated with what we could achieve with the ideal of a republic. For us in the Social Democrats, it is built on institutions and public services. It is not just about the flags and symbols or who gets to vote in what way; it is about what the institutions and public services look like. This is a really exciting conversation. We have a decade of reimagining in front of us, and a decade of persuasion in some instances. Motions like this help us to keep the conversation going. It is a conversation I look forward to being involved in.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I thank Sinn Féin for introducing this motion. The Social Democrats will support it.

Democracy is something we must strive to keep in a world where we see it being eroded and erased. Voting in elections is fundamental to democracy. The decision to extend voting rights to people has been a battle, particularly for women, over the past 100 years.

Last year was a bumper year of elections. We had local, European and general elections. I do not need to tell anybody in this House about them; we all know about them. Every candidate knows the importance of getting people out to vote. I am sure there were voter registration drives in every constituency, and there was also voter education, led in particular by our wonderful adult education services. Despite these, the turnout in some constituencies was very low. The lowest was 47.77%, in Dublin Bay South, and Wicklow had the highest, at 67%. In my constituency, Dublin South-Central, the turnout for the general election was 49.1%, which means over half of people eligible to vote did not do so. Therefore, it is important that we en-

gage citizens to vote and engage with our democracy.

There are cracks, however. The independent Electoral Commission was established in February 2023 under the Electoral Reform Act 2022. What is really great is that it has oversight and sets out a clear roadmap in respect of a national register, audits, public information campaigns, binding accuracy standards and, crucially, a dedicated budget and staffing for local authorities, which are so badly needed. A recently published Electoral Commission report starkly showed there are legacy accuracy issues, with hundreds of thousands of names on the register that should not have been due to death, emigration and people moving between local authority areas. The register even exceeded the estimated eligible population in 11 counties.

I welcome my colleague Deputy Aidan Farrelly's electoral (amendment) Bill, which would see the voting age reduced from 18 to 16. This is not a novel idea. In 1972, the voting age was reduced from 21 to 18. Including people in voting is so important in our democracy. We must fight to keep our democracy. We see all over the world that democracy is being eroded and erased. We see people being othered and rights being removed from people who fought so hard to get them. As politicians, we need to rebuild trust that seems to have been slipping away. We must ensure the people who vote us into this House see we are using our voice here to represent them, and we must ensure we are doing what is right for everybody in this country. We must also ensure people get out to vote. People have told me, and probably several other Members, at the doorsteps that they did not vote because they did not believe it would make any difference. We all know it does. It makes a difference to individuals and communities and it will make a difference to this country. Whether an election is local, European, general or presidential, it is important that people get out to vote.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: By arrangement, I call Deputy Tóibín.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I thank Deputies Brian Stanley and Catherine Connolly for their flexibility on speaking slots.

I am delighted to speak on the motion. Often, we focus on the urgent issues, which are very important for sure, but forget about the important issues that pertain to this country and its development. Shockingly, an Irish citizen in the North can stand for election as President, campaign for election and win the election but is prohibited from voting in it. That is incredible. An Irish citizen living in the North with an Irish passport, recognised by the Good Friday Agreement, is not allowed by this State to vote in a presidential election. That is very sad and dangerous. It means we have a two-tier situation. It is deeply undemocratic and against the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement.

Let us imagine the joy Irish citizens in the North of Ireland would experience if, for the first time since 1918, they were able to vote in a democratic expression of self-determination on an equal basis with those in the rest of the country. The Minister of State has potentially a legacy to leave regarding that historic event if he grasps this. This is not a zero-sum situation. It is not the case that for nationalists or republicans to achieve a right, a right has to be taken away from unionists or loyalists. This removes no rights from our unionist brothers and sisters in the North. The power to change this is not in Westminster. We do not have to go with a begging bowl to persuade the British Government. The power to change is not in Stormont, and we do not have to try to change the views of the DUP or UUP to achieve this objective. The power is in this Chamber and in the ballot boxes throughout the Twenty-six Counties.

The Government, in its inaction, is withholding the rights of 700,000 citizens in the North. One of the things I have noticed in this Chamber is that historically one of the best ways for a Minister to say “No” has been to say “Yes” and do nothing about it. That is what is happening in this country. We have opinion polls in the South indicating the majority are in favour of a united Ireland. A vote in Stormont indicated a majority of MLAs support this particular project.

7 o'clock

Practically every political party in Leinster House has stated in their manifestos that they are in support of this. Why is this not happening? I will tell you why it is not happening and I will be honest with the Minister of State about this. I believe that the narrow self-interests of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael do not want an all-Ireland vote on a presidential election, because they do not want 700,000 Northern nationalists voting in a presidential election, because they fear that it could hand the seat over to a Sinn Féin candidate in this election and maybe others. Withholding an election because you do not like the result is profoundly undemocratic and profoundly wrong. You should never ever treat the right to a franchise in that manner. I do not want a Sinn Féin President either. I am a member of Aontú. We are an all-Ireland political party. The SDLP also garners many nationalist votes in the North. If you really want to stop Northern nationalists from voting for Sinn Féin a presidential election, organise in the North. Set up Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil cumannns in the North. In that scenario, stand in local elections. If a small party like us can do that, surely a well-funded organisation like the Minister of State's party can too.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome this motion, as somebody who passionately believes in the national reunification, not unification, but reunification of the national territory. It is an important step forward and it is long overdue. There has been foot-dragging on this and we need a timeline for progress. National reunification is important. All parties nominally sign up to it. I believe we should do better and we should be proactive about it. The Taoiseach talks a lot about the shared island project. Let us share and extend democracy on the island. We have had Presidents Robinson, McAleese and Higgins. They have done great work and outreach to both communities and indeed all communities in the North, even the very small minority communities.

Increasing numbers of citizens in the North are more open to all-Ireland co-operation. There is more co-operation now through business, sports, culture, health, politics and the North-South Ministerial Council, which is meeting again. Hopefully its role expands and I welcome that that is happening. We saw a setback yesterday with the A5 motorway project. Unfortunately, that has been held up again. Hopefully, it will get started and that can be done. It is important for Tyrone, Derry and indeed Donegal. The Good Friday Agreement confirmed the right of Irish citizenship to everybody on the island of Ireland. We have had candidates from the North. We had Martin McGuinness, an excellent candidate from the Six Counties. We had Mary McAleese as President, who did a good job, and was open and inclusive in her outlook and approach. They do not have the right to vote for themselves, their families cannot vote for them and the communities they come from are refused that right.

We cannot blame the British Government for this one. This is our job. The solution is here in this building, in this room and in Government Buildings. I am disappointed that I do not see it in the programme for Government. I am open to correction. I cannot find this in it. I was hoping it would be in the programme for Government. It is a matter of equality and democracy. We cannot have any more foot-dragging. The electoral register in the North is much improved and is probably more accurate than the one here at the moment. Polling stations could easily

be put in a community centre in the larger towns. I think people would come out and vote in numbers. Let us extend democracy and let us start fulfilling the promises of the Good Friday Agreement. Some of us supported that reluctantly back in 1997 and what was eventually put forward in 1998. We supported it on the basis that these all-Ireland dimensions would improve and expand. This is one practical step that we can take to do it. Nominally, we are supposed to be all agreed to it here, but I do not want to see it just be nominal. As somebody who passionately supports the reunification of the national territory, we need to be active about this. The Government has Opposition support this evening and we should do it sooner rather than later.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Can I get the clock stopped for a minute to clarify something? I assumed we were letting Deputy Tóibín have his slot ahead of us and that we were sharing our own slot, which was six minutes each.

Deputy Brian Stanley: We have six minutes each.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Yes. I will look after the clock. Go ahead.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank Sinn Féin for tabling this motion. It is brief and to the point. I have no problem with implementing the recommendations of the Fifth Report of the Convention on the Constitution, which was quite some time ago now, for all Irish citizens on the island of Ireland. I have no difficulty with that. To follow on from my colleague, Deputy Stanley, it is not in the programme for Government, which is disappointing. It was in the 2020 programme for Government. While I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, telling us the Government is not going to oppose this motion, just like somebody said, that is often a recipe for doing nothing. Perhaps at the end, the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, might tell us what the next step is, having accepted this motion. Where are we going with this? We have had many attempts before. We had the Thirty-fourth Amendment of the Constitution (Presidential Voting) Bill 2014, which did not go anywhere. We have the Fifth Report of the Convention on the Constitution from 2013, which did not go anywhere. Now the Government is agreeing with the motion. I welcome that. Tell us what the Government is going to do for the next step. Is it a cross-party committee? What forum will there be to do it?

It is beyond ironic that we can elect somebody as President, as we all know and as has been said so many times, including former President Mary McAleese and indeed other candidates from Northern Ireland, including Martin McGuinness, who could not vote for themselves. It is unacceptable, given the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. It goes against the principle of equality and it allows us to continue to speak out of both sides of our mouth about Northern Ireland. I have gone up there quite a number of times in the past on trips relating to the Irish language, including to Carn Tóchair in County Derry and to Belfast. I toured all the Irish facilities. The strongest emotional feeling I had crossing over was that we had literally cut off our right arm with Northern Ireland. It is time to have a realistic timescale for a united Ireland. This is the first immediate step that we can take.

Regarding the broader issue of extending votes to the diaspora, while I agree in principle, there are huge practical problems which need to be teased out. I would like to see this part of the motion go ahead because it is a much easier to progress it, and then we can look in more detail at what we mean. Quite a number of articles of the Constitution are involved, including Articles 12 and 16, one about the Presidency and one about the Dáil. We also have an interesting article, Article 9.3, under which Irish citizens have a fundamental political duty of fidelity to the nation. We need to tease out what the nation as opposed to the country is and how we

protect that article. While I am open in theory to extending it to the diaspora, it needs to be teased out in a manner that is respectful.

The Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, said that we must ensure this can be passed. Members of different parties said to look at the last referendum and said that we did not sell it right. I think what happened with the last two referendums was that the Government was disingenuous with the electorate, who were far ahead of us. They saw that the Government was simply not telling the truth about carers or about removing the mother from the Constitution. If you want to remove that, put in parents, but that is not what happened with both of those referendums. I thought about them carefully and studied them. I found myself with bedfellows who I would not normally be with but that did not deter me from making my decision that what the Government was doing was totally wrong in amending the Constitution under the guise of protecting carers, when it was doing exactly the opposite. One of the basic ways of protecting carers is to recognise them fundamentally in the Constitution in a separate article and then to roll out the practical steps that should be taken and, separately, address the importance of the family. Whoever is in charge of the family, whether mother, father or parents, I have no problem with that, but the two should have been addressed separately. The Government did not do that. It misled the people. They were way ahead of the Government. They voted overwhelmingly against both referendums. Maybe the Government might learn from that to speak honestly and openly to people as to what it is doing and stop the deceit.

Further, the Government decided there was to be a referendum on the Unified Patent Court. At the time, the Government told us that was vital. I sat and listened to the Government. We were told it was vital to change the Constitution to allow for that. Suddenly, it did not matter anymore. It is gone. The Leas-Cheann Comhairle might be able to help us find out where the importance attached to the Unified Patent Court referendum has gone. We were told we had to change the Constitution to allow for that but suddenly it was put off because the Government got a bashing in both referendums.

When we go back to disinformation and distrust, it comes from governments. It is not coming from the people. The people are begging for an open honest approach. They want to trust politicians but trust is not created by the Government telling us one day that it is essential for trade, commerce and industry to change the Constitution in the context of the patent court, but the next day it is gone and does not matter anymore. There is no sign of it. A parliamentary question was recently asked by a Government TD. The reply stated that the international agreement on a Unified Patent Court had been signed and so on. It continued: "Government has committed that a local division of the Court will be established in Ireland if the State ratifies", but nothing is happening. There is no explanation other than the Government decided it was going to get another bashing. I agree with the Government it was important to change the referendum on this, but it did not do it. It sought to change the referendum on two other issues. That was completely wrong and disingenuous.

Getting back to the motion, I ask the Government to deal with the steps that need to be taken following on from the fact that it is not opposing the motion. What is the Government going to do next?

Deputy Michael Collins: Independent Ireland believes we must give all people on the island of Ireland the right to vote in presidential elections. It makes no sense that people who live on the island of Ireland - North and South - cannot vote for the President of Ireland. It would ensure that all Irish citizens, regardless of their residence, have a say in electing the Head of

State, fostering a sense of inclusion and representation. Voting rights could reinforce the connection between Northern Ireland and the Republic while promoting a unified Irish identity. It would encourage greater political participation and engagement among Irish citizens in Northern Ireland, potentially leading to a more politically active and informed populace.

People who live in Northern Ireland can run for President but they cannot vote in the presidential election. Granting voting rights would address the current disparity whereby Irish citizens in Northern Ireland can run for the Presidency but cannot vote and would align with the principles of equality and fairness. All Irish citizens on the island of Ireland should have the opportunity to vote for the President of Ireland. This would be in line with the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement. This is something that Independent Ireland will be very strong on going forward.

Getting people out to vote is a big issue here too. Turnout in recent referendums and Dáil and local elections was low. The first and foremost issue for the Electoral Commission, established in 2023, is to look at the registers. The registers are no longer updated. They are in absolute tatters and disarray. I was an local electoral enumerator myself. There were not five people out in the electoral register in my area when I was working on that. Now, the Government has got rid of every one of those enumerators and the register is in bits. I am hearing it is approximately a 60% turnout but I reckon it is really a 75% turnout because there are people dead for ten to 15 years who have not been taken off the register. We need to have people like the local postman who have knowledge of what is going on out there. Those people could get a payment on the side and come back with a completely corrected register. It is scandalous to see some of them. I got the register. I got to see who voted and who did not. Obviously, we do not know what way they voted, but we are entitled to look at it. The names of people who have been dead for years have not been taken off the register. I saw the names of people who went away 20 years ago still on it. Something is wrong somewhere. This will be a big issue going forward and we need to clean it up.

A person has to be over 35 to run for the Presidency. That should be brought down to 21. It is the same in the general election. During the general election campaign, there was a young lady who was 19 years of age and was eager to run in Cork South-Central. I could not let her run because she was not 21 years of age. She was over 18. I do not agree with 16-year-olds voting but if people are allowed to vote at 18 years of age, they should be able to run for office at 18 years of age. The requirement to be 35 or older is a bit much. We need to examine that going forward. These are areas where we can try to encourage people to come back into the system and get out and vote like they should.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I am a believer. I grew up believing there are Thirty-two Counties in Ireland, not Twenty-Six Counties. We are the island of Ireland. Call me old school; that is the way I was brought up. People from the North of Ireland can run for President but would not be able to vote for themselves. They are from Ireland. It is the island of Ireland. That is the bottom line. How many people who have left these shores and gone to Australia, Dubai and all the other countries are not citizens of the other countries? They hold an Irish passport. They are from Ireland and leave the country for five or six years to make a life for themselves or get a few pounds together to come back home. Are they allowed to vote in presidential elections if they are not in Ireland? They have left these shores because they could not be looked after here. They could not see a future for themselves and they could not see funding to allow them to build a life here, so they went to other countries. How many have left? Teachers, doctors and nurses are all leaving. They are Irish people with Irish passports. They also

should be allowed to vote in presidential elections. I am 100% saying that if a person is Irish, they vote. If they are from Ireland and living abroad, they are Irish. If they are not a citizen of any other country, they are Irish and they should be entitled to vote. That is the way that Irish people should have it. I am old school, and I will always stay the way I am. There are Thirty-two Counties in Ireland, not Twenty-six Counties. I will treat it that way for as long as I have breath.

Deputy Ken O’Flynn: I thank my colleagues in the Sinn Féin Party who brought this motion forward. It is almost a carbon copy of the motion that was brought forward by my colleague in Aontú, a motion co-signed by Independent Ireland. I thank Aontú for bringing that motion before the House in recent weeks. There is merit in tonight’s motion. The reality is that there are a number of disenfranchised people on this island who should be allowed to vote. However, there is a greater question, as my colleague, Deputy O’Donoghue, just mentioned. There are 500,000 Irish-born citizens living in the United Kingdom. There are an estimated 130,000 Irish-born holders of Irish passports living in the United States. In Australia, there are 80,000 to 100,000 Irish-born holders of Irish passports. In Canada, there are an estimated 30,000 to 50,000 Irish-born holders of Irish passports. There are 18,000 people, many of them retired, in Spain and Portugal who are holders of Irish passports. These people disenfranchised not just in presidential elections but also in general elections and local elections.

There is a wider question that has to be answered here in the House. How is it when we see elections being called around Europe and in further places that we see citizens of other countries - European and non-European countries - have voting rights? They can go to their embassies or post their vote to the embassy like the Spanish do. We have a large community of Polish people living in Ireland, in the Republic, and they have made their homes here. However, our Polish citizens who are interested in their country, intend to go back to their country and hold Polish passports vote in Cork City Hall when elections are called. There are various polling stations built for them.

We are talking about doing it for the people of Northern Ireland like it is a big shock. These are people who are only up the road from us. As my colleague said, there are Thirty-two Counties in Ireland, not Twenty-six Counties. We are disenfranchising that. Let us call a spade a spade. Why are we disenfranchising the people of the North? Why are we disenfranchising the Irish who live in the United States? Why are we disenfranchising those who live in the UAE or in Australia? It is happening because this Government is fearful. I can guarantee that the majority of the 80,000 who are living in Australia are anxious to come home but have no jobs or no houses to come home to. Perhaps they would register their disappointment with this Government at elections. Perhaps those who are living in the UK who had to leave this shore to get jobs and employment because there were no opportunities for them here and they cannot get make a living here would register their disappointment with this Government and its politics. The reality is that the Government does not want Irish citizens around the world voting. It knows what it has done to those people it has cast out of this country and not allowed to come back. It has not created an environment for those who are anxious to live in their country to come back to. That is the reality of life today in Ireland and it is very disingenuous to see the Government is not opening up voting, at least in the presidential election. This should be extended to general, local and European elections. Surely Irish citizens should have the right to have a say about their own country and not be disenfranchised.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am delighted to speak on this issue and thank Sinn Féin for tabling the motion. As we know, most parties in this House and in this country say they are in

favour of a united Ireland. They say they are in favour of many things. It is nice to say. I want to put it on the record that I am fully in favour of a united Ireland. I come from a republican family. My late dad was in the War of Independence and spent 14 months of his life in Castlerea as well as time spent on the run. We salute him and the many people like him for the freedom we have. It is a pity we were not able to do all of it at the time. He opposed the treaty and I think it was a bad job as well and now we have that situation in Ireland today.

