



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoín, 26 Meitheamh 2025

Thursday, 26 June 2025

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

National Treatment Purchase Fund

1. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the steps she has taken to ensure that Health Service Executive and National Treatment Purchase Fund spending on insourcing initiatives is transparent and accountable; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34742/25]

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy David Maxwell: Deputy Clarke is asking this question on behalf of Deputy Cullinane.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach for facilitating us.

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): The Government remains committed to increasing capacity in the public system. The commitment is underpinned by unparalleled levels of investment as we move to universal access to health care. However, until the capacity is in place to meet the increased levels of demand, it is necessary in the interim to make use of all available capacity in the public and private systems to ensure that patients have access to the care they need.

The waiting list action plan 2025 includes targeting the delivery of additional capacity in the public and private systems through a co-ordinated approach by the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF. NTPF insourcing initiatives are governed by a memorandum of understanding, MOU, between the NTPF and the relevant public hospital. Under the MOU, the public hospital confirms that any such work is additional work over and above core hospital activity and is specifically carried out to reduce waiting lists.

In early April I requested that the HSE CEO initiate a detailed survey of all insourcing activity within the HSE to include activity funded directly by the hospital concerned and by

the NTPF. The review is being co-ordinated through his office, assisted by finance, internal audit, HR and access and integration functions. The outcome of this review is expected shortly and will determine the appropriate next steps. We need to move away from this model by maximising internal underutilised capacity, while at the same time not negatively impacting on patient waiting times and outcomes.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I want to begin by acknowledging the great work done by staff in Children's Health Ireland, CHI. However, in the past month details of an unpublished report conducted on the clinical department of CHI at Crumlin hospital has been put into the public domain. One of the revelations in the report was a finding of several inappropriate and unnecessary NTPF-funded Saturday clinics conducted by a consultant. The report details how a consultant was facilitated to set up hundreds of appointments for patients who did not need to see him. He then placed these patients on his own waiting lists, which resulted in patients waiting twice as long as they would have otherwise. The report states that 95% of those patients could have been accommodated during normal working hours, that is Monday to Friday, without the need for NTPF funding. How confident is Minister that the audit will be able to identify this type of misuse of funds?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: It is an excellent question. It is exactly what I have asked Bernard Gloster to do. Of course, I have to wait for the report to be able to express my confidence in the quality of the work that has come back. The Deputy may take that as a reference example. As I said in my opening reply, if there was underutilised capacity, that is, as the report states, other people in the hospital could have held surgeries at an earlier period but did not due to the waiting list management process, that is very serious.

In advance of receiving the insourcing report, we have mandated a centralised referral mechanism so that if someone is referred to surgery, they are not referred to Jennifer, Sorca or whoever. Rather, patients are referred to the system and will then be allocated an appointment according to capacity rather than an individual consultant having the capacity to manage their lists or patients in a way that is unhelpful.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I thank the Minister. There has been a significant increase in Saturday clinics over the past years. An example of this concerns scopes. More than 10% of scopes are now done on a Saturday but the distribution is very uneven across hospitals. Of the scopes carried out in Cavan hospital, one third are now done on a Saturday, that is 900 out of a total of 2,700. However, hospitals are still conducting fewer scopes than they were in 2019 when all services were provided between Monday and Friday. Waiting lists did not reduce during 2024 but they have reduced this year.

The system may be working and I do not doubt Cavan hospital in that regard. However, the CHI revelations are startling and there is real concern that this may be the tip of the iceberg. There is also concern that the quality might be suffering in some of the Saturday clinics or productivity could be higher during Monday to Friday. How is the Minister ensuring that hospitals are preventing the misuse of public funds and controlling spending and waiting lists initiatives? What is the breakdown of weekend hospital activity between the new public consulting contract and the fee paying service clinics? What action does Minister intend to

take if she is not happy or there are unanswered questions when Bernard Gloster and the HSE bring forward the audit report?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The Deputy raised the issue I am concerned about, namely that there are incentives to be under productive during the working week with a view to, or which have the outcome of, very busy clinics on Saturdays or bank holiday Mondays. That is exactly the sort of incentive I need to see stop.

I cannot speak to the relative activity because I do not have that data. The Deputy's example is precisely the sort of example that prompted me to conduct the work on insourcing. I wish I was a couple of weeks ahead and had the data and could give her a better answer, but I will have the information during the next Priority Questions session. The Deputy is highlighting exactly what I might be concerned about.

To be fair, Saturday clinics and the NTPF meet those who have waited the longest and there is a need for that work, as she acknowledged. These sorts of incentives or opportunities are precisely what I am trying to identify, along with variations across hospitals or specialisms within hospitals, which is also important. I want to find ways to make sure that we are not permitting those incentives and there is a standardised approach that we can stand over and thereby reduce our dependence on such a system.

Cancer Services

2. **Deputy Pádraig Rice** asked the Minister for Health if her attention has been drawn to the failure of a number of symptomatic breast disease clinics to see newly referred patients within ten working days (details supplied); the steps being taken to ensure that these clinics meet their targets; if the required resources will be allocated to these clinics to ensure there is adequate staffing; to provide an update on the programme for Government commitment to 'protect diagnostic pathways and invest in infrastructure and equipment to meet target treatment times outlined in the national cancer strategy; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [35169/25]

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Access to symptomatic breast disease clinics has become a postcode lottery. Following an urgent GP referral, a person should be seen by a clinic within two weeks. However, timely access to these clinics varies widely. Last year, only four out of nine hospitals met the target of seeing 95% of urgent referrals within two weeks. The other five failed. The Mater Hospital only reached 29%, St. James's Hospital 51% and Letterkenny 58%. Some of these are shocking failures. It should not matter where one lives; no person should have to wait more than two weeks. These are urgent referrals. Where is the sense of urgency?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: There are nine HSE rapid access symptomatic breast disease clinics nationally, as the Deputy knows. The HSE has set a target of 95% of urgent referrals being seen within ten working days. Non-urgent referrals should be seen within 12 weeks. The HSE national cancer control programme monitors the performance of these clinics. Last year, national compliance with targets was 76% for urgent and non-urgent referrals but I recognise the variations the Deputy described. While five centres generally met or exceeded

the targets during the year, four did not. This is often caused by staff shortages or problems in accessing diagnostics or radiology services.

These clinics consistently operate at full capacity. Unfortunately, any disruption to services can lead to a backlog, which can take time to clear. Where a performance issue arises, the HSE implements site-specific measures, but it may also need to implement regional measures, which we can discuss further. These can include funding additional clinics or providing locum cover where necessary.

The national cancer control programme is also developing new or modified pathways for certain patient cohorts. These aim to make better use of available capacity and provide appropriate access for high-risk patients such as those with a family history of breast cancer. My Department is also reviewing diagnostic services to ensure that capacity is fully maximised. The Government's commitment to cancer services is reflected in significant investment, with more than €105 million provided for cancer services under the national cancer strategy, including €23 million in 2025. Nevertheless, there is a great deal more I would like to say about it. Perhaps I can do so in a supplementary reply.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: One report states that one in four people waited longer than recommended for an appointment at these urgent clinics. I would like to share with the Minister the experiences of two women from north Dublin. They had to wait for in excess of the two-week period to be seen by the Mater's symptomatic breast clinic. In February, one woman was referred by GP due to the presence of two lumps in her breast. However, when the Mater Hospital received the referral, she was told the waiting time to be seen had risen to three months.

Let us imagine receiving this news at a time of extreme uncertainty and fear. It was May before she received her appointment at the Mater. Another symptomatic patient in the Mater who had been waiting for an appointment since April was seen last Monday, two months later. During these agonising two months all these women were told was that the Mater's BreastCheck clinic was understaffed and there was no estimated appointment date to be provided. In what world is this acceptable? What has happened to this country's cancer services? Cancer care used to be regarded as the jewel in the crown of our health services.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The Deputy is right. Yesterday I was at St. James's Hospital and it and Trinity College have become one of the accredited cancer centres of the Organisation of European Cancer Institutes. There are many accredited centres but this is at a different level. It is the most prestigious award for cancer control. The Deputy is correct that we have very good services. He asked in what world is this acceptable. There is no world in which it is acceptable and there is no world in which the Mater's figures are remotely acceptable.

Let me also say that like the Deputy I have correspondence from the breast health unit in the Mater and I am deeply disappointed with the content and the tone of the letter being sent to women who are not just going for BreastCheck but who are going because there is a problem. I have written to the CEO of the Mater hospital to express my concern about this and to ask for the number of people waiting on it. I have also asked the regional executive officers for that area and the adjoining area, which includes St. Vincent's University Hospital and Tallaght

University Hospital, to come up with a regional solution that meets the needs because this is absolutely unacceptable.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: We absolutely need better planning here. A lot of this comes back to staffing. Greater resources must be allocated specifically to breast clinics to ensure adequate staffing throughout the country, regardless of where people live. To secure cancer care pathways greater workforce planning is required but this cannot be siloed in the Department of Health. We need joined-up thinking. The Departments of Health and higher education must work together to ensure people are able to access places on various healthcare courses, especially radiology given its key role in diagnostics. The HSE also has a role as it must ensure there are enough clinical placements for trainees. Crucially, we need to ensure people can stay in Ireland to work in our healthcare system after qualification. As the Minister has said, these are very concerning findings. These are women who have symptoms and who are waiting for too long to be seen. It needs to be addressed urgently.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy and I agree with him on all of these points. Yesterday at the health committee we covered some of the workforce planning issues and the expansion of training places. It is also a workforce management issue and the variation between hospitals is well noted. I am told that in the Mater there have been long-standing recruitment challenges but they have been stabilised. There has been a consistently high volume of urgent referrals with difficulty in accessing radiology in St. James's Hospital. A lean project is under way to improve efficiencies. In Letterkenny the hospital has met the urgent KPI targets for the past three months, although the figure for the year to date is 85% following a poor performance in January. St. Vincent's Hospital has been meeting the urgent KPI since last September and it is at 99%. Cork University Hospital remains in the 80% to 90% range for urgent referrals.

I know the Deputy did not raise this necessarily in the parliamentary question but Galway University Hospital's performance this year has averaged 33% but it is expected to show improvement in May because of the appointment of a replacement breast surgeon. He and I are having to discuss this on a hospital-by-hospital basis and we have to make sure the system is across itself.

Health Services

3. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the steps she has taken to improve governance and accountability at Children's Health Ireland, CHI; if she will publish the unpublished review of a department at CHI at Crumlin; the steps she has taken to address issues highlighted in that report; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34743/25]

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Will the Minister detail the steps she has taken to improve governance and accountability at Children's Health Ireland and will she publish the unpublished review of a department at CHI at Crumlin? Will she outline the steps she has taken to address the issues highlighted in the report?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: In response to a series of reviews which raised corporate and clinical governance concerns at CHI, I have moved to strengthen governance and oversight structures at CHI in a range of different ways. This was done via the appointment of two members of the HSE board to the board of CHI on 28 May. There are more board appointments to be made. This means that all but one members of the board have been appointed since 2024. This is a different reference period to some of these activities.

The service level agreement between CHI and the HSE has been strengthened, and there is significantly increased involvement from the Dublin and midlands regional executive officer. Recognising the need to co-ordinate oversight of the range of matters of focus in CHI in a cohesive fashion, the HSE CEO has established the HSE CHI improvement steering group. These actions are designed to support the new CEO in CHI and enable her to continue with the transformation programme she has started.

Regarding the 2022 internal examination referenced by the Deputy, I have been advised by the Attorney General that I do not have the legal basis to publish this report. I sought that legal advice with a view to trying to put it into the public domain correctly. I received it correctly but it is the property of CHI and I do not have the power myself to publish it. Any publication must be made by CHI. On 16 June, CHI published a summary of the report. Subsequent to my letter on 26 May requesting a response from the CHI board to the report, on 18 June I wrote to the CHI board requesting assurance that the recommendations have been addressed in full. I also emphasised the priority I place on child patient safety issues and asked the board to report directly to me on the status of the children that may have been impacted.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: There has been scandal after scandal at CHI. There were inappropriate spring implants, possibly hundreds of unnecessary hip surgeries and now a scathing leaked report of an examination of a clinical department at Crumlin hospital. The report has raised exceptionally serious concerns and it follows the Boston review, the HIQA review into unauthorised springs and the hip dysplasia audit. We would not know about the first two reports if it were not for whistleblowers who came forward, and the third report was released by HIQA. The approach from CHI has been unacceptable. It has stonewalled and refused to release the report in full. It has also refused to report the misuse of public funds to the Garda. The HSE took doing this into its own hands earlier this month. The HSE said CHI did not even share the report with it until after it was leaked. At a time when we hope to move into the new children's hospital in the coming two years, confidence and trust in CHI has never been lower. What steps is the Minister taking to address this? In terms of the new board members coming in, how does she intend to hold the previous board members to account?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The Deputy will note the number of resignations from the board. She has identified a series of important and serious issues, most of which we knew would be coming because of the concerns raised by whistleblowers and others. Reports were correctly commissioned with HIQA by the HSE and CHI. We knew they would come but, as she pointed out, the report that was not shared with either the HSE or the Department raises very serious concerns. It comes from 2022 when it should have been shared and addressed properly but it is today that we have to address it. I recognise that we have nearly a new board. We certainly have a new CEO who was appointed in February and is establishing an executive team around her, all of whom are new to the system. I will work directly with them to ensure

this is taken forward. Of course I have stronger confidence because of the increased involvement of the HSE. There is ongoing reporting to me of what is happening about the implementation of the various issues. I am concerned in particular, of course, from a patient safety perspective.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: There are still 226 children waiting on spinal surgery. Of these, 34 children have been waiting longer than six months. There are also many more who were removed from waiting lists because they were left for so long that they have become inoperable. One of these is a young lad called Mikey. He is from Mayo and is aged 16. He has severe scoliosis. Last September Mikey's parents were told by CHI that he is not fit for surgical intervention. The letter did not indicate any pathway for Mikey. His parents have asked many times for a second opinion abroad. Last month my colleague Deputy Conway-Walsh, who is from the county, raised this with the Taoiseach and he stated he was of the view that a second opinion should be facilitated. The family has had no update from CHI in this regard. Will the Minister make sure that Mikey and children like him get the second opinion they need?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I want to be very careful of the privacy of Mikey and his family but I have met him and I have met his family. I am aware of the various issues. On foot of meeting them, I put in train a process and perhaps I might speak to the Deputy about it privately rather than on the floor of the Dáil, recognising his privacy.

With regard to scoliosis and the issue of waiting times, it is a source of great frustration to me that there has been so much additional investment, both financial and personnel, into the system but we are not getting what I would regard as a commensurate increase in output or productivity. They sound like harsh words but I mean surgeries for children who need them. It is very important to look at the work the HSE internal auditor will do. The auditor will look at three specialisms, two of which will be surgical and one medical.

The auditor will examine the waiting list management within that, and I imagine that scoliosis will be one of those areas that will be examined. Again, I reiterate the importance of a central referral system, which manages it on behalf of the team, rather than individuals managing their own lists.

Departmental Schemes

4. **Deputy Marie Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if she will act to protect front-line healthcare workers impacted by long Covid and who are in receipt of the special scheme of paid leave; if she plans to extend this scheme or recognise long Covid as an occupational illness to qualify for occupational injury benefit payments; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34984/25]

Deputy Marie Sherlock: As the Minister knows, the scheme for special leave for those who contracted long Covid is due to expire on in four days on 30 June. A total of 166 employees of section 38 organisations and the HSE are currently in receipt of this payment. To be frank, the response to date has been downright disrespectful and degrading to those who gave so much and risked so much at a time of such uncertainty and risk in this country. What plans has the

Minister put in place and what actions has she taken to protect those health workers who have contracted long Covid?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy.

The role our healthcare workers played during the pandemic cannot be overstated, particular at the very early stage of it. They went beyond the call of duty, working in front-line environments, treating Covid-19 positive patients, particularly in the early days when the control mechanisms were what they ultimately became and while the risk was extraordinarily great. In response to that, a temporary scheme was put in place for 12 months in July 2022 to support eligible staff who were impacted by long Covid in the public health sector. The intention of this scheme was to support those employees working in Covid-19 environments in the time before PPE and vaccinations were readily available. It is my understanding that approximately 159 employees are currently on the special scheme, the majority of whom have been supported on full pay for almost five years.

My Department has always worked hard to ensure supports have been in place for those workers impacted by long Covid. At the Department of Health's request, the now Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation has agreed to extend the scheme on four occasions, most recently at the end of June 2024, when it was extended for a further 12 months for the existing group of employees being supported by it. However, I understand the Department of public expenditure was clear at the time that this was the final extension that would be granted. As such, the special scheme will conclude on 30 June 2025.

I reassure, to the extent that I can, those 159 employees who have been supported by the scheme for up to five years that they will continue to be supported. The full provisions of the public service sick leave scheme will apply for anyone who remains unable to return to work. The sick leave scheme provides full pay for three months and half pay for three months. This is followed by temporary rehabilitative remuneration, which can provide up to a further 547 days of paid leave. The critical illness protocol that forms part of the sick leave scheme may also provide additional supports for up to three years.

I am aware that concerns have been raised by a number of unions about the scheme ending, and I know that the matter was before the Labour Court on 11 June, the findings of which are currently awaited.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: As the Minister knows, people's lives have been turned upside down by long Covid. This is not any ordinary type of illness. This was contracted in the workplace, yet there has been a persistent refusal by this State, in sharp contrast to the vast majority of EU member states, to recognise Covid as an occupational illness. The refusal to extend this scheme or to put in place a long-term framework for those who contracted Covid in the workplace reflects a shocking lack of empathy and respect for those workers. The reality is that the sick pay scheme currently in operation across the public service runs out after a period. As workers have described it to me, the special scheme has been a lifeline. There is a different pay calculation for that scheme relative to the ordinary sick pay scheme. The crucial point is that these workers have ultimately been told they are five years on and to get over it, but that is not their lived reality.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: There is no intention not to recognise that or to not be empathetic, which is why the scheme for full pay was there for five years. I am aware that the Minister for Social Protection has reviewed the EU recommendation in respect of the recognition of Covid-19, not long Covid, for an occupational illness. Following that review, it was determined that Covid-19 did not meet the requirements to be recognised as an occupational illness in the context of the occupational injuries benefit scheme and the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005.

It is important to recognise that the EU advisory committee on health and safety recommended the recognition of Covid-19 and not long Covid as an occupational illness in health and social care settings. As I said, the Minister for Social Protection reviewed those recommendations and did not recognise it in the context of the occupational injuries benefit scheme. While many EU countries recognised Covid-19 as an occupational illness or injury, this related to Covid-19 and not long Covid. It is not clear that any country sustained full pay for workers suffering from long Covid in the same way Ireland has for its public health workers through the special scheme we have had to date.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: With respect, the Government is splitting hairs in distinguishing between Covid-19 and long Covid. Clearly, long Covid resulted from Covid-19. The reality is that the request has been for a framework to be put in place to support these specific workers. We are only talking about health workers. We are not talking about gardaí or the many other front-line workers who went out to work during that period. The Government gave false hope last year that some sort of scheme would be put in place. Now those hopes have been dashed. It is shameful that people have had to go to the High Court and that unions have had to go to the Labour Court to try to get respect for those workers who contracted this illness in the workplace. My direct appeal to the Minister is that she ensures some sort of new scheme will be put in place in specific recognition of those workers, their experiences, their desire to get back to work and their need to be supported. The scheme should be separate from the sick pay scheme that exists in the health service.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Again, I recognise that the findings of the Labour Court are still awaited and I respect that. I will also reiterate the terms of the sick leave scheme. Having been on full pay for five years, the healthcare workers may receive further full pay for three months, half pay for three months, temporary rehabilitative remuneration for 547 days of paid leave and the critical illness protocol that forms part of the sick leave, which provides additional support for up to three years.

I appreciate the distinction, importantly, the Deputy has not made between Covid and long Covid. Nevertheless, when we look at the EU comparison, we are not aware of any case such as that. If the Deputy is aware of any case where any country sustained full pay for workers suffering from long Covid in the way Ireland did, I ask her to please bring it to me. We have tried to take an empathetic and supportive approach. The Minister for Social Protection has reviewed the EU position to determine how this works with the occupational injuries benefit scheme. The public service sick leave scheme is an important scheme in the context of supporting all people in the public service.

Health Services

5. **Deputy Charles Ward** asked the Minister for Health the process she is currently undertaking in choosing a location for a surgical hub for the north west, as outlined in the programme for Government; the factors that will be considered in choosing the location; if this decision will be based solely on geography, population, demographics, day case numbers and staffing numbers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [35141/25]

Deputy Charles Ward: It will be no surprise to the Minister what I am asking her today. The decision of where to locate the surgical hub in the north west is an important one. Therefore, transparency in the decision-making process is vital. Will she outline, in detail, what factors will be considered when choosing the surgical hub for the north west?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy.

As part of the Government's ambulatory care policy and in advance of the new elective hospitals, the HSE is developing surgical hubs across the regions. They will play an important role in separating scheduled and unscheduled care, reducing waiting times, thereby improving access and care for patients. The programme for Government committed to delivering six new hubs and exploring the provision of an additional surgical hub for the north west. No decision has yet been made on a location for this hub and the business case has not yet been submitted to my Department. I visited Letterkenny on 1 May to better see and understand the hospital and the supporting environs, such as the 110-bed community nursing unit across the way that is under construction and the excellent Errigal hub, which is also across the way from Letterkenny Hospital.

On 11 June, I believe I met with all Oireachtas Members for Donegal. Last week, I also met with representatives of doctors and consultants in Letterkenny, who have engaged with me very constructively and positively on this issue. It was a wide-ranging discussion, and I have committed to meet with them again soon. I am open to listening to them and to understanding the issues, which I share, regarding surgical capacity in Letterkenny in the medium and long term. I look forward to my next engagement with them to best determine the way to deliver healthcare for the people of the north west.

Deputy Charles Ward: I thank the Minister for outlining that. The location of the surgical hub has generated a lot of public interest. It has the potential to impact many people's lives across the north west. It is important we get it right. As I said to the Minister, this is not a Sligo versus Donegal issue. The north-west region alone is disadvantaged in many ways. We should not be forced to fight over squeezed resources. Ideally, to address the imbalance in healthcare and to meet the current demand, two surgical hubs should be established. All I can say, as someone who has worked on the ground in Donegal, is that the case for a surgical hub in Letterkenny is overwhelming. Donegal consultants and GPs who met with the Minister last week outlined this. I am asking her to take their experiences and all the data presented into account. The public needs reassurance that the decision will be data-driven and free from influence.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank Deputy Ward and I assure him, representatives from Donegal, the consultants and doctors in Letterkenny and the people of Donegal more broadly that I will do precisely that. I am committed to that region. That is why I visited it a number of weeks into becoming Minister for Health in order to understand for myself. I cannot look at it on a map or look at drawings. I have to be there to understand the dynamics and to listen to people, which is precisely why I went and have tried to engage in this way. No decision has been made yet. I ask Deputy Ward to give me a little bit more time to work out how to manage this.

I wish to update the House on the operation of the surgical hubs. I was in St. James's Hospital yesterday. To update the House, the surgical hub that has opened in Mount Carmel Community Hospital has seen 1,000 patients already. The CEO of St. James's Hospital informs me that its pain relief list is nearly clear because they are able to give pain injections. The surgical hubs are really important.

In respect of what Deputy Ward describes, I know and respect the geography of Donegal. It is important we have capacity there to deliver these different services. I ask Deputy Ward to allow me a little bit of time. I am trying to work on it.

Deputy Charles Ward: I thank the Minister for her engagement on this matter. She has been proactive and committed to ensure that all the data and experiences are being taken into account. We appreciate this. In Donegal, we are grateful the Minister is listening to us. We are fighting our corner and are willing to listen. The Minister is taking all the situations into account. We appreciate and understand that.

All the TDs in Donegal are united on this matter. We are disappointed and honestly shocked that the HSE decided no consideration be given to Letterkenny for the surgical hub, despite overwhelming data presented to it, including the geographic population, demographics, day case numbers and staffing numbers of the hospital. It is hard not to feel a bit despondent when faced with this. I truly appreciate the Minister's consideration and I look forward to engaging with her in the future on this matter.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank Deputy Ward and I hear what he is saying about his experience of the HSE. That is important. It is also important to reflect on local hospital management and their responsibility to advance cases on behalf of the hospital. When I met Deputies from Donegal, I went through the projects that had been advanced and supported. I recognised there was, in my view, insufficient surgical ask by the local hospital management. While I am not trying to deflect from the surgical hub issue in any sense, it is also important there is a real development control plan for Letterkenny University Hospital for the medium and long term in the way that has been successful in Galway and other places. I strongly urge Deputies to pressure for and demand this sort of approach for Letterkenny. However, do not allow me in any way to attempt to confuse that with the specific surgical hub issue, which is more pressing and immediate.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Regulatory Bodies

6. **Deputy Marie Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health her plans to strengthen the inspection and regulatory regime in HIQA; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34932/25]

Deputy Marie Sherlock: We are all reeling from the revelations about Beneavin nursing home and the nursing home in Portlaoise in recent weeks. It is clear that HIQA has given a wide berth to nursing homes when it comes to its inspection regime, which is in sharp contrast, I might argue, to how other authorities regulate, such as the Food Safety Authority and the Health and Safety Authority. I wish to hear from the Minister and Ministers of State as to how the inspection and regulatory regime will be strengthened within HIQA.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I will answer on HIQA specifically and ask the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, for his perspective as well. HIQA plays a crucial role in ensuring high-quality and safe care for patients using our health and social care services. The Government strongly supports HIQA in maintaining and strengthening its critical regulatory role. While it provides an important role, it also needs improvement. A number of changes to both primary and secondary legislation have been made in recent years to expand and reinforce HIQA's functions. Under the Patient Safety (Notifiable Incidents and Open Disclosure) Act 2023, HIQA's remit has been expanded into private health services and hospitals. Other legislative amendments have strengthened the regulatory framework in nursing homes, giving HIQA additional new powers in the areas of enforcement, data collection and compliance notices.

My Department has committed significant financial support to HIQA, reflecting its expanded regulatory role. The budget allocation of non-capital expenditure from my Department to HIQA in 2025 is €35 million, which is a considerable increase of more than 60% compared with the €21.4 million allocation in 2022. It is likely HIQA's regulatory responsibilities will expand further under future developments, such as the patient safety (licensing) Bill, the provisions of which I took to Cabinet this week.

I met with HIQA last week. Along with the Minister of State and I, it is considering what is needed to further strengthen its regulatory role and processes, in particular to reflect the changing dynamic of the nursing home market and sector and the ownership structures within those. That is important. I will continue to work closely with HIQA in reviewing its powers and exploring ways to improve and strengthen its inspection and regulatory regime. As I said, that includes exploring how HIQA can best deal with regulating larger corporate entities that operate in the nursing home space.

It is important to say - and I know the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, has been strong on this - that there is a need to report in real time, rather than some months later. We must have better visibility over this at an earlier stage. HIQA is an important institution in this State which has done exceptionally good work. I have good confidence in it. Everything, be it this House, HIQA and everything else, needs process and institutional development improvement in response to these events.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I thank the Minister. There are four clear systemic issues within HIQA at the moment, notwithstanding that it is a much-trusted institution in the public's mind. That confidence has been dented, however. Clear legislative change and clarity are needed in four areas. The first issue is in regard to the licensing. I welcome what the Minister is saying about the licensing of corporate institutions and their intervention into the market. The second issue is the inspection regime. There is a large degree of ambiguity as to the point at which HIQA can intervene on the basis of an individual complaint or its own inspections. The third issue is enforcement. It is crazy we are having this debate about whether it can fine. While HIQA has powers to go to the District Court, it has never used them. The final issue concerns liability. There is a glaring gap in that regard. Liability on the part of directors does not appear to be pursuable. While staff are going to be pursued for wrongdoing, and rightly so, there must also be liability on the part of the directors.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): The Deputy and I have engaged intensively at the health committee. I will go through the points she raised. With regard to the licensing, there is absolutely a lacuna there at the moment. Within a group of companies, the licensing inspection is on individual nursing homes and who they are run by, but the parent company is not under HIQA's remit. I want that to be changed. There is an acceptance in that regard.

In respect of the inspection regime, HIQA does an inspection on the day. When it publishes its report, which might be a number of months later, it is based on that inspection. I want to see that report updated with the current position of the nursing homes and whether they have complied with any conditions required of them under the inspections. That makes common sense.

In the context of HIQA's enforcement powers, it is correct to say that HIQA cannot issue fines directly. We have no issue in this regard. It is something HIQA recommends and we very much support.

When it comes to liability, these are all areas we are looking at. The key thing is that HIQA has acknowledged the need for change in terms of updating schedules. We will work with it on that.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: There is an added piece with regard to leadership. In the responses at the health committee last week, in the instance of Beneavin nursing home, there is 100% non-compliance with fire safety systems in that building. We were told that it does not relate to the structure, but rather only to the fire systems.

If the fire systems are not fully operational, there is an immediate fire risk. It may not happen today or tomorrow, but it could happen at some stage and there is a very real patient safety risk. To hear that sort of response and lack of urgency on the part of the leadership of HIQA is deeply troubling. There needs to be very clear action taken to ensure that the leadership team of HIQA is fit for purpose.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: The context here is quite simple. I always go back to the needs of older persons in nursing homes. What we saw in that programme with the residents in the nursing homes in Portlaoise and Beneavin was wanton neglect and abuse of older people. We

want to look at the regulatory system and how we can improve it. All aspects will be considered. This is ultimately about improvements and ensuring that older persons have the right and entitlement to be in nursing homes that are safe. We are working with HIQA to ensure that we enhance the regulatory system.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: It is exceptionally important to acknowledge that our focus here is on HIQA, but HIQA did not do and did not enable what happened in the nursing homes. I want to take a moment to reflect on the fact that the provider and the individuals involved are ultimately responsible. We will also work with HIQA but let us first and foremost direct our ire at the providers of the nursing homes.

Medicinal Products

7. **Deputy Shane Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health if the Belgian model is being examined in the context of the programme for Government commitment to investigate early access schemes for rare disease treatments; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34617/25]

Deputy Shane Moynihan: The Minister is no doubt aware of the cases of those who suffer with Duchenne muscular dystrophy, a matter which has been raised in the Dáil a number of times, as well as with the Minister directly, not least because of the Thompson boys in my own constituency. This has brought into focus the need for an early access scheme for rare disease drugs. I know there is a commitment to this in the programme for Government that has been discussed before. What considerations is the Department is taking into account? Is it looking at other models internationally of how such a scheme might be applied?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I recognise the importance of timely access for patients to medicines, including new medicines. Supported by €128 million of funding, in the past four years the State has delivered access to 194 new medicines. Of these, 74 were for cancer and 49 were for rare diseases. Budget 2025 allocated €30 million for new medicines, to come from efficiencies to be identified by the HSE.

The Government has introduced a suite of new measures to enhance capacity in the HSE's pricing and reimbursement system, including 34 additional staff, which is a 100% increase, and a medicines application tracker to increase the transparency and efficiency of the process. Access to medicines requires industry and the State to work together, through timely assessment, reasonable pricing and fully completed health technology assessments. This partnership has already directly benefited patients, for example those with cystic fibrosis and other rare diseases. In this spirit of co-operation, I continue to encourage pharmaceutical companies to submit timely applications for their products so as to increase access for patients with unmet needs. It is also the responsibility of the HSE to improve its efficiency and it has been enabled to do that with the provision of a 100% increasing in staffing in that area.

All medicines are assessed from a clinical, economic and ethical standpoint, with no hierarchy of disease. Upon approval by the European Medicines Agency, applications for reimbursement are assessed by the HSE in the order in which they are received from applicant companies.

As outlined in the programme for Government, as the Deputy correctly identified, consideration will be given to various measures to address access to medicines. As part of this, my Department is looking at reimbursement systems across the European Union, including Belgium. We are working closely with our Benelux partners on access to medicines where we have had some previous success.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: It is great to hear about the progress that has been made in implementing the recommendations of the Mazars report on this subject that was published some years ago. That goes to the heart of the extra resourcing that the Minister spoke about. She is right; there needs to be a partnership between industry and the State to make sure that these applications are put through immediately and that the HSE can adjudicate on them accordingly. I am very encouraged to hear that the Department is considering other systems internationally, like the Belgian model. This model is particularly interesting because it shows a way in which timely access to these drugs that is not necessarily contingent on EMA approval can be provided. That is based on EU Regulation No. 726/2004. Article 83 of the regulation provides access to medications that are in late stage clinical development, expected to receive EU marketing authorisation and targeting patients with serious conditions. If we had those sorts of parameters for a scheme focused on early access to rare disease drugs, it would be a game-changer for many families that are afflicted with these conditions.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I want to put a little bit of context on this. The State spent more than €3 billion in 2023 providing medicines to patients. We sometimes forget that €3 billion of the health spend goes to providing medicines. That is appropriate but it is a major budgetary consideration as well. With the early access programmes, we have to get the balance right between being able to get access to the drugs and also being able to work out how that programme intersects with the State's ability to negotiate the right price for the drugs.