I am disappointed that the semi-new custom has come into this House whereby the Government decides not to oppose motions like this. It acquiesces and allows it to go forward but that is as far as it gets. It is left on a shelf gathering dust. That is not a good idea. Motions are agreed and people think they have got somewhere but they have not.

As we know, the former President Mary McAleese and the late Martin McGuinness, both of whom were born and reared in Northern Ireland, stood for election to the Office of President, with and former President McAleese serving for two terms. It is a bit farcical that a citizen living in Northern Ireland can stand for election here but cannot vote in a presidential election here. We need to examine that. Maybe we could put our toe in the water with the presidential election and see what type of appetite there is in Northern Ireland for people to participate in electoral democracy down here.

We also have to turn our eyes to the low turnout in elections in the South. We must also examine the perilous state of the electoral register. It is in a terrible state. I thank the people in south Tipperary County Council who I and my office deal with regarding corrections to the register. There is nothing more hurtful or annoying to a family than if someone has been deceased for one, two, three or maybe ten years and his or her name is still on the electoral register. It is unforgivable that death certificates are not linked up with the electoral register. What is wrong with this country that in 2025 there cannot be a synchronisation with death certificates? One's birth certificate is a very important document and one's death certificate should be also. In this age of technology why can we not have an automatic rectifying of the register when somebody passes away? There is nothing more hurtful when a family receives a letter from An Coimisiún Toghcháin, as well as many other letters and surveys and everything else, for a deceased person. It is shocking and not good enough.

I know some efforts were made this time but, for last year's local and general elections there should have been a shorter or more up-to-date closing date before which people had to register. People should be able to register online with their PPS number up to 24 hours before the election. There is apathy and a low turnout of maybe 58%. One must ask why that is. We see now there is no great interest in standing for the presidential election at this time. Maybe we should consider having a constitutional review of the role of President. If the President differs on anything or steps on the Government's toes, it is not accepted. We need a President who will look after all of the needs of all of the people of Ireland. We should strive to have an evaluation of how the Constitution is serving us in that area. I am not criticising it but maybe it is time to update it.

As for diaspora living abroad, of course I believe they should be entitled to have a vote. Many of them chose to go. We see young graduates going in their droves, which is a pity, but many of them still want to have a say and they have the aspiration to come back here. One meets people who have been living in America or other places for 20 or 30 years and are still anxious to come back to their native soil. Deputy Connolly mentioned fidelity to the nation. That has gone a long way down the line and our Taoiseach and other leaders here can be ques-

tioned on that. He is interested in parliaments all over the world, as is the former Taoiseach, but he is not interested in the issues at home and he has a *béal dúnta* on the issue of migration into this country - inward migration. The Six Counties - I would love to have all Thirty-two Counties - is like a sieve, with people who are not entitled to be here coming across the Border. That is very wrong. It is like an elephant in the room. We have closed our ears to it and will not deal with the problem and listen to the people out there. That is the rock we will perish on. We must listen to people who have concerns. We must not demonise, attack or demean them for questioning our immigration policies and the greed that is involved now with the people who are getting into the industry in a caring role, *mar dheá*. We have a great record in this country for caring, with our diaspora - brothers, sisters and everybody else - having gone all over the world, including to third world countries and those experiencing famine. We now need to have a proper policy on inward immigration here and allow people who want to be involved to be involved, but not the greed merchants who are there to make vast millions.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank Sinn Féin for opening up this debate and giving us the opportunity to talk on this important matter. Yes, Ireland consists of Thirty-two Counties, not Twenty-six Counties. We need to know more from the Government as to what it means by not opposing this motion. The Government needs to be more transparent as to what it believes, what it is thinking of, how this will be done or when will it be initiated. When will we make a start? Will there have to be a referendum? Our own people will have to be consulted. Will the people in the North have to be consulted? Will they get a chance to decide whether they want to vote for an Irish President just for the Twenty-six Counties? That might be an issue for them as well as for people down here.

There are a lot of issues around immigration; Deputy McGrath mentioned them. There seems to be a lot of immigrants coming from the UK through Northern Ireland and slipping down here. It creates a lot of issues for housing and social welfare and it is mucking things up. We have a new Minister for justice now who seems to be gaining control and trying to manage this. He has already made a good start and we are depending on the Minister to keep going.

What I know from my dealings with people from the North of Ireland, whether it was in marts around Kerry - in Cahersiveen, Castleisland or Kenmare - is that they are very honourable people. They come down here to buy cattle and they pay for our cattle and our sheep. On the other side, for the past eight years Deputy Collins, Deputy Michael Healy-Rae and myself have taken a lot of people to Kingsbridge Private Hospital to get their cataracts removed and to get hips and knees replaced, and we are still doing it. The hospital provides a great service up there. It is immediate. People need to get the operation before they lose their sight. If they had to remain in the South of Ireland and depend on getting through the waiting list, many of them would go blind before their cataracts were removed, and that is a sad reflection. What we see happening up there is that the hospitals work all around the clock. They work the seven days and provide the service on Saturdays and Sundays, the very same as if it was Monday. We appreciate that because it helps people here in the South of Ireland to be with their elderly people going up to get their cataracts removed. Indeed, I was glad to be able to help a young foreign boy who was in Killarney. He was only nine years of age and he had to get his cataracts removed. He was about to go blind. It was only in Kingsbridge Private Hospital that I could get this done and I was very glad and proud to do that.

There are so many things to be considered. How will it be carried out? Who will be in charge of the ballot boxes up there? Will the UK Government and the powers that be up there facilitate this happening? We have to consider that. There are a lot of issues surrounding

this. It is a very laudable idea, and there is no denying that the people of the North, of those Six Counties, fought to be free and to be under Irish control as well as any of those who came before us and fought here in the South of Ireland. They were instrumental and did their part on every occasion. Therefore, we cannot deny them, if that is what they want, but we need to hear from their side that that is what they want. There is a democratic system up there in the Six Counties as well as there is here. It will need more direction and more involvement with the two Governments. The Irish Government and the UK Government and the Stormont Assembly need to get together and see how this will go forward. It would be nice to see that happening. It is a good idea but we need to get some idea of how long it is going to take. We need to get more transparency for our people down here because I have no doubt they will be asking us a lot of questions in the coming days. We need to have some kind of an answer for them and we are depending on the Government to give us that answer.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Emer Higgins): I thank all Members in the House for what was a really interesting discussion on this really important issue. Like my colleague the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, I am pleased the Government has not opposed this motion. The Dail's engagement on diaspora matters is always welcome and it was really positive to have such good engagement today. Every day, we see the value of the sustained investment in our communities abroad. That was evident in the response of the Irish community to the Covid pandemic, a response of which we as a country should be so proud, as well as more recently during the wildfires in California and, of course, in the many zones of conflict around the world.

I saw at first hand the importance of the importance of a strong and thriving community when I visited Australia for St. Patrick's Day this year. I was in Adelaide, Perth and Brisbane. We all know about the growing Irish communities in that part of the world. Many are successful and are cherishing the experiences of a new life and a new culture abroad. Others, as elsewhere in the world, have a much more challenging experience. In Australia, organisations like the Claddagh Association in Perth and the GAA are working tirelessly with those who find themselves in need of support abroad. The Government, through the emigrant support programme, has invested in the likes of the Claddagh Association since 2009. As a result, we have organisations that work in partnership with our embassy to support our seniors and those who find themselves in crisis abroad.

What I also saw in Australia was a diaspora engaged with its new home while also remaining utterly committed to this country. I met multigenerational families who have built their lives there. My own brother is an example of someone who has built his life and family abroad in Australia. So many in the diaspora are leaders in their communities and are making real contributions, be it in politics, business or the arts. I met with two ministers in Australia, both of whom have Irish connections and one of whom was born here in Dublin. They are advocates for human rights, inclusion and peace and reconciliation across the globe and we have to be willing to use their skills, access and influence in supporting our Irish both abroad and at home. In today's challenging climate, when it is vital that we continue to diversify our markets, we are also seeing the global Irish step up and bring the experience, the knowledge and the goodwill of diasporic business networks to support the scale-up Irish of businesses in strategically important locations and sectors. For our part, we will ensure the emigrant support programme continues to invest in projects that foster a sense of community, nurture our identity and culture overseas and that deepen our trade, business and educational links.

I welcome the support and work by the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, in undertaking to deliver this new diaspora strategy. As we look to deepen our relationship with the diaspora, it is right that we continue to take on board an inclusive definition of what it means to be part of the global Irish family. It is a community that encompasses Irish-born citizens and those whose parents or grandparents were born on the island, those with ancestral ties, as well as an affinity diaspora such as those who once lived, studied or worked here - those who hold a deep appreciation for our people and culture. It will also be important that the new strategy reach out to support those from under-represented groups such as the LGBT community, who are facing uncertainty in many countries across the world, and also to our new and mixed-race Irish and those in the Travelling community. I am so pleased to see the ongoing investment in Irish studies around the world. It is our culture among the new generation and the next generation of our diaspora and we are continuing to see a growing interest in people exploring their Irish citizenship.

Demand for foreign-birth registrations, or citizenship by descent, has increased exponentially over the past number of years. Prior to the Brexit referendum, those foreign birth registration applicants were about 5,000 to 6,000 per year, yet last year we had over 40,000 applicants and 50% of those came from Great Britain. The passport service is reviewing the foreign-birth registration application process with a view to improving the service we provide to prospective citizens, including those in our diaspora who have direct familial links through their grandparents.

The expansion of our diplomatic footprint has also provided a platform for greater engagement with our Irish away from home. Whether it is St. Patrick's Day or harnessing the spirit of St. Brigid's Day, supporting Irish business networks abroad or promoting our national games in partnership with the GAA, our embassies and consulates, and indeed our honorary consulates, play a central role in the continued renewal of a meaningful relationship with our diaspora. This engagement will be enhanced as we open new embassies in Belgrade, Sarajevo and Chişinău later this year and new consulates in Malaga and Melbourne early next year. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to our embassy teams who are working at the moment in very difficult circumstances in conflict zones. As we face greater risks from conflict and environmental challenges, our missions remain an important safety net for our citizens who are resident overseas.

There has rightly been substantial discussion this evening on Irish citizens living in Northern Ireland. The Good Friday Agreement makes very clear that the people of Northern Ireland can identify as Irish or British or both. Article 2 of the Constitution, as amended, forms a key part of the agreement and ensures the entitlement and birthright of every person born in the island of Ireland to be part of the Irish nation. This Government and all Governments since 1998 have advocated for and defended that right. We must do so as co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement and will continue to do that. There are and will continue to be differences in constitutional preference and identity. The question today is not just about identity but also about citizenship. It is about ensuring the rights of everyone on this island are respected. That is paramount to maximising the benefits of the Good Friday Agreement and moving towards a more peaceful and reconciled society.

I, too, was pleased the issue of voting rights in Irish presidential elections was debated recently in the Northern Ireland Assembly, during which a number of important aspects were touched on. Not least among these were the principals enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement regarding identity. On a practical level, however, the complexity involved in the implementation of the recommendations of the Convention on the Constitution was noted there also. I must

be really clear in stating that extending voting rights in such a way would require a referendum to change the Constitution. The work undertaken by the Convention on the Constitution on voting rights and other matters was important. The issues were well researched and the discussion was mature and transparent. It is a model that others abroad now look to, and rightly so. The issue of extending the franchise for voting in presidential elections simply is not straightforward. The detailed 2017 options paper on the matter prepared by the Department of housing, planning, community and local government and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade considered a range of policy, legal and logistical matters that we need to be mindful of and that need legal consideration. These include issues around the register of electors and postal voting in particular.

This is not to say it cannot be done - it absolutely can - but it requires careful thought and preparation, as well as securing a positive result in a referendum. As the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, said in his opening remarks, the Government is not interested in holding a referendum just for the sake of a referendum. We want to hold a referendum if we are in a position to win it. That is why debates like this are so crucial. I want to reassure the Dáil that the Government takes this matter very seriously and will continue to reflect on it, and it will work cross-party to look at this issue in a lot more detail.

An Ceann Comhairle: We move to the closing speeches from Sinn Féin, whose Members are sharing time. I call on Deputy Carthy.

Deputy Matt Carthy: It is not only disappointing but, I would suggest, disgraceful that, once again, we are going to have a presidential election and, once again, a significant portion of our nation will be denied the opportunity to participate. Almost 30 years after our first President from the North was elected, we still have the ridiculous situation where people from the Six Counties can run in the presidential election but they cannot actually vote. We have failed to uphold the rights of those in the North to their Irish citizenship as recognised in the Good Friday Agreement.

The truth is that the issue should have been resolved long before now. It is right that we would ask what it says to our citizens in the North when we continue to ignore repeated calls they have made for the extension of the right to vote in presidential elections; that we refuse to act on the recommendation of the 2013 Fifth Report of the Convention on the Constitution; and that we fail to act in response to an historic motion in the Northern Assembly that calls for the extension of voting rights to citizens in the North. What it says of successive Governments is that, at the back of it all, there is a sense that people in the North are not as Irish as the rest of us.

I come from the Border community. A slip of someone's pen during the time of Partition could have resulted in the same disenfranchisement of people who I currently represent very proudly in this House. It has to end. We have to move forward every single day to undo the historic wrong that was the Partition of our country. We have to start by making practical outreach steps. One of the easiest things we can do is say that our President is, as those who have held the office have proven, the voice of all of the Irish nation. Let us take the step and make sure it becomes a reality.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: One hundred and forty-one countries enable their diaspora to vote. People living in my constituency and members of my own family can vote in the presidential elections. It is mind-boggling that Irish citizens in the North and our international diaspora cannot vote in presidential elections. The Minister of State said this will be looked at

and that there is so much we agree on. We have to stop commentating on this and put it right. It is plainly wrong that we have not enacted it so far.

President Higgins rightly cited the Irish diaspora as one of the greatest resources. In *Global Ireland - Ireland's Diaspora Strategy 2020-2025*, the Government commits to holding a referendum on the extension of the franchise. We are almost at the end of 2025, so where is that referendum? The question that people ask me is what the Government is afraid of. What is it afraid of in extending the franchise?

A citizen must mean a citizen. Being an Irish citizen must mean more than being entitled to hold an Irish passport. It brings with it implicit rights, or it should do, and one of those rights should be enabling Irish citizens in the North to vote for their own President. It is lunacy to think that you can be President but you cannot vote for yourself. We are making fools of ourselves globally that we cannot do that in this day and age. It is time for action. We need presidential voting rights for Irish citizens in the North and for the Irish diaspora.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: As we know, Mary McAleese was the first President of Ireland born in the Six Counties and she proved to be a very effective President. However, incredibly, when she ran for election in 1997, she was not allowed to vote for herself. Our Presidents Mary Robinson, Mary McAleese and Michael D. Higgins could have presented the Sam Maguire or Liam MacCarthy cups to players like Joe Brolly, Peter Canavan or Oisín McConville in Croke Park on all-Ireland final day but those same Irishman were not allowed to vote for these same Presidents. It is wrong, it is ridiculous and it is blinkered. It is the result of a very partitionist mindset of this Parliament over the past century that has viewed the Irish nation as an entity that ends at Dundalk, Clones or Lifford.

Ba chóir agus ba cheart go mbeadh cead ag muintir na hÉireann, muintir na Sé Chontae, Fear Manach, Ard Mhacha, Tír Eoghain, Doire Cholmchille, Aontroim agus an Dún, vótáil i dtoghchán d'Uachtarántacht na hÉireann. Our fellow citizens in the Six Counties should be able to vote in the presidential election. Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil Governments have previously accepted this right but, of course, did nothing about it. Last month, we had an historic vote in the Northern Assembly in support of extending the voting right to the Irish citizens of the Six Counties, and 12 years ago, the constitutional assembly in this State voted similarly. Bunreacht na hÉireann states that it is the birthright of every person born on the island of Ireland to be part of the Irish nation and to call themselves an Irish citizen. Unfortunately, many of our citizens in the Six Counties, as well as those abroad in the diaspora, feel completely abandoned by this State.

The Government has a constitutional duty to uphold the citizenship rights of everybody born on the island of Ireland. We should not be facing into this presidential election in a few months' time with fellow citizens in the Six Counties once again excluded. This must be the last time it happens. The time for excuses is over. People want to see action from this Government, not just fine words.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The President of Ireland is largely a ceremonial position which acts as the representative of the Irish State both at home and abroad. The President holds some limited legislative powers and is one part of the checks and balances on the Legislature. Our current President has not been afraid to expand the role of the President and has been outspoken on a number of issues, most recently the genocide taking place in Gaza. This is entirely fitting for a person who has, throughout his life, been a strong advocate for those suffering human rights

abuses, particularly in South America and Central America.

The Constitution says that the President shall be elected by direct vote of the people, although being a citizen does not necessarily guarantee a vote as the Constitution also restricts that right to those who can vote at an election for Members of Dáil Éireann. This effectively disenfranchises a whole cohort of citizens who, by accident of history and geography, reside in the North of Ireland. Yet, any one of these citizens, if they are over 35 years of age, can in theory become the President if so elected, as the Belfast native Mary McAleese was in 1997.

There are a number of practical issues that need to be sorted out, as well as a change to the Constitution. However, these are not complex issues, as some might suggest. All the major political parties in the South have supported the recommendation from the 2013 constitutional convention to extend votes to citizens living outside the State. There is a fear that a Sinn Féin-nominated candidate might get elected if voting rights were extended to those in the North of Ireland. If that is the position of some people in government, it is outrageous. What chance have we for a united Ireland if that attitude prevails? The President of Ireland should be elected by all Irish citizens on the island of Ireland, no matter where they reside, North or South.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Tomás Mac Curtain once wrote, “Unity can triumph over fear.” These are the famous words of the Irish republican and former ard-mhéara of Cork City Council, who was assassinated by the RIC and the Black and Tans to quieten him so that his voice would not be heard. However, his words have never been more important. True patriots know that only united will we defeat those who look to overcome us. Every small step towards unity is a step for a better future for generations ahead. We see the power and the spirit that positive, real and honest patriotism can have when we look at groups like Kneecap. Mo Chara, a member of the band, is being tried in Britain under terrorist charges by a Government that was sending bombs to slaughter men, women and children in Gaza. That is another story but it is horrendous. Mo Chara has said he does not want British citizens out of Ireland; he wants the British Government out of Ireland.