Regarding Duchenne muscular dystrophy, which the Deputy mentioned, I do not see how the State could be more proactive in trying to support this. On approval from the European Medicines Agency, I asked the CEO of the HSE and the Secretary General of my Department to find ways to support this. The HSE has proactively reached out to the company to ask it to submit an application. I made it my business to speak with the Italian Minister of Health at the EPSCO Council in Luxembourg to ask him to encourage the company to submit an application to Ireland. We will do everything we can because we recognise the life-changing implications of some of these drugs. However, as Minister, I must also point out that we have to get an early access programme right in a way that enables the State to get the best negotiating price for the delivery of drugs for everybody.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I appreciate the efforts of the Minister in this regard and I have conveyed that to the families involved. I am very grateful for the Minister's proactive approach. The beauty of getting an early access scheme right is that it does not necessarily rely on the proactivity of the State to be involved in that process but, rather, the partnership is hardwired into every piece of the system and the State is empowered to get value for money but also to ensure timely access to these drugs. In many cases of patients with rare diseases, time is the issue when it comes to stopping the deterioration of their conditions. I ask the Minister to keep

us updated on the Department's progress in looking at these international models and to ensure that the best practice we learn from those is applied in any such Irish case.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I will do so, Deputy.

Questions Nos. 8 and 10 taken with Written Answers.

Hospital Procedures

11. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the mechanism by which parents whose children were and are deemed to need hip dysplasia surgery at CHI hospitals at Temple Street and Cappagh will be able to get independent second opinions by experts of their choosing paid for by the HSE; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33749/25]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I want to ask the Minister the mechanism by which parents whose children are deemed to need hip dysplasia surgery at CHI hospitals such as Temple Street and Cappagh will be able to get independent second opinions by experts of their choosing, paid for by the HSE? I have spoken to the Minister on this previously and I believe she was working with Bernard Gloster on finding a solution to this issue, which is absolutely necessary.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I agree completely with the Deputy. However, my immediate priority is to ensure that there is clinical follow-up and care for patients who have undergone pelvic osteotomy surgery in accordance with the recommendations of the Thomas audit report. I am very aware that there are families around Ireland who are receiving letters and follow-up to say that surgery was not necessary on their child. I cannot imagine the distress that those families experience when they receive that sort of communication. I have spoken to families who are having that experience and it is so utterly distressing for them.

Clinical follow-up to skeletal maturity for children in CHI Crumlin, CHI Temple Street and the National Orthopaedic Hospital Cappagh, NOHC, is already under way for patients. These children have been identified and categorised by age, with a proportion of them being close to skeletal maturity and likely to need just one appointment. The clinic is structured as a one-stop multidisciplinary team model for assessment, and that includes consultation with a doctor, a physiotherapy assessment, an X-ray, if clinically indicated, and immediate documentation of findings. After this, patients enter the recommended normal follow-up process.

As of Monday, 23 June 2025, 115 appointments have been offered to CHI and NOHC patients. A total of 86 patients have been booked and 71 patients have been seen so far. Patients who request attendance at another hospital or with another consultant will have their request facilitated by CHI. It is important to say that the consultant who did the surgery is not the one who is doing the review, in the clinical follow-up. I will get to the expert review as well. I just want to make sure that this is on the record.

In relation to the retrospective reviews of cases, which is the second process, to determine the indications for surgery and whether they were warranted, the HSE is establishing a separate process, involving external experts. Professor Deborah McNamara, the president of RCSI, has agreed to assist the HSE in establishing the expert panel and terms of reference.

I have more information for the Deputy on that.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I do not think anyone will disagree with the assertion that we have had an absolute disaster and failure around children's care. Many have gone through operations they did not need. We need to deal with those children and make sure they are reviewed correctly and properly from a medical point of view and that they get the correct pathways afterwards.

I bring it up and brought it up before because I am thinking of a case in my constituency. A mam has three kids, two of whom had the operation. She has the question mark over their care, whether they needed the operations and all those terrible questions she is dealing with. She has another child who was to have an operation. We are talking about osteotomies. Her issue previously was it was delayed. Most people would believe what a medical expert tells them about whether an operation is needed.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I thank my colleague for tabling this question. We recently had CHI and the HSE in the committee on this issue. In the Gallery were representatives of the hip dysplasia advocacy group. Afterwards, I met one of those dads in the car park, a young dad and an awful nice guy. He was in a ball of tears. I do not know this man. I had never met him before and he had never met me. That is the level of distress these parents are under - crying to a perfect stranger in the car park of Leinster House. It is not something I ever thought I would see or something I ever want to see again.

I ask the Minister for two things. First, will she meet with the hip dysplasia advocacy group? Second, the HSE gave me a commitment that day to make all supports available to the parents. I ask that each and every one of them be offered psychology or counselling supports, given the level of distress these parents are under.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: My practice, as much as I possibly can, is to meet people. Like Deputy Clarke, I have met parents and seen the distress. I have parents in my constituency in this situation. There is no difference between our experiences of this. I cannot believe the distress being experienced by the parents of the 71 children. We are already identifying children. Parents are being told through this initial clinical follow-up that their child did not need this.

I will now update the Deputies on the expert review process to follow. We are in the process of establishing that panel. It is not complete but there are a number of experts from Canada and the United Kingdom. It is not surgeons within the system; it is very different. The clinical review follow-up, the first process, is expected to take about six months and for the secondary review panel, the independent expert one, it will take until September for the establishment of the team. We have four at the moment and there are a number of others to come. They need to agree the terms of reference; it is not for us to impose the terms of reference on them. They can assess each case as appropriate once they have begun.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I appreciate the timelines. The clinical review is six months and the Minister is saying it is September for the expert review process. The terms of reference are not set. We would like to think this will deal with the issue of the considerable timeline that

would need to be taken into account, the huge number of cases and the disparity. In the case of my constituent, can we find a process to ensure she can get the follow-up care for her daughters and can get an independent review she can trust in relation to her other child, who has been told she needs surgery? Trust is at an all-time low in relation to CHI. We need this work done as soon as possible. I ask the Minister to take into account many of the cases we have brought forward, particularly the parents who got reviews and, on that basis, did not go ahead with operations. I brought an issue like that to the Minister previously.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I do not know the exact details of the Deputy's constituent's case but for any child now indicated for surgery, the assessment is done in a very different way from how it happened before. Any such assessment is done by a multidisciplinary team, including a doctor. It is a cross-site piece of work including a physiotherapist assessment. It is not, as had been the case, that an individual consultant makes decisions in his or her own bubble. This is a multidisciplinary team. The Deputy's constituent or any Deputy's constituent who has a child indicated for surgery can, depending on the timing, get the assessment through the multidisciplinary team. It is very different from what was there before. I hope that will give her more confidence where she has questions relating to her child.

I agree with Deputy Clarke on counselling and psychological supports. Parents who take the advice of clinicians do so in the best interests of their child and now feel they have done something wrong in following that advice. It is a devastating thing to happen to a parent who is only trying to be a good parent and take the right decisions. They need support as much as their children do. I totally recognise that.

Disease Management

9. **Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí** asked the Minister for Health the status of the chronic disease Mmngement programme; the number of patients now enrolled; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34666/25]

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The GP chronic disease management programme commenced in 2020 and has been rolled out on a phased basis over four years to adults with either a medical card or, for GMS patients, a GP visit card. The aim of the programme is to prevent and manage chronic diseases. Since 2020, over 680,000 patients have been registered on the programme, including those who have exited the programme. Some 91% of patients now receive routine care in community settings, reducing their reliance on hospitals. An ICGP study found that for patients enrolled in the treatment programme, there were 30% fewer emergency department attendances, 26% fewer hospital admissions and 33% fewer GP out-of-hours attendances compared with their pre-enrolment rates.

The majority of patients manage their conditions through the GP chronic disease management programme. In addition, the 26 operational community specialist teams for chronic disease management, linking the care pathways between acute and community services, are delivering services from integrated care hubs located in or adjacent to primary care centres. They are fantastic. In 2024, over 354,000 patient contacts were provided by community specialist teams for chronic disease management, about 55% ahead of target, and

this year to the end of quarter 1, 108,000 patient contacts had already been provided by these teams, which is about 30% ahead of target.

The conditions covered by the programme are type 2 diabetes; asthma; chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, COPD; and cardiovascular disease. The treatment programme supports patients in managing their chronic conditions. Patients receive two reviews in a 12-month period, with each review including a practice nurse and a GP visit. GMS patients over 45 years of age found to be at high risk of cardiovascular disease or diabetes are enrolled in the prevention programme and receive one annual review. The prevention programme was expanded from 30 November 2023 to include adult GMS patients with hypertension and all women who have had a diagnosis of gestational diabetes or pre-eclampsia since 1 January 2023.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I am looking at this programme and it seems to be a quiet success story for the HSE. We hear very little about it. The Minister mentioned statistics regarding fewer presentations at emergency departments. That is a very good measure of success. The Minister mentioned some additional conditions that will be brought into it. I think she mentioned hypertension. It would be useful to have that list.

I see from the HSE's report that the overall uptake is pretty good but it is probably behind for younger sufferers, mainly because it has not been open to them for as long. Are there plans to promote it or make those patients aware they have this option? It is a very good option for those patients.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: That is right. It impacts early detection as well. As populations age - which ours is doing - the prevalence of chronic conditions, including multimorbidity, rises. Early protection through the chronic disease management programme prevents the need for more intensive hospital-based treatments. Since 2020, 51% of the new chronic disease diagnoses have been made through elements of this programme. It is not just treating more effectively; it is diagnosing more effectively and being able to divert attention to prevention and early intervention.

As regards expansion of the scheme, a further expansion of the programme to include chronic kidney disease is planned for the end of the year, and further expansion would include rigorous clinical assessment and engagement with stakeholders. Not all chronic conditions can be managed in that way and it is important to recognise the capacity of general practice and how we are trying to grow general practice at the same time. I have listed a number of conditions but I also want to flag that, for example, the Benbulbin hub in Sligo treats a range of different illnesses and it is separate from the hospital, and again and again, prevents hospital attendances.

Dental Services

12. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the progress made by the orthodontic services waiting list initiative for grade 5 patients; the location and number of successful tenderers; the number of patients it is anticipated will be seen in 2025; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [33748/25]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: This is a particular issue and there is huge cohort, in particular in the Louth hospital in Dundalk. Those with grade 4 issues were dealt with but those with grade 5 issues, which were more serious, were not. Obviously, the longer we leave this the greater an issue it is. It needs to be dealt with.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I can update the Deputy on the orthodontic waiting lists. As of April 2025, the HSE employs 14 consultant orthodontists and 36 specialist orthodontists nationally. There are almost 35 oral healthcare vacancies at the moment which the HSE is working to fill, including three specialist orthodontist whole-time equivalents, and a further 2.22 dental nurse whole-time equivalents. There are staffing challenges within orthodontic services in the Dublin and north-east region.

At present, both specialist orthodontists posts in Dundalk, which also serve counties Cavan and Monaghan, are vacant. The HSE is sanctioned to fill those posts and is actively pursuing both temporary and permanent recruitment options. A locum consultant orthodontist post is also being considered. The region also has orthodontic units in Navan and Ashtown, which have a combined total of two consultant orthodontists and five specialist orthodontist whole-time equivalents, currently filled and providing care in the Dublin and north-east region. The HSE is engaged to address the best use of existing funded private procurement options to support delivery of orthodontic care in the region.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Could the Minister come back to me regarding the waiting list initiative? We have submitted multiple parliamentary questions on this. This was one of the solutions. There had been a huge number of vacancies. It is positive that attempts are being made to fill these positions but we need to make sure it happens as soon as possible. I saw movement on those who were seen as grade 4 patients and who needed that orthodontic dental work done, but my fear is that those who fall into the grade 5 bracket have a greater medical need and the longer they are left, the greater the issues there may be. I accept the Minister might not have the answer in front of her, but I would appreciate it if she could come back to me with the specifics of this initiative to deal with the waiting lists. We need to make sure there is no hold up and slow down in filling these vacancies related to orthodontic services because the impact this could have could be serious.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I totally recognise that and I commit today to writing to the Deputy with a full answer on these points. However, as regards the waiting list initiative, there is €8.4 million for this year, provided on an ongoing basis this year to address the primary care waiting lists for children, including in orthodontics. The funding is ongoing rather than one-off and is provided to try to reduce the waiting lists and address increased demand for those services. In the area of orthodontics in 2025, €1.35 million is to be invested in the jaw surgery initiative, while €1.5 million is to be invested in the community-based treatment initiative. Up to the end of May, 128 patients had been transferred to private orthodontic treatment, with 33 receiving jaw surgery under that initiative. A higher number of grade 5 patients are commencing, progressing and completing treatment than grade 4, and I recognise the very serious impact that has, particularly on young people, and the need for timely surgery. I will come back to the Deputy with a complete and full answer.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I appreciate the Minister's response. We need information on timelines and tenders so that we can see light at the end of the tunnel in terms of delivering for those patients. The Minister accepts that we are talking about those with the most serious orthodontic need. The sooner that happens, the better. Otherwise we could be talking about people who need far more acute care, which will be a cost to them and their families and to the State. We need to ensure these initiatives, which have been promised, are up and running and work as soon as possible, while ensuring that those vacancies that exist in respect of orthodontic services, particularly in the Dublin and north-east region, are dealt with. This is an issue constantly raised in my constituency office. There is even communication from time to time from those who work in the services who see the stress parents are under as well as the pain and anguish children go through in these circumstances.

General Practitioner Services

16. **Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí** asked the Minister for Health the progress on increasing the number of GPs and GP practices across the country; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34667/25]

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: General practice plays a vital role in our health service but we need more GPs to improve access to services in some areas. To meet that need, the programme for Government has committed to increasing the number of practising GPs through a combination of increased training places and international recruitment. In part, to attract doctors to practice as GPs here, the Government has significantly increased expenditure on general practice, primarily through the 2019 and 2023 GP agreements. The agreements provide for increased fees for GPs, increased and new practice supports, and new services for patients, including the GP chronic disease management programme we spoke about.

The number of doctors entering GP training increased by 80% from 2019 to 2024. As a result, the number of GPs graduating has also increased and will increase more in the next few years. Evidence of strong interest in GP training and high-retention among GP graduates shows the positive impact of the Government's increased investment in general practice.

In addition, recruitment from abroad continues under the HSE and ICGP international medical graduate rural GP programme. Under the programme, doctors work in general practice while undergoing a two-year training programme. Currently, there are 118 such GPs in placement, while a further 18 have completed the course. The number of HSE-contracted GPs has increased by approximately 7% since 2020, although this is a key-target area for growth.

The recent ESRI publication on the future capacity requirements for GP services confirms the need to continue to increase our GP workforce in light of our growing and ageing population. The strategic review of general practice will be completed this year and will provide further recommendations to improve GP capacity and the sustainability of our general practice service.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I thank the Minister for her response. There is an assertion out there that GPs are being trained and are then leaving the country. My colleague, Deputy Colm Burke, tells me that is not the case. The turnover of GPs is typically 5% to 6%, which is very low. The Minister has laid out the potential GPs entering the system through the various

channels which is really positive. Perhaps the Minister could deal with the assertion they leave as fast as they come in and that they go abroad the minute they qualify.

My own Dáilcheantar, Dublin Bay North, is quite mature. We have a particularly difficult issue, in that I am contacted a lot by constituents looking to register with a GP, in particular younger people moving into the area and looking to register with a GP practice but who cannot do so.

10 o'clock

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: What we are talking about is the continued need to expand GP services, as we have pushed more and more services into the community and that is where we want services, such as the chronic disease management programme we discussed, to be delivered. It is the case that the number of GPs is increasing, albeit at different rates in different regions, but we have a particular challenge in rural Ireland. That is one of the reasons there is now a dedicated programme in the University of Galway. It is a specific rural GP programme to address some of the different slightly specialised issues. That is why I met the Medical Council recently. It was to address such cases as those of Irish people who trained in this system and got three or four years' experience abroad, who come back to Ireland and wish to work as a GP immediately. We need to make sure those people's registration process is triaged and expedited by the Medical Council, there being no reason those people should not be activated to work, as they wish to do and their communities need them to do, as quickly as possible. I have a good detailed list of the number of HSE contracted GPs. It is increasing. It is an option that was clearly identified in the programme for Government. Not everyone wants to set up a business. Some people want to work in a different structure and we are trying to enable more and more of that.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I support that, given that there are different models clinicians will want to work under. As the Minister said, not all of them will want to take the risk of setting up a GP practice with everything it entails. The Minister mentioned the chronic disease management programme. That is a classic example of where GPs have helped to make a big difference and it is clear from the HSE's assessment that they have been key in all the outcomes the Minister mentioned earlier.

Will the Minister comment on the issue of GPs leaving and whether it is a factor? She may not have that information today. It would be useful if she could share it at some stage so that we can deal with the issue that GPs seem to be leaving. I do not believe it because I know many of them and they are still here.

Deputy Colm Burke: In fairness to the Irish College of General Practitioners, it has done a huge amount of work as regards having more GPs trained and putting in place a programme for people who have worked abroad and now want to work in Ireland. It has a two year programme whereas for the normal training, people would have to produce evidence of having worked abroad.

One of the things we need to fast-track in a lot of areas, especially growing urban areas, is the provision of primary care centres so a whole range of services are available. One of the things that is happening with GPs is that they are specialising. Therefore, it is important that a

primary care centre is in place to provide a whole range of services and it allows GPs to deliver a far more comprehensive service in an area. The Department should work further on and encourage the HSE to deal with the issue of delivery primary care centres in a timely manner.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I agree on the delivery of primary care centres. It is difficult for me to speak in general terms about GPs or other medical staff leaving because there will always be a case of someone who has done that. It is not the general trend of what we are seeing. There is clearly work here. There is the opportunity to set up a business and work in one's own practice. There is the opportunity to work in HSE primary care centres and other more directly employed opportunities, that is to work in different ways and there is clearly a need for that. Notwithstanding that, the contracts in 2019 and 2023 were favourable and there is an opportunity to continue to expand practice. There are now direct diagnostic referrals from GPs to try to get GPs operating at the absolute top of their practice and experience. It is very attractive.

On the recent dialogue in the Dáil about the cost of living and some of the challenges in the price of groceries and other things, it is a source of great frustration to me that we have expanded eligibility for GP access cards to 430,000 people and only 72,000 of them have taken it up. We have tried to communicate. We will do more to try to communicate, but I ask every Deputy to communicate to their constituents as there are people who are entitled to free GP access cards. We are delighted to pay for them and it would be wonderful if they would take it up.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): I will go back to Question No. 13 and Deputy Carthy.

Hospital Equipment

13. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health if she will ensure that a CT scanner and MRI scanner are located within Monaghan Hospital. [34678/25]

Deputy Matt Carthy: I thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach for his latitude.

The Minister may be aware there has been a long saga in respect of Monaghan hospital since emergency and other services were removed by a previous Fianna Fáil Government. Will the Minister help with the evolution and redevelopment of Monaghan hospital by ensuring there is a CT and MRI scanner located on the hospital campus?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The Government is fully committed to the ongoing development of regional hospitals, including Cavan and Monaghan which operate as a single hospital entity, with integrated managerial and clinical governance systems, care pathways and support functions. Since July 2020, significant resources have been invested to meet the needs of patients using Cavan and Monaghan hospitals. The total budget for Cavan Monaghan General Hospital has increased by 30% from €115 million in 2020 to €149 million in 2025. Staffing has increased in the Cavan and Monaghan hospital by 295 people since January 2020. That is an increase of 26%. The budget has gone up by 30% and the staffing has gone up by 26%.

Median waiting times for patients attending the emergency department are within 3% of the national average. For those admitted to the hospital through the emergency departments, median waiting times are 10% lower than the national average. Cavan and Monaghan hospital has two CT scanners and one MRI scanner, which are located at the Cavan general hospital site. As with all CT scanners, I will be assessing how and when they are used. Cavan Monaghan General Hospital has made an application to the HSE national equipment replacement programme to replace the existing MRI scanner located at Cavan. This project has been approved and works are expected to be completed by the end of this year.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Cavan and Monaghan hospitals might be put together for operational purposes but it cannot be claimed that a service in one is equal to a service in the other. There are 47 km between the two sites. Perhaps that does not seem like much to some people, but if people are living in an area with no public transport and a poor ambulance service, that matters. When the Minister says that Cavan Monaghan General Hospital has two CT scanners and one MRI scanner, that does not deflect from the fact that Monaghan hospital has neither and that needs to change. There is a medical need. Currently, more than 1,500 people are waiting for an MRI appointment and more than 1,800 people are waiting for a CT appointment. By providing the services in Monaghan hospital, not only would the Minister be providing a service the people of Monaghan deserve, she would also be relieving the pressures that are on Cavan hospital.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Waiting times at Cavan Monaghan are improving a lot. Some 35% of outpatient appointments occurred within Sláintecare wait times compared with 25% in the same period last year, which is an improvement that needs to continue. Some 58% of inpatient day cases occur within the Sláintecare wait times, as do 95% of GI scopes, which is an improvement on 87% last year, and 94% to 100% of those waiting for outpatient, inpatient or day case, and GI scope appointments are waiting 12 months or less. I see progress there.

The application is from Cavan Monaghan General Hospital for the replacement of the MRI scanner located at Cavan. That is the application the hospital has made to the HSE.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The difficulty is that the application for scanners at Cavan hospital is made, as the Minister said, by Cavan Monaghan General Hospital, but Monaghan hospital needs these scanners and as I understand it, the staff there want them. The difficulty is that they have to go through this convoluted process Micheál Martin established that put Monaghan and Cavan hospitals together. What happens? Priorities are chosen and the priorities have never been the people, patients or even the staff at Monaghan hospital and that needs to change.

I am appealing to the Minister to engage directly on the ground with elected representatives, the staff of both hospitals and management of the Cavan Monaghan General Hospital and ask them how it is that there is capacity, willingness and eagerness in Monaghan hospital to deliver a service with MRI and CT scanners that is desperately needed by patients, yet there is a reluctance in the management group to ask for them.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I am sure the Deputy has discussed this in detail with the management group already. I wonder what response he got directly.

As I said, staffing at-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: Deputy Carroll MacNeill is the Minister. I am asking her to ask.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Deputy Carthy is the local representative in Monaghan so I assume he has discussed this in detail with hospital management.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Yes, I am not happy with the response so I am asking the Minister to ask.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): The Deputy should allow the Minister to answer.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: If the Deputy would like me to answer, I will do so.

The reality is that staffing has increased in Cavan Monaghan General Hospital by 26% but the increase in Monaghan has been 70%, so Monaghan is not being left behind. I look forward to going there and discussing all these issues, including the business cases submitted or not submitted by Monaghan hospital, as I am sure the Deputy already has.

Questions Nos. 14 and 15 taken with Written Answers.

Question No. 17 taken with Written Answers.

Pharmacy Services

18. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the up-to-date position on further plans on expansion of the role of community pharmacists; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34893/25]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Pharmacists have shown time and again their great capacity to expand services and provide more and more services to communities locally, for example, vaccinations, repeat prescriptions and in so many other different ways. Will the Minister outline the next steps in expanding the role of pharmacies in community care?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy. I am a huge advocate for the reform and expansion of pharmacy services and the Government is committed to ensuring people can access as much care as possible in the community including in pharmacy, which will play a very large and expanded role in this.

The report of the expert task force to support the expansion of the role of pharmacy was published in August 2024. Its findings provide a framework to inform how we are going to do that. My vision for the future includes pharmacists playing a much larger role in the health service. I am happy now to see the progress being made between my Department and the representatives of the Irish Pharmacy Union, IPU, in this regard.

The priority focus is the development and introduction of a common conditions service in community pharmacy. That service will be the first step in enabling full, independent pharmacist prescribing. It will allow pharmacists in Ireland to treat their patients for common conditions such as shingles, urinary tract infections and conjunctivitis. It will also support the development of new revenue streams for pharmacies.

Development of the service is well under way. It is led by the community pharmacy expansion implementation oversight group. That group meets monthly with the aim of developing the necessary enablers required to establish the common conditions programme. That includes clinical protocols along with the pharmaceutical regulator, new education and training for pharmacists and a package of required regulations.

We aim to have all of these in place to facilitate pharmacies to establish this new service before the end of the year. Deputy Ó Muirí asked about GP care. The huge advantage of this is that it will take some of the work from GPs into pharmacies that can be done more easily. From the patient's perspective, I would like a patient to be able to go into a pharmacy, be diagnosed for a simple and common condition of this kind and pay a fee to do so, and get their prescription there and then rather than go to a GP, pay a GP fee, go back to the pharmacy and pay for the prescription. All of that can be taken into one. The intention is that this would be the basis for beginning this, recognising that taking that approach will expand access to healthcare generally, and that patients in the general medical services, GMS, scheme and so on still have that option with GPs but now with, I hope, increased capacity.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I thank the Minister. She has kind of pre-empted my next question on GPs.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I am sorry.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: They are under pressure in the complexity and range and the load of the increasing population. GPs in many places are under pressure, especially in rural communities, and medical experts are available beside them with a willingness to expand out and give support.

On the common conditions, it is good to hear that the Minister is aiming to get that done in the months ahead before the end of the year. There is a limited number of conditions the Minister is focusing in on. What is the plan for expanding that out? Have the details on it been discussed yet? Will the Minister give an outline on expanding the conditions for which it could be available?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The first and most important thing is to take the steps forward to get this going. There was an inertia on that, if I may say, until recently. It has now been progressed and there are detailed negotiations to take the necessary steps forward. I would like to see this in place and operational and then be able to expand it appropriately. I have already said, I think, that the list of common conditions should be expanded. It is not going to be enough but it is no harm to get the practice under way as quickly as possible, make sure it is supported by the appropriate regulatory and training environment, and recognise that pharmacists themselves need more support and more pharmacists' assistants and technicians.

They are working under pressure in different ways and need to build their own capacity to do this as well.

My vision for it is that it is established, is working well and will be expanded as quickly as possible. Pharmacists are trusted and we need to expand this service as much as possible, recognising that will take that pressure off GPs. For an older woman, in particular, a urinary tract infection can be very dangerous. They need to be seen and diagnosed and get medication early rather than wait for a GP appointment. By moving that into pharmacy, it frees up that slot in a GP practice as well. It is a broader expansion and a good thing generally.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Pharmacists have been raising with me the Veterinary Medicinal Products, Medicated Feed and Fertilisers Regulation Act 2023 and the dispensing of medication for animals. The implementation of the statutory instrument on that is due shortly. They feel very much that this restricts the capacity to make available veterinary medical products, between the cost of getting a prescription and integration with the computer system and in so many different ways. Can we ensure there would be greater integration in, availability of and access to the prescription system? At the moment, a limited number of vets use the online system. Pharmacists are concerned that there is not access to it. Can we also ensure that pharmacists would be enabled to prescribe antiparasitic medicines for food-producing animals?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Deputy Clarke wanted to ask a supplementary question.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I cannot fail to take the opportunity to speak further on the issue I raised with the Minister at committee yesterday around the emergency supply scheme, where somebody from a virtual clinic, or leaving as a previous inpatient of a hospital, has 24 hours to get to their GP if they are a medical card holder and will receive only a seven-day supply of medication. There is a very real opportunity for our pharmacists to be more involved in this scheme. It is absolutely bonkers, to be quite frank, that you would have only 24 hours. It also does not reflect the reality of the prevalence of virtual appointments and the lack of need for forms to be filled in triplicate at this point. There has to be a better way of doing it, and a very important part of that would be our pharmacy network.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I agree completely with the Deputy, and I thank her for that. While I do not have an update for her today - it was yesterday we discussed it - I have instructed my officials to see what can be done, and I will revert to her on it.

I have to say Deputy Moynihan has got me. I do not know, and I am going to have to find out. I can tell him about estradot patches and so many different things but I cannot tell him about vets, agriculture and pharmacy. He has got me, and I am going to have to go back and find a proper answer for him. I commit to writing to the Deputy today to make sure that is done. I ask him to please forgive me; I do not know.

Questions Nos. 19 and 20 taken with Written Answers.

Hospital Services

21. **Deputy Pádraig Rice** asked the Minister for Health if her Department has received a copy of a 2017 report into paediatric urology services, known as the Dickson report (details supplied); if her Department was made aware of the existence of this report by Children's Health Ireland, CHI, or anyone from Temple Street or Crumlin hospitals prior to CHI's establishment; her views on CHI's decision not to publish the report; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [34815/25]

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: On 19 June, CHI advised the Joint Committee on Health that neither Temple Street nor Crumlin hospitals accepted the Dickson report when it was completed in 2017. My Department received a copy of the report on Friday, 20 June and my officials are reviewing it. I will be seeking assurance from CHI that the matters raised in the report have been addressed.

In light of concerns raised in relation to corporate and clinical governance concerns at CHI, as the Deputy is aware, I have appointed two HSE board members to the CHI board. We discussed yesterday the changes to the service level agreement, the role of the HSE and the internal audit being conducted by the HSE. I do not wish to disrespect the Deputy by repeating those issues he already knows about, but all of those governance changes are being made with a view to supporting the new CEO as she continues to establish her executive team. She needs to implement the recommendations of a range of different reports and at the same time take CHI forward in a constructive and positive way towards the new hospital but also towards the delivery of better paediatric services across this country.

On the Deputy's direct question around the Dickson report, my Department received it on Friday, 20 June and is reviewing it. I can engage with the Deputy further on it.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: A number of patient advocacy groups and parents have for a long time been calling for this report to be published. I urge the Minister to consider that and to consider publishing that report along with the others. What we have seen time and again from CHI are issues around transparency, accountability and a reluctance to release information, and we have had to drag that information from the organisation, which is deeply concerning.

It indicates to me that the culture in the organisation is not changing. This is another example of it. Last week we raised the internal investigation with CHI. Its officials told the Joint Committee on Health they would provide us with the legal advice on that internal investigation. We have not received that legal advice from them. CHI did publish a summary, as the Minister mentioned. Is it her view that that summary of the internal investigation is a true reflection of the full report?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I could say about the summary that it is CHI's view that this is the best it can do, recognising some of the HR and legal constraints. I want to see the report published in the broader public interest but it is not necessarily the case that in every instance it should be published. In particular, I am concerned that this was a HR report where people who might be constituents of the Deputy, and for whom he might take a protective trade union perspective as well, participated in a process to try to address a significant cultural issue.

It would be very difficult for those people to talk about the experiences they had in this HR process and for their comments to be published in the public domain. While we are trying to get to the issues relating to culture and to governance, I understand the difficulty there for those individuals and CHI's perspective on that.

In relation to the legal advice, in general that is a matter for CHI and the committee directly.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I thank the Minister. There are ways of publishing these reports that anonymise the individuals and redact information that is key but then provide full transparency and accountability because trust in this organisation is now at an all-time low. Families are deeply concerned. We need more information released and more publications. Sunlight is a good disinfectant and CHI has been at every stage reluctant to release information to us.

I also raise concerns about some of the answers to parliamentary questions we are getting from CHI. Its officials are reluctant to answer reasonable questions we are putting to them. I have no doubt they will be before the health committee again. We have a long list of questions to put to CHI. I have concerns around the pace at which the culture is changing. It seems to me that culture change is not happening quickly enough. That reluctance to release information persists and we have seen that time and again with report after report and the one referenced here is another example of that.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I very much respect the Deputy's perspective on that and on the culture piece. I had a good meeting with the new CEO, Lucy Nugent, where I was very clear and reiterated that this is a new CHI for the future with a new executive management team, a new approach and a new culture. She needs that team around her to be able to implement that new culture. She is coming from Tallaght, where there has been good success and where she has a very strong track record in relation to that. I take the Deputy's perspective on the response to parliamentary questions and other matters very importantly and seriously. There is never a difficulty in being forthcoming with information to the extent that it is appropriate legally and from that HR perspective but there is a way in which you can lean in and provide better confidence.

I would be careful with phrases such as "confidence is on the floor". People are attending Crumlin and Temple Street hospitals today. I was there last week. I have a lot of confidence in the medical team there. I have a lot of confidence in the nurse specialists who listened to my voicemail and rang me back and the service and support I receive. That is the majority experience of Crumlin and Temple Street. There is a very important set of problems that we have to address but the majority experience is positive. I have parents contacting me to continue to make that point about their experience. This is parents and children at very vulnerable moments going in to receive hospital care and they are getting it.

We have a body of work together as a Legislature but we just need to be careful about the experience that they are having as well to make sure that we are reflecting it in a universal way.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Sports Facilities

125. **Deputy Joanna Byrne** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport his position on the redevelopment of the landmark Ulster GAA stadium, Casement Park; and the steps his Department is taking to support the project to construction phase; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34632/25]

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I thank the Deputy. In February of last year the Government agreed to a range of funding allocations of more than €800 million to affirm its commitment to work with the Northern Ireland Executive and with the UK Government to make cross-Border investments that will make the island of Ireland a better place for all of us who call it home to live. This is evidence of course of our commitment to Strand 2 of the Good Friday Agreement and of North-South co-operation. It is the largest ever package of Government funding for cross-Border investments.

As part of this wider set of commitments, the Government announced a commitment of €50 million through the Shared Island Fund to contribute to construction of a redeveloped Casement Park in Belfast. This is both a North-South and an east-west project. It is the Government's wish that the ground will be made available to a wide range of sporting and cultural events.

Consistent with the Government's on funding for large scale sports infrastructure, principles for funding of the project will be agreed such that it is accessible to and will benefit a range of sports, and is operated to facilitate equality, diversity and inclusion in sport, including supporting cross-community relationships in Northern Ireland and throughout the island.

I welcome the UK Government's recent funding commitment of £50 million, as part of the UK Chancellor's spending review, for redevelopment of Casement Park. I have met, as has the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, with the GAA recently to discuss how the project can move forward without further delay.

The Government and the UK Government have each made significant funding commitments to support the delivery of a redeveloped Casement Park. It is now for the Executive and the GAA to confirm their respective funding commitments for the project, which each date back to 2013, and to define the overall funding package available that will allow redevelopment to proceed. I am hopeful that this total amount would then be sufficient to see the project move ahead without delay. The Government will continue to engage positively with all stakeholders to encourage that outcome.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I welcome the Minister of State's comments about North-South co-operation and striving to build cross-community relationships. The amount pledged by the Government has been broadly welcomed in all corners of our country, along with the £50 million from the UK Government, the £62 million from Stormont and the £15 million from the GAA.

Although the project is still some way short of the £260 million price tag and we expect that to rise due to inflation, the progress in recent weeks is welcome, despite the many delays. The critical thing now is to bring everyone together to ensure that work is started on the stadium as soon as possible. This will not be just beneficial to the GAA but will be of huge social and economic benefit to Belfast and to all of us in creating jobs and attracting investment.

I also welcome the comments of the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste last Friday following the North-South Ministerial Council meeting reiterating the Irish Government's commitment to this project and that they stand ready to assist it. I urge the Government to do all it can to support this project through to completion.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: We are all united in this House on the importance of this project going forward. That is very much represented by the Government's financial commitment to the project as well.

When the redevelopment of Casement Park was first mooted in 2013, a budget of £77.5 million was envisaged to complete the project, made up of £62.5 million from the Northern Irish Executive and UK Government at that time and £15 million from the GAA. Of course, as the Deputy said, costs have increased significantly and the overall cost projection in that intervening 12-year period. In recognition of this and of the significance of a redeveloped Casement Park as a facility for Belfast and Ulster both for Gaelic games and for other sports, that €50 million of shared island funding was allocated by the Government in 2024. However, we stand ready now to work with all stakeholders. At the moment it is really with the GAA and the Northern Ireland Executive to engage on their funding commitment, which dates back to 2013, when the overall cost tag was £77.5 million for the project. We will certainly work with both the GAA and the Executive to be as constructive as possible to see what is a really important project come to fruition.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: The delays are regrettable. They are, unfortunately, a sign of the times in which we live. None of us wants this opportunity to slip away and to be left looking back with regret in the years to come having made no progress. I note and appreciate the Minister of State's collegial tone. I look forward to working with the Department and both the Minister and Minister of State to assist in any way I can, going forward.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy. It is appropriate that we discuss the issue today, given the good progress we have seen. All of us welcome the commitment of €50 million from the British Government. Let us now continue to move forward. The stadium has been a tremendous loss to Belfast, the province and the island. It has fallen into disrepair and is not being used. We want it to be rebuilt and redeveloped so that its full potential is realised. We look forward to working with everyone to achieve the objective.

Departmental Reviews

126. **Deputy Robert O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport when he expects to receive the findings from the independent review of the night-time economy pilots; and if he anticipates these findings will recommend the appointment of night-time advisers across all local authorities. [35189/25]

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: Will the Minister outline when he expects to get the findings of the independent review into the night-time economy? Does he anticipate the findings will recommend that a night-time adviser is appointed to each of the county councils?

Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): I thank the Deputy. In support of action 19 in the report of the night-time economy task force and as part of the Department's key role in driving the night-time economy in Ireland, we are funding nine night-time economy advisers in Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway, Kilkenny, Sligo, Longford, Buncrana and Drogheda.

The night-time economy pilots are a significant project within the night-time economy policy area and arguably one of the most impactful. This year, I have allocated just under €1.4 million in funding to support these pilots to cover salary costs and a funding package to roll out their plans, including support for Culture Night Late and Cruinniú Late.

The advisers are helping to drive and support a more sustainable night-time economy in their local areas. The Department engages with them regularly and supports their development. They also work collaboratively on larger projects, which have included a late-night transport campaign in partnership with the National Transport Authority and a late-night safety campaign. Each is responsible for developing specific action plans for their own areas. The Department has detailed service level agreements with each local authority setting out key objectives and deliverables.

Following a competitive tendering process in 2024, Communiqué International was appointed to conduct a review of the nine night-time economy pilots to look critically at the structures involved in supporting the advisers, the visibility and impact of each in their respective areas, the future roll-out of the pilots, whether a further roll-out is warranted and what needs to be put in place.

I understand that the review of the pilots has now concluded and the subsequent report is due to be finalised very shortly. The report will detail a set of recommendations in respect of the future of the pilots. I have not seen the report yet as it is not finalised and, therefore, I am not in a position to comment about what the findings are likely to be. Once the report is received, we will undertake a consultation exercise with the County and City Management Association and the wider night-time economy implementation group about the recommendations on the future roll-out, prior to publication. I expect publication to take place soon after that.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: It is good to hear support for the plan, especially in respect of public transport, which is a particular difficulty outside Dublin when people try to get in and out to venues in cities.

I attended the launch of the report from the Give Us The Night campaign yesterday. Its members have been campaigning for reform of the Irish nightclub industry for more than 20 years. Parts of that industry are still regulated by the 1935 Public Dance Halls Act. We need renewal in the nightlife sector. It is in a bad way. There are 23 nightclubs in all of Dublin and none in the north of the county. Shenanigans in Skerries is long gone. This needs to be addressed and discussed.

I would also like to mention the Oireachtas broadcast unit workers and their precarious employment. I urge the Minister to meet them, if he can. Their dispute seems to have cross-party support. It would nice for them to be heard.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I thank the Deputy. The Oireachtas broadcasting unit, as the Deputy knows, is a matter for the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission. All parties are represented at that commission. Those are ultimately the people who have responsibility for the operation and running of the Oireachtas. It would not be appropriate for me to cut across the Ceann Comhairle and members of the Oireachtas commission.

In response to the comments the Deputy made about the night-time economy, much progress has been made in this space. During the week, for instance, the Government made a decision to establish a Dublin task force. This is not just a Dublin issue. It is an issue that relates to small towns and villages and other regional centres. I was glad to hear the Deputy reference the improvements that have been made to public transport. That is encouraging, although more in that space needs to be done. I see it in my own area. The Government has made significant investments in rural transport. All of that, together with the review of the report once I have finished it and can lay it before the House, will add substantially to the whole night-time economy.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I thank the Minister. We can work on this issue on a cross-party basis. I thank him for his contribution and look forward to the publication of the report.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I acknowledge the Deputy's support for the sector. He has been consistent in his remarks.

Departmental Schemes

127. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the process undertaken for deciding on successful grant applicants for the grassroots music venues support scheme funding; if regional dispersal of the awards was considered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34955/25]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: This question relates to the process undertaken for deciding on the success of grant applications for the grassroots music venues support scheme funding. Was regional dispersal of awards considered? Will the Minister make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I thank the Deputy. I launched the grassroots music venues support scheme in March this year to support small and established music venues that promote themselves and are known in the community for programming grassroots music artists, in recognition of the contribution they make to the music industry and the wider night-time economy. The support scheme aims to provide employment opportunities for emerging artists and professionals, including production staff and crew, who are dependent on live performances. The scheme operated with a total fund of €500,000 and grants were available of up to a maximum of €15,000 to host events showcasing the talent of emerging grassroots artists performing live music that they have written or created themselves.

A total of 96 applications were received by the Department and assessed strictly in accordance with the guidelines of the scheme. In line with the published criteria, applications were processed by my officials strictly by order of date and time of receipt, that is, on a first

come, first served basis. In addition, venues had to meet the eligibility criteria in order to qualify for funding. Venues had to demonstrate that they promote themselves and are known in the community as an established live music venue or dance venue with grassroots music performance forming a core part of their programming. The venues had to operate with a capacity of 500 or less. Venues were also required to submit evidence, in the form of promotional material, photographic evidence and ticket sales, of a strong track record over two years, 2023 and 2024, of regularly programming grassroots music events.

Applications were, as I said, assessed on a first come, first served basis. While regional dispersal of the awards was not considered as part of the assessment process, I am satisfied that the grants awarded demonstrate a good regional spread. In addition, the important feedback and insights gained from this pilot edition of the scheme will help inform us of any future decisions in respect of the scheme.

I understand that some people might be disappointed, as I have already said. I recognise the value of this scheme to venues across the country and I am committed to considering another phase of this support in the not-too-distant future.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The main question here is whether applicants were aware when they submitted their applications that the scheme was run on a first come, first served basis. In March this year, the application process closed. There were 96 applicants, some of whom, although we do not know how many, did not qualify. Only 33 applicants were granted any money from the pot. Even though €5,000 or up to €15,000 could be allocated, every one of the applicants whose application was granted received the maximum amount. There is still a shortfall of €5,000 in the fund, which could have been allocated but seems not to have been. The main question is whether any of the applicants know before others about the secret change. There was no indication in advance that this was going to be allocated on a first come, first served basis.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Deputy will appreciate it was a pilot scheme that had a relatively small amount of money available and attracted considerable interest. The officials in my Department had to ascribe a basis for the allocation of the moneys, as I have outlined. They also had to cut it off at a certain point because there was no point in continuing *secula seculorum*. We will be doing this again and will have regard to those who were unsuccessful this time around. I hope to build the scheme into the budget for 2026 at a much higher level. We will take account of the findings from the initial tranche of the pilot.

Hopefully, it will be put on a much more concrete basis in future, akin to something like the sports capital grants, where it will be done regularly. I want to try to support as many as I can and I want to support the smaller ones in particular. This was a first stab at it. In fairness to the officials in the Department, they did their best with a very small amount of money.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I welcome the money, as does the industry. The Minister mentioned the sports capital grants. It would be chaotic if that scheme were to be run on a first come, first served basis. When opening and closing dates are issued, all the applicants have to be assessed case-by-case based on their qualifications. The Minister or the officials can then put them in whatever order will be acceptable. This would be in contrast to saying in the middle

of an application scheme, however, that it is first come, first served and hard luck to all those after number 33 that do not qualify. This seems to have been the case in this regard rather than looking to see if the money could be divided up in a more equal way, or perhaps even look at a regional distribution. The fact no venue north of Galway or west of Louth got any of the funding suggests something else is going on here. I welcome that the Minister is going to run this scheme again, but I ask him to please examine it and run it in a different way from what it looks like was done in this instance.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Regarding the previous question Deputy O'Donoghue raised, it will be appreciated by Deputy Ó Snodaigh that a small town like Buncrana has a night-time economy adviser that the Department made provision for. Many towns in Ireland that are much bigger than Buncrana do not have one. This is the basis of pilots. There will always be disappointment but once the pilots are concluded, that will give us an opportunity to take lessons from the scheme. I compared this to the sports capital grant. I know what the Deputy said was a bit tongue-in-cheek and he appreciates I would not ask anybody to divvy out €350 million on a first come, first served basis. This is €500,000. It is a start. It is regrettable that the party opposite is trying to undermine and pick holes in a scheme that, ultimately, I am trying to get into the budget. It has been welcomed by the night-time economy and the venues. Ultimately, there is disappointment. There was going to be disappointment when there was only €500,000 but I hope to be able to allay that disappointment in future. Rather than having a go at the scheme, it might be a more productive use of time to see if there were suggestions the party opposite might propose for the scheme in future.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I gave the Minister the suggestion that he not do it on a first come, first served basis. There is a basis that I outlined, so I ask him not to misrepresent what I said. I welcomed the fact that this was going to happen and also welcomed him indicating he was going to have another grant scheme.

Television Licence Fee

128. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport if he will abolish the TV licence and replace it with a tax on big tech companies to fund public service broadcasting. [35187/25]

Deputy Paul Murphy: The TV licence is a regressive, unjust tax.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Ah Jesus.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The richest household in the country has to pay the same €160 as the poorest eligible household in the country.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Oh my God.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Increasing numbers of people are voting with their feet and boycotting the TV licence. Will the Minister read the writing on the wall, scrap this regressive tax and replace it with a levy on big tech corporations?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The question is whether I will abolish the television licence and replace it with a tax. No, I will not. That is the end of that. I have no notion of doing it. That fund is in place to support RTÉ and public service broadcasters. It also supports Sound and Vision. I have no intention of replacing it. I also have no intention of going down a cul-de-sac as the Deputy would like us to do, which would be a road to nowhere for RTÉ and everyone associated with broadcasting. The short answer is "No".

Deputy Paul Murphy: I thank the Minister. I presume he accepts that the tax is deeply unpopular. Licence sales have plummeted since the Tubridy scandal and everything else that came out in terms of the behaviour of those at the top of RTÉ. In 2022, €950,000 was paid. This dropped to €825,000 in 2023 and €790,000 in 2024. This represents a drop of more than 155,000 households that are refusing to pay, either in protest or because they cannot afford to pay this regressive flat tax that takes no account of ability to pay.

I suspect that RTÉ's appalling coverage of the genocide in Gaza has contributed to the further drop in people buying TV licences, when RTÉ often continues to use a both sides framing of what is a horrifically asymmetrical conflict in using terminology like " Hamas-run health ministry " and providing platforms for representatives of the genocidal Israeli State.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I am here to answer questions regarding communications, so I will answer the question on communications. There was not really a question in the Deputy's second contribution. My position remains the same. The television licence is not a tax, by the way. I do not see that reference anywhere in the legislation, so I do not know what hat he drew that rabbit out of. It is an important funding mechanism for RTÉ. The Deputy would be the very first person out in RTÉ protesting if the Government were to in any way reduce funding to it. He wants to have his cake and eat it. On this, I am not going to go down the cul-de-sac where he just wants to erode the tax base of every element of public expenditure and revenue generation. He seems to think there is a phantom entity out there that can pay for everything bar yourself. That is the way he operates. In the real world of a constitutional democracy, that is not the way things work. If he ever gets the opportunity to spend a day in government, maybe he will realise that.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Minister might tell us if considers all the countries across Europe that have abolished TV licences not to be constitutional democracies. Is the test of being a constitutional democracy having a TV licence? He might clarify that. I presume he is aware that just over one third of funding for RTÉ and public service broadcasting comes from the TV licence. It is not even where a majority of funding comes from. The Minister may not be aware of our proposals in RTÉ for the People: A Radical Plan to Transform RTÉ and Public Media, which would increase funding for public service broadcasting, and takes on board many of the recommendations of Coimisiún na Meán and does so not by imposing this regressive flat tax on ordinary households, but on the big tech corporations making huge profits. I do not know if the Minister is aware of this fact. I do not know if he is aware of the parasitical role these

corporations play on journalism, where they are not creating any of this content but getting most of the advertising revenue from it. It clearly makes sense, therefore, to allow those companies to pay. I will continue to support those who refuse to pay the TV licence. I warn the Minister this number is increasing. It seems even An Post has given up pursuing people, if we look at the number of prosecutions, which are also dropping.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Deputy is no stranger to RTÉ and he gets a fair crack of the whip there. Of course, he never uses the opportunity to express his thanks for the unbridled coverage he seems to get from RTÉ on a day in, day out basis. Those of us on this side of the House might have something to complain about if there was a fairness test. I do not, however, because it is a public service broadcaster and I am not going to interfere in editorial coverage.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It sounds like the Minister is interfering now.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Deputy has form in this space. He does not want to pay for anything. He feels that everybody else should pay for something else other than him. He is entitled to start whatever campaign it is he wants to start to undermine another public service. I do not wish him the best of luck with it. Most people do not either. When he does get an opportunity to sit on this side of the House, with whoever it is that will actually have him as a partner in government, he will then see there is more to running a public service than a megaphone.

Artists' Remuneration

129. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport if his Department plans to expand the basic income for the arts scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34053/25]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I was sorry to hear about the Minister's ill health recently and I wish him the best of luck with it in future too. The basic income for the arts scheme is an initiative we in Aontú have supported for many years. Many artists live in poverty and deprivation and have lives full of economic anxiety. The basic income for the arts scheme is designed to reduce that deprivation and to help artists to create. Will the scheme be expanded in a manner that will encompass more than the current 2,000 recipients of this income?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I thank the Deputy for the question and for his remarks at the start of his contribution. The programme for Government commits to assessing the basic income for the arts pilot research scheme to maximise its impact. I appreciate the importance of the basic income support for artists, which is why last week I announced that the Cabinet had agreed to my proposal to an extension of six months to allow further evaluation of the pilot data. This will also give sufficient time to engage in stakeholder consultation and to evaluate the data which will provide the evidence base for Government to make decisions on the next steps.

The primary objective of the scheme is to help artists deal with the precarious incomes and to prevent talent from leaving the sector for economic reasons. Evaluation of the pilot is and

has been continuous, with participants completing a detailed survey every six months. The Department has been undertaking a comprehensive research programme based on this data. I am aware that there is broad-based support for the scheme, and I recently met with the National Campaign for the Arts to discuss the scheme. I intend to bring proposals for a permanent intervention to Cabinet as part of budget 2026 based on the evidence arising from the research programme and stakeholder engagement.

The current scheme costs just under €35 million per year to provide the payment to 2,000 recipients. The cost of a six-month extension is €16.7 million.

The net overall cost of the pilot scheme to the Exchequer is likely to be less, given the high number of recipients who were previously on social welfare supports prior to the scheme. A cost-benefit analysis currently under way should bring further clarity to the overall costs.

While the research phase of the pilot scheme is still ongoing, it is clear from evidence collected to date under the scheme that it is having a positive impact on participants. The scheme support is hugely valued by artists in receipt of it. It has been the subject of much positive commentary both at home and abroad and makes an important statement about the value that the Government and Ireland place on the arts. A Government decision will be required on a successor scheme once the research is concluded.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: First of all, it is interesting that we do not know the net cost. We know the cost but many of these recipients were on social welfare previously.

I ask the Minister to speak to the other aspect of this, namely, the impact it is having on the creative sector at present.

Much of the study, and the information, has been on the 2,000 recipients but there is a control group of 6,000 other individuals who applied for this income. I would be interested to know how those in the control group are experiencing being an artist in an economically difficult situation. If that information was available to the Opposition, it would be an important part of the discussion and the development of this fund. It is worrisome that there is no evidence as yet - maybe it is the Minister's plan - that the scheme will be expanded to the other 6,000 people who have applied for this. There are few income supports that are given at random to a small sample of the people who need them. Most income supports are given to everybody who needs them.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I agree with the Deputy, to be honest about it. It has shone a light on the precarious nature of the income, which was the initial overriding consideration my predecessor had when this scheme was brought in. Not everybody was enthusiastic about this scheme when it was brought in but, qualitatively and quantitatively, when we have the research concluded, it will demonstrate in a clear way that this is a good scheme.

Ultimately, I would love to be able to broaden it, but it will be resource dependent in the context of the budget. First of all, I will have to get Cabinet approval for its continuation as a scheme. The amount of funding that will be made available to it will obviously be a determining factor in respect of the number of people we will be able to support. We will also have to have consideration, as the Deputy rightly said, for those who would have loved to be part of the initial scheme but who, unfortunately, for one reason or another, were not.

There is a bit to roll on this yet but the most important thing is that the Government, the Department and I, as Minister, are committed to it.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: One of the difficulties is that for many, in reality, being an artist is synonymous with poverty. While now and again on the news or in the newspapers we see people who do economically well from their art, they are a tiny minority of that group. Historically, we know of artists who died as paupers only to have their art appreciated after their deaths. It is important that there is an understanding of the value of the work artists do in reflecting back to society who we are and what we are about. There should be space given for that cohort of individuals to be able to create and produce their work.

I ask the Minister that any information he currently has on the impact of the fund on the creativity of the 2,000 artists who are in receipt of it, but also any of the qualitative analysis of the control group, be given to the Opposition as soon as possible or published in order that we can understand the benefits better.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I will take the last part first. Once I have had an opportunity to digest the material - the Deputy would accept that is not unreasonable - it will give me an opportunity to make further decisions. As regards the result of the analysis and the possible publication, we want to be sensitive to people's individual identities, etc. I do not want to compromise people one way or another. I also am conscious, as I stated, that there are a number of people who did not get to participate on the scheme.

It is important to point out that even outside of the scheme there is significant support being provided by my Department, indirectly or directly, to the arts. The total budget for the Arts Council is of the order of €140 million. This is not insignificant. It has grown quite large over the past number of years under successive Ministers and we hope to be able to continue that trajectory during the lifetime of the Government.

Sports Funding

130. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the total budget and allocations for elite sport athletes; his plans to enhance that amount in the lead up to the next Olympic Games; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34959/25]

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I ask the Minister about funding for elite athletes in Ireland ahead of the next Olympic cycle.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: As the Deputy will be aware, for the Paris Olympic cycle 2021-2024, the Government provided a record level of investment of approximately €89 million towards high-performance sport. This was a substantial increase on the €59 million invested for the previous Tokyo cycle. In line with the Government's target of delivering €30 million per annum for high-performance sport by 2027, as indicated in the national sports policy, Sport Ireland has announced that €27 million will be invested in high-performance sport over the course of this year. This increased funding for high-performance sport will reflect, in particular, Sport Ireland's High Performance Strategy 2021-2032, which provides the

overarching policy framework for the development of the high-performance system for the next two Olympiads, that is, Los Angeles the next time around, in 2028, and Brisbane in 2032.

The international carding scheme provides financial support to athletes for their training and competition programmes. The primary purpose of this funding is to support Irish athletes in reaching finals and in achieving medals at European, world, Olympic and Paralympic levels. This year, Sport Ireland will invest €4.5 million under the international carding scheme and the player funding scheme for men's and women's senior teams. Through the Sport Ireland international carding scheme, 129 individual athletes and others on relay teams will be supported across 16 different sports. Sport Ireland also provides €350,000 of Government funding in direct athlete support to Golf Ireland through the Golf Ireland professional scheme.

The task ahead is to sustain and build on what has been achieved to date. More athletes, coaches on stable contracts and additional services will be needed in the coming years to enable national sporting bodies to carry through well-funded, stable high-performance programmes. Therefore, the importance of collaboration in preparing for these games, in particular between Sport Ireland, the Olympic Federation of Ireland, Paralympics Ireland and the relevant national governing bodies of sport, should also be recognised.

With the benefit of considerable support from the Government, I am confident that Team Ireland's participation in the next Olympic and Paralympic Games will build on the successes of recent games.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: It must be recognised initially that, as the Minister of State outlined, since the previous Olympic cycle funding has dramatically improved, which is very welcome, but he will be aware that there are probably more challenges facing our elite athletes than ever before. I speak specifically about aspects of social media and the pressures that brings. Many athletes are having to try to find alternative streams to support them in taking time off work or, in some cases, giving up their jobs and dedicating themselves to sport. Built in with those pressures are mental health concerns as well. There is the possibility of burnout because athletes are training at such an immense level.

The dramatic increase in funding is welcome but, obviously, the job we have here is to ensure that we bring home more medals in the future, which is what we all want. The nation gets a lift every time our athletes go out and perform and bring home the goods. Our job is to continue to highlight that they always need additional funding.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: It is fair to recognise we have come a long way and a large part of that has been down to the funding that the Government has put behind our athletes, alongside really good governance and planning and strategic direction, both by Sport Ireland and the national governing bodies but, of course, on top of all of that and most important is the commitment and excellence of our athletes. That contributed to us having our most successful Olympic Games ever in Paris last year with a medal haul across a number of disciplines, some of which we did not have a strong history in.

I was glad to address the Olympic Federation of Ireland AGM yesterday evening with many of the governing bodies in attendance and, indeed, to congratulate all of them collectively for the work they have done in supporting athletes. That is something we, as a Government, are

committed to continuing to do. We are committed to continuing to back that effort and back our athletes with good strong funding but also, importantly, to making sure we are backing athletes in terms of their well-being. That is why we have also supported the Federation of Irish Sport in appointing an athlete support manager in September last year and also why we are backing the Sport Ireland athlete career transition programme to make sure athletes are supported in their transition from a sporting life to professional life after that.

11 o'clock

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I do not think I need to recite them all but I will give a few examples. Paul O'Donovan, who we all know from the rowing world, is practising as a surgeon. Sophie Becker was working in a full-time job in a pharma company until recently. Phil Healy was working as a software engineer. They are all doing this while competing at the top level in their sport. The dedication those people demonstrate is immense. I do not think anyone in this Chamber could give the commitment and dedication they do to their respective trades.

On funding in the wider sense in terms of LSSIF and putting money into facilities, not only for the elite athletes but also the amateur athletes who aspire to one day make it to professional or international status, will the Minister of State give us a run-down of the next round of the LSSIF and when he anticipates that might be?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I acknowledge the Deputy's ongoing advocacy on behalf of sporting organisations in his constituency. We expect to open the sports facilities fund, which is for clubs up to a maximum of €200,000, next spring with announcements next autumn. It normally runs every two years. We have only ever run two iterations of the large-scale sports infrastructure fund, the first in 2019 and the more recent at the end of 2024. The plan is to reopen that in a shorter timeframe for the third round but it should be borne in mind the last one was a five-year gap. We would like to pull that back but that will be dependent on being able to get capital funding. We are currently engaged in the national development plan review for the next five years and that will be central to the decision on the fund. Our focus now is on those who did receive funding last autumn and working with them to make sure they get on with the project. We see drawdown by the 2019 applicants too and we are making sure all those projects proceed. I know it is something in which the Deputy takes a very big interest in his constituency and I look forward to continuing to work with him on that.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Local Authorities

131. **Deputy John Connolly** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the progress made towards meeting the programme for Government commitment to support local authorities in the acquisition of new lands for parks and playing pitches; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34641/25]

Deputy John Connolly: There is a very progressive commitment in the programme for Government to support local authorities in the acquisition of new lands for parks and playing

pitches to help build liveable communities. We all know the importance of active recreational spaces. Have efforts commenced to develop a strategy around that commitment?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. I know it is something he is committed to. We have spoken about it before. Encouraging clubs to collaborate particularly with local authorities under a municipal approach could deliver significant benefits to sporting organisations and opportunities for people in local communities to engage in sport across the country and, from the Deputy's perspective, in County Galway in particular.

We all know the importance of sport to the well-being and health of our local communities. The availability and ease of access to sports facilities is central to that, whether in a club setting, on public lands or in other amenity areas. Planning for future facilities needs, locations and types is a particular focus of our current sports action plan. In the past, there was not a particular weighting in the sports capital grants towards municipal facilities. There has been support where people are collaborating but, with the sports capital grants reopening next spring, we will look at how we can try to incentivise clubs to come together and, indeed, local authorities to work together too to support that objective.

Accessing land is a particular challenge, especially in some of our cities but also across the country. This is something we will reflect on. There is no funding for land at the moment but we want to develop and structure the next sports capital grants in a way that incentivises people to come together, particularly in respect of existing land that local authorities have, as well as looking at land that schools might have. Secondary or primary schools that need sporting facilities might have land and we can encourage them to collaborate with local sporting clubs in a way that maximises and leverages the investment for everyone in the community and makes sure it is accessible at different times of day. I look forward to engaging with the Deputy further on any ideas he has on how we can best do that. We want to make a real impact through this approach.

Deputy John Connolly: The Minister of State noted many of the challenges that sports groups and local authorities meet in the development of facilities. The programme for Government also includes a complementary commitment to conduct a nationwide audit of sports facilities to address shortages in areas where there is a population of over 1,500. The audit will probably find a deficit in the provision of playing spaces in urban areas. I am not familiar with the locations but I have heard from some of my colleagues and from the media that there are significant parts of Dublin city which have no active recreational spaces for clubs to pursue their interests. That is something we need to challenge. It also happens outside Dublin. The demand for land has led to increased pressure in terms of its price. That makes it difficult for voluntary clubs to be able to purchase the land, as the Minister of State noted in his response. The viability of buying land for sporting clubs in our major urban areas is a really significant challenge.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: We have asked Sport Ireland to conduct an exercise to assess gaps in particular sporting facilities around the country in order that we get an overall sense of what the facilities are in different areas and are able to factor that into our future sports capital considerations and announcements. My experience, and I am sure the Deputy's too, is

that almost all clubs across all sports are under pressure for space. We had seen very significant uptake in participation, with a significant closing of the gender gap in terms of female participation, which is really important, as well as across age groups and youth participation in many different sports. However, that is putting pressure on playing facilities. I rarely visit a sports club which is comfortable with the space and facilities it has for the demand it has. We need to continue to invest across all sports but we also need to look at where the acute needs are and factor that into the considerations. The work Sport Ireland is doing will be important in informing us around that.

Deputy John Connolly: The GAA has done a lot of analysis of its activities in different parts of the country. It is concerned about the future organisation of the GAA in some urban communities because the lack of playing space will limit its ability to undertake activities and increase its membership among new communities. That is worth noting in this debate. As a concrete example, in 2017 Galway City Council developed the Kingston master plan for an area quite close to where I live. It was to include playgrounds, changing rooms, outdoor gym equipment, pedestrian walkway, cycle paths, a pitch and ancillary facilities. We are yet to see that go to planning. We have been talking about it for eight years but, due to the challenge of financing it and some of the land not yet being in local authority ownership, it has not come to fruition.

The Minister of State noted the challenge of purchasing land not currently covered by the sports capital grant. We could have something like the Housing Finance Agency for local authorities to allow them to draw down long-term loans at low interest rates for the purchase of land specifically for community and sporting facilities.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: We will look at all of this. I want to ensure that our local authorities are thinking seriously about sporting facilities in their planning for an area and their use of land, particularly existing land. I also want to ensure our schools are thinking about how they can collaborate with sporting clubs. While land is a challenge, there is a lot of latent potential in the land we have. In the past, we did not put enough focus on getting people to co-operate and collaborate and to think how they can work together to develop facilities. We will be considering that very strongly in advance of decisions on the structure of the next sports capital grant, along with consideration of where the acute gaps are.

Deputy Connolly has been speaking to me on a number of projects in Galway. He wants to see real progress there and he has ideas about how we can try to promote this. I look forward to working and engaging with the Deputy as well as with others to see how we can best make sure the sports investment we are putting in makes the biggest impact at local level.

Question No. 132 taken with Written Answers.

Post Office Network

133. **Deputy Noel McCarthy** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the measures his Department is taking, or plans to introduce in the future, to support the post office network; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30269/25]

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I know from having spoken to the Deputy that he is very committed to the post office network and wants to see it developed. I thank him for raising the matter. As he is aware, the Government is committed to a sustainable An Post and post office network which, as we all know, is a key component of the economic and social infrastructure of communities across the country. The programme for Government states that the Government will continue to provide the nationwide network of post offices with funding to ensure their sustainability and enhance the value they bring to local communities. My Department is working to deliver on this and is engaging with relevant stakeholders on funding. In addition, my Department is working with Government colleagues to secure future funding in line with the programme for Government.

As the Deputy knows, €10 million per annum is currently being provided to An Post over a three-year fixed term, which is due to end at the end of this year. An Post then disperses this funding across the post office network, with all contractor post offices benefiting from the funding with the objective of securing their stability and that of the network. The funding is being paid monthly for each 12-month period. There has been over €23 million claimed by An Post for the period 2023 to the end of April 2025 for the network.

As we know, An Post is a commercial State body with the mandate to act commercially and has statutory responsibility for the State's postal service and network. Decisions relating to the network, including decisions relating to specific post offices, are operational matters for the board and management of the company and not an area in which I, as Minister of State, have any function. The postmasters' contract with An Post is a matter for postmasters and An Post and any negotiations are a matter for the parties. The role of Government is very important, which we recognise. We have recognised that with a €10 million investment.

The Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, and I are involved in the budgetary process in order to seek to renew that. We are very committed to making sure the contract is renewed and we do everything possible to make sure post offices stay open and are strongly supported across the country.