The three young men in Kneecap have championed our language, people and culture in a positive way on a global scale. In November, however, they will not be able to vote in the presidential election. How is that right? A person on the Falls Road wearing an Antrim jersey and with a hurley in hand is as Irish as a young man or girl in Cork wearing a Cork jersey and with a hurley in hand. By not enacting legislation to give every Irish citizen on this island a right to vote, the Government is playing politics and denying people their constitutional right to vote. It is shocking.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Climate Action Plan

87. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Transport if he is aware of the recently published annual review of the transport sector by the Climate Change Advisory Council, CCAC; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34494/25]

Deputy Pa Daly: Is the Minister aware that the CCAC's recently published annual review of the transport sector is clear that the Government is failing when it comes to a just transition? There are serious problems in the transport sector because it is Ireland's biggest source of energy demand. Last year, transport emissions reduced by only a tiny 1.3%.

Minister for Transport (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I thank the Deputy for his question. I welcome the publication of the Climate Change Advisory Council's annual sectoral review of the transport sector. I recently met with the council and, separately, with its chair, Marie Donnelly. We had a very constructive discussion. My Department and I will be reviewing this report and its recommendations. I certainly will take them into account as we update our approach to next iteration of the climate action plan later this year, which will be its 26th iteration.

The annual report from the CCAC is a critical input into our policy approach. While there has been an unprecedented level of investment in sustainable transport and electric vehicle, EV, supports over recent years, I fully agree with the council's assessment that we are not yet achieving the pace of change required to achieve our 2030 climate objectives. The report acknowledges that, despite challenges, good progress has been made, particularly in the increased usage and expansion of public transport services, which we debated last week, with broad acknowledgement across the House of progress made. That progress has benefited from the Government's support for reduced public transport fees, which we will further expand later this year by way of free transport for five- to eight-year-olds.

We are confident we will achieve our electric vehicle, EV, targets for 2025, with 177,000 EVs on the road at this point of the year and a continued rebound in EV sales. Public transport passenger numbers are now at record levels, registering more than 1 million journeys daily. Our renewable fuel blending ambitions are on target as well, with a growing number of private sector entities ramping up their use of low-carbon fuels such as hydrotreated vegetable oil, HVO, and compressed natural gas, CNG.

Deputy Pa Daly: I do not agree with the Minister's claim about all the progress being made. In fact, progress is stalling and any gains that have been made are quickly being overtaken because the plan is not delivering. We definitely will miss the target of having 1 million EVs on Irish roads by the end of the decade. The Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, has said we will probably miss it by up to 300,000. Sales of new EVs have fallen by 24% and there was an 8.1% decline in used imports.

We are also falling way behind in the roll-out of the charging infrastructure, with a deficit in rural areas in particular. At the end of 2024, there were 2,802 publicly accessible charging points. That is seven per 10,000 people, compared with 13 per 10,000 in Britain. As with retrofitting, it is only those with significant means who can afford to participate in the grant scheme. There is a serious problem in that EVs are more accessible for middle-class people than for working-class people.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I said last week that I am reviewing the EV grants. We have made significant progress. The Deputy referred to the reduction in growth in that sector last year but he did not mention that quarter 1 of this year saw a significant rebound in EV sales and registrations. Today, I brought to Government a policy on renewable fuels for transport, which sets out the ambition in this regard. It takes into account the sustainability issues the CCAC has, rightly, highlighted.

No one is denying, in any way, shape or form, the challenges ahead in meeting our very exacting targets. However, if we look at where we have come from in regard to EVs, electrification of the public transport fleet and alternative fuel use by the heavy goods vehicle, HGV, sector and by the bus fleet across the country, progress has undoubtedly been made. I respect the work of the CCAC, which is why I met its members in plenary session. The chair was there and I met her separately as well. I value the council's input and it will inform any policy changes we make into the future.

Deputy Pa Daly: Does the Minister accept there is a problem with accessibility and affordability in rural areas and less well-off areas? Will he make any provision in the next budget to broaden the grant scheme to make it more accessible and affordable and, perhaps, as the CCAC suggested, extend it to second-hand EVs in order that people who have less money can afford to purchase one?

The EPA's assessment of ports indicates our ports are way behind and that much more must be done to deal with more frequent storms, floods and coastal erosion, particularly on the east coast. What steps are being taken to make ports more resilient to the storms and weather events we will see in future?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We are trying to cover a lot in a short time. We will have a chance to go through a lot of these points in more detail at the transport committee, which is meeting tomorrow, and at the environment committee.

Regarding EV charging, under the motorway infrastructure scheme, 131 additional high-powered charging points across 17 different locations on the motorway network will be delivered by the end of this year. There is also a scheme to fund high-powered charging on national primary routes, with 175 high-powered charging points to be provided at 53 different locations. The infrastructure is certainly increasing and will increase further.

The Deputy referred to issues with accessibility to EVs in respect of income and in areas that do not have as much public transport as others. I am looking at options, as I said here last week, for how I can reframe the grants. That will potentially require Government approval. I am also looking at options regarding second-hand EVs, which I will bring forward later this year. I will be happy to share those proposals with the transport committee once they are approved.

Public Transport

88. **Deputy Ciarán Ahern** asked the Minister for Transport the steps he has taken to ensure the safety of drivers and passengers of Dublin Bus in the aftermath of an incident at Mountjoy Square; his plans for a dedicated transport police; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34557/25]

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: What steps has the Minister taken to ensure the safety of drivers and passengers on Dublin Bus in the aftermath of the very serious incident at Mountjoy Square in April in which a man threatened a bus driver with a gun? Will he outline his plans for a dedicated transport police force?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank the Deputy for his question on what is a real and im-

portant issue for public transport users. We debated it in some detail yesterday. Particularly among those who do not use public transport often, they can have a certain perception of the level of safety on it.

8 o'clock

To the Deputy's specific question, antisocial behaviour is a broad societal issue to which public transport is not immune. It is those passengers and staff who regularly use and work within our public transport network who are most directly impacted by any safety or security incidents that occur.

We have a strong commitment in the programme for Government to create a transport security force under the NTA, which would operate similarly and have similar powers to airport police and customs officers. That will supplement the work already being done by An Garda Síochána. I assure the Deputy that I am taking this commitment forward as a priority. Work is under way in my Department, in conjunction with the NTA, to identify the most appropriate organisational structure to progress it. Last week, my Department officials and I met the Minister for justice and his team to examine the role they will have in the establishment of the force. We will continue that engagement towards its implementation to ensure the positive collaboration between An Garda Síochána and the operators is maintained.

We are in the preliminary stages of this deliberative process and it is important to note that the introduction of such a force will require the development of legislation. Work will also be required in respect of existing by-laws. I will be looking for the co-operation and assistance of all parties in this regard because most will see the benefits of the creation of this force, which will be an additional resource to the very good work already being done by An Garda Síochána. We need to make sure that, as we continue to expand our public transport system, this force will be in place on all public transport operators, whether on road, trains or the Luas.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: It is good to hear that work is under way. We would like to see a separate division of An Garda Síochána rather than a separate policing force. I would like to understand the Minister's thoughts on that. Antisocial behaviour and violence on public transport happens in all of our constituencies, not least in my own constituency of Dublin South-West. It does not often get too much public attention. I am thankful that our community in Dublin South-West is working constructively to reduce these issues. We hold monthly transport forum meetings between local gardaí, juvenile liaison officers, Dublin Bus drivers, Luas drivers, the local council - that is important - local community groups, youth groups and public representatives to try to ensure drivers and passengers can experience a safe environment on public transport. An Garda Síochána is really throwing the kitchen sink at this but it needs more and it needs it quickly.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I agree on that point. An Garda Síochána is doing a good job already. The Deputy will be aware of Operation Saul. That is under way. To take the Dublin metropolitan region, the area in which we have the best data in this regard, as an example, there are gardaí delivering both overt and covert policing on bus, Luas, DART and other train services. In 2024, the operation resulted in 754 arrests, 1,289 charges preferred and 280 summonses. Between 1 January 2025 and 21 March 2025, there were 194 arrests and 381 charges preferred, so the Garda is doing its job. The Government committed to providing additional gardaí in the programme for Government and we intend to fulfil that commitment. The transport security force will have a very specific role. It will support the work of An Garda Síochána

but, working with the operators, it will particularly focus on the black spots, the areas where the predominance of antisocial behaviour occurs, in order to stamp that out at the start.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I will press the Minister again to provide a more defined timeline for this. When does he think it is going to be done? Has the Minister looked at the Travel Safe policy document prepared by SIPTU? Has he met SIPTU or any other interested parties yet? I suggest that he do. There is one proposal from SIPTU I was particularly taken with. It related to public transport assistance units. These would be social care intervention officers specifically trained to deal with those causing a public disturbance on the public transport network. This would be more applicable to interventions in respect of underlying social care issues. These officers would work with the transport police in whatever format that force took. I ask the Minister to really consider that because, from talking to the JLO in my area at our Tallaght transport forum meetings, I know that is the way forward if we are talking about interventions and ASBOs on public transport. Some 80% to 90% of young people do not reoffend after a JLO intervention. That is to be preferred to a court or criminal intervention.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We have a public transport safety working group on which unions, workers and operators are represented. I have met these representatives. We will be discussing this in more detail. I assure the Deputy that, when the proposals in this regard become clear, I will be seeking their input.

I do not have an exact timeframe for the Deputy. Suffice it to say that this is an important priority. We first have to agree the way forward as regards the structure of the force. It will operate under the NTA but we need to consider its interaction with An Garda Síochána, from which it will be separate. We will then need to draft legislation. In the meantime, An Garda Síochána is working on this.

Security spending in Iarnród Éireann was up 41% in 2025. It is the same with Dublin Bus. It has three dedicated units operating in north, south and central Dublin. As of February 2025, Bus Éireann operates a mobile security unit. The Luas also has its own security force. That will continue while we continue to prepare legislation to establish the force.

Public Transport

89. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Transport if he will report on Local Link; if he is taking steps to expand its capacity; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34495/25]

Deputy Pa Daly: On bus routes in west Kerry, there is a shortage of bus stop signage, poles and paper schedules. In Baile na nGall, there is a parking exclusion zone, so buses cannot turn properly. In Lios Póil, there is no dedicated bus stop, so many people have been caught out because they did not know where to stand when the bus was going past. This is symptomatic of the lack of infrastructure for Local Link services. The International Institute for Management Development has said Ireland's infrastructure is the area in which our performance is weakest and the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council has said it rates very low when compared to other European countries.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call the Taoiseach.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Taoiseach is not here.

An Ceann Comhairle: Excuse me. I meant the Minister. It is getting late.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Thanks.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is a sign of things to come.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): I thank Deputy Daly for his question. Infrastructure is a matter that has been raised by many Local Link companies. Arising from the Indecon review, it is important that we look at the issues the Deputy has raised in consultation with TFI and the NTA. They are valid concerns but there are also issues in respect of safety, the suitability of certain stops' locations and certain signage. I will work with the Deputy and my colleagues in the Department to ensure the concerns the Deputy has raised are taken on board. They have also been expressed to me by some of the people concerned. If Deputy Daly would like to give me details of the issues in west Kerry, I would be happy to talk to him about them. I will also come down to visit if the Deputy would like me to.

Deputy Pa Daly: Of course, the Minister of State is more than welcome any time. Perhaps we could take a bus trip around west Kerry during the recess. That applies to the Minister as well. There is a feeling that there is a regional imbalance and that the infrastructure is much better in the cities than it is in, for example, west Kerry. Cars are the dominant mode of transport in rural Ireland. They are used for 82% of all trips. The National Transport Authority's latest household travel survey demonstrates that a significant portion of the population does not access public transport services at all. From the massive increase in the numbers accessing the services that have been provided, we see that, when they are provided, people will use them. We can see that from the Local Link services, where demand is outpacing what is being delivered. We have a problem, in that, because of the housing crisis, many students are talking public transport to college. The bus from Ballybunion through Listowel and into Tralee is oversubscribed. Will the Minister of State commit to producing another bus for September?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The Deputy's question is different from the one that was submitted. To provide one figure, under this Government and the last Government, we have seen an increase in funding for the rural transport programme. It has gone from €16 million in 2022 to €25 million last year. As the Deputy will know quite well, we have seen growth in his county of Kerry. For example, route 280 from Waterville to Killorglin was enhanced to improve frequency. We have seen a vast number of other routes being increased across the country. Route 278 from Fenit to Tralee has seen a new service operate seven times daily from Monday to Sunday. The route operates a peak-time and evening service for commuters and provides an additional evening service on Friday and Saturday.

As the Deputy knows, it is about the balance between the demand response and enhancing rural services. As the Indecon report shows, we are committed to a review of governance, performance and structure. We will also be influenced by extensive stakeholder engagement. I have travelled the country and met many of the companies.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister of State will be able to come back in.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The Government is very committed to rural transport.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister of State will have a further supplementary reply.

Deputy Pa Daly: Another type of rural transport which does not get much of a mention and which has been suggested to me by Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh and people working in her office is the door-to-door services. In many counties, no new door-to-door services have been funded for a number of years. Connecting Ireland funding has generally gone towards high-frequency services, which, of course, are beneficial and have been used a lot but are not the only type of service that is desperately needed. In rural areas of Mayo and other western counties, for people who cannot afford a car or those who no longer drive, the door-to-door network is essential. There are some door-to-door services that operate weekly or biweekly but we need more frequent door-to-door services. Will the Minister of State commit to expanding this type of service in order that people in more rural areas can access public transport like people in the more populated areas?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: As the Deputy will be aware from the situation in his county, there are regular rural services and demand-responsive services. These allow passengers to travel from their local villages and towns for business, shopping, healthcare or to connect with the national bus and train network. We are committed in the context of the provision of rural transport to engaging further with stakeholders. As per the Indecon report, we will examine the effectiveness of the existing operations and look at the organisational structure and the governance of our rural transport programme. We will base our recommendations on the outcomes from that and carry out an extensive network of engagement. I have been in Longford, I have been in Waterford and I have been in parts of Cork. I have met with the companies. I have spoken to the former Ministers, Ms Coughlan and Mr. Dukes, in Donegal and Kildare. We will work to ensure that the feedback we receive and review will be the *modus operandi* we will use in the future in terms of policy. I will be happy to talk to the Deputy and meet with any group in Kerry he wants me to meet.

Bus Services

90. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Transport if he is aware of ongoing issues with the provision of bus services by a company (details supplied) and the fact that its contract is up for renewal shortly; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34357/25]

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Is the Minister aware of the ongoing issues with the provision of Go-Ahead Ireland's bus service in County Wicklow and the fact that its contract is up for renewal? I extend an invitation to him to come to Wicklow and stand at a bus stop down there with me and wait for the bus to come, seeing as invitations are being thrown out this evening.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We will all be travelling on buses together soon. I use the bus a lot but not in Wicklow.

I am aware, as the Deputy obviously is, that Go-Ahead Ireland has experienced difficulties in maintaining service levels, particularly in the first quarter of this year, primarily due to a shortage of mechanics. In response, the company took a number of remedial actions, including bringing in additional mechanics from Britain and securing further technical support from external sources. I understand that the situation has improved significantly since then, not necessarily on every route, with fleet availability returning to normal within a relatively short period. Go-Ahead Ireland has reported that since January, eight new engineering staff have joined the company and 129 drivers have started in the driving school. In addition, Go-Ahead Ireland has completed overseas recruitment, with ten engineers expected to start in September.

The NTA monitors the performance of all public transport operators, as the Deputy will know. Under existing contractual arrangements, financial penalties apply where performance falls below agreed standards. The NTA continues to engage with Go-Ahead Ireland to enhance service reliability.

Having said that, things will happen but we need to ensure as best as possible that punctuality and reliability and, underpinning that, affordability happen. I instructed the NTA to carry out a review of the ghost bus phenomenon, for want of a better phrase, and I continue to keep that positive pressure on in my supporting role as Minister to make sure that people can be assured that buses which are scheduled arrive on time.

In my supplementary reply, I will provide a little more detail of what will happen in the coming period. I have initial information from review; I do not have the completed information on it. If there are any particular matters relating to Wicklow or anywhere else as regards buses not showing up, I want to know about it.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: The roll-out started in January, and there were major problems when it started. It has got better. Unfortunately, there are still problems on many routes, including the L2, L1, L3 and L15. The reality is that people who go to get a bus need to know that it will show up. They need more than to think that it might show up or that it will show up most of the time. A bus needs to show up every single time or else people will not use buses and will not be able to trust the service. Unfortunately, that is what is happening in Wicklow, with buses not showing up, buses being late and elderly people having to wait for two hours for an hourly bus that just did not appear. I have had two instances this month of the last bus of the night being cancelled. It is completely unacceptable for that to happen. I raised the matter with the NTA, which stated that this is not to be allowed at all. We have had multiple instances of it, so there are still major problems.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: There is still work to be done. We are adding new routes. As everyone knows, in all sectors, but particularly around drivers and mechanics, there have been shortages of workers because it is a very competitive environment. We have commenced further recruitment across all our transport operators.

We started the review in spring. Two of the main reasons for buses not showing up are, one, late notification by operators of cancelled and curtailed services, with that resulting in incorrect information being given to customers, and, two, technical issues with the older bus automatic vehicle location equipment. That equipment is being replaced with live data on each bus. This will improve the service greatly from 2026.

We have to continue to monitor the situation. The Deputy is right to raise complaints, certainly, but let us not lose sight of the fact that we had a record number of passenger journeys last year. We are at about 1 million public transport passenger journeys every day now.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I thank the Minister for that. I acknowledge that there have been improvements, but some routes have been particularly hit. I believe they are those routes in Wicklow. This is one of the problems. When a bus does not show up, it requires the person left standing there to email the NTA, Go-Ahead Ireland or a TD. They usually come to a public representative and say there are problems. When we see that there are multiple problems, we raise the matter here with the Minister. What would be really useful is transparency when it comes to what is being missed. No-Show Bus in Cork was set up by a student there, and there

is one in Dublin that was set up by *Dublin Inquirer*. If we had some sort of system like that, it would bring greater transparency in respect of this problem. If we could see exactly how problematic this is, the difficulties it is causing and on what routes it is causing them, in a more real-time fashion, that would be very useful.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The transparency around this is there. The operators have to report on service level agreements. When specific issues arise, a lot of the time I see that people will tweet the NTA on X, send emails or whatever. I get text messages regularly, including from my daughter if a bus does not show up when she is travelling to DCU, so I know from my family that this happens from time to time. There can be understandable reasons for this. We need to build up the human resources within each of the operators. Go-Ahead Ireland has very specific issues relating to staffing. What I was not happy about at the time - and it was early in my tenure - was the fact that I had no sight of those issues to know that its resources were that tight. It has addressed that matter since, and fair play to it for doing so.

Fines are levied. In 2024, operators were fined just short of €1.5 million by the NTA for not meeting their service level agreements. We have to continually watch this to ensure that we have a reliable, punctual service.

Air Navigation Orders

91. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Transport if he is aware of the carriage of Israeli munitions through Irish airspace; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34496/25]

Deputy Pa Daly: As the Minister probably knows, under the Air Navigation (Carriage of Munitions of War, Weapons and Dangerous Goods) Orders 1974 and 1989, it is prohibited for civil aircraft to carry munitions of war in Irish sovereign territory without being granted an exemption to do so by the Minister for Transport. Is the Minister aware of this? I presume he is. Complaints have been made that Israeli munitions are being carried. Will the Minister make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I am aware of the regulations and the legislation. The Chicago convention of 1944 is the main international treaty that governs the operation of international civil aviation. Article 35 of that convention provides that no civil aircraft may carry munitions of war in the sovereign territory of a state without that state's permission. That provision is implemented in Irish law in the Air Navigation (Carriage of Munitions of War, Weapons and Dangerous Goods) Orders 1973 and 1989. Under these orders, the carriage of munitions of war is prohibited on any civil aircraft in Irish sovereign territory unless I in my role as Minister for Transport have granted an exemption that permits it. From October 2023 to date, no applications have been received and no exemptions have been granted for the carriage of munitions of war to any point in Israel.

Any exemption granted is not a permission to carry munitions of war from one foreign state to another. It is only in respect of the operation of such a flight through Irish sovereign territory. The granting of an exemption permits entry to and exit from Irish sovereign territory. When an application for an exemption is refused, the flight must redirect.

I am aware of media reports that allege several air operators have flown through Irish sovereign territory while carrying munitions of war without the required permission. My officials

have engaged in examining those allegations, communicating with the air operators concerned, collating the information and scrutinising the data gathered. We are committed to completing this examination to a standard that will support any further action that may be necessitated. These are allegations. Unfortunately, the nature of the examination genuinely means it is not possible right now for me to provide a completion date but I assure the House that officials are working diligently towards its conclusion.

Deputy Pa Daly: While it is true to say there are media reports, there has been more than that. Complaints have been made to the Department about this. While the Minister says the Department is scrutinising information, a freedom of information request revealed that, on 13 March, a draft report was furnished to the Department. This was denied by the Department in the committee last week, when it said it was an ongoing document. It says in the freedom of information document it is a draft report. For ten months, the Government has done nothing while Israeli bombs, munitions and weaponry have passed through our airspace. Every time there is a flare-up of conflict somewhere else, what is going on in Gaza is forgotten. It is unfortunate that nothing seems to be done. I am worried this report will not be furnished in the three weeks left before the recess. Will the Minister furnish the report before the middle of July?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: A lot has been made of the increased number of exemptions. People try to link that somewhat to the start of the conflict in the Middle East, particularly in Gaza and Israel. From October 2023, there has been an increase in exemptions granted to Irish-registered aircraft operating outside of Ireland. A substantial number of Irish aircraft operate in other territories. This increase is linked to the Scandinavian operation of the SAS Group, particularly SAS Connect, an Irish-based airline. This subsidiary of SAS Group operates a fleet of 30 aircraft with bases in Copenhagen, London, Heathrow and Stockholm. A lot of these exemptions are nothing to do with Irish sovereign territory or airspace; it is Irish-registered aircraft flying elsewhere. The type of exemptions granted are not for munitions of war at all. They can be personal, a weapon or a member of An Garda Síochána or the Defence Forces.

Deputy Pa Daly: The Tánaiste said recently it is a real challenge to know what is going through our skies, despite all the notifications. There is clearly a draft report. Will the Minister share it with the House before the recess and let us know what is contained in it? I think most would agree we should do everything to have no part in the slaughter of medical attendants, children and others in Gaza by Israel. We cannot be complacent. We need the facts. We know there are complaints and that the Department is aware. It is not acceptable to stand idly by and wait until the beginning of September before this document is shared with the public.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: When serious allegations and complaints like this are made, I, as Minister, take them seriously. It behoves us to afford the time to carry out a proper investigation and interrogate the data given to us. We are in regular contact with all air operators. With Irish airspace being one of the main entry points across the Atlantic, I instructed Department officials to further remind all air carriers and operators of their responsibilities under international and domestic Irish law and of notification procedures. We receive many notifications of flight manifests and so on. I take this seriously. I mentioned media reports, and yes, complaints have been made. The people who made the complaints deserve that they be properly investigated. We will do that. I cannot give a definite timeframe for the conclusion of that work. It is important and I want to bring to a conclusion as expeditiously as possible.

Rail Network

92. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Transport if he will provide details of the funding provided by his Department to improve the rail network and train connectivity in County Offaly in 2023, 2024 and 2025 to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33880/25]

Deputy Carol Nolan: I thank the Minister of State for taking this question. I am asking him provide details of the funding provided by the Department to improve the rail network and train connectivity in County Offaly in 2023, 2024 and to date in 2025. I do so because I am constantly being contacted by constituents who are very anxious to see improvements to our rail and connectivity in Offaly, particularly in Clara, which I will refer to later.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney): I thank the Deputy for the question. As she may be aware, my Department provides public service obligation, PSO, funding for socially beneficial but financially unviable public transport services across the country. In 2023, Iarnród Éireann was allocated €187 million in PSO funding by the Department, increasing to €215 million in 2024. This is expected to further rise to €265 million this year. All of this provides for an improvement to rail passenger services. The funding has enabled Iarnród Éireann to increase the frequency of rail passenger services in County Offaly, including at Clara and Tullamore stations. I highlight the additional weekday and Sunday train services on the Dublin to Galway line, which serves Clara and Tullamore, announced in 2023 and 2024. In addition, last year, train services were added and amended to allow passengers travelling from Tullamore to Galway to avail of two weekday services arriving in Galway in advance of 9 a.m.

In terms of rail infrastructure improvements, assisted by the European Investment Bank Advisory service, the Department, the Department for Infrastructure in Northern Ireland and rail stakeholders North and South are currently examining how best to implement the recommendations of the all-island strategic rail review published in July last year. This work includes a project prioritisation strategy which is at an advanced stage of preparation. It will consider both short-term and medium-term investments on the rail network, including the Dublin to Galway line. This work is also being used to inform the Department's engagement on the review of the national development plan, which is ongoing. Funding in recent years has helped to provide the people of Offaly with a more frequent rail service. I look forward to working with Iarnród Éireann to build on this progress in the years to come.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I welcome the Minister of State's response and the fact that €265 million has been allocated in funding this year alone. I accept there have been huge improvements in services. My question relates to the need for capital funding for a second platform at Clara train station. I brought this issue up only last week with the Minister during a debate. It would make social and economic sense in achieving balanced regional development in rural countries like Offaly, my county. I would hope there could some commitment to ensuring capital funding is put in place for a second platform, given that €265 million has been allocated this year alone. It is an easy win for the Department. It is practical, would allow further expansion of services, and would ensure users in surrounding areas like Moate, Kilbeggan and Ferbane could also avail of further services at Clara train station.

Deputy Seán Canney: The all-island strategic rail review undertaken by the Department of Transport in co-operation with the Department for Infrastructure in Northern Ireland informs

the development of rail on the island of Ireland in the coming decades up to 2050, in line with net zero targets for both jurisdictions. The review's final report was published in 2024 and sets out 32 strategic recommendations to enhance and expand the rail system. The EIB advisory services, the Department of Transport and the Department of infrastructure are progressing with this report's recommendations in the year ahead. As part of this project's prioritisation strategy, we will consider how best to optimise the sequencing and implementation of the review recommendations, including both short-term interventions and longer term projects.

It is important to state a project like a second platform will be one of the interim interventions that could be put in place, but we will wait to see what comes out of the EIB analysis.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I thank the Minister of State for his response. It is certainly positive that there is a review and analysis of our infrastructure, our rail infrastructure in particular. However, I hope there would be a commitment given to the people of Offaly, especially the people of Clara who want to see further development in the town, on capital funding for a second platform. I hope also that the pace of delivery for projects like this, which are there for the taking and would contribute enormously to the expansion of existing services for minimal cost, will be stepped up. As I said, they would also help us achieve a commitment in the programme for Government, namely, balanced regional development in all our rural towns.

Deputy Seán Canney: I agree with the Deputy. The important point is that the all-Ireland rail review is exactly that; it is about regional development, the cities, connecting the cities and connecting rural Ireland by public transport. When we are realising the recommendations of the review we need to ensure passengers are at the heart of it and have a good experience, so that when they take a train they will be happy to do so again. It is important that when we put in investment we put it in to serve all the island. That is why the review is called the all-island rail review.

I agree with the Deputy that there are opportunities for investment throughout the country to ensure the public transport we deliver is second to none. We can look at the success of the Galway-to-Limerick section of the western rail corridor. Over 630,000 passengers travel on that every year, even though when it opened a number of years ago the figure was 132,000. We have the opportunities, potential and spirit to carry on with that.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Aviation Industry

93. **Deputy Emer Currie** asked the Minister for Transport if he will publish the national policy framework for unmanned aircraft systems before the summer recess; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34142/25]

Deputy Emer Currie: My question is whether the Minister will publish the national policy framework for unmanned aircraft systems, UAS, that is, drones, before the summer recess. As part of that, will he implement U-space regulations that have been applicable in EU states since 2023? U-space provides for the creation of a new, dedicated airspace for drones. It is essentially a traffic management system that could play a critical role when it comes to the prolifera-

tion and impact of drones flying over residential areas.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: As the Deputy knows, the programme for Government includes a commitment to finalise and publish a policy framework for unmanned aircraft systems, otherwise known as drones. This will guide high-level strategic planning and development of the drone sector in Ireland through supporting growth, which we want, and innovation, which we also want, while ensuring safe and secure operations and managing environmental and other concerns.

I am aware that this matter has come up in the Deputy's constituency, especially adjacent to the Blanchardstown Centre area. Work on the drafting of the policy framework has recently been finalised. When I say "recently" I mean I received the draft document last Friday. I am going to review that. I want to make sure I am content with it before I publish it. The policy framework sets out the vision, strategy and priorities for the development of the drone sector in Ireland. There are massive opportunities here and great benefits to it. The framework aims to guide high-level strategic planning and development of the sector in Ireland over the next decade by supporting growth and innovation, as I said. The framework also seeks to ensure safe and secure operations. Many of the issues that will be addressed by the policy framework fall directly within the remit of the Department of Transport. Some others cross over into areas of responsibility of other Departments. The policy framework has been developed through good cross-departmental engagement structures and it will be implemented through similar structures. The framework was informed by the work of an interagency steering group, its sub-working groups, a targeted stakeholder consultation held in 2022 and a public consultation in held in 2024.

The Deputy asked if I would like to get this published before the summer recess. Yes, I would. However, I want to review it properly. As I said, I only received it late last week. It will give clarity to the sector but it also highlights a lot of the benefits of the UAS sector to the general public.

Deputy Emer Currie: I thank the Minister. It is good to see a bit of a move away from the gobbledegook that has dominated the answers I have had so far on drones. The indecipherable regulation-speak reflects the paralysis and powerlessness large sections of my community feel when they are in their homes and gardens listening to the drones above them. Dublin West is being used as a test ground for commercial drones making food deliveries. There have been 170,000 flights in the past 12 to 18 months and that figure is set to soar. There has been no direct consultation with our community and no meaningful complaint mechanism. The Irish Aviation Authority, IAA, oversees the regulations we have but those are risk-based. They have no teeth when it comes to the impact of drones on residential areas. When we build homes we do not just focus on structural specifications but their place in a community. If we want to erect a bus shelter, there is a planning process. The regulations need to be expanded urgently to cover noise, flight paths, schedules, consultation, feedback mechanisms and investment in public information, because currently it looks and sounds like a free-for-all. The U-space regulations give me the most hope for dealing with that.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I have not commenced my review. I appreciate the points the Deputy has made and take them into account. I listened with interest to a vox pop in Dublin West. I think it was on FM104 last week when I was in the car. There had been complaints made by some public representatives. Then there were interviews with people on the street in Blanchardstown and many of them had different views on the matter. Having said that, this is

a sector that will grow. We are seeing the benefits with respect to the delivery of medical aids, lifebuoys and other things. There are great advantages to using drones in an appropriate way. I am aware they have been used for food deliveries and other things and the Dublin West area, especially Blanchardstown, is being used as a test area. We will be informed by people's experiences there. I have not commenced reviewing this. I will, in a short space of time, review it in detail and I am happy to receive further input. We have had the public consultation and I do not intend to open it up again. We need to provide clarity on this and the use of drones.

Deputy Emer Currie: I am aware that there are polarised views and I am also aware of the benefits. My concern is also timing. A corporate entity operating in a space without sufficient regulation will not have the duty of care to communities that is required, and we are seeing that already. A commercial operator in our area is claiming it has received 77 complaints about 170,000 flights, but I would have had that number of complaints in the past seven weeks. Companies are operating within the regulations but that does not make it right. We cannot have a situation where the horse has bolted without the legitimate concerns and rights of residents being addressed. That is just bad planning. I imagine it would have consequences under the Aarhus Convention. If U-space is the answer to getting the balance right, then the IAA needs the funding and resources to implement it now and certainly not in 2030, as some of the replies to parliamentary questions suggest.

While I have the Minister, and maybe a one-word answer would suffice, the legal barriers to DART+ West have been cleared. Will he progress the project and funding it as soon as he can?

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I compliment my colleague from Dublin 15. Representatives from that area have been working on the issue of drones for some time. Griffith Avenue residents have raised it on the basis that drone use is expanding to new areas. While it currently relates to food deliveries, we can only imagine the impact it would have if, for example, all parcel deliveries were to be transferred to drones in a short space of time. The issue here is also about the planning application for the site. We have time restrictions on when we can have takeaways operating. We also need to have time restrictions on when drone deliveries of all sorts can be used.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I am happy to engage with both Deputies on the issue of drones. I want to review the draft document and I will engage with them. I am sure we will be talking to the transport committee about that. This type of technology is here to stay. It is about how it interacts with our communities. There are also major benefits. The Ministers of State, Deputies Canney and Buttimer, have informed me about the use of drones in search and rescue. There are lots of good things there. With food deliveries it is generally people in the area ordering food. There are people who find it of benefit and others who find it butting in on their quality of life.

There is good news on DART+ West and the whole plan with the withdrawal of the judicial review. I want to see this project advanced as quickly as possible. I know Deputy Currie is a big supporter of it, as am I. Deputy Moynihan has an interest in DART+ South West. There is also DART+ Coastal North. The previous Government committed to DART+ in general and it went through the first approval gate. Obviously, the capital review of the NDP is critical to delivery. These projects are critical to Dublin and the greater Dublin area, and I will keep the Deputies informed of progress.

Road Projects

94. **Deputy William Aird** asked the Minister for Transport to include the Portlaoise northern orbital route and the Mountmellick bypass in the revised national development plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28042/25]

Deputy William Aird: I ask the Government to include both the Portlaoise northern orbital route and the Mountmellick bypass in the revised national development plan. They are not just local road projects; they are critical infrastructure with regional and national significance. As the Minister of State knows, Portlaoise is one of Ireland's fastest growing towns. The town is already under pressure from traffic congestion with heavy volumes of vehicles passing through daily. The northern orbital route has long been identified as a key priority to ease congestion in the town centre, improve road safety and enhance the quality of life for residents and businesses.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Deputy for the question and for his ongoing advocacy for his county of Laois. The Government has earmarked approximately €5.1 billion for investment in new national roads projects between 2021 and 2030 and a further €2.9 billion for the protection and renewal of the network. I can confirm that approximately €600 million of Exchequer capital funding was provided to local authorities through TII for national roads in 2025.

Regarding the Mountmellick bypass, in 2022 Laois County Council concluded the preliminary appraisal of options process in relation to a bypass of the town. However, a proposed bypass of Mountmellick, unfortunately for Deputy Aird, is not included among the projects that are identified for development during current NDP and therefore, it was not possible to advance the proposed project at that time.

The Portlaoise northern orbital route project was originally proposed during the 2000s and was to be funded by private developers at the time. However, following the subsequent recession and the funding stream no longer being available, the project was not progressed. While it is referenced by Laois County Council in its draft local area plan, it was not included in the current NDP due to issues of funding.

With regard to the progression of projects such as these, it is important to point out to the Deputy and the House that it is for the local authority, in the first instance, to engage with TII. I assure the Deputy that Department of Transport officials and TII will give any proposal for the progression of these projects full consideration. All projects, including those listed in the NDP or any revision to the NDP, require statutory approval and compliance with the infrastructure guidelines. The programme for Government contains a commitment to increase funding for new roads as part of the NDP review. This would include funding for town bypasses, such as those outlined by Deputy Aird, which improve regional connectivity and promote compact growth in our town centres. Work is currently under way within the Department of Transport to contribute to the review of the NDP, with input from TII and other agencies.

Deputy William Aird: We do not need consideration; we need money. This road is vital to redirect HGVs coming from Rosslare to the west of Ireland. We are trying move this traffic away from residential areas, schools and hospitals. This route is also essential to future-proof Portlaoise for sustainable growth under the national planning framework. Without this orbital route, development is hindered, traffic continues to choke the town and emissions increase. It is clear that inclusion of the Portlaoise northern orbital route in the revised national development

plan is needed now.

The bypass needed in Mountmellick is equally important. Mountmellick has suffered severe traffic bottlenecks for years especially during the school rush hour. This is more than an inconvenience; it is a safety issue. The main streets in Mountmellick were never designed to carry the present volume or weight of traffic, including articulated lorries and agricultural machinery. The lack of a bypass affects the town's viability, slows economic development and poses safety risks to pedestrians and cyclists. It also affects regional connectivity, which we spoke about, between Tullamore, Portlaoise and surrounding areas. A Mountmellick bypass has been on the agenda for decades. It is time to move it into action.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I again thank the Deputy for raising the matter. He makes pertinent points about the orbital route and the traffic congestion. I remind him that Laois County Council received an allocation of more than €1.1 million this year for protection and renewal of the county's road network. With regard to the N80 road safety improvement project in Portlaoise town, including the Mountmellick Road and James Fintan Lalor Avenue, a technical adviser has been appointed, and a feasibility and options report seeking funding for the project is underway. TII is awaiting a submissions report and anticipates that Laois County Council will submit a report seeking funding by the end of this year. On the Stradbally N80 pavement project, tenders are being assessed and it is expected that works will be completed later this year. I remind Deputy Aird and Members that it is up to any council, including Laois County Council, to submit and engage with TII on the review of the NDP. I encourage it to do that, and I am happy to work with the Deputy on the matter. However, he raises valid and pertinent points this evening.