Deputy Noel McCarthy: I thank the Minister of State for his response. Post offices are vital social links in urban and rural communities. They support local economies by providing essential Government services. However, they need further support, as the Minister of State said. Recent increases in inflation and the minimum wage have unfortunately occurred at the same time as a decline in transaction-based income for postmasters. As such, the post office network seeks to stabilise the existing network and prevent post office closures, in particular in rural and disadvantaged areas. Increased investment would ultimately provide long-term certainty for postmasters across the country, while ensuring the availability of essential Government services to citizens in all social settings. What more can be done to support postmasters and the network?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: We will continue to determine how we can ensure we utilise and maximise the post office network in terms of providing face-to-face services to local communities. As he knows, in many small villages post offices are the last remaining face-to-face service. They provide important services in towns of all sizes, in particular small towns. We want to make sure that we examine how we can utilise the network to the best capacity possible.

We also recognise the importance of making sure that post offices are viable and provide an economically viable income for postmasters. That is why over the past three years we have delivered €10 million per year. We are committed to making sure we renew that funding. We have engaged with the stakeholders and the budgetary process, subject to budgetary considerations, to make sure we continue to support post offices. I was glad to attend the Irish Postmasters Union annual conference recently and engage with it on its ideas. It is something on which Deputy McCarthy has very strong views which he has made very clear. I look forward to continuing to work with him and other Deputies to ensure we support the network.

Deputy Noel McCarthy: I thank the Minister of State for his positive response. I cannot speak highly enough of our post office network and the service it provides, in particular when compared with its European counterparts. However, I find it concerning that the Irish Postmasters Union warned this week at the Oireachtas communications committee that there could be significant post office closures if funding is not increased.

Taking this into account, and given the importance of the service, is the Minister of State satisfied with the current level of funding of €10 million annually for the national post office network, in particular in comparison with other EU countries? France and Italy have invested €2.6 billion and €1.3 billion, respectively, over the past four years, while Belgium has outlined investment of over €630 million over four years. Such numbers are greatly above the current funding commitment to the postal network in Ireland.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: We are very clear on the importance of Government funding and the three-year contract to make sure post offices are sustained. I have no doubt we would have seen closures over the past three years if it had not been for the Government stepping up to the mark. We are also very clear on the importance of us continuing to step up and support the network.

We have received a submission from the postmasters' union on the renewal of the contract. There are state aid considerations and that technical work is being worked through and fully assessed. It will involve engagement on the part of the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, and I with the Department of public expenditure. We are very clear on the importance of the network and ensuring that it is supported, along with the importance of Government funding to support the network.

We will continue to liaise with the postmasters' union and An Post on this. The Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, and I will continue to work hard on the budgetary process and with Oireachtas Members, of whom Deputy McCarthy is very much at the forefront in this regard, to ensure the post office network is maintained and kept economically viable and sustainable.

Arts Funding

134. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport for an update on his plans for a successor scheme for the basic income for the arts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34834/25]

138. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport further to his announcement that the basic income for the arts pilot scheme is to be extended by six months, his plans for the permanent roll-out of the BIA scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34911/25]

141. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport if his Department has undertaken any analysis of the effectiveness of the basic income for the arts scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34056/25]

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: The basic income for the arts pilot scheme has already shown a transformative impact. Artists report producing more work, enjoying better well-being and feeling more financially secure. It has been extended for six months to allow for a full evaluation. I ask the Minister to outline his plans for a successor scheme and to confirm that budget 2026 will include ring-fenced funding for its continuation.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I propose to take Questions Nos. 134, 138 and 141 together. As the Deputies will be aware, the programme for Government commits to assessing the basic income for the arts pilot research scheme to maximise its impact. The scheme has now been operating for almost three years and is underpinned by a robust research programme collecting data about all aspects of the lives of the artists and creative arts workers who are participating in the scheme.

There is clearly broad support for the scheme, as is evident from the numerous representations from colleagues to me on behalf of their constituents. Last week, I announced that Cabinet agreed to my proposal for an extension of six months, to February 2026, to allow for further evaluation of the pilot data, which will provide the evidence base for Government to make decisions on the next steps. This will also give sufficient time to engage in stakeholder consultation.

I am aware there is broad-based support for the scheme across the sector, and I have met the National Campaign for the Arts to discuss this. I intend to bring proposals for a permanent intervention to Cabinet as part of budget 2026, using the evidence arising from the research programme and stakeholder engagement. The programme for Government and the Government's research and innovation strategy note the importance of incorporating the use of evidence into the policy development process and of improving links between policymakers and researchers. This is a key programme to bring research and data to provide an evidence base for Government to make decisions on future policy for the arts.

The rate being paid to recipients is €325 per week and this allows for 2,000 people to receive the payment within the current pilot scheme, which costs €35 million per year for 2,000 recipients. The current scheme costs €105 million for its three-year duration. The full cost of the six-month extension is €16.7 million. The net overall cost of the pilot is likely to be less, given the number of recipients who were previously on social welfare supports prior to entering the scheme.

The scheme's research pilot is designed as a randomised control trial in order to make it possible to identify causality and has benefited from the involvement of external researchers. This randomised control trial includes a treatment group of 2,000, that is, recipients of the

payment, and a control group of 1,000 who are not in receipt of the payment. The control group provides the same survey data as those in receipt of the payment and, although that cohort does not get the payment, individuals are paid €650 per year to participate. The differences in outcomes for the treatment group and control group illustrates the impact of the basic income for the arts payment to those in receipt of it. The control group data shows that they suffer more from the precarious and inconsistent nature of their income. It is important to note that even those in receipt of the payment fare worse than the general population in terms of deprivation and depression.

This is the first large-scale randomised control test undertaken by a Department and represents one of the leading impact evaluations under way in the public sector. Evaluation of the pilot is and has been continuous, with participants completing a detailed survey every six months. The Department has undertaken a broad research programme, including two papers based on the baseline survey, that is, information about participants' lives before they received the first BIA payment and two impact assessments that have been published to date.

The Department is preparing a report examining the first 24 months of the scheme, which is due to be published over the summer months. An interview research paper written by an independent researcher was also published recently. This paper collects the experiences of 50 recipients, who have been interviewed by a sociologist.

While the research phase of the scheme is still ongoing, it is clear from the evidence collected to date by the Department on the scheme that it is having a positive impact on participants. This data shows that the BIA payment is having a consistent, positive impact across almost all indicators, affecting practice development, sectoral retention, well-being and deprivation.

In terms of ongoing evaluation of the scheme, work has recently begun with an external independent economic consultancy to prepare a full cost-benefit analysis of the BIA. The aim of a cost-benefit analysis is to compare the benefits and costs arising from a specific policy, in order to determine its net value. Therefore, the costs and benefits arising from the BIA will be measured and compared to determine its effectiveness prior to any decision on a successor programme. In addition to the cost-benefit analysis, the contractors will map available funding opportunities for artists in Ireland and examine how the BIA functions within the broader art ecosystem, to understand if it is a more or less efficient policy than similar supports.

As I mentioned, I also recently published a qualitative research paper, based on interviews with recipients of the BIA. This provides the lived experience of some of those in receipt of the BIA. This report found that the stability of the payment has significantly reduced underlying financial stress, to provide relief and peace of mind that allows recipients to experience a reduced sense of anxiety about meeting their basic needs.

As part of the policy development process, the Department established an interagency consultative committee on the basic income for the arts research scheme. This committee is an opportunity for the research outputs to be shared across relevant Departments and agencies and allows for discussion of the research findings. I know that the BIA support is hugely valued by artists in receipt of it. It has also been the subject of much positive commentary at home and abroad, and makes an important statement about how Ireland values the arts.

A Government decision will be required on any successor scheme to the pilot, and the future of the BIA will be decided when the results of the research are available, something which is facilitated by the extension I have announced. I plan to engage with stakeholders over the coming months to determine what adjustments could be made to the scheme and how the eligibility and other criteria might be refined. I look forward to bringing forward the proposals I have at that stage to my Cabinet colleagues as part of budget 2026.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I thank the Minister for the reply and for the work he continues to do on the basic income for the arts pilot. The scheme has made a real difference to the lives of close to 2,000 artists. We know that the evidence the Minister has mentioned points to positive outcomes across practice development, sectoral resilience and community engagement. Given the Department is preparing the full report and a cost-benefit analysis, will these findings be published in full? I appreciate the Minister will bring them to Cabinet, which will be able to make a decision thereafter, but it would be great if the findings were published and we could see the evidence. Does the Minister accept it is more than just an income support for artists? It is a statement about the value we place on culture and creativity in Irish society. A successor scheme or a continuation must be co-designed with artists, including those with disabilities and from minority backgrounds, to ensure it is inclusive and accessible from the start.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Aontú has supported the scheme from the outset. The reason we have done so is that, unfortunately, poverty and the arts are often synonymous. People who work in the arts probably have the most precarious work that exists in the country. Their lived experience is often the direct opposite of people's understanding of the glamour of the arts. The difficulty I have with this is that we have a project that has been going on for three years and we still do not have a decision on it from the Government. Absolutely we need time to evaluate and to make a decision but I have been long enough around here to have noticed that difficult decisions are often kicked down the road. I have a worry that only one quarter of the people who need this particular payment are in receipt of it. Now we will see another nine months pass without a decision being made on their experience. Theirs is probably the only sector of society which should get an income but whose income is decided on a random basis. It would be great to crystallise the decision as soon as possible.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I thank both Deputies for their support. To reply to Deputy Tóibín, this is not a difficult decision that has been kicked down the road. The scheme was due to end in August and the easy thing to do would have been to wind it up but I did not do that. I have extended it past the budgetary date at the end of the year and into the new year. This will give me an opportunity to use empirical quantitative and qualitative data to demonstrate to the public and to colleagues in the Government that this is a scheme worth retaining. As with any pilot scheme, such as with regard to grassroots music venues, with a pilot there is always a confined number of people at the start. Invariably there will be people who are disappointed. This is the nature of pilot schemes. I welcome the fact that Deputy Tóibín's party supports it.

Deputy Ó Cearúil is right that the concept of this when my predecessor introduced it was to give people the opportunity to practise while, at the same time, taking them out of a poverty

trap. The cost-benefit analysis will give us an opportunity to see what has been defrayed by way of social protection payments and what has been offered by way of this payment. We will then have a more holistic view of the outputs regarding what the State has gleaned and gained from making the investment, how the artists themselves have gained, how the community has gained and what the costs are. The costs can be borne and weighed in terms of savings made from the non-payment of social protection as against, on the other side, the assignment of moneys under the basic income for the arts. There is a bit of work to be done on this yet but the community has responded very positively to my position on this, which is that I want it retained. I do not think this is kicking the can down the road. It is making sure before I bring a proposal to the Government that we have all our ducks in a row.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Other countries such as Finland and Germany have introduced similar schemes as part of long-term cultural and economic planning. Has the Department engaged with these international examples or does it plan to do so? Something I am very conscious of, and I know the Minister is also, is ensuring there is no cliff edge for participants when the pilot ends. Many of these artists will have structured their lives and livelihoods around the scheme. We have to allow them a level of certainty and make sure they understand whether there will be a continuation or an end to it at any stage so they are prepared for it. What we need is a permanent inclusive scheme with certainty, as I have said. I appreciate the level of research the Minister needs to do before continuing it. I also appreciate that the pilot scheme will continue until February 2026.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I thank Deputy Ó Cearúil. At a recent meeting of culture ministers in Brussels, a number of colleagues from other member states spoke to me about this and they could not believe, to be quite honest about it, that we had introduced a scheme of this nature. They were envious, to put it mildly, that we have a scheme of this nature and that we have the resources and capacity, based on the economy and the way we have managed the country's financial resources, to introduce this, albeit on a pilot basis.

Deputy Ó Cearúil is right with regard to a cliff edge. This is why I did what I did last week. I had to make sure we removed the cliff edge. Had I not done anything, and had I just wound it up and brought the data to the Government after the fact, then everybody would be out in August. I did not think that was the most appropriate way to deal with it. I have given certainty to the first 2,000 people. Ultimately this will be a decision for the Government. It will be a resource-based decision. There are competing demands in the Department and between Departments. Everybody who comes in here to ask oral questions will ask about agriculture, roads, schools or doctors. This is a competing demand. I welcome the fact that Deputies from all parties and none are supportive of it. Any support that can be articulated to my colleagues in the Department of Finance and the Department of public expenditure and reform would be very welcome.

Culture Policy

135. **Deputy William Aird** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport his plans to invest in cultural infrastructure in rural counties such as County Laois (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34380/25]

Deputy William Aird: What plans does the Minister have to invest in cultural infrastructure in rural counties such as County Laois? These are counties with vibrant local artists and heritage buildings that would benefit greatly from targeted support. Will the Minister make a statement on this matter? County Laois, like many others, has a wealth of artistic talent and historic buildings, which too often are underused and underfunded.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I thank Deputy Aird. As outlined in the programme for Government, the Government believes that culture and the arts are essential to a well-rounded society. Ireland is well-known for our rich, diverse and vibrant arts sector. There have been significant increases in support for arts and culture across the country, including in County Laois, in recent years. Within my Department, a number of measures are in place to support the arts at amateur and professional levels, including annual funding provided to Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann for its work in the protection and promotion of Irish traditional music and culture. The music capital scheme, managed by Music Network on behalf of my Department, provides funding for the purchase of musical instruments to non-professional performing groups, ensembles and professional musicians. The pilot capital support scheme for the night-time economy will support the development of vibrant late-night arts and culture scenes in Irish cities, towns and villages as well as additional capital to assist in the provision of building and equipment needs.

More broadly, under the Arts Act 2003, the Arts Council has primary responsibility for the development of the arts in Ireland. Budget 2025 provided record funding of €140 million for the Arts Council. Additionally, a network of cultural infrastructure, such as Dunamaise Art Centre in Portlaoise, exists throughout the country, with the majority in the ownership of local authorities. Annual support, including programming and revenue supports, is provided to these arts centres by local authorities and the Arts Council. My Department focuses on providing capital grant funding to develop and maintain these arts and cultural facilities. Under stream E of the cultural capital scheme, grants are available to not-for-profit organisations with a defined arts and culture remit. Grants of up to €20,000 are available at a 85% grant funding rate except for local authority-owned facilities, where the maximum grant is 60% of eligible costs. Grants of up to €50,000 are provided at a maximum grant funding rate of 70% or 60% for local authority-owned facilities. As part of the programme for Government, the Government has also committed to examining the feasibility of a minor capital works grant scheme to support arts and cultural facilities that are not funded through the Arts Council. Work on this proposal is under way in my Department.

Deputy William Aird: Laois has a proud cultural identity, rich in music, literature, theatre, visual arts and storytelling. It has produced many artists and continues to support new generations through festivals, exhibitions and community-led initiatives. Towns such as Portlaoise, Rathdowney, Mountmellick, Portarlinton, Mountrath and Stradbally all have active community groups that are crying out for adequate spaces in which to perform, rehearse, exhibit and collaborate. The EU just transition fund currently supports innovative projects to promote economic, social and environmental sustainability in the midlands. This is very welcome, but if we are to support the long-term development of the midlands, we must also invest in our cultural heritage assets. This includes infrastructure that celebrates the unique character and history of the region. For example, this could be done through the development of county museums or even a dedicated midlands museum. Such initiatives would generate

tourism and employment and provide an opportunity to share the diverse story of Laois and the wider midlands region, from ancient chieftains to achievements in science and aviation.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Deputy Aird has given a good report with regard to the cultural offering of County Laois. I know he is a very proud Laois man representing them in the Dáil. As I said earlier, there is a commitment in the programme for Government to examine the feasibility of a minor capital works grant scheme for the arts scene, which is currently not available. We are looking at it. I would like to develop it under the auspices of something similar to the sports capital grants, whereby we could help small halls, community centres and community arts facilities that are struggling to maintain basic infrastructure. That is something we have committed to in the programme for Government. Work is under way in the Department on that. Subject to budget approval and approval by the Department of public expenditure and reform, I hope to be able to include it in budget 2026.

Deputy William Aird: That is welcome news. I also welcome the Minister's recent announcement that the pilot programme regarding the basic income for arts has been extended. What artists need now is his commitment to make it permanent. The programme should be inclusive, support more artists and address barriers faced by those with disabilities. As the Minister knows, arts and culture are central to our Irish identity, community well-being and global reputation. The national development plan rightly places emphasis on balanced regional development. Create Ireland's programme has made great strides in enhancing the success of and engagement with our country's culture and creativity. However, there is still a significant urban-rural divide when it comes to capital investment in cultural infrastructure. Too often, counties like Laois are left behind. I ask the Minister to commit to dedicated funding for rural cultural infrastructure through capital grants for heritage, buildings, artist workspaces and the development of cultural centres. Rural Ireland deserves more than recognition; it deserves real, sustained investment that matches the energy, talent and heritage that our communities offer every day.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: As I said, I am committed to trying to do something in this space. The national cultural institutions are very Dublin-centric. Between the library, the concert hall and the gallery, pretty much all of them are based in Dublin, with the exception of the Crawford Gallery. I am very conscious of the fact that a person should have access to facilities that promote and encourage our cultural and artistic development regardless of where he or she lives, whether that is in counties Laois, Galway, Sligo or wherever.

I welcome the Deputy's acknowledgement of my decision last week regarding the basic income for the arts. As I said in response to Deputies Tóibín, Ó Cearúil and others earlier, that will be dependent on budget 2026. Commitments are laid out in the programme for Government, and we will be anxious to make significant progress in this area over the lifetime of the Government in the next five budgets.

Swimming Pools

136. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the steps Monaghan County Council should take to secure funding for a swimming pool in Carrickmacross. [34630/25]

Deputy Matt Carthy: My question is more of an appeal to the Minister and the Minister of State to work with Monaghan County Council, the local community and all elected representatives to help ensure that we can deliver a swimming pool complex in the town of Carrickmacross.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy Carthy. As he knows, capital support for new swimming pools and the refurbishment of existing pools continues to be provided by the Department through the large-scale sport infrastructure fund, LSSIF, which to date has allocated €28.9 million to nine swimming pools throughout the country. Investment in a swimming pool for Monaghan, as the Deputy knows, is a matter for the local authority in the first instance. Once the next round of the LSSIF opens, Monaghan County Council will be eligible to apply for funding.

Ireland's first national swimming strategy, which was published in August 2024, sets out a vision to provide everyone in our country with an opportunity to swim. It includes an action plan containing more than 50 actions across five thematic strands, focusing on providing improved facilities, increasing access for people with disabilities and improving the culture of inclusion, better coaching supports, increasing safety awareness and providing a pathway that allows for the nurturing and development of potential high performers.

Responsibility for the delivery of the strategy's action plan will be shared across Departments, State agencies and other key stakeholders, including local authorities. Sport Ireland has established an oversight group of key stakeholders to give leadership, policy direction, prioritisation and mobilisation of resources to support, monitor and measure the strategy's implementation. My current focus is on ensuring project delivery under the first two rounds of the LSSIF, from 2019 and 2024. There have only ever been two rounds. I would expect, and it is our objective, that the period until the next round of the LSSIF will be shorter than the period between the previous two. There were five years between the previous two. There was a significant gap in funding infrastructure until that large-scale sport infrastructure fund was introduced. It will be subject to our capital allocations within the national development plan. Within a much shorter timeframe, we hope to be able to run a new round. Monaghan County Council should work to have its preparation in place in order to be able to apply whenever it opens.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I urge him to ensure that the new round of funding is opened as quickly as possible. There has long been a demand for a swimming pool among the people of Carrickmacross. When the previous local authority swimming pool programme was in place, there was a substantial fundraising drive in the town but it did not result in a swimming pool.

That was largely, to be quite frank about it, due to a bias within the county council executive at that time. Thankfully, we now have a situation where all partners are on board, including the council executive, the members of the local authorities and particularly the local community

and sporting organisations. Thanks to the efforts of Councillor Colm Carthy and the wider areas, we recently had a pop-up pool in the town for a number of months. The period of time it is going to be there has been extended because the demand for it has been so great. There is clearly a huge surge in support for swimming activities. Carrickmacross needs this facility. Will the Minister of State be proactive in supporting towns like Carrickmacross to deliver these facilities?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The first requirement is for the county council to be proactive. While I certainly will be proactive in trying to ensure we secure funding and deliver swimming pools throughout the country, we will only be able to deal with applications that are on our desk. It is highly likely we will not be able to deal with every application, given the level of demand, but we will be doing our best to see real development in this regard.

There is no doubt there are significant gaps in swimming pool infrastructure throughout the country. Swimming is the only national sport at the moment that has a dedicated national strategy, the national swimming strategy, which was published approximately one year ago. As part of that strategy, one of the action points was to develop a sense and audit of the swimming pool facilities across the country. Swim Ireland is undertaking that audit. It is assessing where swimming pool facilities and the most significant gaps are. That will inform how we step out to try to address that. We want to get to a situation where everyone has the opportunity to be able to access facilities and learn to swim. We want people to be able to participate in swimming throughout their life, both in Monaghan and throughout the country.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I am pleased to report that Monaghan County Council is now being proactive. As I mentioned, the pop-up pool has been a huge success. A feasibility study has been conducted by the local authority, which shows and reinforces that the demand is there.

The reason there is a national strategy for swimming is that it is much more than a sport. In fact, people involved in every sport benefit from utilising swimming facilities. There is also a recognition that this is an amenity. Carrickmacross is a growing town that has faced challenges in recent years, not least due its growth but also because many of the town's amenities have been delivered from within the community. We have not seen the type of Government investment that other towns the size of Carrickmacross have received. It would send a very powerful message if we were to deliver the sod-turning on a swimming pool complex in Carrickmacross within the lifetime of this Government. I again urge the Minister of State to work with Monaghan County Council. While it has a role it needs to play, I ask him to be proactive in opening a round of funding that Monaghan County Council can apply for to make this project happen.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: As the Deputy knows, we had a round recently in which almost 30 projects across the country were grant-aided under the large-scale support infrastructure fund, LSSIF. The focus on the short term is to work with all of those applications that were successful in the recent round, as well as with a good number from 2019, to ensure that they are progressing, that funding is getting drawn down and that we see those facilities built. Some swimming pools are a part of that.

We hope to have the next round in a shorter timeframe than the five-year gap between the last two rounds. It remains to be seen what that timeframe will be. I encourage Monaghan County Council to ensure it gets its preparations in place to be in a position to apply at that point. In the meantime, I will be working with Sport Ireland and Swim Ireland to get a full assessment as to where the gaps are across the country. We will then look at how to ensure we get as much funding as possible to develop swimming pools throughout the country and open up applications in order that Monaghan County Council and other councils will be able to apply for pools. We will look to see where we can plug gaps to ensure everyone gets the opportunity to swim, particularly young people. It is about them having that opportunity earlier in their lives to be able to learn to swim in order that they can continue to participate and avail of it throughout their lifespans.

Expenditure Reviews

137. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport if his Department has conducted any value-for-money analysis of its spending on Galway 2020; if a breakdown is available on the way in which the €15 million spent by his Department on Galway 2020 was spent; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34052/25]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: One of my biggest frustrations and that of Aontú, in this Dáil and the previous one, is the waste of taxpayers' money and the lack of proper investigations and accountability. The Galway 2020 situation is an example of that. The difficulty with regard to waste is that it often becomes a crisis for a couple of weeks until the media cycle moves on and people forget about it. In the context of Exchequer funding to Galway 2020 and the Government's decision for that not to exceed 50%, the Comptroller and Auditor General stated that the decision was not adhered to and that funding went far beyond that. He also said the disclosure of information was not forthcoming. Has there been a proper investigation into what happened with Galway 2020?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Galway's designation as European Capital of Culture 2020 provided an opportunity to promote the city's culture nationally and internationally. The Government allocated €15 million in two stages, with €14 million allocated to deliver the cultural programme of Galway European Capital of Culture and €1 million allocated for its legacy programme.

The drawdown of €14 million allocated to deliver the cultural programme was completed in November 2020. In line with the programme delivery agreements with the Department, quarterly management and independent auditor reports were received from Galway 2020. The independent auditor confirmed that Galway 2020 followed best practice in transparency, accountability and secured value for money.

In line with the requirements of the European Parliament and Council, every capital of culture is required to have an external and independent evaluation of its programme. This found that Galway 2020 had fulfilled its ambition as set out in its bid book and achieved the general and specific objectives of a European Capital of Culture and the operational objectives relevant to individual European capitals of culture.

An analysis by the independent evaluator demonstrated that the €14 million investment helped provide employment to 894 artists and cultural workers. Cultural projects delivered more than 1,200 events to the public through a combination of physical and online delivery across all art forms, the majority of which were free.

The final payment of €1 million under the legacy programme was made to Galway Culture Company in July 2024. The agreement between the Department and Galway Culture Company required an external evaluation of the programme and an independent auditor's review, as well as regular monitoring meetings. Key performance indicators and drawdown requirements were also set out for the programme. I recently received the final reporting on the legacy programme. I welcome the analysis by the independent evaluators, The Audience Agency, that Galway Culture Company delivered a successful programme using a budget of €1 million in an effective and efficient way, demonstrating transparency in the way this had been administered and meeting its obligations as stated in the performance delivery agreement with the Department.

I will give more information in my next response.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I thank the Minister. The independent auditor and its outcomes are in direct contradiction to the Comptroller and Auditor General. The project had received more than €20 million in State funding by 2023. The Minister's Department provided approximately €15 million; Galway City Council provided €3.7 million; Galway County Council provided €2.6 million; and the EU provided €1.5 million. The outcome of that was a number of resignations. Several resignations happened and people took cases to the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC.

There is no doubt that Galway is a fantastic city and that much of the money did good work to support local artists. Bad luck with weather and Covid-19 played a role in what happened to Galway 2020. Nevertheless, many people are not satisfied with the value-for-money aspect of the programme and that the Comptroller and Auditor General's questions are still outstanding. Does the Minister not have a concern about that?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: To finish my earlier response, the analysis of spending found that the €1 million budget had been allocated under the following strategic objectives: €191,920 to facilitate international and EU relationships and funding; €537,413 to support place-based cultural programming; and €270,668 in supports to the cultural and creative sector. Galway 2020 was delivered in the most efficient circumstances during the height of Covid-19. While this necessitated a complete re-engineering of the year, the Department is satisfied that its funding was applied appropriately.

The Deputy is right that there was an unfortunate sequence of events with weather, Covid-19 and everything else. I think the earlier part of my response, which outlined the independent evaluation and the audit trail in place for moneys expended by my Department, was clear.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It would be unfortunate if we were to insulate the expenditure from the Minister's Department from all of the other expenditure that came from this. A representative of Aontú in the area, Luke Silke, has done significant work on this matter. A large amount of money was spent. Taxpayers have had to fork out for this, even in the years

subsequent to 2020. People were still paying for this in 2023. As soon as the Minister started his job, he came across the crisis in the Arts Council with the IT system that never functioned. Privately, he probably shares the same concerns as me around value for money and the waste that is happening in these spaces.

My appeal to the Minister is for him to leave a legacy on this, so that there is full accountability for waste that happens. Full accountability means that there is a cost to the individuals who are not protecting the public purse. If we do not have this cost, we are cursed to wake up to see these same stories repeat themselves.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Deputy is right in respect of what I did on assuming the office of Minister with responsibility for culture, communications and sport. I became aware of a substantial problem in the Department and a legacy problem in the Arts Council. I have dealt with this in a manner that I believe to be proportionate and responsible in the sense that I have asked Professor Niamh Brennan, in the first instance, to carry out a complete overhaul examination of the culture, organisation and corporate governance in the Arts Council. I have made the commitment that any recommendations from this will be implemented. I have also asked the IPA to look at my Department because I have said on the record in the Dáil that I am not satisfied with the manner in which the Department dealt with it. Regarding Galway 2020, I can only answer here for the Department. I cannot answer for Galway City Council or Galway County Council. I have previously expressed views regarding the role of the Comptroller and Auditor General in respect of local authorities. I believe that would be an appropriate way to leverage this.

Question No. 138 taken with Question No. 134.

Arts Funding

139. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the total number of eligible applicants to the grassroots music venue supports scheme who met necessary criteria to avail of the scheme; the total number of successful applicants; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34898/25]

149. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the total number of eligible applicants to the grassroots music venue supports scheme who met necessary criteria to avail of the scheme; the geographical distribution of the successful applicants; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [34899/25]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I want to raise the issue of the criteria that were used for the grassroots music venue support scheme. I commend the Department on introducing this scheme. As a festival director, I am acutely aware of the challenges for major festivals, like our own, but also the grassroots music venue supports. The scheme was very welcome, but it is devastating to learn how the Department divvied out this money on a first-come first-served basis. Not one venue north of Galway or west of Louth got money, despite the fact that there are sound technicians, music technicians and artists playing in venues that were eligible. The whole region has been left out because of the criteria used by the Department. This needs to

be examined quickly. Some of these venues need the support and I ask the Minister reconsider the decisions that have been made.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I propose to take Questions Nos. 139 and 149 together.

I launched the grassroots music venue support scheme in March this year to support small, established music venues that promote themselves and are known in the community for programming grassroots music artists, in recognition of the contribution they make to the music industry and the wider night-time economy.

The scheme aims to provide employment opportunities for emerging artists and professionals, including production staff and crew who are dependent on live performances. The scheme operated with a total fund of €500,000 and grants were available of up to €15,000 to host events showcasing the talent of emerging, grassroots artists, performing live music that they have written or created themselves. The scheme was extremely popular and it was closed in early April as it was oversubscribed. A total of 96 applications were received by my Department. Applications were assessed by my officials strictly by order of date and time of receipt and all venues had to meet the eligibility criteria and conditions of funding, in accordance with the guidelines of the scheme. Of the 96 applications received, a total of 45 were eligible for funding. I recently announced the names of 33 venues that were awarded funding under this scheme. Of the 45 venues eligible for funding, there was a broad geographical spread with more than 40% of the venues located outside of the major cities and more than 70% outside Dublin.

The majority of eligible applications were from Munster with a total of 19 venues eligible for funding; 13 applications were eligible for funding in Dublin; ten in Leinster; two in Connacht and one in Ulster. I acknowledge that the number of eligible applications for Ulster is low but we only received four applications for funding from that province and six in total for the north-west region. Unfortunately, we could not allocate funds to the remaining 12 eligible applicants, based on available funding resources. My officials have written to all successful applicants to ask if they will use their full allocation and should any funding become available, they will redistribute the funding to the next eligible applicant on the list. I understand that there may be disappointed applicants but, as I have stated, I recognise the value of this scheme to venues across Ireland and I am committed to considering another phase of this in the not too distant future.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I welcome the scheme and that money was provided. It was announced that the scheme was open and there was a closing date for it. The only venue in County Donegal that is eligible for the scheme is The Social in Gaoth Dobhair. I will give an example and the Minister will be aware of it because all the details were provided. The Social operated 84 eligible grassroots events during the two years that the scheme was available. This means that the venue was, on average, operating one of these events every week. This is a stand-alone facility; this is not a pub. It hosted ticketed events with artists such as The Hothouse Flowers, Muireann Bradley and others from across the island of Ireland. This supported sound engineers, lighting engineers and, most importantly, the acts themselves. To my knowledge, not one venue in the north west has been granted this money.

The Minister announced this scheme that went from €5,000 up to €15,000 and the Department decided that 12 eligible applicants would get no money whatsoever. It would have been fairer for the Department give every eligible applicant €11,000 or thereabouts. There was €500,000 available so each could have got €11,000. However, the Department decided to give the money on a first-come first-served basis, despite the fact that in the case of The Social, its application was in to the Department within a week. They were told that someone got in before them and that was it. That is completely unfair. Good luck to all the venues that got the support. I imagine that there are very few that were as active and had as many eligible events as The Social in Gaoth Dobhair. The Minister will have this data.

My question to the Minister chimes with what Jim McGuinness has been talking about regarding Donegal GAA for a while. Does the Minister not recognise that there are grassroots venues in the north west, that there are acts that need to be supported in these venues and that there are sound engineers and technicians who need to have a way of life as a result of that? The night-time economy initiative in Buncrana is completely different. No venue in Buncrana is eligible. No venue in counties Donegal, Sligo or Monaghan fit the criteria that have been set, bar The Social.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I have outlined the rationale for the distribution of funding under the scheme and I have said that I am committed to additional schemes of this nature in the future. It is remiss of the Deputy to try to run down the officials in the Department. Ultimately, this was a pilot scheme. We tried to give out the money as quickly as possible. I have outlined the number of people outside of Dublin who got it. No matter how the officials in the Department distributed this money, they were going to be wrong in somebody's eyes. They have done a very good job and I hope that there will be cross-party support for the continuation of the scheme in budget 2026. I hope we will have a bigger pool of money and that we will be able to address all of those who were disappointed. There are disappointed people in many other counties as well, which the Deputy did not reference.

I am glad the Deputy referred to the night-time economy officer. There are many towns in the country that are way smaller or way bigger than Buncrana that do not have one. The Deputy did not reference this in his retort. I am sure that the officer is working very closely with venues in Buncrana and I will be able to evaluate the work in the not too distant future.