Deputy William Aird: These two projects must be included in the revised national development plan to address fair regional development, align with national goals, reduce emissions, promote balanced regional development and support active travel and safer roads. The Portlaoise northern orbital route and the Mountmellick bypass projects would complement existing investment in the region's rail network. I urge the Minister of State to work with these county councils and Transport Infrastructure Ireland to ensure that the Portlaoise northern orbital route and the Mountmellick bypass are fully recognised and funded within the revised NDP.

When I was a councillor, I sat in Laois County Council during the previous NDP plan, and we were not included. We got nothing out of it. We were told the plan was closed for ten years, but because there was a general election that envelope was opened up. I assure the Minister of State that now that I am a TD, I will make sure these projects are in it. When the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, came off at junction 17 recently, he saw the road that goes down through the business park and travels solely to the west of Ireland. Not one shilling did it get from the former Minister, Eamon Ryan. I pleaded with him to give us money, but not a fivepenny piece did he give us for that. We funded that out of our own coffers in Laois County Council, so the Minister owes it to us to put us into that national development plan.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I hear loud and clear Deputy Aird's advocacy for the importance of this route. I remind him that this Government under the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and I has seen a further €2.9 million for the protection and renewal of the road network and we are investing €1 billion in new national road projects over the coming decade. I also say regarding the NDP review that it is up to all local authorities to work with TII and the Department to ensure projects get consideration. I hear the Deputy on sustainability and the issue of traffic gridlock and road safety, but the programme for Govern-

ment contains a commitment to increase funding for new roads as part of the NDP review, as I have said. That is about ensuring we see town bypasses completed and we see work continue and carried out on regional connectivity. Deputy Aird has made a good point tonight. I am sure the advocacy work that he is doing and will continue to do will be well received in the Department. We hear the Deputy tonight, but I remind him that the two road projects I have listed are under way. Laois County Council has appointed a technical adviser and tenders are being assessed. It is important that Laois County Council engages in the NDP review.

Deputy William Aird: I thank the Minister of State for that.

Transport Policy

95. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Transport to provide an update on the Finglas Luas expansion project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34107/25]

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I want to raise an issue that is identified in the national development programme, which is the Finglas Luas project. It is a fantastic project that makes a lot of sense, with 4 km and four stops connecting it to an existing line that will give access to thousands of people in my constituency. We are one of the few constituencies in the country that does not have rail services. We are entirely reliant on bus services. However, we hope the Finglas Luas will come out of planning this year, and we want to make sure that next year it goes to construction.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy knows this project well. It is one of four proposed Luas tram extensions that have been identified by the NTA as part of the current statutory transport strategy for the greater Dublin area. This project is 3.9 km, just short of 4 km, but still extensive as it would extend the Dublin tram network from Broombridge to Finglas. This is eminently doable. The route will serve an estimated population of 56,000 by 2035 at four new stops, namely, St. Helena's, Finglas village, St. Margaret's Road and Charlestown. The Deputy has been a strong advocate for this and continues to be. The project will serve people beyond those communities through interchanges with the bus network and with rail services at Broombridge train station, which is on the planned DART+ West line. In addition, the project provides for a 350-vehicle park-and-ride facility at the St. Margaret's Road stop, close to the M50-M2 interchange.

Transport Infrastructure Ireland, as the sponsoring agency, prepared the preliminary business case for Luas Finglas, while the NTA, as the day-to-day approving authority, approved it for submission to the Department of Transport. In October 2024, the Government approved the project at approval gate 1 of the infrastructure guidelines. That was a very significant step. TII did not delay. The following month, it lodged a railway order application with An Bord Pleanála. I am pleased to say I understand the board has recently confirmed that a decision will be made before 30 September 2025. It is not often the board comes out with a definitive date like that. That in itself is very significant.

Should the railway order be granted, the NTA will need to provide my Department with a procurement strategy for Luas Finglas, as is normal, under the infrastructure guidelines. Following ministerial approval, the project can enter the procurement stage. Subject to the planning decision, this project will be transformational for residents of the Deputy's constituency and the surrounding area, who will be able to link through the other networks.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: It is very welcome that we will have a planning decision by 30 September. The Minister is right that the decision to bring it to the Cabinet for gate 1 was really important. The Minister, Deputy Lawless, really assisted us in doing that. He came on site and examined the potential of it. I was pleased the Cabinet signed off on that.

Almost all the Luas projects that have happened have gone through the planning and procurement phase in one five-year cycle and in the second five years they have been constructed and delivered. That is where we need to focus now. We are looking beyond planning and procurement to the potential of the site. It has the potential to unlock more housing in the area, which is crucial. When we built Finglas west and Finglas south, there was a line through the middle of it. That line was intended for a railway project many decades ago. While this is being prioritised, there is a legacy here. This will deliver for our constituency. I want to ensure the Minister is aware of it, which he is, and that we keep the pressure on the NTA and TII to deliver it.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I have been many times in the Deputy's constituency and in Finglas. I want to see this project move forward to construction and delivery. We have a couple of hurdles but not big ones. We have to get through planning. Should that be granted, there is then the procurement strategy for Luas Finglas under the infrastructure guidelines. Ministerial approval will follow that and the project can then enter the procurement stage. As is the case with all projects, this will go through Government consent and must receive approval at gate 3.

The project has a lot going for it. The construction is relatively simple for the very reason the Deputy highlighted. The railway corridor is there. The population and housing have developed around it and will allow us to develop more. Transport-oriented development is what we want for new homes and businesses.

I await with interest the decision prior to 30 September and look forward to working with the Deputy directly to deliver this project for Finglas.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I see we are making good progress on that. We will keep a watchful eye and ensure it continues. Many people on the other side of the constituency will hope for the delivery of the metro project with the same urgency. It is a far more complex and detailed project but one that has been promised for some time. The review of the national development plan is happening in the next couple of weeks. Those two key projects in my constituency are really important, along with the BusConnects projects. The core bus corridors are the quickest and easiest ways to deliver better public transport in our areas. The network design was not uncontroversial and there was a great deal of input from people. I still have issues with certain elements of it but the core bus corridors will be important in providing high-frequency access. Those are my three asks. I wish the Minister the best of luck in his portfolio. It is the first time I have had the opportunity to ask him questions on it. I look forward to working with him on it.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I congratulate my colleague, Deputy McAuliffe, on his advocacy for Finglas Luas. The Minister will know Luas Lucan is very important to me. I am keen to know about the overall set of plans identified by the NTA for extension of Luas lines around Dublin. Will he consider putting a standing Luas project office in place to think of continued expansion of light rail? It is fair to say we have developed an expertise in the construction of light rail. We do it well, on time and in budget. We have a real opportunity to build a comparative advantage so it might be worth considering for the future.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: That point is a very good one. TII has built up excellent expertise and knowledge in delivery of those projects. Expansion of the Luas network needs to be looked at in the round and that is being done. Deputy McAuliffe mentioned MetroLink and we expect that to come out of planning with a final decision - not a draft decision - in the month of July. That would be a transformational project for the north Dublin area from the airport right into the city through Ballymun, and indeed beyond. The challenge and opportunity for the Government and everyone in the House is that many of these projects are now coming through planning, including DART+ South West, DART+ West + and DART+ Coastal North. All of those projects will be coming through. Moreover, BusConnects will start this year. Twelve projects have come through An Bord Pleanála. Four or five of them are unencumbered by judicial review. I have two tenders back in already. We expect to award a contract on the first one, which will see construction on the first BusConnects corridor happening this year. That is what the public wants to see. It wants to see investment in public transport infrastructure - bus, rail, Luas and metro.

Question No. 96 taken with Written Answers.

Public Transport

97. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Minister for Transport the expected timeline for the roll-out of contactless fare payments on all public transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34135/25]

98. **Deputy Joe Neville** asked the Minister for Transport if an interim measure, such as payment by app, which happens in other cities, could be explored for public transport until contactless payment becomes an option; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33948/25]

102. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Minister for Transport if he will provide an update on the roll-out of contactless fare payments across public transport services, including buses and trains; the expected timeline for full implementation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34183/25]

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: We have seen the extension of contactless fare payments in cities such as London, Edinburgh, Barcelona and Milan, as well as in the Netherlands. I am looking for the expected timeline for the roll-out of contactless fare payments on all public transport.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I propose to take Questions Nos. 97, 98 and 102 together.

I thank an Teachta Ó Cearúil. For background, the next generation ticketing project, led by the NTA, is for a new, modern public transport ticketing system that will facilitate a variety of payment methods for passengers, including contactless.

In April 2024, the NTA with Government approval entered into a multiyear framework agreement for next generation ticketing with Indra Sistemas S.A. to deliver this project. The initial focus is on the greater Dublin area and it will be rolled out across four phases. This is a major, complex project, with a capital cost of over €160 million - €160 million in Exchequer funds is being invested in this project - to implement it in the greater Dublin area alone, covering the costs of the enabling works to install new equipment for transport operators and the costs for the NTA team delivery team overseeing the project.

Phase 1 of the project in the greater Dublin area is due to launch in summer 2027. I am happy to be able to give that date. We will need to keep a close eye on the progress being made. That will be significant because it will test contactless payment on a small number of new validators or ticket machines. Phase 2 will be ready for summer 2028, allowing passengers on Dublin Bus and Luas services to use the next generation ticketing technology, including contactless payments on validators.

The NTA and Indra are currently planning phase 3, which is implementation across Iarnród Éireann's train services, and phase 4, which is implementation on commuter bus services in and out of Dublin. The NTA will be in a better position to provide timelines once planning is complete.

The timelines are not bad. It is summer 2027 for phase 1. I would like to see that shortening for phases 2, 3 and 4. The fundamental thing is to get the IT system in place. This will be account-based as well. It will be better than the system in Britain, which people might be used to if they use tap-on and tap-off, because they will also be able to have accounts. I am interrogating those timelines.

9 o'clock

This would be transformative for our transport system across all bus, rail, Luas and DART services. In the meantime, and as an interim measure, Iarnród Éireann already provides for passengers to download a QR code to their phone, removing the need for a physical ticket on longer journeys. Obviously, we have the Leap card as well, which I use. In addition, the NTA's barcode-based app, TFI Go, already allows customers to buy a range of tickets for bus services outside Dublin, including on all Bus Éireann public service obligation services, Dublin commuter routes operated by Go-Ahead Ireland and all local link rural services nationwide. As part of the young adult fares scheme, 27 private bus operators already sell their tickets on the TFI Go app.

It is good news that this is being advanced. It is a significant investment on behalf of our people, but it is a critical project. I am not at all questioning the complexities involved, but I want to interrogate those timelines further. If we can get phase 1 going by summer 2027, I would be content with that. However, I am not sure I want to wait until summer 2028 for phase 2. I do not yet have timeframes for phases 3 and 4. I will meet with the NTA to discuss this matter shortly. I have already met with the NTA a number of times in respect of it. The Government is committed to this. I want to see it in place; done correctly, obviously, and in a timely fashion.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: The Minister has announced extremely positive news here this evening that is extremely welcome. It would be great to see a breakdown of the timelines. What do we need to do in order to get to the first phase in the summer of 2027? Is there a need for procurement of IT systems? Are particular systems for buses, etc., required? It would be great to see the routes included in phase 1 as well. Would it be possible to expedite those later phases? We have to wait until the summer of 2028 for phase 2. Phase 3 relates to Iarnród Éireann and phase 4 relates to commuter buses. Obviously, the vast majority of people who commute to Dublin, particularly from Kildare North, do so by bus or rail. If we could get a breakdown to ensure we meet those timelines and to see if they could be expedited it would be very beneficial.

Deputy Joe Neville: Can we get a contactless payment system in the interim? Obviously, the timelines have been highlighted. It might be another two, three or four years before things happen. Could we look at putting in place an interim measure that whereby people could use app to make contactless payments? Coming from north Kildare, it does not seem reasonable that we should expect it to take three or four years.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Deputy Neville may have missed the final part of my answer. TFI has the TFI Go app in place, and we have Leap cards as an interim measure as well. The point is taken, however. Many of the resources will be used in implementing this new system. Obviously, some will be used to design it but most will be used to implement it. I have a more detailed breakdown of the major release phases. Phase 1, which, as I mentioned, is scheduled for summer 2027, will introduce a small number of new ticketing machines for a combination of bus, tram and train services. That is to test and improve the functionality of the validators. It is right and proper that this is done before committing to a larger scale development.

We then get to the major release 2, assuming the test phase of the major release 1 works well. This involves installing new validators, initially across the Dublin city bus and Luas networks. This will take some time to complete, which is fair enough, and will involve replacing all of the validators on 1,300-plus buses and approximately 400 validators across 69 stops in the tram network. I understand there is a complexity involved, particularly when you are keeping Leap cards, free travel and all of the existing measures in place, such as the TFI Go app and others I mentioned. You are introducing a new system while you are operating the existing one.

Effectively, you then move into major release 3, which brings in Iarnród Éireann, or Irish Rail. That is a separate release owing to the specific complexity of installing and removing station gates. This will involve quite a lot of physical work on our rail network. In major release 4, the NTA will extend contactless bank card payments and barcode tickets to commuter and other bus services in the Dublin commuter zone. There are four phases, as I have stated, and four different releases. I will be meeting the NTA on this to see if there is any way we can shrink the timelines. However, it is welcome that it will start in summer 2027.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: As I said, this is extremely positive news. It is great to see such a development. Indra Sistemas, which is carrying out the work, has done similar work previously in an international context. Are there any binding milestones built into the contract? The reason I ask is because there are four phases, which is excellent, and we can see clear steps to achieve the overarching aim, but the priority should be to ensure that everything is delivered on time and within budget. Could we get an understanding of the contractual arrangements with Indra Sistemas?

It goes without saying that there are more vulnerable users, older people in particular, who would like to continue to use cash. It is important to ensure that option is still available for those people and for those who prefer to use cash.

I thank the Minister for his work on this. It has been a priority for him, and it is great to see progress here so far.

Deputy Joe Neville: The reason I bring up contactless payments is because I commute from north Kildare. As someone who has used buses and trains over years, I have seen the improvements in the public transport system. At the same time, contactless payments are something we have seen in many other countries and cities. A lot of people would have used them in different

places. I see no reason Dublin and Ireland should be any different. That is the reason I tabled my question, but I also wanted to speak to an interim measure we could use. We all use our Leap cards, we all update them on the app and we all update our payments, but, sooner rather than later, it should be a simple case of being able to tap and go. Obviously, it will be a costly and complex exercise but we will need simple steps in place in order that we can identify the costs along the way, how they are orientated and whether the projects are hitting their targets within the timeline. I am very happy that contactless payments are a key focus for the Minister. Hopefully, we look to them being delivered in the near future. The sooner we get an interim measure in place, the better it will be for everyone.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank both Deputies for their support. I will meet the NTA and Indra Sistemas, which is developing this system. I will try to secure more specific timelines from the company. It has been very helpful so far. Work is progressing very well. On the contractual arrangements, I do not have that detail right now. I commit to reverting to both Deputies with an update on this after I meet with the NTA and Indra Sistemas.

If we look at other innovations that have taken place, the Leap card was a big step forward from what we had before. The 90-minute fare is very useful. The interaction of the Leap card between all of our transport operators as well is useful. It is not too many years ago that this option was not available to people. Thankfully, because this Government is still committed to free travel for our seniors, there will be no requirement for cash payments for most of them. As the Deputies know, a commitment made by the previous Government and this one is that people with free travel will be able to bring a companion with them, and it is being rolled out right now. Later this year, probably in September, we will bring forward free travel for those between the ages of five and eight. The purpose of this is to recognise that costs are high too for families. We also want kids who are using buses, etc., to get used to doing so in order that it becomes a habit. We had record public transport passenger journeys last year. We want to try to exceed that this year. People are responding in that regard right across urban and rural locations. The Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, answered questions about the advancement of Local Link. That has been really significant.

We have a great deal of work to do in this space, but real progress has been made. I will keep Deputies Neville and Ó Cearúil up to date. I will revert to them, post my meeting with the NTA, with specific timelines.

Electric Vehicles

99. **Deputy John Clendennen** asked the Minister for Transport the take-up of EV charging schemes for sports clubs, community facilities and town and village centre residents; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34002/25]

Deputy John Clendennen: Will the Minister of State give some information to the House on the take-up of EV charging schemes for sports clubs, community facilities and town and village residents, and will he make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Seán Canney: I thank the Deputy very much for the question. The Government is fully committed to tackling climate action with practical, innovative solutions that support our economy, communities and future generations. Promoting EVs is a central pillar of our strategy to reduce transport emissions, along with proposals to increase the use of active travel and pub-

lic transport, reduce overall car usage and increase the mix of sustainable biofuels in the petrol and diesel fuel blends. Having an effective and reliable charging network is an essential part of enabling drivers to make the switch to EVs. While over 80% of charging is expected to happen at home, there is an absolute need for a seamless public charging network that will provide for situations or instances where home charging is not possible.

The regional and local EV charging network plan was launched in April this year and sets targets and strategies for local authorities to drive EV infrastructure development at destination and neighbourhood locations, with Government support. This plan will help deliver the charging infrastructure people need, where they need it, at home, on the road and at key destinations and neighbourhoods across communities.

The shared island funded sports club EV charging infrastructure scheme was officially launched in February 2023 with an allocation of €15 million. The aim of the scheme is to install a network of publicly accessible chargers in communities throughout the country, through their local sports clubs. The scheme was advertised both generally and through recognised national governing bodies for individual sports. Over 220 clubs across the island met the eligibility criteria to continue to the next phase. The next phase has been to procure charge point operators to undertake the works required. This is well advanced and announcements on this will be made in the coming weeks. This will enable sports clubs to engage with the selected CPOs to agree on works to be done and commence the draw-down of the funding.

Deputy John Clendennen: Many of the community groups that pursued the initiative did so as part of a revenue-generating initiative, but there has been frustration. The Minister of State referred to some of the schemes but there are others that go back as far as July 2023, when expressions of interest would have been sought. These are ongoing. It takes more than two years to get an EV charging station installed at a community centre. There is frustration over how long it takes and the burden of administration. Rather than examining how we deliver the infrastructure, we need to examine the timeframe of delivery and place a serious onus on the agencies and scheme operators to deliver in a much shorter space of time than at present.

In town and village centres, the local authorities have to step up to the mark. Householders on streetscapes that have no access to a connection are frustrated. In other countries, streetlight poles have been used in this regard, and that is one of the initiatives we should be considering.