Regarding this scheme, I intend to have a repeat of it as soon as possible. When I have the necessary resources, we will be able to evaluate the output that of the scheme. Hopefully, we will also be able to address some, but maybe not all, of the disappointment.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am a Donegal TD. I will not stand here and say that the Department did a great job when it excluded the entire north west from this support scheme. The venue that I am talking about provides more grassroots events than many of the others that were eligible. I am sure that the Minister will be delighted when he goes back to Limerick. How many got the grant in his own county? Was it four or five? That is good for them. I support every single grassroots venue and every single festival. That is really important. However, in Donegal and the north west generally there is an industry that needs to be supported as well. The idea that the Department decided without telling the applicants that funding would be provided on a first-come first-served basis is simply wrong. I commend the Minister on being able to secure this as a pilot project. However, there was enough money in

the pool, limited as it was, to ensure that every eligible venue got support. Why is that important? It is important because the acts, the sound engineers and the lighting engineers get the support. There are people in my county and the north west who need that support, just as much as they need it in Limerick, Cork and Dublin. The Department has made a major mistake in how this was allocated. It has completely ignored the north west. Because it is not a huge amount, I appeal to the Minister to provide funding to the other 12 eligible applicants. It would be about €150,000. The Minister should at least make an appeal to the Minister for public expenditure or to his own Department to make sure that every eligible applicant gets their fair share of this support.

12 o'clock

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I thank the Deputy for the single transferable speech. No matter what I did on this, the Deputy was going to be opposed to it any way. Let us call a spade a spade. There was one eligible application from Ulster. I have said and made it very clear that as soon as we get an opportunity to have a second scheme, I am sure the Deputy will have all the wisdom of Job in articulating what should be in that scheme.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: A bit of regional balance and stop screwing the north west-----

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: You have had a good run now for your video. My priority was to get the maximum amount of money out to the maximum number of locations. Rather than run down the locations that got it-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I did not run them down.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Deputy's party should be supportive of the locations that got it, rather than running them down.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister said there was good regional spread. On which map of Ireland does good regional spread mean no venue north of Galway and west of Louth?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Doherty, please resume your seat.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: If the Minister thinks that is true, he is off his rocker.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: How is Sinn Féin's infrastructure Minister doing?

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is not good regional spread.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Has Sinn Féin's infrastructure Minister heard of the north west and the hames they made of the A5?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thanks very much, Minister. Will you make way for the Tánaiste? He has to come in.

The Tánaiste: I do not want to interrupt.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Now for round two.

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Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Having got warmed up, does Deputy Doherty want to contribute under Standing Order 38?

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Tá brú ollmhór ar theaghlaigh de bharr praghsanna atá ag ardú. Ní chreideann daoine a gcluasa nuair a deir an Rialtas nach ndéanfaidh sé a dhath le tacú leo. Ní féidir leo a thuilleadh de na praghsanna seo a fhulaingt. Caithfidh an Rialtas pacáiste tacaíochta a thabhairt chun cinn láithreach a thabharfaidh faoiseamh d'oibrithe agus do theaghlaigh.

Soaring prices - that is what everybody is talking about out there. In the last couple of weeks, we put out a cost-of-living survey online. Thousands of people replied to that survey and the results mirrored what we hear every day. The price of everything is going through the roof and people are finding it harder and harder to keep their heads above water. Almost 70% of respondents to our survey say they were just managing to get by. People are sick of seeing their hard-earned money swallowed up by out-of-control prices and are fed up with barely keeping up. They are hit from all angles, whether extortionate rents, massive energy bills, the high cost of petrol and diesel or unaffordable childcare. The one thing that is putting households under most pressure at this time is the cost of food. Some 91% of respondents told us they were struggling with runaway grocery prices.

As part of the survey, we asked them to tell us their stories. I want to share a few of them today. Jackie wrote:

My weekly food shop bill has doubled. 4 years ago I wasn't worried about the summer holidays. But kids will want days out and treats. Just like ice cream. I can't afford that. I haven't brought myself new clothes in 3 years. I don't sleep well with worry.

Paul says:

When we go grocery shopping we tend to buy the cheapest brands and try to get our meat and poultry at a discounted price in the sell by date fridge. We worry that we're not eating properly. We're afraid to turn on the heating when it's needed [because] our bill goes through the roof. We've a 7 year old son. It hurts telling him that we can't afford to buy him nice things.

Lorraine told us:

As two university graduates with 4 children, we struggle every week. Only one parent can work full time as childcare is too expensive. We are trying to manage 6 people on 1 salary. Our grocery bill has skyrocketed. We try to save on our electricity bill but this is also way

higher than it was 4 years ago. Our health insurance puts us into debt but we have to pay it because one of us has a life threatening medical condition. It's infuriating. My teenagers are going to college soon. I have no idea how we will pay for that.

Thousands of people filled in this online survey. That is a snapshot of what they are feeling about out-of-control prices and what they are doing to people. It is a nightmare for folks out there and they cannot believe their ears when they hear the Tánaiste or Taoiseach, or their partners in government, stand up and say they will not do anything for them and will not bring forward a cost-of-living package in this year's budget. The State has never been better off but the hard-working people who made that happen have been left high and dry. How is that fair?

The Tánaiste says - and I am sure he will say it again - that the Government is aware of what people are going through, but then he does nothing. He rules out a cost-of-living package. He cannot keep patting himself on the back for the things the Government did last year or the year before. People are under pressure right here, right now. That is Paul's experience, Jackie's experience and countless experiences across this State. They need help now. I am pleading with the Tánaiste to change his mind. I ask the Government to do its job and bring forward a package of supports that will provide relief for these households. It needs to bring a cost-of-living package forward without delay.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I want to acknowledge at the outset, because it is true, that people in this country are still finding the cost of living a very significant issue. I know that, the Deputy knows that and there is not a TD in Dáil Éireann who is not aware of that in their own community and from their own constituency work. I want to be clear the Government is taking action in the here and now in a variety of areas. It is not a question of the Government saying people have to wait until the budget for supports. The Government is taking action this month that will have an effect on people in a range of areas.

I will give a few examples. This month 114,000 carers will receive the highest carer's support grant ever, and rightly so. Next month, we will see income levels for the carer's allowance increase so many more people will qualify for financial support. Over the summer months, the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance will be paid out. In September, there will be a significant increase in the number of people who qualify for the fuel allowance, allowing more people who are worried about heating bills, particularly in the run-up to winter, to qualify for that allowance for the first time ever. This month and again later this year, public sector pay will increase, including for the lowest paid workers in the public service, benefitting around 300,000 people. Anybody with a child starting secondary school in September will see the free schoolbooks scheme that has been a real success at primary school extend to secondary school. The Deputy talked about the cost of food. He will see for the first time the roll-out of the summer version of the hot school meals, what we are calling a summer meals programme. Women going into the pharmacy to access HRT see that it has been made free in the last number of weeks. Student grant payments will increase from September and childcare costs have fallen this year.

When the Government came into office, we decided to extend the reduced VAT rate on gas and electricity for exactly the reasons the Deputy mentioned, which is that if we had not done so, we would have had the VAT rate at 13.5%. We thought that was wrong so we took the decision to make that 9%. In recent weeks, we brought about a reduction in the levy, which is

called the renewable electricity public service obligation. That will give people an approximately 40% reduction in the levy and save them a few bob on their electricity bills.

The Government is taking action on the cost of living and I do not think it is right or proper to get into a branding exercise about whether there will be a cost-of-living "package". There will be measures to help people in the budget with the cost of living, absolutely. Read our programme for Government and read what we want to do on childcare and for small businesses. Read what we intend to do for carers and how we intend to support farmers. Expect to see progress in this budget and the next number of budgets as we seek to fulfil that.

I push back very strongly against the narrative that anyone in government is saying we should sit back and wait many months. I have given more than ten examples of where we are already helping people with the cost of living. We want to build on that.

We can all say inflation is falling and that is true. We have been through a big inflationary crisis, probably the biggest since the 1970s, but I accept there is a significant time lag in many areas between inflation falling and citizens seeing any benefit in their bills.

The Deputy referenced groceries. There is a commitment in the programme for Government to expand the powers of the CCPC. That should happen. We have seen recent examples of it taking action to protect consumers. We need to see how we can strengthen its powers further.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Tánaiste says inflation is falling and it will take a while for people to feel the effects, but he knows the phrase "inflation is falling" means prices are still going up. It just means they are not going up as fast as they were in the past. It means the prices people have seen go up in recent years are higher today. That is the real lived experience of Jackie, Paul, Lorraine and thousands of people across the State. The Tánaiste can pat himself on the back as much as he wants for what he has done but people's lived experience is that not enough is being done. The Government has ruled out a cost-of-living package in this year's budget. It is the wrong approach.

The Government has done other things the Tánaiste did not mention. For example, it passed legislation last night meaning every person in this State will pay more local property tax. Earlier this year, it put up the price of petrol and diesel. Also earlier this year, it put up the price of gas and heating oil to keep people's homes warm.

Just in the last weeks, the Government has ensured that rents will go up for new renters right across the State, including students that the Government talked about in terms of student supports. That is also the lived experience of people.

Let us get down to basics. Costs are going through the roof. People are struggling with their weekly shopping. A Minister of State said he was going to stop this. He was going to tackle this. He said he was going to call in the supermarkets two years ago. He was going to lay down the law and everything was going to change within six weeks. Prices are through the roof. This Government is impotent in the face of that. People are struggling. I am asking the Government again for a cost-of-living package that will support families and workers right throughout this State in the middle of this cost-of-living crisis. It is what is needed. It needs to be brought forward without delay.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy is accusing me of saying things that I never said. Nobody suggested here that anyone is patting themselves on the back. What I did for the people watching at home was push back against the Deputy's misinformation and disinformation that the Government is not taking action on the cost of living. People know the record of this Government in helping them through the past number of years. They know how many measures we took. However, I am also making the point because I do not want fear and anxiety to be sewed in people that this Government is taking help today. We are putting measures in place to help today. Look at what we are doing relating to the carer's support grant. Look at what we are doing to make sure more people can qualify next month for the carer's allowance. Look at what we are doing to make sure more people qualify for the fuel allowance in September. Look at what we are doing to increase student grants from September. Look at what we are doing in terms of increasing public sector pay. Look at what we are doing in relation to free secondary school books. Look at what we are doing relating to free hormone replacement therapy, HRT. We will continue to do this. Does the Deputy know what else we will do? We will keep the economy safe because we are in a turbulent time as well. The Deputy comes in here and says to abolish the carbon levy, get rid of the property tax, get rid of this and then spend a load more too. People saw through that in the election.

Deputy Mark Ward: No more so than you.

The Tánaiste: That is why they voted to put a centrist Government back in office.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Tomorrow will mark another dark day when the latest homeless figures are published. The figure will be over 15,000. This is the population of a town the size of Tullamore. There were 4,775 children homeless in the most recent figures, each an individual tragedy. "The impact of homelessness and unstable living conditions on children is catastrophic" were the words of the Ombudsman for Children on Tuesday at the housing committee. Let us go back just five years to May 2020 and there were 2,787 children homeless. In five years, there has been a 60% increase in child homelessness. The long-lasting effects of such trauma and displacement put these children at increased risk of poverty, social exclusion and adult homelessness long after they have moved out of homeless services. If the Government wants confirmation of the total failure of its housing policies, that statistic sums it up. The Tánaiste admitted yesterday homelessness is too high in Ireland and we have to work every day to do better and more. The ombudsman called for bold brave measures to address the crisis. There is a need for a specific child and family homelessness strategy built on three pillars: prevention; supports in homelessness, and delivery of social and affordable housing. On all measures, the Government is failing.

There is no point telling a homeless child we are building more social homes than at any point since the 1970s. This Government and the previous one had "one of the highest levels of public expenditure for housing, yet one of the poorest outcomes". These are the words of the Housing Commission and not mine. There is a level of inertia in the delivery of public housing

that is impossible to understand. Councillors and local authorities across the country will tell us of the dead hand of the Custom House restricting their ability to get on with it. The private sector will not solve this crisis; only the State can. We know that the tenant in situ scheme has been gutted. We know the Minister has stalled 500 homes by pausing public-private partnerships, PPPs. We know that the Government has hiked rents in the private rental sector. There is an €8 billion surplus, but we cannot keep families in their homes. These are things within the Government's control.

I wrote to the Minister for housing with policy measures to address homelessness in March, but I still have not received a response. The programme for Government has no mention of homelessness prevention. There are huge variations in how individual councils treat homeless children. Labour proposed the Housing (Homeless Families) Bill eight years ago. This was supported by Focus Ireland and has passed pre-legislative scrutiny. The previous Minister considered including it in the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2024 last year, but failed to act. The Ombudsman for Children called for the same measure in its 2019 report *No Place Like Home*. Will the Government now act? How many children must suffer the trauma of homelessness before we see real emergency measures? Will the Government heed the words of the Ombudsman for Children with bold and brave action and a dedicated strategy? For nearly 5,000 children, it is already too late. The Tánaiste wants to do better and more. Will he at least put a plan in place?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for highlighting what is the biggest domestic emergency we face in this country - the issue of housing. It is nowhere more acute than when it comes to children. We are united on that. I have huge respect for the Ombudsman of Children, Dr. Niall Muldoon, for the work of his office and his independence. Both of the parties in government established this structure because it is good to have somebody to hold the feet of Government to the coals and keep us under pressure. The points he made this week remind us of the real acuity of this situation. He made a number of constructive suggestions, including asking the Oireachtas joint committee on housing to play a role in this. I am quite sure that across parties, Members will want to see happen.

I say respectfully to the ombudsman and to the Deputy that it is actually because we are so aware of the issues relating to children that we are taking some of the measures that we have taken. I said this yesterday. The no-fault eviction ban that we are legislating for will help keep children in their homes. I think the Deputy will agree with that. On cost rental, I was out in Tallaght yesterday where we have the first cost-rental scheme by a council, as opposed to the Land Development Agency, LDA. It is a good development in Tallaght. There are 133 homes, playgrounds and a school to go in. This will help children in knowing where they are going to be living for their childhood. That is good. That needs to become a template for the rest of the country.

I take the Deputy's point, though I disagree with it, but I understand why he said there is no point telling a child that this is the greatest number of social homes being allocated since the 1970s. I will gently push back because these homes are being allocated to families with children. These are real people moving into these homes. We have a social house building programme back up and running. I agree with the Deputy on one point, although I will not share the language of the "dead hand". I take the point he made in relation to too many gates and barriers in the context of local authorities getting on with social housing. As recently as

this week, we discussed this with the housing Minister. The Minister, Deputy Browne, intends to bring forward proposals to rectify that and to empower councils to move much more quickly on this. That cannot come soon enough.

We have tried to take a number of big and bold decisions since this Government came into office, including providing clarity relating to rent pressure zones, RPZ; plans relating to the no-fault evictions; reforming our planning laws; and providing more money for the delivery of social and affordable homes. The Deputy will see us take more actions in the national development plan next month to help house building, including the infrastructure that is necessary around water, wastewater and energy. During the election, the Labour Party made a constructive suggestion on the role of the LDA. The party wishes to reform it. We have different views on it, but we have agreed with this much, which is that certainly the mandate of the LDA needs to be expanded. We have taken decisions in recent weeks to give the LDA more power to do more and to deliver more homes.

I do not want to misquote the Deputy but he said something about private investment and public investment. There is a need for both. When I read the Housing Commission report, it is very clear. We need to invest more publicly but we cannot just do it with public money. We also need to get private investment to get a functioning housing market in place too.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: While the measures that the Government announced last week relating to security of tenure are welcome, they were undermined completely by allowing landlords to reset rents to market rate. The Housing Commission was clear that social and affordable housing should form 20% of our housing stock. It currently forms less than 10% of all housing stock. If the Tánaiste has huge respect for the Ombudsman for Children, as he said he has, I hope he will heed what he said and come forward with a bespoke plan to deal with child homelessness, but also include our homeless families Bill that is sitting in the ether for eight years in the housing (miscellaneous provisions) Bill 2025. Words are not enough. The Government has the authority to act, pass legislation and as the Tánaiste said last year when he became Taoiseach to "move mountains". This is the biggest crisis that we face and it is not being treated with the appropriate level of seriousness by this Government.

The Tánaiste: I wish to assure the Deputy that it is. I also assure him that I am aware of the mountain that needs to be climbed to where we need to get to. We will give consideration very much to how we take forward the views of the Ombudsman for Children, whether that is through bespoke strategies or reflected in specific actions in the new housing plan. He is not wrong regarding the need for a renewed focus for children and family homelessness. I will ask the Minister to revert to the Deputy on the Labour Party Bill. It is not just about words from the Government. We have taken approximately nine actions since this Government came into office. We have reformed the planning laws relating to permissions. We are increasing the amount of land available for housing by directing local authorities to revisit their development plans to zone more land for homes.

We have provided more money already for the delivery of social and affordable homes. We are providing more housing options for younger and older people by exempting developments in people's gardens and on their own land. We are expanding the role of the Land Development Agency, meaning the State developer will be active in many more parts of the country, which is important. We are trying to stimulate the construction of new apartments. We have provided

clarity and certainty on rent pressure zones. We are regulating short-term lets and in the coming weeks we will provide more funding for housing directly and for enabling infrastructure, such as water and wastewater.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Every day people in Gaza play what is called "the hunger games". After two months without a shred of food, milk, medicine or flour coming into the territory, they brave Israeli army bullets at feeding stations that have been set up, for the chance of a bag of flour, a tin of food or whatever for their starving families. We had indelible images from the Holocaust. These will be the indelible images from this holocaust against the Palestinians and history will record that this has been sanctioned and facilitated by the EU and US.

Today, we saw the Taoiseach is at the EU summit. He will be blocked in any move to take action against Israel under the trade agreement. It is backed by bigger countries. The Tánaiste has repeatedly said we must use all levers at our disposal to end this genocide. Why does he not use all the levers he has at his disposal? We cannot wait for the EU to act in concert.

The Government is introducing an occupied territories Bill, six years after it was introduced to the Dáil, just before the recess and 20 months into a genocide, but it is denuding the Bill because it does not include services. It does not have even half the power of the original Bill. Why are services not included in this Bill? The International Court of Justice, ICJ, makes no distinction between goods and services. The settlements are illegal and all trade with them should be ended. Some 75% of people in Ireland want the full occupied territories Bill to be passed. The Palestinian people need sanctions and there has been no legal advice to the contrary. Is this due to lobbying from companies like Airbnb that might be affected by this?

The occupied territories Bill only covers a fraction of our trade with Israel. According to the United Nations Comtrade, our trade with Israel is worth €3.3 billion, the second highest after the US and above China. While the genocide was in full swing last year, for example, Ireland was the largest buyer of Israeli integrated circuits, while the Tánaiste was Taoiseach, €3 billion worth of integrated circuits that are used ironically in our health system while the people of Gaza were having their health system destroyed. I will not even go into the companies that are here and benefitting and part of the genocide, but I will ask the Tánaiste to use the lever of Shannon Airport and our airspace. Shannon Airport has become in effect a logistical military hub for the US.

Deputy Martin Heydon: What a statement.

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): What a statement.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It has become a significant transit point for the US military since 9/11. The RTÉ news data, for example, reported 2,000 applications for exemptions, of which only 0.1% were refused. Literally millions of US troops have passed through Shannon Airport in the past 20 years.

The Tánaiste: They are not going to Gaza.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please conclude, Deputy.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Shannon Airport is a *de facto* military base and the US is financing the genocide on Gaza. Will the Tánaiste pull that lever and stop the US army from using Shannon Airport?

The Tánaiste: That was quite an extraordinary attempt to suggest that the country in the European Union, which has done more for and in standing by the people of Palestine is somehow or other complicit in an illegal, despicable genocide that is taking place.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I did not say that.

Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): You effectively did.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: You are, but I did not say it.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: There you go.

The Tánaiste: There you go. You said it now. The mask slips very quickly with you, Deputy.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Stick to the question on the occupied territories Bill.

The Tánaiste: The way this place works is that the Deputy asks a question and then I have the right to answer. It is a democracy, so I ask that my mandate be respected too because I would like to answer the question.

Surely to God, it does not need to be the case in everything that the Deputy is morally superior than everyone over here. Surely to God, sometimes we can actually recognise that it does not matter what our politics are or where we are on the political spectrum. We are all sickened by the genocide and we are not divided on that. Perhaps every now and then we could pull together and be clear about that. The Deputy is again using language that the sponsor of the Bill, Senator Black, the woman who actually did all the work on the legislation, does not use.

I have met Senator Black. She did a great job by the way. She is a good person who is trying to do the right thing. I said clearly to her that we would get that Bill to pre-legislative scrutiny, that we would not dilly-dally and wait for clarity on whether it was possible to include services. We will get the Bill in on goods and do the pre-legislative scrutiny. I have made it clear that, from a policy perspective, we have no issue with adding services. I want to do everything possible to make it clear we stand with the ICJ. We are the only Government in the entire European Union that has published any legislation - ever - to ban trade with the occupied Palestinian territories. We are the only one. I had a good conversation with Deputy Bacik on this and I thank her, but I have not had anyone else in the Opposition ring me about this. I would be very grateful if every member of the Opposition in a leadership position would do one thing today and that is to pick up the telephone and contact their political counterparts in

the European Union and ask them where is their occupied Palestinian territories Bill and when will it be published.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Hear, hear.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Hear, hear.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: I would like to know because it is by all of us coming together that we will create the momentum that Netanyahu's genocide cannot be tolerated.

What the Deputy said about Shannon Airport is an attempt to conflate a number of issues. It is an attempt to suggest somehow or other that Shannon Airport is being used to assist with the horrific activity in Gaza. There is no evidence of that at all. I ask the Deputy to clarify that is not what she is saying.

She is right about, and my Department publishes every month on our website, exactly what happens in terms of flights that land. It is quite transparent. I want to make it quite clear that there is no evidence of any flight stopping at Shannon Airport to transport any weapons or any military personnel participating in any genocidal activity in Gaza or the Middle East. I would appreciate if the Deputy would agree with me on that. She certainly has no evidence of that either.

We will pass a Bill that shows solidarity with the people of Palestine and the ICJ. What we are also going to do is what the Taoiseach is trying to do today, that is build an alliance to try to get other countries involved. The Deputy is right on this point, that we cannot wait for EU unanimity. We waited far too long and we have to move on. I am asking like-minded countries today to move with us and I would appreciate the Deputy's support on that.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The point of my contribution was that we are the second biggest trader with Israel. It is worth €3.3 billion. The occupied territories Bill is a fraction of that. It is a welcome step. The question is why the Government is not moving forward the whole occupied territories Bill that was originally proposed in the Dáil six years ago. It was unanimously or certainly overwhelmingly supported. Fianna Fáil brought it in and was cheering and whooping about it. The Government has the chance to bring in the whole Bill. There is no legal impediment to doing so that the Government has identified. Why not introduce Frances Black's full Bill? It would have been much quicker.

The word "complicity" means that you are involved in something or you know something is wrong and do not do anything about it.

The Tánaiste: Thank you for explaining it.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: For 20 months, we have all known that what has been going on is wrong and very little has been done by Ireland-----

A Deputy: Not True.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: -----to use the levers. The levers are there, but is the Government willing to pull them?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: That is not true

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The first lever is the occupied territories Bill. The Government needs to move it and make sure the Bill gets in before the recess. However, there are other issues such as Shannon Airport and the Bill on the Israeli war bonds, which the Tánaiste and members of Government voted down. The bar is low in the EU. There is no point in comparing yourself to them.

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

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: This is about a neutral country standing up for the people of Palestine.

The Tánaiste: The people of Palestine know we are standing up for them. Deputy Coppinger might not want to acknowledge or appreciate that. The Palestinian ambassador wrote to Sligo County Council in the past week and said

Ireland's commitment to international law and human rights will always be seen and commended by the Palestinian people. Every effort by the Government of Ireland to stop Israel's genocide and war crimes on the Palestinian people is highly valued.

The person who is in our country representing the people of Palestine wrote to Sligo County-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: You are collaborators with the Israeli regime.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: What?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Withdraw that.

The Tánaiste: Hang on a second. It is hard to keep up with the Deputy.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: You are seen as that by Palestinians.

The Tánaiste: I would like to use the 32 seconds available to me. It is hard to keep up with the Deputy's logic. The Palestinian ambassador has written-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Talk to Palestinians.

The Tánaiste: -----to thank the people and Government of Ireland. Funnily enough, I attach a greater value to her view, as the representative of the people of Palestine, than I do to the Deputy's view on behalf of the people of Palestine.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Sound bites.

The Tánaiste: She represents them. That is how it works. She is their representative in this country. We made her an ambassador by recognising the State of Palestine.

On the occupied territories Bill, let me be clear. There are legal issues about services. We will tease through them and, if we can make progress on them that is what we intend to do, but we need other countries to move. If this is not about performative politics and actually about helping to save lives in Gaza, today we need to call on other EU member states to join us and bring forward their own legislation and stop waiting for EU unanimity. Let us get on with the job.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I am not against wind farms or biodigesters but I am for health guidelines being adhered to. It has been shown in the documentation I have here, released under access to information on the environment regulations, that in November 2021 and April 2022 the then Minister, former Deputy Eamon Ryan, and the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, agreed to abandon the 2017 preferred draft approach to wind energy guidelines, a plan based on science and environmental law and a format approved by Government. Instead of following the law, Eamon Ryan turned it into a wind industry fairy godmother with no noise limits to protect health, no plan to deal with amplitude modulation - the whoosh and thump - and no action on low-frequency noise - the hum and rumble. These issues are now in front of the High Court, with three wind turbines in Wexford having been turned off on the basis of these same issues related to health.

The former Minister, Eamon Ryan, decided at the time that he had the fairy dust to override the EPA expert advice. Did he think magic and strategic environmental assessments? That is what it looks like. This is not just bad policy; it is a serious breach of trust. Both Ministers ignored expert warnings and environmental laws. That is not leadership; it is actually recklessness. What legal authority did they have to do this? The HSE recommends the WHO noise standards to An Bord Pleanála for the protection of health. How can the HSE say one thing and the Government policy says something else? Will the Tánaiste now refer this whole matter to the Department of Health and the HSE for a proper public review? Will he stall wind energy generation until the review has taken place on the basis of health grounds?

Everyone here is for wind but we are also for the health of people who live in the areas where there are wind farms. At the moment in this country we have roughly 1,600 wind turbines. Under the 2030 policies, to reach the target we have to meet and to get constant power we could actually have to put up 7,000 to 8,000 wind farms on this island. Is this why the 2006 guidelines have never been updated? Is this why Eamon Ryan decided to ignore health guidelines for the people of Ireland and put wind energy above health? These people were living here before any applications went in. Then, for five years, the DMAPs were delayed, under which we could have looked at offshore and moved it along to help us on wind energy.

This is what I am trying to say. Are we now putting everything else above health for the profiteering of wind farms, to push on to make the 2030 policy?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. The short answer is no, we are not. We obviously take the concerns and the health of people in this country very seriously. I recognise there are people affected. I have met them with the Deputy and with the Minister of State, Deputy Canney. I recognise there are people who have concerns with regard to their own community and the impact on their homes. That is why it is very important that we have new wind guidelines that give significant clarity and certainty on this. I am a big believer in renewable energy. We have to be and the Government is. It is the way forward. I appreciate the Deputy says he is supportive of that too. We can go from being a net importer of energy to a net exporter and that would provide our country with huge potential in terms of economic security. There are lots of issues we talk about in this country like the cost of energy. It would be hugely beneficial for our country so I think it is quite an exciting opportunity.

I do take the point that we obviously have to get the planning structures right in terms of how this is developed. People across the country ask me why a particular field is being used for solar, or with regard to a wind turbine, "Hang on a second, is that the right setback distance?" The Deputy is also right in that the general direction of travel here will be to see a lot more offshore. In the part of the country that I live in, we expect to see a very significant development. That is why we are trying to put in place new guidelines. I accept fully, and it is a bit of an understatement, that this process is taking quite a long time. There is a reason for that. The programme for Government recommits to prioritising the publication of new wind energy development guidelines. It specifically says we will have regard to international best practice and standards, so learning from other countries on this as well.

I was in contact with the Minister for housing this morning and I know his Department and the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment are working together to look at certain elements of the draft guidelines in relation to new renewable energy targets. It is their intention, following the conclusion of the engagement, to bring the review to Government as quickly as possible. I hope and expect it to be concluded by the end of the year. Certainly, that is what the two Departments told me this morning they are working towards.

There has been very significant engagement on this. There has been a lot of opportunity for input and for public consultation as well. The aim here is to get an appropriate balance between addressing the concerns of local communities by ensuring there is greater earlier community engagement, while also making sure we can tackle the energy and climate emergency we face. The review also needs to take on board, and is taking on board, the changed planning policy context. Since this review started, we have passed the new Planning and Development Act 2024 and we now have a new national planning framework recently approved by the Dáil. Those two documents, the law and the planning framework, will need to be taken into consideration as well. They are working towards preparing draft guidelines. They will put those draft guidelines out for public consultation, so there will be a chance for the Deputy's constituents to feed in then. Let us try to get the process done later this year.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I thank the Tánaiste for his reply. We have had guidelines since 2006. The Tánaiste is right; it has taken 12 years where we are looking at guidelines. Every time there is a change of Government, it is guidelines, guidelines, guidelines. If there

are guidelines put in place for wind turbines in this country, at least they can be put up straight away. You will not have High Court battles or objections because the guidelines will be there.

It is the same for biodigesters. It is the exact same thing. If guidelines are put in place, the people who want to build these for the betterment of the farming community, energy and everything else will know where they can build them and there will be no High Court battles about them. We will be able to build them and also meet the energy targets we need to meet. However, having 12 years to put in guidelines and during that time ignoring the health guidelines from the World Health Organization which actually tell you wind turbines are supposed to be done 1:10 will tell you there will be no wind turbines built in Ireland if that is adopted. At the moment we are building 1:4. For every 1 m you go up, they say it should be 4 m away, but the World Health Organization says it should be 1:10. That means we need to push offshore now and save the health of people in this country. Look at the health implications. Put them up where we can, get them up and then cover everything in the policies.

The Tánaiste: Once again, I wish to say that the health concerns of people and making sure any developments we bring about are compliant with people's health and well-being is absolutely important. I appreciate the Deputy saying that he sees the benefit of the guidelines. I share his view on this. Having clarity on this would be helpful for people, including with regard to solar, by the way. When I go around the country, people say, "Hang on, is that a good use of that field? Is that not prime agricultural land?" We need to make a call once and for all. By the way, when we publish the guidelines, as is often the case, I am not saying everyone will be delighted with them. It will probably be far from it but at least we will have clarity and an opportunity for public consultation. We need to call it and get on with it, and that is what the two Departments are working on.

On the issue of anaerobic digesters, there are, as the Deputy knows, priority deliverables under the new strategy. Specifically, there are actions 5f and 5g. They refer to the development of planning guidelines to support local authorities when assessing planning applications in relation to these plants, and a review of resourcing requirements to key Government agencies to support the development of the industry. They are two priority actions that will be delivered through collaboration among key Departments and agencies.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: It will not come as a surprise to the Tánaiste that I am going to use this question to again raise the issue of the rare disease drug reimbursement process we have. I have lost count of the number of times I have been in here with the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach over the last five or six years since I became a TD. I can quote league tables until the cows come home showing how we languish as laggards in a European context. The most recent report ranks us 28th out of 36 European countries with regard to providing drugs, for example, for patients who suffer from a rare condition.

I am not going to waste my time on that today. I would like to focus on what the programme for Government is going to allow for us going forward. There are two specific references in the programme for Government that give me some bit of hope and optimism for the future and I would like the Tánaiste to provide some clarity on that. First, there is a provision in the

programme for Government on the devising of an early access scheme. I met with the Minister for Health in the last weeks and, to be fair, since she was appointed she has been very proactive.

I must give her credit for that. Specifically in respect of early access schemes as a focus in the programme for Government, I need to emphasise how important it is that any early access scheme needs to be decoupled from the existing reimbursement process. If we are going to put drugs through a process that essentially has to run through the same hoops as the system that is currently in place, it will be doomed to failure. That is my concern. Typically you are looking at 600, 700 or 800 days for reimbursement for a rare drug. As I said, any system that provides for early access will have to radically overhaul that.

The second point in the programme for Government is a commitment to a review of the reimbursement system as a whole. Again, that is something I have sought for a number of years. Any review we undertake cannot be a carbon copy of the Mazars report. The Mazars report, from inception to its actual publication, took the best part of four or five years. We have committed to this in the programme for Government as a provision. We need to actually start the process of reviewing the current reimbursement system now. If we wait a further two years, we are not going to see the full published review by the end of this Government's term.