Deputy Seán Canney: I agree that the time it takes to put these things in place is not what we would like. The EU JTF EV charging scheme provides funding to support EV infrastructure at community facilities in the just transition area in the midlands. These include community centres, public libraries, public health centres, recreational facilities and enterprise centres in counties Laois, Longford, Offaly, Westmeath and Roscommon and the municipal districts of Ballinasloe, Athy, Clane-Maynooth, Carrick-on-Suir and Thurles. Ninety-three facilities have met the initial eligibility criteria. All site assessments have now been completed and the process to confirm their viability is now under way. In addition, Zero Emission Vehicles Ireland, ZEVI, has developed a local authority EV charging infrastructure pilot scheme. This scheme has approximately 26 pilot projects across 15 local authorities. I will open the first of these on 27 June in Galway city. This co-ordinated pilot programme focuses on EV charging for multiple users' needs predominantly at destination, neighbourhood and tourist locations. The Department is also funding dedicated EV charging infrastructure officers in each local authority to co-ordinate the roll-out of the infrastructure.

Deputy John Clendennen: The Minister of State mentioned the EU JTF. This is a fund we need to focus on in terms of delivery. It is far too slow and creating serious frustration. In reality today, we have a greater variety of electric cars and they are more affordable, but there is still range anxiety. Until we can get the network delivered, we will not address that.

More than ever before, we need to consider a network of fast chargers. There are issues over the reliability of the charging stations in rural towns. I have heard anecdotal examples of stations with three out of four chargers not working. I have never pulled up at a petrol or diesel pump that was not working, and I do not believe an EV owner should have to do likewise. We have to provide EV owners with reliability at the same level. I ask the Minister of State to boost the uptake, address the barriers and come up with some sort of framework to deal with reliability. I encourage those behind all the schemes to engage with the communities and explain to them why they take so long. A six-month interval between the submitting of information and the response is simply unacceptable.

Deputy Seán Canney: I agree with the Deputy that it is not all being done as quickly as we would like. We need to expedite the process to give confidence to people who are considering buying an EV that the infrastructure will be in place and that they will be able to rely on it to get from A to B. Many things have been happening and we are coming to a point where we will see things happening on the ground. We will be working within the Department to push along the projects to ensure they will be delivered in the quickest time possible so people can gain confidence in the EV infrastructure.

Question No. 100 taken with Written Answers.

Bus Services

101. **Deputy Emer Currie** asked the Minister for Transport to provide a breakdown of the investment made in enhancing existing bus services in Dublin West from 2020 to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34143/25]

Deputy Emer Currie: My question is to ask the Minister for Transport to provide a breakdown of the investment made in enhancing existing bus services in Dublin West from 2020 to date. A handful of routes – four in total – have been introduced under BusConnects, mainly to replace existing services, and one new route called the W4. While we await the full implementation of BusConnects in 2026–27, our existing services are really struggling with demand.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank Deputy Currie for her question. Since 2020, over €18.75 million has been invested in bus services alone in Dublin West, reflecting a really strong and ongoing commitment to improving public transport in the area. This includes funding for both new routes and enhancements to existing services. Notably, new routes introduced over the period include the L52, introduced in 2020, the C5 and C6, introduced in 2021, the high-frequency orbital N4, introduced in 2022, the W5, introduced in 2023, and most recently, the N2, introduced in 2024. Enhancements to existing services have been prioritised, with approximately €1.6 million allocated across the period. However, the most substantial enhancements were delivered in 2020, with more than €1.25 million invested that year to improve service levels and reliability.

Looking ahead, while no new enhancements have been introduced yet in 2025, plans are

in place to extend route 40D to serve Hollywoodrath later this year. An additional €500,000 is also committed this year to specifically address punctuality and reliability issues on routes 37, 38 and 70. These improvements were rolled out in April and are already supporting more consistent services.

Furthermore, phase 10 of the BusConnects network redesign, the B spine, is scheduled for late 2026 and will deliver significant improvements for Dublin West, subject to operational readiness and funding. In the interim, the NTA is working closely with operators to identify priority routes where capacity constraints are most pressing. Due to a range of factors, including limited driver availability, a prioritised list of enhancements will be developed based on the most urgent needs. I would welcome the Deputy's input into that.

Deputy Emer Currie: I thank the Minister. His numbers are the same as the ones I got through a parliamentary question dealing with capacity issues in each of the years 2020 to 2024. Seventeen million euro in that time had been invested in launching new bus routes in Dublin West, but, as the Minister said, just €1.6 million has been spent on enhancing existing bus services. That discrepancy tells its own story. The €1.6 million that has been spent on enhancement has been patchy. According to the NTA, nothing was spent on enhancements to existing services in Dublin West in 2023. A year before that, in 2022, spending was a grand total of €97. I would love to know what €97 was spent on. There has been some increase since then. In 2024, €407,000 was invested in enhancing existing bus services in Dublin West. That is a fraction of the nearly €2.9 million spent on new routes. It reflects the reality that people are experiencing. It is just not enough when it comes to the growth and demand in established communities, which is most of Dublin West, and the growth of new communities while we wait for BusConnects.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: BusConnects is going to make a real difference. It was held up for many reasons. I would suggest that there were initially route design flaws in much of the BusConnects project when it was first published, but that has been rectified. As I said earlier in response to a question, we will see the first BusConnects corridor under construction this year. We have three that are through planning. Rather, 12 are through planning, but a number are being judicially reviewed, which is another story.

The Deputy is right about the €97 that was spent in 2022. I have no idea what that was. As the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, said, it might have been to replace a wing mirror on a bus. Without being facetious about it, further investment is unquestionably needed. I know the Deputy's area very well. It is a major growth area. It is a young area too. The Deputy will have heard a number of other positive developments relating to additional services mentioned already this evening. We have to look at existing services and their reliability. I will bring the Deputy's intervention and feedback this evening directly to the NTA, which reports to me at the end of the day. It selects and approves the routes and route changes, but we need to make sure that it listens to public representatives too.

Deputy Emer Currie: I would appreciate the Minister's intervention because I find those figures shocking. We cannot wait until BusConnects is implemented in Dublin West, which could be 2027. The Minister mentioned services for Hollywoodrath, including the 37 and 38. I have fought for those enhanced services. Underinvesting in existing services ignores the commuters in established communities who want to shift to public transport. We have seen more than 2,000 new homes built in the Blanchardstown-Mulhuddart local electoral area over the last five years. Many have been in a completely new area called Hollywoodrath. The Minister was

there with us.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I was.

Deputy Emer Currie: There were no new bus services and limited enhancement of the existing ones. Last week, the Green Party had a motion calling on the Government not to put the brakes on progress, but under a Green Party Minister, our community saw a decline in the reliability of its services. I am depending on the Minister to take the opportunity to change that. While BusConnects is promoted as a transformative project, and it will be, we have to properly invest in expanding and improving the services that people currently rely on in the here and now.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Regarding what the Green Party might say in Dublin West, the Green Party held the transport portfolio in the previous Government. Having said that, the Government is responsible for the delivery of all services across the board and we are heavily committed to public transport. That is why I mentioned earlier this evening the debate we had last week. We have seen a record number of public transport users and growth in every area, including Dublin West, but there are areas where there are pressures on commuters. I have said to all our operators, rail, Luas and bus, that the customer has to be first in this. I have said that to the NTA too. We can look at the projects and investment that are needed, but everything has to be focused on the customer. It is customers who are paying for those journeys and it is their tax euros that are being invested in the system. I am happy to arrange a specific meeting between the Deputy and the NTA. I want the Deputy to give that feedback directly to the NTA about the preparation of additional enhancements. BusConnects will change things significantly right across the country, not just in Dublin. We are really focused on getting those projects under way and this Government will do it.

Question No. 102 taken with Question No. 97.

Road Network

103. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Transport if urgent pavement works will be carried out on the N22, in particular the section east of Macroom to Ballincollig; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34077/25]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: There is a need to upgrade the surface of the N22 between Macroom and Ballincollig. TII did not approve funding to the council for the upgrade earlier this year. What options are now available to the council to improve this surface and make the road safer?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank Deputy Moynihan. The Government earmarked about €2.9 billion for the protection and renewal of the national road network as part of the National Development Plan 2021 to 2030. As the Deputy knows, the NDP is under review. That includes funding to renew pavement on the new network. In addition, €5.1 billion was earmarked for investment in new national roads projects. While the greater portion of the funding becomes available in the second half of the decade, I can confirm that approximately €600 million of Exchequer capital funds was provided to local authorities through TII for national roads in 2025. Of this, €74 million was allocated to Cork city and county councils.

As part of the current NDP, the N22 road between Cork and Kerry has seen significant development in recent years, not least with the completion of the Baile Bhuirne to Macroom project. In conjunction with the N22 Farranfore to Killarney project, which is being developed, this will deliver greatly improved connectivity between Cork and Kerry. In regard to the section between Macroom and Ballincollig, while it has not been possible so far to allocate funding for pavement works this year, funding has been provided for road safety schemes at Castlemore and Kilcondy. In addition, funding has been provided for a fixed safety camera pilot on the route.

With regard to future investment, the programme for Government commits to increasing funding for protection and renewal. This should allow the pace of road pavement renewal to be stepped up, including the section east of Macroom to Ballincollig. What I am basically saying is that I am aware of the really poor state of this section of road. The Deputy has mentioned it and the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, mentioned it to me again this evening.

I am glad Deputy Moynihan asked this question. We need to be more active with our agencies in making sure, as I said to a previous Deputy, that the feedback from public representatives on behalf of their constituents is actually listened to. This section of road needs to be attended to. We will have an increased roads programme for next year and we will try to secure additional funding to make sure this section of road is attended to.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Some 32,000 vehicles travel on this section of road every day. There is a big flow of traffic coming from west Cork. It is a key artery into the city for many people. Road surface is a major aspect of road safety. Traffic travelling at 100 km/h hitting large holes is just dangerous. Drivers trying to avoid these holes by swerving around them present a danger too. Did the council make a specific application for funding for this work this year? Across the country, projects come under pressure during the year. There may well also be other projects that are not able to proceed to construction. Is there an opportunity to reallocate funding towards a priority project like the N22?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I know the volume of traffic on the N22 is high and increasing. The paving is poor. The Deputy mentioned potholes. Following his intervention through this parliamentary question, I will make direct contact to see what remedial works can be done in the interim. I cannot say if funding will be reallocated later this year. We have just recently allocated the 2025 funding but I will ask. Good work is being done on other parts of the N22 but I want to make sure this section is not forgotten about. I will contact TII in this regard, particularly to see what can be done with the local authority in the interim this year. The fixed camera is working to reduce speed in that area. I do not know if a specific submission was received from the local authority, but I will find out for him and take this matter up with TII. I will keep him informed of the feedback from that meeting.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: The Minister's intervention is hugely appreciated. This is a vital section of road. The Minister mentioned safety works being approved in Castlemore and Kilcondy. Those junctions are vital, as are so many others along the road, but at those junctions in particular, we have, unfortunately, seen many major accidents and tragic loss of life. The council is moving ahead with those works. This year's allocation will not be enough to build any of it but it will move the project towards construction. Can those much-needed safety works be prioritised for funding to make that road safer in any future allocation?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy may take from the fact that we have done a lot of

the preparatory work on design and preparation for the schemes in Castlemore and Kilcondy that we want to see them proceed to the next stage. That will be the logical step going forward into 2026. We will make sure that happens. The Ministers of State, Deputies Canney and Buttimer, and I have increased our roads funding this year by about €92 million. We received that draft funding package quite late because the Government had only come in, yet we were able to effect an increase. We will have a more significant increase in our roads programme next year. Government colleagues' interventions, including the Deputy's, regarding what is important in their own areas will be taken in the round because they are the people elected by their constituents. I will reference the particular section east of Macroom to Ballincollig with TII and I will revert to the Deputy.

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

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Estimates for Public Services 2025: Message from Select Committee

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): The Select Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimates for Public Services for the service of the year ending on 31 December 2025: Vote 20 - Garda Síochána; Vote 21 - Prisons; Vote 22 - Courts Service; Vote 24 - Justice; and Vote 44 - Data Protection Commission.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): 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 Sinéad Gibney - To discuss the closure of a montessori in Stepside and general lack of childcare availability in Dublin Rathdown.

Deputy Erin McGreehan - To discuss the use of Louth County Hospital in Dundalk as a surgical hub for the north east.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the level of preparedness for a major cyberattack on the State.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss the need for drastically improved respite services at schools in County Kerry.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil - To discuss ongoing road safety issues in Kildare North.

Deputy Séamus McGrath - To discuss the need to reduce interest rates to bring them more in line with EU average rates.

Deputy Colm Burke - To discuss the need to allow data centres to put in place their own power lines.

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Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the limitations of the supplementary welfare allowance.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh - To discuss the defective concrete block scheme.

Deputy Carol Nolan - To discuss measures to address the bureaucratic burden for school principals.

Deputy Pat Buckley - To discuss initiating tranche 2 of the flood relief programme for the communities of Rathcormac, Castlemartyr, Killeagh and Mogeely in County Cork.

Deputy Donna McGettigan - To discuss the need for assessment of needs services in the mid-west HSE area.

Deputies David Cullinane and Conor D. McGuinness - To discuss funding for capital developments at ports and fishery harbours in Waterford.

Deputy Mattie McGrath - To discuss funding of Cluain training and enterprise centre in Clonmel, County Tipperary.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly - To discuss the national childcare scheme for children with disabilities.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss implementation of legislative timelines for assessing and reimbursing medicines applied for by pharmaceutical companies.

Deputy Louis O'Hara - To discuss the need for updated wind energy development guidelines.

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher - To discuss the quashing of approval for the A5 dual carriageway, and its implications for the future of the A5-N2 project.

Deputy Thomas Gould - To discuss the closure of SouthDoc Blackpool.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss the lack of adequate aid to address the humanitarian situation in Gaza.

Deputies Conor Sheehan and Maurice Quinlivan - To discuss policing and Garda resources and organised crime in Limerick city.

The matters raised by Deputies Pat the Cope Gallagher, Conor Sheehan, Maurice Quinlivan, Thomas Gould, Sinéad Gibney and Carol Nolan have been selected for discussion.

Road Network

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher: Cé atá ag dul le glacadh an cheist, an Aire nó an Aire Stáit?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Tá mise.

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher: Is ceist fhíorthábhachtach í seo. Níl mé róshásta ach caithfear glacadh leis an Aire atá agamsa anseo anocht. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a chur

in iúl as ucht an deis atá agamsa chun an cheist seo faoin A5 a phlé anseo sa Teach mar aon leis an chinneadh a rinne an Breitheamh McAlinden i gcúirt i mBéal Feirste ag tús na seachtaine agus an tionchar atá ag an chinneadh sin ar an togra A5, an bóthar idir Achadh na Cloiche agus an Srath Bán. Ceanglaíonn an bóthar 88 km sin an iarthuaisceart agus Contae Mhuineacháin ag dul ar aghaidh go dtí an M1 go dtí Baile Átha Cliath. Ceanglaíonn sé Doire, Dún na nGall, Tír Eoghain agus Muineacháin. Cuireann an cinneadh a rinneadh an cinneadh a rinne Stormont ar ceal.

I would prefer not to be here tonight raising this issue regarding the A5. The issue is the decision of Mr. Justice McAlinden in a Belfast court to quash a decision of the Northern Ireland Executive to proceed to construction with the A5. That is, proceeding to construction subject to the agreement of terms with contractors and the conclusion of the ongoing legal battle. Why was the approval overturned? From our understanding of it and the judgment, it was overturned because the A5 was not meeting a Stormont draft climate action plan that was published only last week. We are also told there was difficulty staying within Stormont's first carbon budget and the environmental impact of the new road was not properly assessed. It is not good enough that was not done. Challenges came from farmers in the area. There was also the question of the impact on homes and farms and a breach of the commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

This decision shows a glaring disconnect between the legal process and the urgent realities facing communities along this stretch of road and the general public. I came into this House about 44 years ago. I have been travelling this road all my life. Through the difficult days of the 1970s and 1980s, I always came down the A5. In those early days, we were of the view that the best stretch of the route was the A5. That was only because it had a smooth surface. The bends were the same. They are still the same today. With all the developments that have taken place on other parts of that route, though, it is now the worst stretch of road from the north west or, indeed, in the whole country.

The proposed cost of this road project is £1.2 billion or €1.6 billion. The Irish taxpayers have committed €600 million from the shared island initiative. The whole purpose of that is to fulfil the Good Friday Agreement. I appreciate there are regular meetings between the Executives North and South. I will have another opportunity, but I am calling on the Taoiseach, the Northern Ireland First Minister, the Minister for Transport, Deputy O'Brien, and the Northern Ireland Minister for Infrastructure to meet shortly to decide on a way forward.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): Ar an gcéad dul síos, déanaim comhghairdeas leis an Teachta as ucht an rúin seo a chur os ár gcomhair. Tuigim an díomá atá air agus ar a lán daoine de bharr an chinnidh a rinneadh san Ardchúirt i mBéal Feirste. Tá an ceart ag an Teachta. Is bóthar tábhachtach agus an-chontúirteach an A5. Thug an Rialtas tacaíocht don bhóthar agus táimid ag leanúint leis an tacaíocht sin. Beimid ag obair leis an gCéad-Aire i mBéal Feirste.

I thank the Deputy for raising the matter. He is right, in that it is a very important road. I am not going to read the full script setting out the history of the project because it is well known to all of us in the House. We recognise the importance of the A5. Suffice it to say, the public inquiry into the scheme by the Planning Appeals Commission concluded in 2023. In October 2024, the Northern Ireland Executive gave approval for the first phase of the project to proceed. In preparation for the main construction contracts, advance works over its 55 km length in the form of site clearance, fencing and the setting up of compounds commenced in January. This

work is now well advanced. However, contracts for the main construction works were not entered into, pending the outcome of the court hearing. The Department for Infrastructure received a formal legal challenge to the project, with a date fixed for a court hearing on 18 March 2025. On 23 June 2025, the High Court in Belfast ruled in favour of the legal challenge.

The Minister for Infrastructure will now consider this judgment. While this further delay is clearly not desirable, it is hoped that the issues raised by the judgment will be addressed by the relevant Northern Ireland authorities in a timely fashion. While the timeline for delivery of the A5 project is still uncertain, particularly after this judgment, the provision of £25 million made by the Department of Transport in 2025 for funding the scheme remains, should it be required. Furthermore, as part of Government funding commitments for shared island projects, €600 million was committed to the progression of the A5 project in February 2024. The Government is still committed to that.

Transport Infrastructure Ireland continues to progress related schemes, such as the N2 Clontibret road to the Border and the Donegal TEN-T projects. The N2 project secured connecting Europe facility funding in 2023, allowing the design and environmental phase to recommence. This is expected to be completed later this year. The project was allocated €3 million in 2025. The TEN-T project was allocated just over €2 million, and the finalising of the design and evaluation phase deliverables is ongoing.