Today I ask for two things. Will the Tánaiste give me the direction of any thinking in respect of an early access scheme? How quickly can that come on stream? With regard to the overall review of the reimbursement system, will the Tánaiste give a commitment that it will start urgently so that we can at least have it published in the next couple of years?

The Tánaiste: When I heard the Deputy would be asking a question today I did not have to ask what topic it was likely to be about. I want to acknowledge that, probably more than any other Member, he raises this issue on a very consistent basis. I acknowledge he is a passionate advocate for those with rare diseases. I thank him for the focus he is keeping on that. I know he has had good engagement with the Minister for Health on this matter and I am very pleased with the work she is doing and her determination to make more progress on the issue of rare diseases and early access to medication for people with rare diseases.

I will say that, at a high level, we have over the past four years delivered access to 194 new medicines, 74 of which were for cancer, but 49 of which were for rare diseases. While accepting we have a lot more to do, we are beginning to make progress in relation to access for rare diseases. The last budget allocation was €30 million for new medicines, to come from within the HSE. We have doubled the capacity of the HSE pricing and reimbursement system. Some of this is about the quantum of funding but, in terms of speeding up the process, it is also about making sure there are enough people working in the system. I am very pleased that we have almost doubled the capacity of those now working on the reimbursement system for new medication. We now have a medicines application tracker to try to increase the transparency because we want this country to do even better in these matters.

The programme for Government commits to an early access scheme. It will be for the Minister to outline how she intends to take that forward, with Government colleagues, in the time ahead, but the points the Deputy made here today are very fair. If it is to be an early access scheme that is to make a difference, that is to be somewhat of a disruptor in terms of making sure people can get access to those medicines much more quickly, it will have to be not just a

carbon copy of the existing structures or a parallel process with the same likely outcome. Let us take that away and make sure that is a factor.

Another commitment in the programme for Government that is worth commenting on is the commitment around the heel prick test. We have two population-based newborn screening programmes now and the programme for Government is committing to continually reviewing the number of conditions babies are screened for. Of course, that will help in terms of the early detection of rare diseases as well. Since May 2022, babies have been screened for nine conditions. The previous Minister for Health endorsed the recommendations from the screening advisory committee to add two new conditions. Once implemented, this will bring the number of conditions screened for as part of what is commonly known as the heel prick test in Ireland to 11. Last year, work also began on a complex and detailed process of introducing screening for spinal muscular atrophy, SMA, and for SCID to the national newborn heel prick test.

In terms of the rare disease action plan we have made a number of commitments in the programme for Government and the Minister for Health will bring the new rare diseases strategy to Government for endorsement in the coming weeks. I expect it will be published shortly thereafter. We will look at how we can advance some of the points made through that structure.

In terms of a timeline for the talks on the reimbursement framework beginning, we are eager for that to happen as quickly as possible. We are currently working to identify how quickly that can happen.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: The Tánaiste referenced the number of staff that the State has put in, as one example. Despite the number of staff increasing from four to 30-odd at this stage, the length of time it takes to assess a drug is actually lengthening, not shortening, despite the additional staff. That is one point of clarity.

The Tánaiste also referenced the heel prick test. The decision to add those two extra conditions was made in 2022, as he said. That was largely down to Les Martin in Wicklow, a constituent of the Tánaiste's, who was right behind that campaign. That decision was made in 2022. Fast forward to 2025 and the two conditions referenced are still not being tested for despite them being recommended in 2022. It has not been implemented.

Within the health Act there are specific deadlines for the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics, NCPE, to make decisions. It is supposed to make a decision within 180 days. A recent report by the Irish Pharmaceutical Healthcare Association, IPHA, stated that 86% of all applications are not being dealt with within the legislative times provided for in the health Act 2013. Some 86% of all applications are going overdue.

The NCPE administers all this. The NCPE makes the decisions. I am not casting aspersions on anybody in that organisation. It has handled hundreds of millions of euro in taxpayers' money over the past decade but there is no oversight, no governance, no independent chair, no SLA, nothing. That was a recommendation in the Mazars report a number of years ago. That needs to be done. As I said, I am not casting aspersions on anybody, but a lot of taxpayers' money has been handed over.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for referencing Les Martin, a person I know well from County Wicklow and somebody who has done incredible advocacy work in relation to this based on the lived experience of his two sons. I thank Les for that work too.

The points Deputy O'Sullivan makes are fair. The Minister has rightly reminded me that she is committed to a root-and-branch reform and examination of all the various processes in place in relation to rare diseases. The opportunity to bring forward the new rare diseases plan will be a chance to turbocharge our focus on some of these issues. However, we are already beginning to look at how we can do this in new ways. For example, the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, had engagement with her Italian counterpart in recent days on how we can co-operate and collaborate more across the European Union. Deputy O'Sullivan raised the issue of DMD in the House last week and we went to the North-South Ministerial Council. In fairness, it was also raised by Deputy Crowe. At the North-South Ministerial Council we immediately started a conversation about how our two departments of health can work together. On part of the island you might have the medication, while on another part of the island you might have the professionals. Particularly given that we live in a small country, collaboration at European level, across the island of Ireland and across Ireland and the UK are going to be important steps. The Minister is committed to continuing close engagement with the Deputy on it.

On the reimbursement piece, we have significantly increased the staff to try to speed up the timelines. We will keep in close contact.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The public is outraged by the Government's plan to turn the GPO into mainly shopping units and offices. The GPO is the most iconic site of our country's fight for freedom. It is the place where the Irish Republic was declared and where it was bravely defended during the Easter Rising. It is disgraceful stuff coming from the Government. If that is not enough, the Government refused to name the new national children's hospital after Dr. Kathleen Lynn, a pioneer medic and a heroine of 1916. The Dáil voted unanimously in April to name the hospital after Dr. Lynn, but that was ignored. Instead, €4,500 of taxpayers' money was spent to come up with a name. What did it come up with? Wait for it - the National Children's Hospital Ireland. Is this a joke? In no other country that fought for its freedom would you have a government so blatantly disrespecting and vandalising its hallowed ground and history. I am sure we all remember that the Tánaiste's party and the Government of which he was part wanted us to commemorate the Black and Tans just five years ago. Given what the Government is doing in terms of the GPO and given the disrespect it shows to Dr. Kathleen Lynn, what have Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil got against the heroic men and women of 1916?

The Tánaiste: If the Deputy wants to talk about the type of people his party commemorates, here is a photo of his party chair with a member of Hamas. Get over yourself, giving me a history lecture. Here he is - Declan Kearney meeting the leader of Hamas. I think your man from Hamas is dead but Declan Kearney is still here.

The Deputy should not lecture me considering the sort of people his party hangs around with.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: What about the GPO?

The Tánaiste: We do not need any revisionism from him. It is part of his party's support for terrorist organisations across the world-----

Deputy Denise Mitchell: The GPO.

The Tánaiste: -----that has stalled the developments of peace and the release of hostages, who we need to see released.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: What will we have? Abrakebabra and Starbucks, is it?

The Tánaiste: On the GPO, I will first say this. The Deputy's party welcomed the publication of the Dublin city centre task force report, which the recommendation he is now criticising was in. Maybe he should read the documents in future. Second, the GPO is always going to be preserved under this plan as the historic cultural institution it is.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Will we have Starbucks? We can have anything. Perhaps we could have some of the Government's vulture friends.

The Tánaiste: The GPO is also a massive complex. Let us read the report.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: Shameful.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Shameful.

The Tánaiste: It is not shameful at all.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is shameful.

The Tánaiste: In relation to Kathleen Lynn-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The GPO is where they defended the Republic.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: Fianna Fáil sits by and says nothing.

The Tánaiste: It is a Republic that your party worked to undermine. They collected the killers of Detective Garda Jerry McCabe from the gates of a prison. Do not dare present yourself as a defender of the Republic.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Government will invite Starbucks.

The Tánaiste: There are gardaí dead in this country as a result of the actions of the army wing of your party.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: You invite your corporates in. You shamefully disrespect-----

The Tánaiste: You know nothing about defending the Republic-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: No other country in the world that fought for Irish independence would do what the Government is doing-----

The Tánaiste: -----and here you all are with your Hamas buddies.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----to desecrate the GPO, where Pádraig Pearse stood, where James Connolly fought and where the men and women of 1916 defended the Republic.

The Tánaiste: Jean McConville. Jerry McCabe.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is shameful. They fought an empire.

The Tánaiste: You had a party for the people who collected the killers of Jerry McCabe-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Government is inviting multinational corporations to sell their wares. Shame on you. Nowhere else would it happen.

The Tánaiste: -----and you should apologise.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: You should apologise to the Irish people-----

The Tánaiste: There are gardaí in their graves-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----for what you are trying to do.

The Tánaiste: -----because of your IRA movement.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: You are desecrating hallowed ground.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: Fianna Fáil stands by.

The Tánaiste: Ask Jerry McCabe's family about your defence of the Republic. Give me a break.

Deputy Duncan Smith: That is all eating into all of our time. It eats into the time of all of us who are coming behind. I intend to use only one minute of my time.

Public transport is under huge pressure in our city and surrounding areas. BusConnects, where we desperately need it in north County Dublin, in Donabate and Portrane, has been delayed yet again until autumn 2026. A service there, the 33B, is provided by Go-Ahead

Ireland. In May, there were cancellations on 18 of 31 days. This is not a regular bus. It only runs once an hour. Cancellations mean that people miss caring appointments and doctors' appointments. They are late for connections because the service only goes as far as Swords. It is desperate. It is a microcosm of what is happening all over Dublin and the surrounding areas. Public transport is under huge stress, and we are getting no sense whatsoever that the Government is getting a handle on it.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue about BusConnects. I will ask the Minister for Transport to engage with him directly. Perhaps I could also arrange through my office for the National Transport Authority, NTA, to engage and sit down with the Deputies for the area, including Deputy Smith. I am conscious, particularly in his part of Dublin, of how reliant people are on public transport. There has been very significant population growth in that area. I will arrange for the NTA to meet the Deputy and others on the issue.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before I call on Deputy Rice, I want to reply to Deputy Smith. When we have an exchange such as that which eats into the time available, I assure the House that the time of the Deputies who follow will not be cut. They have the right to speak in this House regardless of what happens.

Deputy Duncan Smith: People have previously been rushed towards the end of their contributions.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will not be rushing. I never do.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Tens of thousands of people will march through the streets of Dublin this weekend for Dublin Pride, a celebration of love, diversity and liberation. However, Pride is more than a party. It is a protest.

Ten years on from marriage equality, progress has slowed. Hate crimes are rising and there is no plan to bring down the numbers. The gaps in family law have not been closed, conversion therapy has not been banned and Ireland has the worst trans healthcare in the EU.

The Government's sexual health strategy, published yesterday, does not provide me with confidence that things will change anytime soon. There has not even been a discussion here of intersex people. I am disappointed we did not get Dáil statements on Pride this year but I am even more disappointed with the stalled progress. Do not take my word for it; look at the international rankings. Ireland is stuck at 14th in Europe for LGBTQI human rights. Rainbow flags outside Government Buildings are nice but LGBTQI people want enhanced human rights and better policy protections.

Will the Government join the growing call for Ireland to set the target of being the best place in Europe in which to be LGBTQI+? Will it ensure full implementation of existing commitments? Will the Tánaiste tell us what meaningful actions the Government will take this year to enhance LGBTQI+ human rights and policy protections?

The Tánaiste: Yes, we will. I am not aware of the background as to why statements did not take place. They should have taken place and it is important that they do. I genuinely take the

Deputy's point about symbolism and flags and accept it. However, this year more than ever, at a time when people across the world are speaking in more hushed tones about inclusion, it is important that this weekend Ireland march proudly in support of Pride, love being love and marriage equality. We have made progress but it is ongoing, as the Deputy said, and in some areas it is under threat. I accept that.

We should arrange an engagement on this issue between relevant Ministers, me and others. I will talk to the Taoiseach about how best the Government might take that forward so that, within this relatively new Oireachtas, we can together mark out how we intend to make progress on this.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Last night, the "Natasha" documentary on RTÉ charted what happened to Natasha O'Brien. It was a valuable documentary. I want the Tánaiste to take seriously the case of a woman who has spoken to me and who was abused by an Army member. He used his Army position, military surveillance, Army guns and even a grenade to threaten her and her family. He told this woman that he was untouchable. I am talking about sexual assault and very serious abuse. She reported him to the Defence Forces for sending pictures of guns to her in November 2022. She made statements to the military police. She still has not had an outcome to that case.

She was told last July, when she pressed again, by the victim liaison officer of the Defence Forces that the investigation was complete and she would be sent the results. In response to a parliamentary question I put to the Tánaiste in April, I was told that an investigation was ongoing and had been referred to the Garda. Which is it? This woman has been given two different stories.

I believe the Defence Forces member in question is on special leave with full pay. How long can it continue that the taxpayer is providing full pay for someone who may or may not have committed offences? Another woman has made allegations against the same person. Will the Tánaiste look into this case on behalf of this woman? It is unacceptable. She has been traumatised for years since all of this happened.

The Tánaiste: I absolutely will look into it. Will the Deputy send me the specific details today? I am conscious that I have answered a parliamentary question on the case, but if the Deputy could send me the specific details, I will personally look into the matter today.

We are planning changes in one of the forthcoming defence Bills. There are powers available to the Garda Commissioner that I believe the Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces needs. Where allegations are made against somebody, the Chief of Staff needs to be able to take action in terms of his or her service in the here and now. There are other arrangements in place in the interim, but I would like that to be on a statutory basis. I will come back to the Deputy directly on the matter.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Last week, An Bord Pleanála overturned a decision by Mayo County Council to grant permission for 92 homes in Ballina, north Mayo. An Bord Pleanála overturned the decision and rejected this development. The site was dezoned in recent years. It is located just 2 km from the town centre and has all the necessary services, including water, wastewater, telecommunications, footpaths, etc. There is a huge demand for housing in Ballina. The board

cited preserving agricultural land and housing targets in its decision. The board has chosen bureaucratic rigidity over people. It has chosen policy over people, preferring cows to couples in search of a home. It is incredible that this development was refused on the basis of potentially exceeding housing targets when housing delivery is on the floor in Ballina and across Mayo.

The rhetoric of the Government in terms of urgency and delivery is not felt on the ground. Will the Tánaiste come to Ballina? Will he engage with the planners at Mayo County Council, the developer and the engineer to see what is happening on the ground? There is no urgency in housing delivery across State agencies.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy will understand that I cannot comment on a decision of An Bord Pleanála because of its quasi-judicial nature and where things may go next. I do not want to comment on the specifics. On the broader point about housing in Ballina, I will certainly ask the Minister for housing to engage with Mayo County Council and the people the Deputy mentioned.

Housing is in an emergency situation. We need to deliver 300,000 homes over the next five years. I will make it my business on my next visit to Mayo to inquire specifically about Ballina.

Deputy John Clendennen: This weekend, a tractor run at Ballybrit in my constituency will see over 200 tractors and drivers of all ages take part. For over a decade, the Road Safety Authority has referenced a tractor driving framework and testing for young drivers but there is currently a void of uncertainty.

1 o'clock

Farmers and contractors are committed to safety and open to initiatives that will enhance it, including for young people operating heavy machinery. Can the Tánaiste provide an update on the status of the tractor driving framework? Importantly, can he reassure farmers and contractors that any such initiative will not limit access to labour during peak times or cut off a vital stream of income for young drivers, especially over the summer months? We must prioritise safety while protecting access to labour, income opportunities and community events like tractor runs.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Clendennen very much for raising this issue. I have just been talking to the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, who also has responsibilities in this area. I wish everybody well in Ballybrit with the tractor run. I also assure the Deputy there are no plans to do anything that would discommode our farmers or farming community in relation to this issue. As part of the Government's road safety strategy, we are looking at the issue of how we can support farmers in the safety of their tractors. This should be done from a position of wanting to be supportive rather than causing any difficulty, challenge or unnecessary bureaucracy. I know the Minister of State will be eager to keep the Deputy up to date on this matter.

Deputy John Lahart: As an aside on the GPO issue, the GPO has always been a hub of business transactions for well over a century. I am really excited by the Government's plans

and the cultural and historical aspects. The GPO was always a hub of business and business transactions.

My question relates to a serious backlog in HSE dental check-ups for primary school children. Constituents have contacted me about their son who is now finishing fourth class. He missed out on this check-up because of Covid when he was in second class and he will not now be seen until sixth class, which will be in 2027. This child missed vital months of early education during Covid and is now being denied access to essential dental care. Could there be a catch-up programme for children who missed their second-class assessments? Could the Department consider reimbursement for tax relief purposes for those parents who had to seek private care to ensure their children's dental health was looked after? Could the Minister confirm that no cohort would be skipped in the school dental programme, in the interests of fairness, equity and restoring trust in public services?

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. The area of dental services is a particular concern of mine. We are trying to expand the number of training places for more dentists. We also have a difficulty in the number of dentists offering services on the public side, which is impacting. We are trying to find a range of different innovative ways to get dental services to schools more easily and to make it easier for schools, children and parents to get to dental services. I note the particular point made by the Deputy and the intersection around the particular timing there. I might look for a little more detail from him directly and I will try to find a way to make sure this is not left out.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I bring to the Tánaiste's attention proposals for the development of Portumna Forest Park in County Galway being led by Coillte. This is a natural and public resource for the local community. The Protect Portumna Forest Park Community Group has carried out an extensive survey in the local community. The results show clear opposition to the idea of building tourist accommodation in the forest park and strong support for protecting and enhancing the park's natural and recreational value, yet Coillte is failing to meaningfully engage with the group and is actually excluding it from the consultation process. Bordering the park is the site of the derelict former Shannon Oaks hotel. The question that local people have is why this is not the focus for the development of tourist accommodation and why it is not included in the development plan for the site. How can the owners of the hotel, the Comer brothers, be allowed to leave this hotel, which is an eyesore and a safety hazard, in this condition indefinitely and not be held accountable? I ask the Tánaiste to look into this issue, to engage with Galway County Council and Coillte and to ensure a commonsense solution is found. I also ask him to ensure that the owners of long-term derelict properties are finally held accountable.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy O'Hara. My understanding regarding Portumna Forest Park is that this is something at the very early stages and that there will be extensive engagement. I will take his feedback in relation to Coillte and its need to engage and listen. The Minister of State, Deputy Canney, has also updated me on this matter. Regarding the former Shannon Oaks hotel, I have heard about it directly in relation to Galway East. I do know it is an eyesore and a source of great frustration, and I will certainly engage with the local authority. We do now have powers concerning derelict sites. I think there is a significant question regarding those

powers and where their enforcement lies. I expect this is something the Government will consider in the coming weeks and months.

Deputy Michael Cahill: I want to raise an urgent and deeply concerning issue regarding a DEIS school in my constituency, Scoil Saidhbhín in Cahersiveen, County Kerry. It has just had its appeal against a cut of two mainstream teachers and one English as an additional language, EAL, post rejected. This is despite an ongoing surge in enrolment, including more than 40 Ukrainian pupils and recent IPAS admissions. This school, already stretched to capacity, now faces class sizes of up to 40 children, many with complex emotional, linguistic and educational needs. These are children dealing with trauma, ASD diagnoses and language barriers, and now they are being asked to learn in classrooms that are bursting at the seams. The staff in this school have gone above and beyond the call of duty through Covid, emergency enrolments and increasing levels of need, yet the Department's response is a reduction in support. It is not only unfair but unsustainable. I call on the Tánaiste to engage with the Minister for education and for the Government to reverse this decision, listen to those working on the ground and support DEIS schools trying to deliver inclusive education in some of the most challenging circumstances imaginable.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Cahill very much for raising this issue. It sounds like a very stressful situation for the school principal, the teachers and the parents and students involved. I will certainly ask the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, who has special responsibility for special education needs, to engage with the Deputy directly and to look into the issues raised in relation to how we better support that school. I will ask the Minister and the Minister of State to revert to the Deputy.

Deputy Michael Murphy: Forty per cent of the post office network will potentially close unless Government funding is increased. Increasing this funding to €15 million annually over five years will ensure the viability of many of the 845 post offices nationwide, more than 500 of which are in areas without any financial institution. I acknowledge the extraordinary work of our postmasters and postmistresses around the country, in particular those in my constituency of Tipperary South, and the extent to which they remain such a positive force within our communities. Notwithstanding the crucial role the rural post office plays in our communities, there is a much bigger issue here, with social cohesion at its heart. Will the Tánaiste commit to this funding and to standing up for rural post offices? Will he ensure social cohesion by committing to this increased funding?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Murphy for raising this issue. Indeed, I was talking to the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, who has responsibility in this area. Let nobody be in any doubt: this Government remains fully committed to a sustainable An Post and to a sustainable post office network as a key component of our economic and social infrastructure right across the country. The programme for Government is clear in our commitments. I am proud the previous Government agreed an amount of €10 million per annum would be provided for a three-year fixed term to An Post and that that funding was dispersed across the post office network. That has made a very big and significant difference. Our new programme for Government states we will continue to provide the nationwide network of post offices with the funding needed to ensure its sustainability and the value they bring to local communities. The

relevant officials in the Department are now working under the leadership of the Minister of State to deliver on this and are engaging with relevant stakeholders in relation to funding. I would just make one point. Any such funding is going to be to provide space for An Post to continue its own transformation journey. It is a semi-State commercial company and we do need to see that journey of transformation continued.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I again raise the issue of Private Michael McNeela from Dundalk, who as a 21-year-old member of the Defence Forces made the ultimate sacrifice while peacekeeping in Lebanon. His mother, Kathleen, received an allowance or pension. Sadly, she died last year and Michael's father, John, was not able to receive this payment. We are talking about €342 per month. I have had a number of engagements with the Tánaiste and officials on this. I know the Department of Social Protection was dealing with the Department of Defence. I am not very hopeful of that process providing a solution, although I am very glad it happened. I see the only solution being that the Army Pensions Act would be updated and that this would happen as soon as possible. John McNeela is 84 years of age. We are talking about a very small number of families, but families who have made a huge sacrifice for this country, so they should be looked after. As long as it takes to get that legislation right, in the short term we need to find an administrative solution, an interim solution, because the situation now is unfair.

It is mean-spirited and wrong. The Tánaiste has said that he is sympathetic and supportive and that there is a legitimate policy question here.

The Tánaiste: I sincerely thank Deputy Ó Murchú for raising this case on a number of occasions and for the positive engagement that we have had. I want to put on record today my sympathies to the McNeela family and, in particular, to John McNeela on the loss of his wife, Kathleen, and, indeed, their son, Michael, who died while on peacekeeping duties in Lebanon. He served the State with distinction and I want to thank him for his service and acknowledge that as well.

This is a hard case and it relates to a request to transfer a dependant's allowance. I have been convinced, though, that the current system is unfair. It is mean-spirited and we need to fix it. I am pleased today to tell the Dáil and to tell Deputy Ó Murchú that, following an meeting with my officials yesterday, I have now directed them to prepare legislative change so that this pension allowance can be paid in the case of a dependant.

It will require legislative change. I have to be honest about that. I will look for the appropriate vehicle, whichever is the quickest vehicle, to bring it in. We have two defence Bills likely in the coming period of time. I see Deputy Conway-Walsh is here and I am sure we will work constructively on trying to make progress in getting this through as well. I am happy to keep in close contact with the Deputy on it.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Earlier this month, the Public Accounts Committee of the UK House of Commons published a report on the Sellafield nuclear power plant in Cumbria. The report suggests that the Sellafield nuclear waste reprocessing plant is basically falling apart. The site contains one building called the Magnox Swarf Storage Silo - a dramatic name. The Public Accounts Committee inquiry heard that this silo is, and I quote from the inquiry report, "the most hazardous building in the UK".

Is the Government aware of this new report? It was published at the start of June. Does the Tánaiste agree that a visit by our Environmental Protection Agency to the site in Sellafield, as has happened in the past, would be good now to ascertain the potential risks to Ireland from continuously deteriorating physical condition of the buildings at Sellafield?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy O'Gorman. I do not want to bluff; I have not read that report but I will make myself aware of it now that the Deputy has brought my attention to it. I will also discuss the matter with the Minister for the environment. The Deputy's suggestion is a constructive one. On foot of the Deputy raising it today, I will ask the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, to consider that request that it would visit and I will come back to the Deputy.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I will return to the issue of the GPO and the Government's plans, as outlined a couple of days ago, to turn it into a cultural space with retail units and office space. Does that plan not lack ambition? On O'Connell Street and the surrounding streets, we have retail space. We have office space aplenty. Of course, the GPO has historical significance. It also provides a huge opportunity for the city and for the country to have a proper civic museum with a monument to everything that happened there. What the Government plans lack is ambition. It could be so much more, in terms of using that space for a civic museum - something profound for the city. My frustration is that I think we can do more with that space.

The Tánaiste: We do not disagree on this, because it is possible to do quite a number of things. As Deputy Gannon will be aware, and I will not tell him about his own constituency, the GPO is a massive site. Many people, when they walk down O'Connell Street, see the GPO as the historic piece and as the post office. The GPO site goes significantly far back.

This recommendation flows from the Dublin city centre task force, which outlines a number of suggestions. I absolutely believe there has to be a cultural civic element to this. I heard bizarre comments about Abrakebabra and all this sort of stuff being made, although not from Deputy Gannon. Let us get real here. There is a suggestion here of how one best utilises that space and Dublin City Council will be in the driving seat on this. The special purpose vehicle will be under the remit of Dublin City Council and it will be about the city councillors and the directly-elected representatives of the people of Dublin city leading on this project. I am happy to ask that the officials involved engage with the Deputy directly.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: The Tánaiste will not be surprised that I rise to speak today to mention the illegal encampments on the Curragh Plains. In mentioning them, I immediately thank the Tánaiste and his official for the speed with which they moved in the earlier part of this year to deal with the several illegal encampments which were established. The Tánaiste's alacrity contrasts with the way in which the problem was dealt with in previous years.

What has been happening on the Curragh with these illegal encampments, with visitors coming from Britain and France as well as across Ireland, could not even be imagined in the Phoenix Park because the Phoenix Park is a national resource that is perfectly well managed. It is happening on the Curragh because the Curragh is ineffectively and ineffectually managed. The programme for Government commits to a new management system. When will we see that management system put in place so that there can be an end to these expensive, unnecessary and damaging incursions?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Ó Feargháil for keeping in touch with me on this.

Let me say to anyone who wishes to illegally camp on the Curragh Plains that it will not be tolerated. We went to the High Court this week in relation to the situation. The Garda has been there. Bailiffs have been there. If you come there illegally, you will be moved on. That is absolutely crystal clear. I thank my officials, the Defence Forces, the Garda and everybody else who are making sure that the laws of this land get upheld.

Of course, Deputy Ó Feargháil is correct. This is a national resource. It is an incredible resource, not only for the people of Kildare but for the people of Ireland. The programme for Government does give that commitment. There has been good work done. I and the Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan, are in advanced discussions. I would hope, certainly, I believe, within a matter of weeks, we will be able to bring forward a plan on a way forward that better manages and points out the future direction of how we manage the Curragh Plains.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: This week's report from Women's Aid on domestic violence and abuse is very concerning. Women's Aid front-line teams heard over 46,000 disclosures of incidents of domestic abuse and violence. That is up 17% on last year. There were increased reports of all forms of abuse against women, with sexual abuse reports up 30%.

One third of those women in contact with Women's Aid were being subjected to domestic abuse from their ex-partner confirming their lived experience that while they may have ended the relationship, the abuse continues.

The programme for Government commits to increased funding to sexual assault treatment units across the country. I understand that there are still only six units across the country, which seems inadequate. Is there a commitment to expand those units as part of our zero tolerance of abuse strategy 2026-2030?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Ó Muirí for raising this matter. The Deputy is so right too because one of the big findings that emerged yesterday from the Women's Aid report - I thank it for the great work it does - is the stark need here to act on the domestic violence register and what is often called "Jennie's law". I had the honour of meeting Jason Poole, an incredible man, in relation to his sister, Jennie.

The programme for Government commits to working with An Garda Síochána to ensure that a person in an intimate relationship can be informed of a serious risk to them where a new partner has a history of domestic violence. The Minister for justice has requested his officials to examine proposals to establish a register or mechanism which would allow for the disclosure of this information. That is an important step.

We are also absolutely committed to expanding both the sexual assault treatment unit, SATU, facilities and, indeed, women's refuge spaces across the country. The programme for Government is clear on that and on supporting the work of Cuan. We established for the first time ever in Ireland, under the Minister, Deputy McEntee's leadership, the first domestic, sexual and gender-based violence statutory agency to co-ordinate our work on this.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Today marks a full year since the announcement of the appointment of Ms Bríd O'Flaherty as chairperson of the inquiry into the historical licensing and use of sodium valproate in women of child-bearing age. It is almost six years since the then Minister for Health announced the inquiry in November 2020. Why is the inquiry yet to commence?

Thousands of women in Ireland were prescribed Epilim despite emerging evidence of its harmful effects during pregnancy. In France, a redress scheme has been established. In Britain, an inquiry has been held and the government there has committed to a redress scheme. Why is the Government here so reluctant to do the right thing by women in Ireland? When will the Minister for Health reply to the Organisation for Anti-Convulsant Syndrome, OACS, which has requested a meeting? This inquiry needs to get up and running. I understand the need for robust regulations and terms of reference but it is wholly unacceptable that this is taking so long.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I am happy to meet with the group. This is something that I have worked with Epilepsy Ireland on in the past. I am familiar with the issues. I will very happily meet the group.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Six years on; it has to get started.

Deputy Paul Murphy: When Russia invaded Ukraine, schools organised shows of solidarity with Ukraine but when it comes to Israel's genocide in Gaza, some teachers are being silenced and their clothing choices are being policed. I contacted the Minister recently about Harcourt Terrace Educate Together National School where members of staff have been told not to wear their Keffiyeh scarves.

Keffiyehs are simple patterned fabric from the Middle East, which many wear in solidarity with Palestine. Zionist pressure groups are pushing schools to ban this simple item of clothing and at least that school appears to have given in. Two staff members felt so harassed by a small number of parents and pressured by school management that they resigned. Does the Tánaiste agree that a very high bar would have to be met to justify any interference with the right of staff to choose their clothes? Does he agree it must be urgently clarified for schools, perhaps in a departmental circular, to make clear that no member of staff should be victimised for wearing a Keffiyeh?

The Tánaiste: The depth of feeling there quite rightly is around this country about the genocidal activity by Israel and support for the Palestinian people is real, guttural and heartfelt. There should always be a very high bar before interfering on anybody's clothing. In the first instance, these are always matters for boards of management. In light of the Deputy bringing this information to my attention, let me discuss the matter with the Minister for education.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I attended a public meeting on Monday night in Ballymackey outside Nenagh organised by a biogas concern group. I also met groups here a week earlier. Despite the issue of the location of the plan possibly being unsuitable, which road networks alone would dictate, we are committed as a country to achieving certain renewable goals in this area by 2030. It is proposed that there would be over 200 of these plants. There is no regulatory

process for how these plants will be put in place. There are no planning guidelines. All county development plans say something different when it comes to this area. When will we have a regulatory framework for this? When will we have planning guidelines for this to give some guidance to local authorities when it comes to the mass of applications for this? When will a tariff be confirmed in relation to their construction? We are all in favour of renewables but we are way behind and it is unfair on communities across Ireland to be left in this situation.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. I do not have much detailed information before me so I will have to get the relevant Minister to come back to him. I will arrange for that to happen. My understanding is there are two priority deliverables under the strategy for this, 5f and 5g. The first is the development of planning guidelines to support the local authorities, as the Deputy suggested, when assessing the plans for planning applications and the second is the review of the resourcing requirements for key Government agencies in relation to the development of the industry in an appropriate way. I will ask the relevant Minister to come back to the Deputy with timelines for both.

Victims of Sexual Violence Civil Protection Orders Bill 2025: First Stage

Deputy Matt Carthy: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide victims of sexual violence with the right to seek civil protection orders.

I am pleased to introduce the Bill. I thank those who have engaged with me on this issue and whose personal experience prompted myself and my party to bring forward this Bill. In particular I want to commend Sonya Stokes, Leona O'Callaghan and Shaneda Daly who are in the Public Gallery. I also thank Senator Maria McCormack who has worked with us on this issue. Is í aidhm an Bhille seo foráil nua a thabhairt isteach sa dlí trínar féidir ordú cosanta sibhialta a dheonú ar dhuine ar chinn na cúirteanna go ndearna an duine sin cion foréigin ghnéis.

Much more needs to be done to make the judicial process better and more supportive for victims of crime. This is particularly the case when it comes to victims of rape and sexual assault. Among the issues which need to be addressed is the deeply traumatising impact on victims of the disclosure of counselling notes in rape and sexual assault cases. There are many other issues, though, which make the process of securing justice difficult for victims and survivors. These include the delays in the court system and the level of support that exists for victims and survivors as they navigate what is a daunting, complex, and unfamiliar situation.

For victims and survivors, the challenges do not end when the court case ends, even where there is a conviction. Victims of rape, sexual assault and childhood sexual abuse have spoken to me about the anxiety, stress and fear they feel as their assailants come to the end of their sentences.

It is crucial that victims and survivors are kept informed as is provided for under section 8 of the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Act 2017, which relates to information regarding investigations and criminal proceedings. It is timely to review whether these provisions are

meeting the needs of victims and survivors in a consistent manner when it comes to ensuring they are adequately informed at all stages of the judicial and post-judicial process.

Many victims and survivors have genuine fears about the release of perpetrators. They fear contact from perpetrators and encountering that perpetrator as they go about their day-to-day lives. In some cases, these are people who exerted extreme control over them as part of the abuse process and in many cases there is a fear that the perpetrator will seek retribution. The measures that currently exist do not give victims and survivors a sense of safety and security in relation to fears that the perpetrator in their case will not seek them out, approach them or harass them. We need to empower victims and survivors and help them in as much as is possible to have the sense of safety and security needed to rebuild their lives.

To address the concerns that victims and survivors have raised with us, Sinn Féin is bringing forward this Bill. Its purpose is to introduce a new provision in law where a person in relation to whom an offence of sexual violence is found to be committed by the courts may be granted a civil protection order. This Bill will make it possible for the courts to issue a civil protection order for the complainant where the courts have found an offence has been committed under a range of laws related to rape and sexual assault.

While not every victim and survivor of rape and sexual assault may want a civil protection order in place when the perpetrator is released, the potential to put in place such an order should be provided for in law for those who require them. That is the purpose of this Bill. It is important and, in many respects, simple legislation but it could have a profoundly beneficial impact on victims particularly of the serious crimes related to sexual violence. I appeal to the Government to support its speedy transposition through all Stages. I will encourage my party to move this as speedily as possible on Second Stage but we want to ensure the Minister and the Government do not put in place any roadblocks. This Bill has gone through the OPLA, the Oireachtas legal team, and there is no legal reason the Bill cannot be enacted. The only reason we might not ensure the Bill would be made law by the end of the year is political will. I am appealing to all parties to show the political will to pass this important yet simple piece of legislation.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: When we commenced, and I called Deputy Carthy, we had Ministers from the Government and so on here. That is why I allowed the matter to proceed. Now I have to put the question that the Deputy asked and whether the Bill should be considered, that question being: “Is the Bill being opposed?”

Deputy Matt Carthy: It is clearly not.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I presume in the absence of everyone else in the House that the Bill is not being opposed. Therefore I presume that the motion for leave to introduce is agreed.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.30 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.10 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.30 p.m. and resumed at 2.10 p.m.

Criminal Justice (Terrorist Offences) (Amendment) Bill 2025: Second Stage

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am pleased to bring the Bill before the House. It marks a significant step forward in ensuring that Ireland's counterterrorism framework is robust and fit for purpose in the face of modern terrorist threats. The Bill will amend the Criminal Justice (Terrorist Offences) Act 2005, a cornerstone of Ireland's counterterrorism laws, to allow for a broader category of prosecutable offences in respect of terrorist activity. These include terrorist acts with a cross-border element and cyberattacks where the aim is to cause widespread harm.

The Bill is part of Ireland's commitment to bring our terrorism laws into line with those of other EU member states, through our participation in the EU directive on combating terrorism, which this legislation provides for. Its passing will also pave the way for Ireland's participation in enhanced EU counterterrorism networks, enabling a co-ordinated and dynamic response to domestic and cross-border terrorist threats. Enactment of this Bill is a commitment in the programme for Government, and supports the broader programme commitment to strengthen national security.

Ireland has comprehensive counterterrorism laws, found in the Criminal Justice (Terrorist Offences) Act and the Offences Against the States Acts, which we debated yesterday. The Criminal Justice (Terrorist Offences) Act, in particular, represents a response by Ireland to the shared threat terrorism poses across the EU and beyond. Successive EU counterterrorism agreements have been given effect to in Ireland via this Act. This has resulted in harmonised definitions of terrorist offences with our EU counterparts, as well as minimum rules when it comes to sentencing terrorist offences. This provides a benchmark for co-operation and information exchange between national authorities and prevents the existence of legal loopholes that may be exploited by terrorists.

Notwithstanding this, the nature of terrorism continues to evolve. In 2017, in response to the growing threat posed by people travelling abroad for the purpose of terrorism, the heightened security threat they pose when returning home and the increasing threats from citizens inspired or instructed by terrorist groups abroad, the EU updated its counterterrorism framework with the directive on combating terrorism. This followed concern expressed by the UN Security Council over these threats, and instruction to UN member states to ensure domestic laws were sufficient to prosecute and penalise such activities.

The EU's directive on combatting terrorism reaffirmed many of the Union's established counterterrorism measures and terrorist offences. With Ireland having fully incorporated such measures into our national laws and practices, it meant Irish law was aligned with many of the

requirements of the directive. However, new offences were also introduced to tackle the international and cross-border dimension to the terrorist threat previously discussed. It remains incumbent on Ireland to transpose these offences into our national law.

Travel for the purpose of terrorism is a new offence that the Bill incorporates. This recognises the need to stem the flow of terrorist fighters in and out of the country. Travelling to Ireland and travelling from Ireland for the purposes of committing, aiding, abetting, counselling or procuring the commission of terrorism is criminalised. The act of organising or facilitating travel for the purposes of terrorism will also be an offence, with the same elements as the travel offence, save for the prohibited act being that of making arrangements to enable any person to travel to or from the State for the purposes of terrorism.

The Bill criminalises receiving training for the purpose of terrorism. This will complement the offence of providing training for terrorism, which is on our Statute Book. It addresses threats resulting from actively preparing for the commission of terrorist offences and can be committed by those ultimately acting alone and training through self-study. It can involve receiving training in the making of explosives, chemical or biological weapons and other relevant technical expertise.

Like with the offence of providing training for terrorism, there will be a ministerial regulation-making power in prohibiting other weapons and techniques that could be part of such training. This means that should new technologies, materials or practices be developed in the future that could be used to carry out terrorist acts, there is scope to preclude training in their use. Knowledge that the training is for the purposes of committing, aiding, abetting, counselling or procuring the commission of terrorism is required to be convicted of this crime. This means collecting materials for legitimate purposes, such as academic research, would not be considered to be receiving training for terrorism.

Under our counterterrorism laws, it is an offence to distribute public messages aimed at provoking the commission of terrorist offences. Publicly sharing messages with invitations to join terrorist groups, calls to action or denigrating the victims of terrorism is prohibited where such behaviour is intended to, and causes a danger that, terrorist acts may be committed.

In recent years, sophisticated digital messaging tools, including high-quality video, assisted by a network of social media accounts, has allowed for the rapid dissemination of terrorist messaging. This has included videos celebrating or praising horrendous terrorist acts like assassinations and terrorist bombings. This Bill re-articulates the offence of public provocation to commit terrorism to clarify that such provocation can be done by distributing messages that glorify terrorism.

Conviction for the offences I have just spoken about can lead to a maximum prison sentence of ten years. The Bill also provides that when existing offences of recruitment and training for terrorism are directed towards a child, the courts can treat this circumstance as an aggravating factor when sentencing offenders. This recognises the particularly egregious nature of luring minors into the world of terrorism.

It is acknowledged that the activities these offences prohibit involve commonplace acts such as travel and study, or indeed the sharing of content on public platforms which is now a widespread and daily occurrence in our lives. These are acts that in a free and modern society we should be at liberty to participate in, engage in and enjoy unconstrained when carried out

without nefarious aims. That is why the notion of terrorist intention will always be an essential element required to convict someone of the offences in this Bill, with the intentional nature of an act inferred from objective and factual circumstances. For example, it will be necessary to show the intention was to provoke the commission of terrorist acts when publicly sharing messages glorifying terrorism. Furthermore, there must also be a reasonable apprehension that the commission of a terrorist activity could in fact result.

The Bill will also categorise cyber offences already on our Statute Book as terrorist offences and, therefore, allow for extra years to be added to terms of imprisonment for those convicted when the offence is intended to cause widespread harm. These are the offences of interfering with or damaging data or IT systems and where the result could be serious damage to State or international organisations, major economic loss or creating a collective danger to the lives of citizens. We have seen in recent years the destruction and devastation caused by cyber attacks on our national infrastructure. These are grave affronts to our society and it is appropriate that they be treated as terrorist offences. Potential offenders should know that they will meet the full force of the law should they proceed to carry out such attacks.

I have spoken previously about how this Bill will pave the way for Ireland's participation in enhanced counterterrorism networks. Once enacted and when Ireland is fully participating in the EU's directive on combating terrorism, we will be a position to adopt subsequent EU counterterrorism measures. This includes partaking in a programme of modernisation occurring at Eurojust, the European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation, which co-ordinates investigations and information exchange on cross-border crime across Europe. Its modernisation programme includes strengthening its counterterrorism register and case management system. What this means is that cross-border links between terrorism investigations and prosecutions will be more easily and readily identified, and information more swiftly shared among member states via secure digital communication channels. This will ultimately lead to more terrorist acts being prevented and more terrorists being brought to justice.

The Bill contains nine sections and one Schedule. Section 1 simply clarifies that references to the principal Act relate to the Criminal Justice (Terrorist Offences) Act 2005, which is being amended here. Section 2 amends section 4 of the principal Act by replacing references to the 2002 EU Council framework decision on combating terrorism with that of the 2017 EU directive, which is the new EU governing instrument underlying our international counterterrorism laws. This section also signposts new definitions for offences found in latter sections of the Bill. This includes definitions for the three new offences of receiving training for terrorism, travelling for the purpose of terrorism and organising or otherwise facilitating travel for the purpose of terrorism. It also signposts the existing offence of providing training for terrorism which is redefined in this Bill.

Section 3 provides a revised definition of the offence of public provocation to commit a terrorist offence. The revised definition sets out that glorification of a terrorist activity, including by praise or celebration, may be considered publicly provoking the commission of a terrorist offence, provided that other critical elements of the offence have been satisfied.

Thus, it must be shown that he or she possessed the requisite intention of inciting persons to commit a terrorist activity when he or she distributed, published, or caused to be distributed or published, a message that glorified, including by praise or celebration, a terrorist activity. It is

also a requirement of the offence that such distribution or publication must have given rise to the reasonable apprehension that the commission of a terrorist activity could thereby result. These additional elements serve to act as safeguards in ensuring that it is only those who set about to deliberately incite terrorist activity who are captured by this offence.

I am aware some concern was expressed that the enactment of this provision could result in a prosecution similar to that taking place in England at present in respect of the band Kneecap. This is something that will not happen here and I will explain why this is so. If we look at the new provision to be introduced in section 3, the offence is committed when a person, with the intention of inciting persons to commit a terrorist activity, distributes or publishes, or causes to be distributed or published, by any means, to the public, a message inciting terrorist activity or that glorifies terrorist activity, and such distribution gives rise to the reasonable apprehension that the commission of the activity could thereby result. In order for somebody to be convicted of an offence under this section, they have to be engaged in the activity for the purpose and intention of inciting people to commit a terrorist offence. This is not something that could happen in respect of the circumstances regarding Kneecap. The difference between what happens in Ireland and what happens in England and Wales is that Kneecap are being prosecuted under section 13 of the Terrorism 2000 Act of England and Wales. I will quote what this provides. It is an extraordinarily broad offence and it is not something that would be enacted in Ireland. The offence in England and Wales is as follows:

A person in a public place commits an offence if he—

[...]

(b) wears, carries or displays an article,

in such a way or in such circumstances as to arouse reasonable suspicion that he is a member or supporter of a proscribed organisation.

Under the legislation in England and Wales there is absolutely no requirement for someone's behaviour to come with the intention of seeking to cause the committal of a terrorist offence. All it simply requires is that in a public place someone wears or displays an article that would arouse suspicion that the person is a supporter of a proscribed organisation.

As Members will be aware, and I do not want to comment too much about an ongoing prosecution in England, the band Kneecap is being prosecuted on the basis they displayed a flag attached to Hezbollah. If that concert had happened in Ireland with the flag of Hezbollah, the band could not be prosecuted under section 4A of the new terrorist offences Act, unless they accompanied it with a clear intention to get people to commit a terrorist offence, which is something completely different.

The legislation in England and Wales is completely broad and simply requires someone to wear or display something that arouses a suspicion that they are a supporter of a proscribed organisation. When we are discussing it, people need to take into account the marked difference between the two statutory provisions, namely, what we are proposing in Ireland and what exists at present under section 13 of the Terrorism Act 2000 in England and Wales.

Section 4 of this Bill sets out a new definition for the existing offence of providing training for terrorism and inserts a definition for the new offence of receiving training for terrorism. It also includes a standard provision allowing for the making of ministerial regulations. The

power to make regulations is required in order that the Minister may, if deemed necessary, add to the list of prohibited weapons, techniques or methods covered by the offences of providing training and receiving training for terrorism.

Section 5 sets out the new offence of travel for the purpose of terrorism. This criminalises travel to and from the State for the purposes of committing a terrorist offence, aiding and abetting another person to commit a terrorist offence, or providing training or receiving training for terrorism. The same section also makes it an offence to knowingly organise or facilitate travel for the purpose of terrorism.

Section 6 provides that the penalty on conviction for any of the new offences introduced by the Bill is a fine or imprisonment for up to ten years or both. This section also provides that, when sentencing on conviction for the offences of recruitment to terrorism or providing training for terrorism, a court may consider as an aggravating factor the fact that the offence was committed against a child.

Section 7 replaces the text of the 2002 EU Council framework decision on combating terrorism in Schedule 1 of the principal Act with that of the 2017 EU directive. It also deletes Schedule 1A, containing the text of EU Council Framework Decision 2008/919/JHA, which is no longer in force.

Section 8 amends Part 1 of Schedule 2 to the principal Act. This lists certain offences already on our Statute Book that can be considered terrorist offences in certain contexts and so form part of the definition of "terrorist activity" in the principal Act. The section provides for the insertion of a new paragraph 6A to this Part, inserting into this list offences under sections 3 and 4 of the Criminal Justice (Offences Relating to Information Systems) Act 2017. The effect of this is that the offences of interference with an information system, or data without lawful authority, would constitute terrorist activity if intended to seriously intimidate a population, unduly compel a government or an international organisation to perform or abstain from performing an act, or seriously destabilise or destroy the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a state or an international organisation.

Section 9 is a standard provision providing for the Short Title of the Bill once enacted, the collective citation for the Bill and related Acts, and the commencement date.

I am pleased the Bill is appropriate and necessary. When we look at our terrorist legislation at present, there are certain areas where there are gaps, and the purpose of the Bill is to ensure these gaps are filled. As I emphasised earlier, it is also important to recall that in order for a person to be found guilty of committing an offence under this new legislation, it is essential that the person must have the intention to incite others to commit terrorist activity or to be involved themselves in terrorist activity. This is not legislation that can or could be used for the purpose of trying to stymie artistic displays or individuals who may, shortsightedly, wish to glorify terrorist activity in the past. Bizarrely, people who want to do this can do so but they will only find themselves criminalised in circumstances where they are doing this glorification for the purposes of inciting others to commit a serious criminal offence.

It is important to point out that the Bill includes the same definition of "terrorist activity" as is included in the 2005 Act. The definition recognises that terrorist activity is a reference to what we know as serious scheduled offences. We know that in the definition under the 2005 Act "terrorist activity" means an act that is committed in or outside the State and that if

committed in the State would constitute an offence specified in Part 1 of Schedule 2. We are speaking about activity that is already criminal activity. People need not be fearful that, in some respect, this legislation will engage with people who, as I have said, do not have the intention of seeking to promote or incite the commission of a terrorist act.

New terrorist acts are being created in the Bill, such as training of terrorism or teaching of terrorism, but they are appropriate when we look at the climate that exists at present in terms of where the threat from terrorism lies. People may wish to cast a sceptical eye on terrorist offences legislation enacted in the House but we cannot get away from the fact that terrorist activity continues to exist. Certain people believe it is acceptable for them to use violence against citizens and against the State for the purpose of trying to achieve their political purposes. We in this country know that the only way to really achieve political purposes in a democratic society is through debate, discussion and, ultimately, democracy. I commend the Bill to the House and I will listen attentively to what colleagues have to say.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Tá Sinn Féin i gcoinne an Bhille seo mar atá sé comhdhéanta faoi láthair. Is drochreachtáíocht í. Ní féidir linn glacadh leis an alt a bhaineann le griosú.

Sinn Féin is opposed to the Bill as it is currently constituted because some of its provisions are authoritarian, uncalled for and open to abuse, particularly regarding the section that would expand the definition of public provocation to commit terrorist offences. I am surprised the Minister has brought forward this legislation. It is legislation that essentially parrots the language of the DUP and others with regard to the so-called glorification of terrorism. It is exactly the type of language that has been used, in the North in particular, to attempt to curtail the rights of families to remember loved ones killed in the conflict in the Six Counties. It has equally been used in arguments against commemorating the 1916 Rising or wearing an Easter lily. The question has to be asked as to why we would want to include such a provision in the law of this State, given that we know that such a provision could be misused and abused, as they have been in the past. Why would we want to bring in something like what those in the DUP use to prevent the commemoration of those who fought for Irish freedom?

I note the heavy weight the word “intention” carried in the Minister’s remarks. I invite the Minister to go back to the so-called hate speech legislation and the difficulties that his ministerial colleague encountered precisely because of the issues with the interpretation of the word “intention”. While robust legislation to tackle the real threat of violence and extremism is of course necessary, we need to be very vigilant about the misuse of terrorism-related provisions to target legitimate political protest, activism and freedom of expression.

The expansion of the definition of the provisions relating to the provocation of terrorism is deeply problematic. I have termed the provocation of terrorist section “the Kneecap clause” because there is a real fear that this inclusion could lead to charges against political activism and legitimate freedom of expression, similar to the manner in which Mo Chara from Kneecap is currently facing terrorism charges in the UK. Sinn Féin will oppose any such attack on free speech. The provisions are too broad and they are open to abuse. Public provocation charges can be brought where no terrorist offence has been committed. The Minister has acknowledged that, yet the people charged could face ten years in prison. The provisions are so broad that a person could be guilty of a terrorist offence of provocation if they distribute or publish “a message ... that could be reasonably construed as inciting” terrorism, or that “glorifies ...

terrorist activity". The definition of glorification includes "praise" and "celebration". To be quite clear, had such laws existed in the 1980s, it is very possible that putting up in public a poster of Bobby Sands or Nelson Mandela would have been construed as glorifying terrorism.

The debate on this Bill takes place against the background of an increase in the use of this type of legislation against legitimate political protests in Europe, Britain and America, particularly in respect of Palestine. In the past week, in addition to the charges brought against a member of Kneecap, moves have been made in Britain to ban Palestine Action under terrorism legislation, following lobbying by pro-Israel organisations, despite the fact that no one believes this activist group is involved in actual terrorism. Last year, a woman was convicted and fined in Germany for chanting the slogan, "From the river to the sea". We have to recognise the times we are in, when terrorist legislation is being used elsewhere to crack down on legitimate political activism and free speech. In Ireland, the Taoiseach has signed this State up to the discredited IHRA definition of antisemitism, which conflates criticism of Israel with antisemitism. It is a time when the European Union is moving further and further away from the Irish people on matters of foreign affairs and defence. While Europe is moving away from the Irish people, the Irish Government seems to be following Europe rather than the people they serve.

There have long been debates about the definition of terrorism. This comes to the crux of it. The label of "terrorist" has been used to demonise different groups and activities at different times, including those involved in national liberation and the resistance of oppression and occupation. It is worth reminding ourselves of the words of the late Mr. Justice Brian Walsh of the Supreme Court in the extradition case of *Finucane v. McMahon*. In its 1990 judgment, Mr. Justice Walsh dealt with the issue of the definition of terrorism, stating:

The expression "terrorism" is frequently used as a blanket term for many violent acts ranging from pure terrorism to nationalist uprisings to achieve independence. For purely propaganda purposes it is frequently used to characterise activities disapproved of by the propagandists. Only a looseness of thought can equate it with violence as opposed to peaceful persuasion. "Terrorism has no agreed definition and its use is often a way of conveying disapproval rather than being descriptive"

The problem is that overly broad and ill-defined definitions of terrorism can be used against legitimate freedom of expression and political protests.

This Bill transposes the provision of the 2017 EU directive on combating terrorism. I was a Member of the European Parliament when that directive was being passed, and I voted against it precisely because of the overly broad language and the potential threat to democracy and freedom of expression. I shared the concerns of many that the directive could lead to a criminalisation of public protests and other peaceful acts, the suppression of freedom of political expression and other unjustified limitations on human rights. I pointed out that this sort of anti-terrorism legislation undercuts civil liberties, free speech and the rule of law, with little or no effect on actual terrorist activity. Protocol 21, as the Minister knows, provides Ireland with the right to opt-out and the right to opt-in to legislation adopted to govern areas of freedom, security and justice. This protocol remains crucially important in protecting Irish sovereignty and our ability to decide for ourselves what we do on issues such as this. In its briefing note, the Government has indicated that when and if the Bill is enacted, it is its

intention to notify the EU Commission and Council that it wishes to participate in the directive. It is clear that the Government accepts that we have the choice not to opt in to this directive.

I will briefly touch on the provisions regarding travelling for the purpose of terrorism, provisions which I think everyone supports in principle. However, these provisions ignore a central issue in terms of who is currently travelling to engage in violence. Let us be clear: there is no provision in law to deal with those who travel to partake in the genocidal activities of the IDF, for example. The principal Act, the Criminal Justice (Terrorist Offences) Act 2005, explicitly excludes from the provisions of this legislation "the activities of armed forces during an armed conflict insofar as those activities are governed by international humanitarian law". While Israel has repeatedly been condemned for defying international law, those who travel to join the IDF face no threat from this legislation as it currently stands. Even if it is a very small number, Ireland cannot turn a blind eye to those who travel from this State and return having engaged in horrific war crimes in Palestine.

This brings us back to the definition of terrorism and who gets to define what terrorism is. Who decides who is a terrorist and who is fighting for national liberation? Who is a terrorist and who is resisting occupation and colonialism? When we stray into "provocation", it becomes even more unclear and more dangerous in terms of legislating for it. How is someone who fights in the army of the genocidal state not classified as a terrorist, but those who resist them are? That is a distinction that needs to be addressed.

As I have outlined, Sinn Féin is opposing this Bill as it currently stands because we cannot accept the expanded definition of the provocation of terrorism. I had hoped to hear in the Minister's opening remarks a willingness to engage on latter Stages of the Bill to find language that ensures we can be robust in ensuring the legislation tackles terrorism and extremist violence, but does not impede people's rights to hold views that perhaps the majority, if not all of us, find deplorable. That is the challenge for democratic states across the world. I would have hoped that Ireland would have been up for that task.

Deputy Mark Ward: There is a need for robust legislation to tackle terrorism and terrorist activity. I know everybody can agree on this. This is needed, particularly given the current global climate. However, the vagueness in this Bill is more likely to lead to abuse by the Government to stamp out political protest, political activism and free speech.

I listened to the Minister's speech. Intention and the glorification of terrorism are open to interpretation. We cannot have a vague Bill. I will outline why. The Minister is a Dub like myself. Like most Dubs, I was raised on songs and stories of heroes of renown, the passing tales of glories, that once was Dublin town. I could sing that song to the Minister, but that would be an offence. There is a clause in this Bill that could criminalise those of us who wish to commemorate these past heroes of renown. Will the Minister be commemorating the members of the good old IRA, like de Valera, Lemass and Collins? Were they not considered terrorists of their time by the British establishment and Government?

The language of glorifying terrorism contained in this Bill is open to interpretation. As was previously said, this is the language of the DUP, which has sought to criminalise anyone who attends commemorations of loved ones killed in the conflict in the North. I make no apology whatsoever when I attend – and I will continue to attend – commemorations of our patriot dead.

In recent weeks, we have seen Mo Chara from the rap group Kneecap being charged with terrorism offences for waiving a flag while performing on stage. There is no greater oxymoron than British justice. Kneecap has been a thorn in the side of the British Government because it represents everything the British establishment hates. They are proud Irishmen who speak and promote our native language, Irishmen who never bow to British imperialism. The clause the Minister is putting into this legislation is basically a version of British legislation. In the words of Kneecap, get your Brits out of our legislation. If Mo Chara is convicted of a terrorism offence in Britain, could I be seen in this State to be glorifying terrorists by wearing a Kneecap t-shirt like I am at this moment?

We are also on a slippery slope, given other international experiences regarding legislation of this type. Israel, for example, labels nearly every human rights organisation that works on the ground in Palestine as a terrorist organisation. Al-Haq is one such group. It is an independent Palestinian non-governmental human rights organisation based in Ramallah. It protects and promotes human rights and the rule of law in occupied Palestinian territory. I met Al-Haq in Ramallah in 2022. I visited its headquarters in Ramallah as it presented a human rights account of the murder of American journalist, Shireen Abu Akleh. Israel has deemed it a terrorist organisation. If I met Al-Haq after this legislation passed, would that make me a terrorist or someone glorifying terrorism? We should not be putting anything into this legislation that will lead to abuse or misuse. Another recent example is the lambasting of the Irish women's soccer team for singing *Celtic Symphony*. Under this legislation, not only could they be seen as glorifying terrorism, but so too could the person who put the graffiti on the wall in the first place.

In this legislation, public provocation charges can be brought where no actual terrorist offence has been committed, with those charged facing up to ten years imprisonment. These provisions are clearly being used to target freedom of speech, freedom of expression and political activism as opposed to actual terrorism. We cannot stand over that.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We have stood in this Chamber many times before and dealt with a huge amount of legislation, much of which was from Europe. We all want to see a framework of fit-for-purpose legislation, whether that is dealing with cyber issues, legal loopholes or issues regarding international finances. We have always supported those pieces of legislation that make sure we deal with the issues that exist, particularly when it comes to organised crime or issues that fall solidly into the bracket of terrorism or international terrorism. However, I add my voice to the same arguments my colleagues made earlier in the sense that it is hard to talk about terrorist legislation and those travelling for the purposes of training or carrying out terrorist offences when we do not put those travelling members of the Israel Defense Forces into that bracket. We all accept a genocide is ongoing. There is no greater terrorist on God's green Earth than Israel at this point in time. The Palestinians are suffering the brunt of this. We need to do whatever we can. We know the legislative pieces in front of us, such as the occupied territories Bill or the issue of Israeli war bonds that should not be facilitated by the Central Bank. We need to ensure we maintain pressure on the European Union for its failure around the EU-Israel association agreement and the human rights conditions which have not been followed through on.

The fact is that we are dealing with a piece of legislation. I accept what the Minister said. While I wish we were always dealing with people as fair minded as the Minister with his

intention with this Bill, as Deputy Ward said, it is open to interpretation. There is this other piece, which states:

... inciting persons to commit a terrorist activity, distributes or publishes, or causes to be distributed or published, by any means (including via the internet) to the public or a section of the public a message—

... (i) inciting, or that could reasonably be construed as inciting, persons to commit a terrorist activity, or

(ii) that glorifies (including by praise or celebration) a terrorist activity,

That is incredibly frightening. This section, which Deputy Carthy described as the “Kneecap clause”, is far too open to interpretation, abuse and misuse.

Many Members will mention Liam Óg Ó hAinmídh, or Mo Chara, of Kneecap and the disgraceful way the British terrorism Act is being used to attack him. What is he being attacked for? He is being attacked because he is calling out a genocide. British law has been created in such a way that allows that attack to happen. We need to ensure there is no chance that the legislation the Minister is looking to enact could be used in that sort of way. It would be utterly unacceptable to the Irish people. I add my words to what Deputy Carthy said. I hope there is a willingness to engage to find wording that removes this worry. I agree the words “glorification of terrorism” are straight out of what has been the DUP playbook over many years.

When we talk about terrorism, we need to accept that the biggest terrorist currently in operation is the Israeli state. Once upon a time, Tom Barry and Dan Breen were seen as terrorists. We do not want a circumstance where people remembering them, Patrick Pearse, Seán Lemass or Éamon de Valera are considered to be glorifying terrorism. We may have different views into others who engaged in national liberation struggle in this State, country and beyond. Many of us have difficulty with this idea of glorification of terrorism and its impact on us remembering those of 1916, 1921 and the Civil War. Many things happened in Irish history that we would all have hoped did not occur. This also goes for the period of 1981 when Kieran Doherty was elected to this House alongside Paddy Agnew in my constituency. It is absolutely fine for families to remember those sacrifices and the sacrifices of the likes of Francis Hughes, Bobby Sands and many others. We need to look at the language and the particular wording in some of this legislation in order to ensure we are not lining up legislation that could be used by others to create a terrible situation, similar to what the British state is doing to Mo Chara. All Kneecap has done is support the Irish language and support the sound, righteous idea of a united Ireland and removing the British Government from Ireland.

Deputy Alan Kelly: We need to be very careful with this Bill. The Minister needs to get this right because there are legitimate concerns about it. The purpose of the Bill is to give effect to the EU directive 2017/541 on combating terrorism, which is to a large extent directed at the foreign terrorist fighter phenomenon. The Bill includes offences of travelling to commit a terrorist offence, facilitating travel to commit a terrorist offence and receiving training for terrorism. Essentially, the 2017 directive is an updated version of already existing EU counter-terrorism measures. Its main purpose was to establish new offences to address the issue of foreign terrorist fighters.

I would like to concentrate a little on the timeline of how we got here. In September 2014, UN Security Council Resolution 2178 was adopted. It called on all members to address the issue of foreign terrorist fighters. The general scheme was then published on 8 September 2020. Over a year later, in December 2021, the Oireachtas joint committee agreed with the then Minister for Justice that it was not necessary to undertake pre-legislative scrutiny on the general scheme of the Bill. Considering the conversation we are having today, this is very strange. As the Bill has been promised since 2020, no one can argue that this has been treated as a priority. If we go back even further, Ireland signed the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism in October 2008. We have yet to ratify the convention. The phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters had already been identified as an issue in the 2008 Council of Europe convention. The convention requires member states to create offences relating to public provocation to commit terrorist offences and recruitment and training for terrorism. We had done that much in the Act of 2005. The related protocol 215 to the convention supplements it and seeks to criminalise certain additional acts. The Bill finally published this year and being debated now will give effect to the requirements of the protocol Ireland signed ten years ago, as well as some outstanding earlier legislative commitments that will enable us to ratify a convention we signed 17 years ago.

More than six years ago, on 5 March 2019, the then Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, reported to the House that he and other heads of government at the EU-League of Arab States summit had committed to working together more closely to address the root causes of terrorism and to continue joint efforts to combat foreign terrorist fighters. This was more than six years ago. In the same month six years ago, the then Minister for justice, Charlie Flanagan, said that the shared challenges facing all member states arising from the phenomenon of suspected foreign terrorist fighters had been a consistent focus of discussion with EU colleagues at meetings of justice and interior ministers.

Meanwhile, in the real world, while all of this theorising, debating, stalling and discussing was going on, a former Irish soldier travelled to Syria, during the civil war there, to join ISIS. We all now know that Lisa Smith was prosecuted and convicted of the offence of membership of an unlawful terrorist group and sentenced to 15 months in prison. If the gaps in the criminal law that the Bill is trying to fill might be of some practical assistance in cases like that of Lisa Smith, why the extraordinary delay in getting around to passing it? It is a simple question. If the Bill's provisions are not that important and we can have successful trials and prosecutions without it, we should not oversell it. The Minister should give an honest assessment of it, one way or the other.

The Bill proposes to transpose into domestic law the 2017 EU directive by amending aspects of the Criminal Justice (Terrorist Offences) Act 2005 and to introduce the following offences: receiving training for terrorism, travelling for the purposes of terrorism and facilitating travel for the purposes of terrorism. Ireland has an opt-out in EU justice matters. We signalled an intention to opt in to this measure soon after it was adopted. According to the regulatory impact assessment for this Bill, transposition will allow Ireland to also opt in to EU regulation 2023/2131, which aims to modernise the EU Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation, Eurojust, and to update this system for digital information exchange in terrorism cases. It is reasonable to ask, now that we have all had time to reflect after Brexit, whether we intend opting in to become the default option in justice and home affairs into the future.

The implementation of this Bill will be monitored by the new Office of the Independent Examiner of Security Legislation, which was set up under the Policing, Security and Community Safety Act 2024. In this case, as the Minister is aware, the independent examiner is Mr. Justice George Birmingham, a retired president of the Court of Appeal. Once the Bill has been passed, he will be required to produce a review of its operational effectiveness at least once every three years.