I reiterate our disappointment with the outcome. As the Deputy rightly said, the aim of the A5 western transport corridor, with the Northern Ireland Executive, is about improving the dual carriageway and links between the urban centres in Tyrone and Derry. It is a transport link for private and public transport between Dublin and the north west. The Deputy has used it at many key times. The Department for Infrastructure in the North estimates the total scheme will cost €1.6 billion and in this capital project, the A5 upgrade scheme is subject to planning, assessment and approval processes in the North. There have been ongoing legal challenges during the period from 2012 until now, which have led to unavoidable and disappointing delays in the project.

It is important to reaffirm to Deputy Gallagher that the Government is committed to the project. In the coming days, I assume we will sit down and discuss the matter with our counterparts in the North and I hope to see the project recommence. I take the Deputy's points and will bring back his comments about the need for the meetings between the relevant Departments here and in Stormont. I concur with the Deputy that the disappointment is felt on both sides of the Border because this is a project the Government is committed to. We want to see it advanced and that is ongoing.

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I hope it will be too long before a meeting is convened between the Tánaiste, First Minister and respective Ministers. There is only one positive I can take from the judgment, which is that "The shortcomings and shortcuts in the decision making highlighted in this judgment are capable of being remedied". I hope that can be done but this never should have happened and there should have been much more attention to detail.

We can be critical of what has happened there but we must also begin the consideration - the Minister of State referred to this - south of the Border. The €2 million or €3 million provided by the TII over the past year or so is not sufficient. There are major works to be carried out between Ardee and the Border and that should be going on concurrently with the works to be

carried out in Northern Ireland. It will take some time and the more quickly this is kick-started, the better.

The Minister of State may not be aware of the answer but was this matter discussed at the North-South Ministerial Council last week? Of all the projects that had to be discussed, I presume this one would have been. Irrespective of what the view of either side would have been, there cannot be interference with the court. An urgent meeting is absolutely necessary and I repeat my call for that. In thinking of the general public, I must state that 55 deaths in 18 years is too many. We cannot and should not compare that with climate action plans. Along with the 55 deaths, hundreds of people have been maimed and their whole life experiences have changed.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I cannot give an answer about last week's meeting because I do not have that information but I will bring the Deputy's comments back.

Regarding the N2 Ardee to Castleblayney route, as Deputy Gallagher is aware, the proposed project is an important one. It is about ensuring road safety is improved. The upgrade will enhance that road safety by reducing the number of direct access points and turning movements and by providing passing opportunities. It is currently suspended at the design and environmental phase of the TII project management guidelines subject to the ongoing NDP review. It is hoped the project will be allocated funding this year and next year.

Regarding the overarching matter raised by Deputy Gallagher, preliminary discussions have taken place on the establishment of the agreed cross-Border working group in relation to the continued development of the N2 from Clontibret to the Border and phase 3 of the M5. The A5 project has made significant progress over the past 12 months. According to the departmental statement, which is the Department for Infrastructure's formal and public response to the Planning Appeals Commission report, the latest public inquiry on the project was finalised in the summer of last year. Both jurisdictions are working collaboratively to address the key recommendations of the Planning Appeals Commission. Officials are working in the interim on a response in terms of a budgeting profile, while assisted by the €600 million from the Shared Island Fund. There is a second project, the delivery of phase 3 in a separate cross-Border link to provide a seamless connection between both projects. Notwithstanding the decision of the High Court in Belfast on 23 June to quash the decision to approve construction of the first phase of the project, the Government is committed and remains strong in its support in contributing to the successful delivery of the A5 project. The Government is also committed to developing the projects listed in the NDP that connect to the A5 including the Donegal TEN-T and N2 projects. I thank Deputy Gallagher for raising this matter.

An Garda Síochána

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): The next Topical Issue is shared by Deputies Quinlivan and Sheehan.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Both of us are united in our concern about the volatility of the situation in Limerick as it pertains to serious crime and the absence of an adequate and visible policing presence to tackle this.

Limerick is a wonderful place and a city that has come far since the dark days of 20 years ago, yet the lack of an active and visible policing presence has become a defining feature of our

city. In a recent reply to a parliamentary question, it was revealed that of the 120 gardaí who attested from Templemore this month, only two were assigned to Limerick. That is 1.6% of the total number. Seventy four gardaí from the same cohort were assigned to Dublin.

Limerick and the mid-west are consistently overlooked when it comes to the assignment of gardaí. The model for assigning gardaí is failing Limerick. It does not consider the actual level of need in the city. Limerick has nine of the 17 economic blackspots in the city. It is the home of St. Mary's Park, which is a wonderful community but also the most deprived community in the State. The residents of this community do not deserve to live in the shadow of a minority of drug-dealing vultures who peddle crack cocaine, an evil insidious drug.

Gardaí had relatively successful operations - Operation Capóg and Operation Feabhsaigh - to tackle this but these have ceased as Garda resources have been diverted to the south side of the city in order to tackle a wave of violence in Ballinacurra Weston. Make no mistake, we have a feud again in Limerick. We have had shootings, pipe bomb attacks and fire bombings. It is a miracle nobody has been killed. The Commissioner's restrictions on overtime are a complete disgrace. He does not have a clue what is going on in Limerick. This is not something minor that involves antisocial behaviour. We need at least ten additional gardaí in the next passing out from Templemore. I ask the Minister to intervene directly before someone is killed.

I also raise the need for funding approval for the CCTV system in Moyross. This is vital. An ask and a business case has gone to the Department of justice and I plead with the Minister to push for the approval of this as a matter of urgency. An application for a CCTV scheme for the community of Garryowen has been with the Commissioner for over two months and a sign-off is urgently needed on that.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: No disrespect to the Minister of State but I am really disappointed that nobody from the Department of justice is present. This is a really important issue as my colleague has outlined. I will preface my comments by saying the Government really needs to intervene here. It needs to commit to a fully resourced Garda operation targeting drug dealing and feuding in order that hardworking people in Limerick feel safe and secure in their homes, which some of them do not feel at the moment. Many people are extremely frightened and need to be reassured and made safe in their homes and communities.

The scale of drug dealing in parts of Limerick city is worse than ever. It is off the scale. It is a miracle nobody has been killed in the gang feud that is going on across our city. Gardaí have said that, not me. Too many Limerick communities feel abandoned. In recent weeks we have had shootings and petrol bomb attacks in the Ballinacurra Weston, Southill, Garryowen, Thomondgate and King's Island areas of our great city. Recently, I wrote to both the Garda Commissioner and the Minister for justice seeking additional resources for the Garda in Limerick. These resources are needed to combat the ongoing sale of drugs, especially crack cocaine, and gang feuding across Limerick. Hardworking families, pensioners and children living in these communities deserve to live securely in their homes without the presence of drug gangs operating openly and arrogantly. The sale of crack cocaine is pure evil. It has a devastating impact not only on the drug users but on their families and the wider community. Crack cocaine, one of the most destructive and addictive drugs, is peddled to the most desperate of our citizens. There are reports of children selling crack cocaine and I am on the public record as saying that previously. There are several criminal gangs in our city that cause mayhem and destroy lives. They often act like they own the areas. They think they do.

Previous Garda operations in Limerick such as Operation Capóg and others, when resourced, have been successful but when the resources are removed, the criminality returns even worse. We cannot allow crime to spread and we cannot allow these gangs to drag more young people into this. Often, the communities I have talked about have been plagued by criminal gangs who seem to operate without sanction. They feel they are untouchable. These communities see little or no Garda response across Limerick. Many communities have long been left without a community Garda. We must enhance community safety by implementing a comprehensive method to address crime and support local policing efforts. The gardaí in Limerick are well led and when they have sufficient Garda numbers and adequate resources, they can keep all of our communities safe. That is a task of Government and it needs to deliver the resources our gardaí need.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Emer Higgins): I thank both Deputies for raising this cross-party Topical Issue which I am taking on behalf of the Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan. I thank them for raising this issue. I was in Limerick city only earlier this week with Senator Maria Byrne and the issue of crime was raised with me by Limerick Chamber of Commerce. Like all decent citizens, I strongly condemn gangland criminality and, in particular, intimidation and threats using firearms and other lethal weapons. People have a right to live safely and feel safe in their homes and communities, and this Government is committed to the principle that everyone, wherever they live in Ireland, should be safe and feel safe. An Garda Síochána has advised the Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan, that it is carrying out a range of high-visibility and covert operations on an ongoing basis to support public safety in Limerick. Operation Croí has been in place in Limerick city centre, targeting antisocial behaviour and associated offences, including drug-related and traffic-related offences. This Garda operation assists in targeting criminals and the sale and supply of drugs in Limerick city centre. Operation Feabhsaigh was initiated in September 2023 and it has two key priorities, the first of which is law enforcement and crime prevention at King’s Island historic quarter, which includes city centre locations. The second priority is dealing with the sale and supply of drugs, open drug use, chronic antisocial behaviour, aggressive begging and crime in St. Mary’s Park. Limerick is one of three pilot sites for An Garda Síochána’s front-line deployment of body-worn cameras. The use of body-worn cameras is intended to increase public confidence in policing responses by enabling Gardaí to record incidents as they occur and provide evidence of how a particular incident unfolded, thereby providing greater transparency, promoting accountability and deterring criminal activity.

We know we cannot solely police our way out of these situations. The best way to tackle the safety issues communities are facing is through An Garda Síochána and other State services partnering with the community to implement tailored solutions. The local community safety partnerships, LCSPs, which will operate at each local authority level, are building upon the good work undertaken through the joint policing committees; JPCs, as we would have known them. The objective of the partnerships is to bring the relevant bodies, including An Garda Síochána, together with communities in a collaborative manner by focusing on the concerns identified and prioritised by local people. Each newly established LCSP will be required to develop and implement its own tailored community safety plan and will take a strategic approach to its work so that issues arising can be dealt with in a co-ordinated manner and addressed collectively by relevant service providers in partnership with the local community.

The Policing, Security and Community Safety Act 2024, which was commenced on 2 April

2025, also provides for area-based neighbourhood community safety forums to facilitate a tailored, targeted and time-limited approach where issues of concern are arising in a more localised format. The Government's commitment to An Garda Síochána and tackling crime is clear from the allocation of the highest Garda Vote in history, €2.48 billion, in budget 2025. This Government will continue to provide An Garda Síochána with the resources it needs to ensure communities across Limerick and around Ireland are safe and feel safe.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I thank the Minister of State for her reply. First, regarding the LCSP, I sat on the joint policing committee. The joint policing committee has not sat since I was a member of it, which was in May 2024. It is simply not acceptable. What I am looking for is a commitment that the Minister of State will take up the substance of the issues I raised with the Commissioner. We need at least ten additional gardaí. It is not me saying that; it is the chief superintendent. When the Minister of State talks about not being able to police our way out of this, I agree with her. That is why we need to see a commitment that the money in the social intervention fund through regeneration will be maintained for the next number of years. The fact of the matter is this situation is akin to the way it was in the early 2000s and we need a similar level of urgency as there was between 2008 and 2010 when we stamped this out. We are going backwards and I am literally terrified that somebody is going to be murdered in Limerick again soon.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I was really disappointed with the Minister of State's response. There was nothing new that we did not know about before we came in here tonight. It pains me when I talk about these issues in the city of Limerick that I love but it pains me more to see ordinary working families being abandoned by the State. In 2008, Limerick had 92 community gardaí; we now have 30. In 2008, John Fitzgerald commissioned a report which dealt with the policing regeneration programme. He said we needed 100 extra gardaí and a new superintendent. We got 100 gardaí and 99 retired so we got one. We got one garda - that is what we got. About a week ago there was a petrol bomb attack in an area of the city. It took two hours for a Garda response to come to that, even though it was on social media for an hour before the gardaí came out to it. We never got the gardaí we were promised and communities have been left abandoned. As I have said, crack cocaine did not just appear in Limerick; organised gangs brought it to Limerick. I have raised this in the Dáil for the last three or four years. They targeting the most vulnerable people in the State. I agree with the Minister of State that we need a co-ordinated response to this and that is what Operation Copóg was. We need a version of that again. We need to put the resources in. When the Minister sees the new recruits coming out of Templemore, Limerick has to be looked at. We cannot go by the size of the population. We have to look at the problems we have in north inner city Dublin and parts of Cork city but Limerick city in particular needs to make sure we get a fair share of those gardaí. It cannot just be based on population because that is simply not going to work. Communities are abandoned and it is not good enough.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Deputies for raising all of those issues. Regarding the joint policing committees - I too sat on my JPC - as the Deputies will be aware, they are being replaced by the LCSPs. We will get further information on that-----

Deputy Conor Sheehan: They still have not started.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: They are not there yet.

Deputy Emer Higgins: -----but that is the latest information we have in relation to that.

Deputy Quinlivan raised community gardaí and the need to invest in them. I absolutely hear him and will certainly bring that back to the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, on whose behalf I am taking this Topical Issue. At the end of April this year, there were 585 Garda members of all ranks assigned to the Limerick division. I am told that is an increase of almost 6% since the end of the previous decade.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: That is not true. It is down 5% in the last five years.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere): Let the Minister of State respond please.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: It is wrong.

Deputy Emer Higgins: According to the figures that have been provided to me by the Department of Justice, there was a 6% increase in the ten years previous to 2025. In addition to the specific measures I mentioned which are taking place in Limerick - I have gone through the different Garda operations - a number of key actions have been taken as part of our plan to tackle organised crime and the crime groups behind those types of acts. They include legislation that has been brought through this House, for example to increase the maximum sentence for conspiracy to murder from ten years to life in prison; to tackle those who are directly engaged in gangland and drug-related crime; to enact the Criminal Justice (Engagement of Children in Criminal Activity) Act to criminalise the grooming of children into a life of crime; to draft new laws which will provide for the use of biometric technologies, including facial recognition technology; to investigate certain drug offences; and to roll out a support programme to break the link between gangs and the children they recruit. Earlier this year, the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, and the Department of Justice launched a new merged and expanded youth diversion project in Rathkeale and west Limerick, along with the opening of two new projects in nearby east Clare and north Tipperary. We will achieve the target set out in the youth justice strategy of full national coverage of youth diversion projects. These are also an important part of what the Deputy spoke about earlier in relation to the social aspects of this and the need to invest not just in policing strategies but also in services underneath them. From the perspective of criminal assets, there is legislation to strengthen the State's ability to seize criminal assets and to target the proceeds of crime as well and this will also benefit Limerick.

General Practitioner Services

Deputy Thomas Gould: Freedom of information documents I received in May show that on 18 March, the head of primary care services in the HSE South-West asked who approved the amalgamation of services that led to the closure of SouthDoc in Blackpool, but she got no response. I have asked the same question multiple times and I have got no response. A decision was made to close SouthDoc Blackpool and no one knows who made it and no one is willing to admit it. SouthDoc is being paid millions of euros every year to provide an out-of-hours service in the Kinsale Road and in Blackpool but Blackpool has been closed. I will provide some statistics so that the Minister of State knows I know what I am talking about. In January 2019, SouthDoc in Blackpool saw 2,180 patients. Does the Minister of State know how many it saw in January 2025? Zero. I have the HSE telling me it is not closed. The figures prove it is closed. I asked a question.

10 o'clock

In 2021, the HSE advised that SouthDoc Blackpool needed to stay open to prevent people from going to accident and emergency because they could not make it out to the Kinsale Road. They would go to the Mercy Hospital or CUH, which are overcrowded already. When did the HSE change its policy? Who authorised that? The Minister of State is probably going to read out a speech. I do not want to hear any untruths or deception. I am looking for the facts. Who closed SouthDoc in Blackpool and when will it be reopened?

There is a service level agreement in place for millions of euro. Has an audit been done? Who has looked into the service being provided? Are the people getting the service they pay for? This is being paid for. Children are travelling in taxis through the night right across the city, passing the door of Blackpool. A lady from Ballyvolane contacted me to say that she came down Dublin Hill. One minute out the road was Blackpool but instead of going there, she had to cross the whole city. I met a taxi driver from Gurranabraher. He said he met a family, a mother with two sick kids, who had got a taxi out that cost her €40. To be fair to the taxi driver, he brought her home because he knew the woman did not have it. That is not good enough.

The HSE has bottled it. It has buckled and is allowing SouthDoc to make millions of euro and not do its job. I want the truth tonight. I do not want false claims from the HSE. I am sick and tired of the people of the northside being treated like this. Why can we not have a proper health service like everyone else? Why is the northside always being cut? The ambulance service and the orthopaedic service were taken out of the St. Mary's campus. The new hospital for Glanmire has been delayed for years. The primary care centres in Glanmire, Mayfield and Blarney are all delayed and we do not know when they are coming. The one piece of the health service we have on the northside is closed and the HSE is trying to tell me that it is not.

I am asking for answers. I am looking for the truth. I have to go back to Cork and tell the people why the Government is not delivering the out-of-hours care the people of the northside deserve.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I thank the Deputy. I understand that this issue is very important. The provision of out-of-hours GP services is an important part of healthcare and it is essential that people have access to out-of-hours GP services when needed. It is worrying that the Deputy spoke about children travelling in a taxi during the night to the hospital. That is a concern and is definitely something we need to address.

As the Deputy knows, for Cork and Kerry, out-of-hours urgent GP care is provided by the SouthDoc co-operative. It provides a medical service to a population of approximately 736,000, in addition to the visitors to the area, and it dealt with over 200,000 patient contacts in 2024. While they are private organisations, the HSE provides substantial funding to support out-of-hours co-operatives through individual service level arrangements. To ensure its continued viability, SouthDoc continually reviews its service provision formally with the HSE and on an ongoing basis internally. The Department of Health has engaged with the HSE on the Deputy's concerns regarding the Blackpool treatment centre. SouthDoc has assured that there is no intention of closing any SouthDoc treatment centre.

SouthDoc provides services on an appointment basis across all treatment centres. When an individual contacts SouthDoc, all relevant information is taken. The nature and the clinical condition of the patient then determines the service provided. If it is determined that a consultation with the duty doctor is appropriate, depending on the circumstances, the consultation may

be provided remotely, in person at a suitable treatment centre or through a home visit.

SouthDoc has advised that, since September 2023, routine appointments for patients in Cork city are scheduled at the primary treatment centre on Kinsale Road. In the event that a patient is unable to attend Kinsale Road, they may require a home visit or need to be seen in the Blackpool facility. The location of the appointment is a clinical decision made by the doctor on duty. This operational adjustment was implemented as part of an organisation-wide service review aimed at optimising resources and service delivery while maintaining patient care standards within the available budget.

The HSE has confirmed the Blackpool treatment centre remains available for urgent appointments, where necessary. Patients unable to attend the Kinsale Road centre continue to be seen at the Blackpool centre. In addition, home visits continue in the Blackpool area, supporting patients who meet the clinical criteria and are unable to travel for their appointment. The provision of this service will continue to be evaluated by SouthDoc and the HSE on an ongoing basis. That is what I have been informed by the Department.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I thank the Minister of State. I accept that she has been given this information and, in all honesty, she has come here and presented it to the Dáil tonight. However, I have to say that information has gone into the Dáil record tonight that is not true. I ask the Minister of State sincerely to go back to the Department and the HSE and ask them why they gave her false information. She is here as a Minister of this country and she was sent in with false, untrue information. The figures I gave her show that, in January 2019, there were 2,180 patients, and in January 2025, there were zero. How in the name of God could Blackpool be open?

Unfortunately, in the last couple of months, my family and I had to use it, and every time we were sent to Kinsale Road. I and my wife have a car so we are able to look after ourselves, but what about vulnerable people, older people, people with young families and people who do not have access? There is no bus link out to the Kinsale Road. How are people going to get a bus at 12 midnight when even at 9 p.m. they cannot get out to the Kinsale Road? The HSE has sent the Minister of State in here tonight with what I hardly dare to say is lies, but it is very close to it. It is manipulating the words. It is twisting it and turning it.

The Government, the Department of Health and the HSE pay SouthDoc millions, and I am not talking about €1 million or €2 million but millions, and it closed down the SouthDoc Blackpool service. I am looking for an investigation. Who made that decision? Is the tail wagging the dog here? Is SouthDoc telling the Government what it will do? Is that the way it is? The Government is paying it. If it does not want to do its job, can we offer it out for tender to another service provider?

We have a situation here. The Minister of State made a statement about the primary treatment centre at Kinsale Road. When did that happen? I have freedom of information replies, loads of them, and that was never confirmed. Does the Minister of State know who made that decision? It was SouthDoc, which is making millions off the SouthDoc service. I want an investigation and I want Blackpool opened.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I understand the Deputy's concerns. It is something I will go back to the Department to clarify. I have been informed that, as of 5 June last, 22 patients have been seen at the Blackpool clinic in 2025 and approximately 410 home visits

were carried out in the Blackpool area in the same period. SouthDoc has confirmed that the Blackpool treatment centre remains operational on an appointment basis. Alternative care may be provided to patients in the area via a home visit. This change to operational arrangements is necessary to ensure the long-term sustainability of the out-of-hours service in Cork city. The provision of this service is evaluated by SouthDoc and the HSE on an ongoing basis.

As an Oireachtas Member, a TD and a Minister of State, I understand the Deputy's concerns. He represents the people and he needs to get answers. I will go back to the Department to get this clarified for him. I know that, in the programme for Government, primary care clinics or injury clinics are part of what we are looking at going forward. It is in the programme for Government and it is something I will definitely be looking at. I will definitely go back to the Department and then come back to the Deputy. I understand how passionate the Deputy is and I see his concerns.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Thank you. An important question the Minister of State might ask is how it can go from 2,200 down to 22, and they are the Minister of State's figures. I respect that the Minister of State is doing her best tonight.

Childcare Services

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: It is not news that families with young children require childcare and early years education. Why, then, are these families continuously failed by the State in the provision of those services?

In Dublin Rathdown, I am contacted regularly about childcare and early years education. Indeed, it is one of the foremost issues within my constituency. There is a shortage of available places and, rather than seeing new providers coming on stream, we are seeing more and more closures. Costs are too high for parents and providers in the sector are in real difficulty.

Young families are desperately struggling to find childcare for their children. I have been contacted by so many parents who are at their wits' end with this. Last week, a mother contacted me who, despite having her child registered before birth, struggled for months before finding childcare to allow her to return to work. Another constituent said to me: "It is not a surprise that families with young children need childcare. How is this still occurring? Young families are being failed at the very first hurdle."

The providers of childcare and early years services are also struggling in Dublin Rathdown. We have seen many of them forced to close their doors, with Mountainside Montessori in Leopardstown and Naíonra Seomra Mary in Stepside being just two of the most recent examples. Another small provider in my constituency told me she has major concerns about the viability of her business in the coming years. She does not want to opt in to the core funding model because it does not work for her specific set-up. That means it is hard for her to see herself operating beyond another couple of years.

When childcare places can be obtained, the cost is often so high, it puts a real strain on families, with some parents being forced out of the workplace. Workers in the sector are without a pay scale or security, with retention of staff remaining a real problem for providers.

We need a public model of childcare that will address the multitude of issues being encoun-

tered. My colleague Deputy Farrelly has proposed the establishment of a cross-party committee on childcare. This would establish a short-, medium- and long-term plan for the provision of childcare in Ireland. The Government has promised to reduce childcare costs to €200 a month but it is nowhere near meeting that commitment. Families are being forced to pay hundreds of euro more than that every month. Parents all over the country find it almost impossible even to secure a place. The commitment to roll out a public model of childcare and reduce costs to €200 per month has to be more than electioneering. It must become a reality.

As someone who raised a daughter alone, I acknowledge the specific challenges faced by single parents trying to access childcare in my constituency. Both financially and logistically, it is a unique barrier to employment and, indeed, to participation in society when we provide so little support to families headed up by people parenting alone. The single biggest measure we could take to advance gender equality in the State is to provide high-quality and affordable childcare. Women still take on far more of the care role in the household than men do. When we make it hard to source external care, we penalise women and force them to decide between career and home.

What is being done to support providers in the sector? How is the deficit in childcare and early years places being addressed? Will the Government commit to establishing a cross-party committee on childcare?

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue and for sharing her own experience. It is really important that we, as female parliamentarians, share our experience. It is inspiring for others who may follow in her footsteps that the Deputy has done so.

The challenge of providing accessible childcare is very much real. The Deputy outlined the issues many of her constituents face. Many of my constituents, and some of my friends, are in the same boat, having to put down the names of children who are not yet born or named for childcare places. This is not ideal and the Government is committed to addressing it.

Early learning and childcare capacity is increasing. That is a fact. Data from the annual early years sector profile for 2023-24 shows the estimated number of enrolments increased by 19% from two years previously. The Tusla register of services demonstrates a net increase of 226 in the numbers of registered early learning and childcare services last year. That is really positive because it shows it is a growing sector that is ambitious to, and is designed to, meet the forward demands.

A forward planning model is in development by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality. It will be central to building an affordable, high-quality and accessible early learning and childcare system, with State-led facilities adding capacity to what already exists. As the Deputy rightly said, that is something many of the parties campaigned for during the most recent election. The Government continues to support the ongoing development and resourcing of core funding, which has given rise to a significant expansion of places since the scheme was first introduced. It provides stability to services and reduces the risk associated with opening a new service or expanding an existing one. We must do this to support childcare providers.

The Government is also supporting the expansion of capacity through capital funding. The building blocks extension grant scheme is designed to increase capacity in the one- to three-year-old cohort, the pre—early childhood care and education category and in the age range for full daycare. The Minister has approved 50 applications to progress to the next stage of the

building blocks extension grant scheme. When completed, these projects will deliver 1,500 additional full-time childcare places for one- to three-year-olds.

The Deputy is absolutely right in her comments on the impact of access to high-quality, affordable childcare on gender equality in the workplace. That is why we need to support parents, providers and those working to build their career in the sector. When I was Minister of State in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, I got the opportunity to work with some of the organisations that represent our childcare workers. I was delighted to sign some of the new statutory instruments into effect relating to their wages. It is really important that we continue to invest in the sector, whether in the physical buildings, through core funding for service providers or by way of funding for childcare workers. That is the best way to support parents and children and to deliver better gender equality in workplaces.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: While I appreciate the Minister of State's response, it is disappointing there is nobody here from the Department of children. I welcome the statistics she shared that show an increase in provision of places and the work being done to address the problems. However, as she knows, that increase is not keeping pace with the needs of families across the country, including in my constituency of Dublin Rathdown.

We have seen tweaks in the childcare system, with attempts to address one shortfall here opening up another elsewhere. It is not working. We need radical reform. My colleague Deputy Farrelly's proposal, páistecare, is a plan for childcare that is like what Sláintecare was supposed to be for the healthcare system. It is a transformational approach that will supersede shifts and changes of policy and approach under successive governments. It will lock in cross-party support to transform childcare provision in the State. I urge the Government to consider it.

As a State, we are missing a trick when it comes to artificial intelligence, AI. At a meeting today of the AI committee, of which I am a member, we spoke about the labour displacement we all know is coming down the tracks as a result of AI. Childcare is one of the sectors that is untouchable by AI. None of the caring professions, including teaching and childcare, can be automated. However, we need to value the childcare profession. Right now, we do not pay workers enough. The sector offers only precarious employment, mostly to women, including migrant women. We do not value it enough as a society to capitalise on the labour displacement we will see elsewhere.

I ask again that the Government commit to a cross-party committee that will bring together everyone across the political spectrum to put forward a short-, medium- and long-term vision for the transformation to a public model of childcare provision in this country.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Deputy and her colleague for the work they are doing on this issue. The Government is committed to building an affordable, high-quality and accessible early learning and childcare system. I will take her recommendation for a cross-party committee to the Minister, Deputy Foley.

The programme for Government commits, for the first time ever, to provide capital investment to build or purchase State-owned early learning and childcare facilities. This will create additional capacity in areas where unmet need exists. That is the trajectory we are on and we are very clear about it. State ownership of facilities is a very substantial and significant development. It offers the potential for much greater scope to influence the nature and volume of

provision and to ensure better alignment with estimated demand, projected demand and current demand. The programme for Government also commits to planning the development of State-led facilities in tandem with the school building programme. Some early scoping work has already been carried out to explore options to introduce a segment of public provision, which I know is something the Deputy is particularly interested in. More detailed and extensive policy development and design is ongoing to progress to the next stage, the implementation stage, having regard to the wider emerging policy context as set out in the programme for Government.

As I am sure the Deputy is aware, the Department also funds 30 city and county childcare committees. These provide support and assistance to families and early learning and childcare providers. That network can assist in identifying vacant places in services for the children and families who need them and in engaging proactively with services to explore possibilities for expansion among services that already exist, especially where there is unmet need locally. Parents experiencing difficulty with regard to their early learning and childcare needs should contact their local city or county childcare committee for assistance.

On the Deputy's wider point and páistecare, I was in the Chamber when her colleague raised it with the Tánaiste. He expressed an interest in learning more about it. I am sure the Minister, Deputy Foley, will be as well.

School Management

Deputy Carol Nolan: As we approach the end of the school year in many primary schools, I acknowledge the hard work of many school principals and teachers but I also highlight an issue, the overloading of principals, particularly teaching principals. I met with many school principals in my own county of Offaly and they have told me that their workload is excessive, that it continues to be extremely bureaucratic and that it is leading to burnout. Many principals cannot focus on teaching and learning because they are pulled in so many different directions with administration. Principals have pointed out to me that their management does not just extend to the school team, that is, the mainstream teachers and pupils, because they also have EAL teachers, SNAs and many ancillary staff coming in and out of the school. This is an issue we really need to get grips with or we are going to see an exodus of principals, especially teaching principals, from our schools.

I will focus on research that has been done and, at the end of my contribution, on solutions. In April, the Irish National Teachers Organisation, INTO, passed a motion at its annual congress regarding the unsustainable workload facing school principals. The resolution found that the current demands and expectations placed upon principals are unreasonably high, raising serious concerns about burnout and long-term sustainability in leadership roles.

There have been ongoing calls made for an immediate review of the special education allocation model. That is causing great frustration. I have raised it in this House before. It is putting serious pressure on primary school principals, who are often left scrambling for resources to meet the needs of students with complex needs. I have engaged regularly with the National Principals Forum, which I thank for its great work in highlighting the many issues facing teaching principals. With regard to the bureaucratic burden, the NPF recently conducted a survey on the impact of the SET allocation model I have just referred to. This survey was conducted among more than 550 primary school leaders. It concluded that 71% of respondents believed their SET allocations for the 2025-26 academic year are inadequate to meet their schools' needs,

but the important piece is that the majority of principals and school leaders describe the process as chaotic, stressful, ridiculous and frustrating. We really need to take on board what school leadership are telling us. Another recent survey, this one conducted by the TUI, found that the ever-increasing workload, especially that of a bureaucratic nature, continues to be a demoralising factor. That forces many teachers out of the profession.

We really need to get to grips with this. I have a document here in my hand entitled Primary School Leadership: The Case for Urgent Action - A Roadmap to Sustainability. It was published by the IPPN. The report is extremely revealing. It highlights that there is an inordinate and disproportionate focus on managing the organisation and that this disproportionate increase in focus on managing the organisation without a corresponding increase in management supports and resources undermines the capacity of school principals to deliver greater focus on leading teaching and learning.

The chief inspector also contributes to this debate. A report from him dated between 2016 and 2020 also concludes that there is a disproportionate focus on management and administrative tasks that diverts principals from their key leadership responsibilities and undermines their effectiveness as institutional leaders in the school communities.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue, which is raised with many of us in this House by principals up and down the country whose jobs are constantly evolving and constantly getting more challenging. I really appreciate the Deputy raising this here today.

The role of schools within communities is crucial and the Minister for Education and Youth, on whose behalf I am taking this Topical Issue, acknowledges the contribution made daily by all school leaders in the operation of our schools. International evidence is clear on the vital impact school leaders have on student outcomes and on leading teaching and learning in our schools. To ensure our school leaders are supported in an increasingly complex environment both now and into the future, Department officials are examining how best to support school leaders. A review of leadership supports is currently in development, as committed to in the programme for Government. I hope that is welcome news for the Deputy given that it was the thrust of what she asked for this evening. This review will examine current resourcing, distributed leadership, administrative and advisory supports, and professional learning supports for school leaders. Extensive consultation with stakeholders will inform this work.

The numbers employed in our schools will reach their highest ever level in this current school year. There are over 42,900 teaching posts allocated across the primary school system. This represents an increase of just over 5,000 teachers when compared with 2019-20. In three of the recent budgets, priority was given to reducing the pupil-teacher ratios in primary school by one point each year. This has brought the teacher allocation ratio to an average of one classroom teacher to every 23 pupils in all primary schools. That is the lowest level ever seen at primary level. In addition, the threshold at which a teaching principal becomes an administrative principal has been reduced from an enrolment of 176 pupils to 169 pupils. That is something the Deputy will be particularly interested in given that she queried the role and workload of teaching principals in particular. Budget 2022 ensured that each teaching principal having a minimum of one release day per week became a permanent feature in all schools. Schools with one special class received four additional release days while schools with two special classes have administrative principal status.

As well as general teaching post improvements, a new leadership framework, introduced

back in 2017, allows for flexibility in identifying and prioritising the evolving leadership and management needs of a school. This shared leadership model supports school leaders in the overall management and operation of schools. It provides for the assignment and reassignment of post holders to specific roles and responsibilities to meet a school's evolving needs.

Today, one in three primary school teachers holds a management position. Budget 2024 provided for an additional 500 additional assistant principal II posts for the current school year while budget 2025 provided for the equivalent of 500 assistant principal II posts, being distributed as 110 assistant principal I posts and 251 assistant principal II posts for the purposes of fully restoring all posts of responsibility in primary schools. A revised post of responsibility schedule issued to schools in April to reflect the increase in posts of responsibility available to schools for the coming school year.

In examining leadership, the Department of Education and Youth is acutely aware that we need to protect what works well in our school systems and what serves so many of our young people so well. We want to build on the strengths of the system, to address challenges that will support our school communities and to be responsive to the needs of students in an increasingly complex world.

The programme for Government commits to a trial of new administrative support for principals and boards of management to assist with demands faced and to support school leaders in rebalancing some of their time towards leading teaching and learning. Planning for this trial is now at an advanced stage.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I welcome the improvements the Minister of State has just listed, but in order to tackle the current bureaucratic nightmare, there are decisive solutions that could be taken. For example, there is a pilot of the small schools scheme. I completely welcome that. That is certainly one solution. If that were to be rolled out nationally where schools form clusters and support one another with admin, and if the threshold, which stipulates that the scheme is for schools of four teachers or fewer, were increased, I think it would capture and support more schools.

To give the Minister of State an idea of how bureaucratic this is becoming, since 2006 an average of 44 circulars have been issued to schools. That is a huge workload to land on any principal's desk, and that is just one layer of the workload that exists. As I said, we should look at the small schools scheme, roll it out nationally, extend it to more schools and support teachers. Teachers are managing a huge number of people. It is not just mainstream teachers, as I said; this has extended to SNAs and ancillary staff. We need to look at all that and tackle the bureaucratic nightmare quickly, efficiently and effectively before we have, unfortunately, more principals leaving their posts. It is time we put more solutions in place and allowed teachers do what they do best and what they signed up to do, which is to teach. That is what they are passionate about. I know this myself from being a former school principal. We had to do revenue returns and we had so much landing on the desk and, unfortunately, that situation has only got worse in recent years.

As I said, there are clusters of this pilot in Galway, Donegal and Mayo. I think its extension nationally would be one way of helping principals.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Deputy for sharing her own experience, which is so relevant. Ultimately, the existing models of leadership and governance in our schools place a

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burden on school principals as well as boards of management and the sector as a whole. It is a very difficult balance to strike to get the appropriate level of checks and balances which are critical for both our students and the industry and to make sure we are not overburdening principals, in particular, and school leaders.

Recognising these challenges, the Department of Education and Youth is now putting an increased focus on leadership and governance at school level and across the sector nationally. Department officials, in conjunction and in consultation with education partners, are examining the current policies and practices to see what elements are serving school communities well and what elements can be improved on. The Deputy put it very well herself when she said we want teachers to be able to do what they do best, that is, to teach, which is what they are passionate about. We want to empower them to be able to do that.

The Deputy mentioned the small schools project. To give her an update on that, the feedback from the 26 small schools has been really positive. That is reflected in the interim evaluation report, which is due to be published by the Department shortly. The independent review identifies potential areas for closer collaboration and an analysis of the scalability of actions already undertaken. There will be evaluations as this continues. I reassure the Deputy that it will form a strong basis that will inform future policy as regards the direction for all small schools. That feeds into the delivery of this important programme for Government commitment we have.

As regards the new administrative supports, there are currently trial roles being actively recruited in two of the six clusters, which is really interesting. We will be able to evaluate that. It will look at things like leadership and governance, at both primary and post-primary level, and will all be about supporting school leaders and the school communities better. As the Deputy said, the small schools pilot will be really interesting for us to learn from and, hopefully, to be able to get learnings that we can roll out right throughout Ireland.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 10.34 p.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 25 Meitheamh 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.34 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 25 June 2025.