There is serious concern about some of the wording in this Bill. I think this concern is genuine. The definitions are critical. Freedom of expression and how far this Bill could potentially go is worrying for some people. These are genuine worries. We all know what is going on with Mo Chara and Kneecap; it has been referenced before. The phrase "glorification of terrorism" and how it is understood and defined, reaches into other areas of the Bill, can impact on the execution of the Bill and, in practice, can be used in everyday life and is a concern for me. I genuinely want to support the theme of this legislation. That is the Labour Party's position but we have to get this right. The Minister really needs to get this right. I believe we will have to bring in a certain number of amendments. I hope the Minister will discuss them with us and take our views on board.

Considering the Bill we are discussing, I want to raise some issues relating to the case of Evan Fitzgerald, the manner in which he was arrested and charged and his suicide. I want to say this to the Minister in a very honest way. I have probably never said this before, but it is one of the most disturbing things I have ever had to deal with in my life, not just in my career. From everything I know now, it is harrowing. It is so disturbing and I am deeply upset about it. I have had sleepless nights over this issue.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Grace Boland): Is this relevant, Deputy?

Deputy Alan Kelly: Yes, it is.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Grace Boland): Please make sure you keep it relevant to the legislation.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Please be assured that I have been here a long time and I have seen what is brought up in relation to Bills. I was made aware of this Garda operation some time ago. It was months ago, long before this young man took his own life. Members will be aware that journalist John Lee wrote about it in the *Mail on Sunday*. So much has happened in this case that does not add up. This creates a nervousness for me regarding this new legislation. It is clear and obvious that what he was doing was totally wrong. None of us can argue that. I hope the Minister will reflect in a deeply honest way on what I am saying. He was wrong; he was a vulnerable young man. He was also something else, though. He was a young man who loved his family. He was incredibly close to his childhood friends, and I know this to be true. Considering the legislation we are looking at, it is true to say that he had a fascination with guns. An Garda Síochána has admitted as much. However, given what we are talking about, Evan Fitzgerald was not a terrorist. He was not involved in organised crime, or any crime, for that matter. He took his own life. He could not see any way out and he felt so bad about everything that happened, particularly in relation to his two friends and their families. What these Houses need to ask is whether he needed to end up in that situation, in that dark hole.

3 o'clock

It is ironic, given the legislation we are discussing, that the Garda today detailed in the *Irish Examiner* how it uses controlled deliveries. Why it feels the need to put this out there, I have no idea. I have no issue with controlled deliveries when used appropriately for reasons related to terrorism or organised crime. It is, by and large, good policing. However, they have to be used appropriately. I have serious concern when they are used on a vulnerable young man who, as a consequence of An Garda Síochána's actions, took his own life very publicly and had, I have no doubt, an impact on many other people in that shopping centre.

I understand the HK G3 military assault rifle delivered to him was stolen by the Provisional IRA from Norwegian reserves in 1984 and recovered by An Garda Síochána well over 20 years ago. I cannot understand, and never will, why the Garda did not take a different strategy, especially after meeting him, observing him, talking to him, following him and profiling him. The critical question is why there was not a knock on the door. Was it necessary to expend weeks in costly operations involving some of the most important Garda units to entrap this young man? Was it necessary to arrest him in the manner in which they did, smashing the windows of the car he was in, when they knew there was no threat? The other critical question is why An Garda Síochána needed such a big win. Why did the Garda agree to bail if he was such a big threat and warranted such a costly and high-profile Garda operation?

I want to raise some critical issues. One relates to the evidence given in court by the garda in March 2024. I have a direct request for the Minister. It is one I hope he reflects on because I believe him to be a decent man. I ask him as Minister for justice to read over the DAR, which is the report of the court sitting where Evan and his two friends were charged. There needs to be full accountability on this from the Garda Commissioner down. Maybe the Minister should sit down with the Garda Commissioner on it. Please, please, please read the DAR.

We cannot tolerate untruths being told to a District Court judge. In the Seanad on Tuesday, Senator McDowell said the same. Not alone was it a case of entrapment, but what was said in the court was not accurate. It was not true. Amazingly enough, An Garda Síochána said in the media that it was unaware of a judge having been misled. It was again answering a question it had not been asked. It said it was unaware of any court case where a judge categorically stated that a member of An Garda Síochána had misled him or her. How could the judge say that when the judge was not aware? The judge was told, and this was read into the record in the Seanad by Senator McDowell, that the arms were bought on the dark web. The judge later asked:

"When you say the dark web, do you have any idea who was selling them on the dark web?" A member of An Garda Síochána, in sworn evidence, told him, "That is an ongoing investigation. At this stage I wouldn't want to", and the judge said, "Compromise the trial", and [then the garda] said, "[This] is an ongoing investigation on the dark web."

We now know the guns and ammunition were supplied by An Garda Síochána, not on the dark web or by anyone else. Senator McDowell said:

It is a shocking thing... that untrue and misleading evidence would be given to a judge of the Irish District Court in these circumstances, leaving him in the dark that these were decommissioned weapons supplied in a controlled delivery by members of An Garda Síochána [to set up] one naive [young] man[.]

The central issue is that any deception - I use that word in the sense of a deception for the right reasons - in executing a worthy Garda operation needs to end when the independent, impartial judicial process begins. Does the Minister get that? It did not happen in this case. If John Lee in the *Irish Mail on Sunday* had not raised this issue, I am not sure we would have ever known. The book of evidence was served after his articles were published and we do not know what Evan Fitzgerald knew about the entrapment before he took his own life.

There are no legitimate circumstances when the Judiciary is deliberately kept in the dark by misleading evidence concerning the substance of what precedes the exercise of the judicial function. If controlled delivery involving deception is legitimate and justified to produce evidence of guilt, once the evidence is brought into existence, the right to deceive falls away when the judicial function is invoked. The judge is entitled to expect the whole truth to be tendered in evidence, as required by the oath. In this case, informing the judge that the source of the firearms was under investigation was not true. The source was known to the Garda. The untrue evidence tendered was intended to conceal the truth from the court and the persons charged. The true source of the firearms and the fact they had been rendered useless were relevant to the bail decision, the judicial process and judicial discretion.

The Minister needs to deal with this. This is not going away. The follow-up by An Garda Síochána since Evan Fitzgerald took his own life is also worrying. The briefings from security sources that people like me and Senator McDowell - and I hope others will take an interest in this now - should not be speaking up on this issue and that such commentary was manna from heaven for organised crime groups is insulting to both Chambers. We are entitled to ask legitimate questions. I think I have said enough to show these are legitimate questions. Why did I have to tell the Minister about this? He has admitted I rang him in relation to this case. I appreciate the fact he has acknowledged that and that he took those calls, but surely under section 36(1) of the Policing, Security and Community Safety Act 2024 the Garda Commissioner should have done so because the Minister did not have a clue. Maybe his Department knew; I do not know that. In fairness, the Minister, I gathered from the tone of the call, did not know. I am not saying he did not have a clue in a derogatory way. I am saying he genuinely did not have a clue, in fairness to him.

There were reports of a manifesto on a USB key left by Evan. I understand there is no manifesto. Why was that put out there? The Garda keeps saying this issue was investigated by Fiosrú, the new GSOC. Miraculously, considering the length of time numerous investigations by this organisation have taken over many years, it turned this around in three weeks. That is not what happened. There was no investigation. If there had been, surely all the gardaí involved would have been interviewed, and so would many others. Indeed, I might have been interviewed myself. The journalists might have been contacted but they were not.

The Garda Commissioner has been asked to send details to the justice committee of what was sent to Fiosrú. I look forward to seeing that. I presume it was the file on the case and possibly the newspaper articles by John Lee about the case. The Minister's Department said on 10 May that it was aware of the case but could not comment because it had been sent to Fiosrú. The Garda Commissioner has confirmed it was sent to Fiosrú on 21 May, so I do not get how that was said on 10 May. More importantly, I believe there is a real issue here for Fiosrú, a new organisation commencing its work. I said in this House that GSOC had lost all

credibility because of the way it was dealing with cases. Fiosrú has an opportunity to start afresh but this is a case that needs to be looked at.

There has to be an investigation in this case. I commend the Minister because he rang me about it. He did the right thing when it came to the Shane O'Farrell case. He now needs to show courage in the Evan Fitzgerald case. I will commend and thank him if he does so.

Deputy Joe Neville: I will focus on the issue at hand and what we are here to discuss. I came here to welcome the Bill in a changing world from the Government benches. As a country, we are familiar historically with terrorist activity; we have seen it on our own shores. We have seen waves of it throughout Europe and America over the recent years and especially in the 21st century. That terrorism has taken many different forms, such as cyberterrorism, online radicalisation and online glorification of terrorism. In my lifetime alone, we have seen huge growth in this and the impact it can have. It has led to many deaths and many bombs in places where ordinary people were going about their business. In Ireland we have not seen that yet, but there is always a risk. Therefore, we have to update our laws to reflect this and keep them in line with modern norms.

There has been some opposition to this Bill, which we heard from the past few contributors. However, I do not see what is wrong with a Bill that protects young people, targets early stages of radicalisation, enables gardaí to act proactively, tackles cyberterrorism, tracks down extreme radicalisation online and strengthens national security. Those are just some of the key highlights. I will try to address those key highlights individually.

To protect young people, this Bill recognises the particular harm caused when minors are recruited. To say that does not happen is wrong. We need to try to ensure that does not happen and is treated as an aggravating factor in sentencing. We need to target early stages of radicalisation. New offences such as receiving terrorist training and travelling for terrorist purposes allow authorities to intervene earlier. That is key because we need to get in before attacks occur. This Bill enables gardaí to act proactively and gives An Garda Síochána more robust tools to disrupt and prosecute terrorist activity at the planning and preparation stage. What could possibly be wrong with that? As someone who grew up in a Garda family and saw the benefits of gardaí - indeed we had the Garda Commissioner and his team at the PAC today - we know the contribution they make throughout all of our streets. To strengthen their hand is the most important thing we can do in this Chamber to protect the public.

This Bill tackles cyberterrorism. By including cyber-related offences this Bill future-proofs our legislation against digital threats such as hacking and data breaches. These are the kinds of things we have seen. We have seen data breaches throughout our country, including the HSE and elsewhere in the past number of years. We need to put in place legislation to protect the country in myriad ways. It is key that we bring that in here.

This Bill criminalises elements of publicly stating how amazing terrorism is. We have seen the impacts of that online and across social media platforms. It rightly includes the glorification of terrorist acts as a criminal offence, cracking down on extremist propaganda and online radicalisation. Who could not say that has been an issue especially in the 21st century with social media? This Bill strengthens national security and modernises counter-terrorism law, ensuring Ireland is better protected from evolving and international terrorist threats. As I asked, who could object to that?

Earlier, Deputy Carthy asked what the definition of terrorism was. He seemed unsure. He mentioned different things but, ultimately, it is very clear. If the Deputy had looked it up in the dictionary, he would have seen it is “the calculated use of violence to create a general climate of fear in a population, thereby to bring about a political objective.” Terrorism has been practised by political organisations in different ways, by nationalistic and religious groups, revolutionaries and even state institutions such as armies, intelligence services and police. It is not hard to understand what terrorism is. We have lived it, to a degree, over many centuries and in different places, but we especially see it in the 21st century in many different ways.

I thank the Minister for outlining at the very start why this legislation is so different from the UK and why the Kneecap case would not be applicable under this Bill. I profoundly disagree with the case the English Government has taken against the members of Kneecap and welcome what the Minister has outlined today. That case would not be possible under this legislation, which the Minister stated very strongly. That message needs to go out today. We have enough problems with misinformation on social media and that misinformation should not come from this Chamber.

I also heard references to rebel songs. Deputy Ward referenced the words of different rebel songs from Dublin. I have sung rebel songs and have been in the company of others as they sang rebel songs. My granduncles were involved in the War of Independence. My family had difficulties dealing with the Black and Tans. That history is a republican history we all have. This will not impact that. It is not about taking people who sing songs out of pubs. To use that kind of misinformation - if that is the level of discussion we are having in the Dáil - then we have all got it wrong.

This is about making our country and streets safer. It is about keeping our children safe and ensuring we do not have situations where bombs are going off left and right in towns and that we do not have terrorists here. We cannot come in here the following week, asking why we did not know. We would have the Garda Commissioner asking the Minister why he was not more proactive in taking out this sect or that group. That is what this is about. It is about being proactive, being early and getting in with European norms. I welcome any Bill that gives support to the gardaí to do their work and indeed make our country safer.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I wanted to speak on this Bill specifically. One of reasons is that when we make new laws, change laws or look at legislation in this Chamber, it is not just about what I think this Minister, this Government or anybody in this Chamber would do. My concern always has to be what future Governments could do. That is an issue that needs to be thought about when we look at dismantling the triple lock. Even if someone at home believes this Government or this Minister would do one thing, we always need to look at what can happen in the future. As a result, I have serious concerns about this and the inclusion of what we have called “the Kneecap clause.”

I take what the previous speaker mentioned. He talked about moving towards European norms. I also come from the perspective of being half German. At the moment in Germany, there is a huge clampdown on political protests and political activism for Palestine and against the genocide in Gaza. Only yesterday a person was again arrested at a pro-Palestine protest in Berlin. We talk about moving towards European norms but we need to look at what those norms could be, and what impact they could have here on political activism on the streets by

people who protest peacefully and stand up for what they believe is right. We have a history on this island with regard to the impact of people who peacefully protested. We do not need to look too far back in history to see the impact of what happened on Bloody Sunday, for example. I am not suggesting this legislation is the same thing, but I am talking about the impact any kind of legislation can have on peaceful protest. That is something I am particularly concerned about. I am really concerned we will be looking at clamping down on political activism and political protests. As I said, this is not necessarily about what I believe this Minister would do but rather what could happen in the future.

Some of my colleagues mentioned the ongoing court case with Mo Chara. I understand the Minister spoke about it at length when I was not in the Chamber, so I might skip that part. The other issue, something the previous speaker and my colleague, Deputy Ward, mentioned, is our own political history and Irish history and how people are remembered. The use of language is terribly important in that. When we look at going forward and at peace and reconciliation, it is really important that everybody can remember their dead. I am concerned as to what impact this could have. The Minister will be aware of my own family's history in that respect, and the impact I would be concerned about in that regard.

I have serious concerns about this legislation. As with all such legislation, my biggest concern is how they can be interpreted and used by future Governments. My hope is that the Minister would not use them in this type of way, and I assume he will say he would not, but we do not know what is coming down the line and its impact in the future.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I thank the Minister for the opportunity to debate the Criminal Justice (Terrorist Offences) (Amendment) Bill 2025, which is important legislation. I want to be clear from the outset that we support the Bill's objectives broadly.

We live in a world where terrorist threats evolve quickly. We have a responsibility to ensure our laws evolve with them. I accept that measures to address cross-border terrorist activity - training and facilitating travel for terrorist ends - are both necessary and prudent. However, I will not accept the absolute silence from the Government at the growing threat closer to home. The rise of far-right extremism, the mobilisation of hate online and the violence that has spilled onto our streets are not abstract ideas. They are not hypotheticals. They have already happened. We have lived through it and witnessed it with our own eyes. We saw in the riots that shook the city, shops looted, buses burned, gardaí and ordinary people injured and a neighbourhood terrorised. Why? It was because a tragedy became a rallying point for far-right agitation, for those spreading fear, hate and outright lies, who went on to inflict terror on the streets of Dublin. Those platforms became recruiting grounds for hate, racism, conspiracy and a mob that felt emboldened to take to the streets. They were emboldened by actors who were predominantly online telling people that there were threats and to go and burn down buildings. They faced no consequences for that.

What lessons have been learned? What concrete measures have been brought forward? There have been very few. The Government promised urgency and we received platitudes. We watched as the hate crime legislation was stripped of its core provisions on online incitement. We have watched as the Government has failed to stand up to big tech and hold platforms to account for the content that festers and spreads on its watch. We have watched as

disinformation has been allowed to circulate unchallenged, unfettered, poisoning public discourse, endangering communities and putting gardaí and ordinary people in harm's way.

The Bill before us acknowledges the threats posed by cross-border terror and online training for terror. That is good and welcome. However, I would also like to see - we will table an amendment on this at a future point - the same urgency when it comes to terror that plays out on our streets that is mobilised by online agitators. That requires the same urgency. Of course, someone who downloads a training manual for an online terrorist group should be considered a threat in the deepest sense of the word and it needs to be acted on. However, so too should a person who purposely shares rumours online with the intent of sparking riots on the streets of Dublin or elsewhere in the country. That is also a threat we cannot ignore.

There is merit in supporting some aspects of the Bill. I understand it incorporates threats posed by terrorist actors across and outside our borders, but I ask the Government not to ignore the threats posed by the actors spreading terror and fear in communities the length and breadth of Ireland. That requires legislation, resources and urgency, but also a simple acknowledgement that it is happening. We have seen how quickly online platforms can mobilise hate. We have seen how big tech platforms have become weapons for those who want to sow terror and discord in our communities, yet this Government refused to stand up to them when it abandoned key elements of the hate crime legislation. We have watched as Ministers talk tough in soundbites and then walk away when it comes to standing up to Silicon Valley. If we are serious about making this country safer, we have to acknowledge that security is not just about borders and international threats, although they are no less important. It is about every area where fear is stoked by racism and lies. It is about every parent who worries about the online spaces their children inhabit. It is about all people who are terrorised in their communities because the Government has failed to prioritise tackling far-right and online ecosystems that have gone on to fester scenarios where library staff are being harassed because of books kept on the shelves.

We must also acknowledge that the threat we face is a threat to the very values on which the State is built. The idea that all people regardless of their background, beliefs and circumstances can live in safety and dignity is at the heart of our democracy and it is very much under threat. The rise of online hate and far-right ideology threatens to rip those values apart. What we saw on our streets last year and continue to witness on our streets every day is an attempt to undermine the fabric of our society, our norms, our compassion, our decency and our tolerance of people who choose to live in a way that is different from how I might choose to live my life. We owe it to ourselves and to future generations to confront it with the same urgency that we apply to threats from outside our borders. We owe it to victims, to every person who has felt afraid to walk down the street because a mob felt entitled to claim it. We owe it to all people targeted online because of their race, gender, religion or identity. We owe it to young people scrolling through their phones tonight exposed to toxic algorithms that prioritise hate and disinformation over safety and belonging. If we can mobilise resources and attention, as we should, for terrorist threats outside our borders, we should not shy away from mobilising the same urgency for threats within.

Our laws must evolve but so too must our priorities. We can no longer treat the online spaces that host radicalisation and hate as neutral platforms. I am conscious that this weekend we are celebrating Pride. Pride this year will be different from how Pride has been for the past

ten or 15 years. Genuine terror is being experienced by people in the LGBTQI community because of the extent to which they are now being targeted online, which results in them being targeted on the streets. We have seen instances of that on the streets of Dublin and all over the country in the past year.

This brings me to a provision in the Bill that gives me serious concern, the amendment dealing with public provocation to commit terrorist offences. I listened to many of the speakers today on this same matter and there will be some overlap with my contribution. People who have contacted me and their friends, colleagues and family members understand why a measure like this needs to be confronted and tackled. They understand that, as a nation born out of conflict against an oppressor, we should not seek to mirror the oppressor's laws. I refer specifically to the new wording to be introduced in section 4A, which allows for a person to be found guilty if:

with the intention of inciting....terrorist activity...[he or she] publishes, or causes to be....published...a message

(ii) that "glorifies (including by praise or celebration) a terrorist activity

and

(b) such...publication gives rise to the reasonable apprehension that the commission of a terrorist activity could thereby result.

Of course, we must have strong laws to stop the glorification of and incitement to terrorist acts, but we should be absolutely clear that the right to protest, speak out and hold the Government to account is absolutely vital in our democracy. We must be vigilant that provisions such as this do not, intentionally or otherwise, give too much room for a government to characterise legitimate protest, commentary or debate as incitement. The right to speak, dissent and protest is a cornerstone of democracy. We should make sure that in tackling terrorist threats, we do not also create tools that could be used to silence those very democratic voices and norms. The reason we are saying this is that we are watching what is happening in the UK, where it is very clear what is happening to the band Kneecap. They took to the stage and called out genocide and because they did that, they have been brought to court and charged with terrorism offences. While I understand that is not the exact reason outlined in the court case, we also understand the motivation behind it. I understand there is a court case going on, but we are speaking in the Parliament about Irish nationals who are going to be tried for terrorist offences for calling out genocide. It is incumbent on all of us to speak about how wrong that is.

The language in this provision includes such words as "glorifies", "praise" and "celebration" which are too open to interpretation. They are too subjective and reliant on a person's or authority's reading of intent. Will a song sung at a concert or match be subject to scrutiny? Will an academic article or a piece of historical commentary be treated as glorification? Will satire or art be punished because someone somewhere finds it offensive or deems it reasonable to construe it as incitement? Those questions matter because when the line between legitimate expression and incitement is blurred, it is too easy for that line to be abused.

It is important to say at this point that when I was writing that paragraph, I did not have the Minister in mind. I do not believe for a second that a Minister for justice such as him would

use those laws to go after the people we are concerned about in our pages, but there will be governments after this one and after that as well. When legislation is enacted, it is not just for the current Minister but for those in the decades to come. That is why we should be fearful when we enact provisions such as these. Incitement to terrorist activity is already outlawed. Those provisions exist and this Bill strengthens them appropriately, but extending this to ambiguous or contested notions of glorification threatens to cross a line that is vital for a free and democratic society. We cannot combat terror without preserving democratic freedoms. We must do both.

I ask the Minister and the Government to revisit this provision to make sure the language is clear, precise and objective, to ensure that in trying to protect society from terror, we do not endanger the right of all people to speak, protest, express themselves and be heard. There is much in this Bill that is forward thinking when it comes to counter-terrorism law and I welcome aspects of it. If we continue to bury our heads in the sand and pretend that combating online radicalisation and far-right mobilisation is not as urgent as combating the more traditional forms of terror, then we are failing ourselves, communities and the people who are being impacted by them as we speak. The Government has a duty to listen, act and protect, not only when it suits its agenda or involves transnational threats or when it is making statements about its role in Europe. It has a duty to act on the threat that is here at home.

I ask the Minister to match the purpose of this Bill with an equal ambition to stamp out the terror that is festering online and in communities. I ask him to put forward legislation that will finally regulate big tech platforms, revisit the hate crime provisions that were abandoned and give An Garda Síochána the tools and training to respond effectively to the threat from far-right extremists and online radicals.

The threats we face are evolving every day. The measures we adapt must evolve as well so let us have the courage to react, lead and protect every person in this State regardless of where the threat may come from.

It would be a loss if I did not also use this opportunity to say that as we speak, there are people in Gaza and Palestine who are also experiencing terror in its most horrific form. There are weapons being used in that terror, and people being mobilised to inflict that terror, who are landing in our airports, including Shannon Airport, and going off to inflict terror on children. Palestinian children also have the right to protection. Do we avert our gaze, as the Tánaiste did today, and say there is nobody involved in genocide passing through Shannon Airport? How do we know? We are certainly not doing any inspections or looking to see what is in the planes. We are not looking to see who is on them and we are certainly not taking any interest as a State in what they are doing when they leave Shannon Airport or our airspace, and go off to carry out devastation upon the population of Gaza and the West Bank.

Oftentimes in this Chamber, when we are operating under the shadows of a genocide, there is a hypocrisy in much of what we are bringing forward. If we do not apply the same standards to other people who are suffering, it is in contravention of our own history as an oppressed people. We should not mirror the laws of our oppressors. We also should not avert our gaze when other people are feeling the hard thumb of imperialism, and the bombs, violence and starvation that goes with it.

Deputy Paul Murphy: This Bill is a very serious attack on freedom of speech and the right of people to protest. Mo Chara from Kneecap is being prosecuted in Britain for opposing the genocide and expressing solidarity with Palestine, and now the Government here is trying to pass legislation that would allow him to be prosecuted here too.

Section 3 of the Bill expands the legal definition of provocation of terrorist activity to include glorifying "(including by praise or celebration) a terrorist activity". The phrase "terrorist activity" can include activities both inside and outside of the State, so Kneecap could be prosecuted here, just as they are being prosecuted in Britain. Palestine solidarity activists in this country could also be prosecuted, presumably, for expressing support for Palestine Action, a civil society campaigning organisation that is in the process of being proscribed as a terrorist organisation in Britain. I, for one, support Palestine Action.

People will remember the mass outbreak of pearl-clutching that followed the Irish soccer team chanting, "ooh ah, up the 'RA", and young people singing along to The Wolfe Tones's "Celtic Symphony" at Electric Picnic. It seems that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael potentially want to lock these people up too. Is that not glorification of terrorist activity? This is outrageous. The lowering to the floor of the legal bar for provocation of terrorist-linked activity must be resolutely opposed. The Government was forced to drop its draconian hate speech legislation; it must now be forced to drop this renewed attack on freedom of speech.

Section 3 of this Bill opens the door to people being prosecuted for expressing solidarity with direct action carried out by protestors. Criminal damage can already be classed as terrorist activity if it is committed with the intention to "unduly compel a government ... to perform or abstain from performing any act". Someone, for example, posting support on social media for anti-water charges protestors pouring cement on water meters and saying "More of this, please" could be arrested and charged with terrorist-linked activity of "public provocation to commit a terrorist offence", fined an apparently unlimited amount and sentenced to up to ten years in prison. The same would apply to someone tweeting in support of Palestine solidarity protestors throwing red paint at the Department of foreign affairs or damaging a US war plane at Shannon Airport en route to assist in genocide, and saying something like, "We need more direct action like this". Under this legislation, that would constitute glorifying "(including by praise or celebration) a terrorist activity", even if nothing happens, no more red paint is thrown, or no more warplanes are actually damaged.

Section 4(3) of the Criminal Justice (Terrorist Offences) Act 2005, which remains unchanged by this Bill, states: "In determining whether an act is a terrorist-linked activity, it shall not be necessary for an offence... to have actually been committed." Just saying online or at a public meeting that US warplanes should be sabotaged to stop them from arming the genocide in Gaza, even if that never happens, is now enough to get you locked up for terrorist-linked activity.

Section 8 of the Bill is also extremely worrying. It adds "*Unlawful interference with information systems or data*" to the list of terrorist offences, where it is committed with the intention to "unduly compel a government or an international organisation to perform or abstain from performing any act". Under the Criminal Justice (Offences Relating to Information Systems) Act 2017, "Unlawful interference with information systems or data" is defined extremely broadly, to include "transmitting, damaging, deleting, altering or suppressing, or causing the deterioration of, data" on an information system, as well as "rendering data" on an

information system "inaccessible". Redefining this not just as a crime but as a terrorist activity means that various forms of online activism, potentially including co-ordinated mass email campaigns that collapse servers or a mass reporting of social media posts, could now be defined as terrorist activity. If you express support for that or encourage people to take part in it, you can be charged with provoking terrorism.

Section 4 of this Bill also strengthens the criminalisation of training for terrorist activity or terrorist-linked activity. Alongside a long list of relevant instruction or training that includes training in firearms, explosives and chemical, biological and nuclear weapons, we find training "in techniques, methods, skills or technical knowledge" that enables someone else to "commit, or aid, abet, counsel or procure the commission of, a terrorist activity". Showing people in your local anti-water charges campaign how to pour cement into a water meter, training people in cyber activism, suggesting to people how they might get through the fences at Shannon Airport - all of that could now be classed as training for terrorism.

We live in an upside down world where those who try to stop genocide are prosecuted for terrorism, where people who bravely went into Shannon Airport and tried to stop US warplanes are facing prosecution. With regard to those who are guilty of the terrorism, the ones who are raining the bombs down on the people of Gaza and shooting down people of Gaza queuing for food, those who fund, arm and politically support them, we are told, "No, they are not the terrorists. You are a terrorist if you try to stop it". I know which side I am on and I know which side will be vindicated by history but this Bill is a shameful attempt to criminalise effective protest.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I, too, have serious concerns about this. On first reading of the Bill, you would think it is fairly innocuous, in that we are going to punish the receipt of training for terrorism, and travelling and organising it. Then you look at it more clearly and you will see we are amending legislation from 20 years ago to make it stronger. We are doing it on the basis of a directive that we were not obliged to buy into but nevertheless we gave our word to it. We are adding in three new things, including what has already been referred to - the public provocation to commit a terrorist offence.

We are doing this on the basis of a directive that itself is extremely problematic and has been highlighted by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights and by a whole European network of national human rights institutions, which made a number of recommendations. We seem to have ignored all of that, and the European Commission itself noted difficulties with proving legislative intent, and that some member states find it challenging to qualify violent extreme right-wing acts as acts of terrorism, which the Commission noted to be crucial to ensuring the directive is applied in a non-discriminatory manner. We have a directive that was brought in without complying with essential procedures at the time, a directive that is proving difficult itself, and yet we have the Commission going on and prosecuting or taking infringement proceedings against over 20 countries that have not implemented the directive that is extremely faulty.

We are going on another level altogether, a bizarre level where we do not need to implement this directive but we are bringing in legislation that is seriously problematic. I again thank the library staff for all their work on this. I do not have the time to go into the concerns raised but they are laid out in black and white, and we are absolutely ignoring them.

I look at how terrorism is defined. Of course we all need legislation that deals with and prevents terrorism, but that terrorism must be analysed within a broader remit. If we in this Dáil cannot recognise that Israel is a terrorist state, then we are in serious trouble. We have not condemned Israel for attacking Iran without provocation. Israel went in and bombed nuclear sites with all the problems that entails on the basis that the Iranians had weapons or was almost ready to have weapons so Israel took pre-emptive strikes. The Government, and the Minister for Justice, do not seem to have any problem with a terrorist state taking action against all international law. Everything has to be done on the basis of trust. While at one level I am agreeing with the Minister that this is necessary, when we actually look at it, we see how problematic it is. Then we have the tunnel vision that will only look one way at terrorism but will not look at the real terrorist acts that have taken place. We are losing count of the number of dead people on the ground from bombs, destruction, starvation and from depriving them of water. We see Palestinian children and fathers and mothers being shot. I hate the picture but it is like going to a fair where there are moving targets. The army is shooting moving targets and killing. We are standing idly by. We do not define terrorism here; we look at terrorism in very general and expansive notions that should have no place in legislation, including "Public provocation to commit terrorist offence" and "that glorifies [...] a terrorist activity". I do not think I have ever seen the word "glorifies" in legislation. Perhaps it was taken straight from the 2005 Act. If so, we should not reuse it. If not, it has no place. Glorification is something I have seen in church prayers and in religion. To glorify is way too broad.

I am taking Israel and Palestine and looking at what has happened there. We stood idly by when Amnesty International said that Israel was operating an apartheid state. I mentioned this many times. It is important to keep saying it because this and the previous Government, and the current Taoiseach, told us they were uncomfortable with the word "apartheid". We never discussed the report because the Government was uncomfortable with the word "apartheid" being used in relation to Israel. Then Israel designated six human rights organisations, two of which we fund directly, as terrorist organisations. I ask the Minister to stay with me for a minute. If we are allowing Israel to designate six human rights organisations as terrorists, does that not make a mockery of an open analysis as to what terrorism is? We allowed that to happen on our watch. The EU came back and said there was no evidence that they were operating as terrorist organisations and still that happened.

Today, the Minister is bringing to us a Bill that has not been subjected to pre-legislative scrutiny. That in itself is appalling because all the issues around this should have been teased out through pre-legislative scrutiny. There is no urgency to this Bill in the sense that we never had to comply with the directive. Pre-legislative scrutiny is there to tease out these issues. I am grateful and delighted to have six or seven minutes to speak on this, but this should be teased out at pre-legislative scrutiny. The committee waived this scrutiny but it should not have. It is very important that we tease out this. We would get an opportunity to look at how terrorism arises, who the biggest culprits are and what money is going into it but we will do none of that while we go down a tunnel of looking at very vague terms like "glorifying" and "incentivising".

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The problem with this legislation is defining who are the terrorists in the world right now. The biggest terrorists in the world right now are Israel, the US and Russia. There are many other terrorist states also but they are the big three. To the best of my

knowledge, the Government has only condemned one, which is Russia. We are trading and dealing with Israel. We are the second biggest trader, as has been reported. Of course, this Government completely kowtows to the US.

I ask again: does the Government condemn the bombing of Iran by the US last weekend? I would like the Minister to answer that because I did not hear any condemnation from the Taoiseach or from the Tánaiste. To bomb a nuclear site is extremely dangerous, and apparently up to 500 people were killed in Iran.

In regard to Israel, we now know that the Government does call it a genocide but it took quite a while. The reality is that Israeli terrorism is not being addressed. This directive has come from the EU. Most member states support Israel. The EU Commission president said Israel has the right to defend itself, just after it bombed Iran. The people of Gaza are playing their hunger games every day, risking their lives choosing between a hail of bullets or starvation, yet the EU Commission put that statement out.

This is the context from which this Bill is coming. This Bill is a massive attack on the right to free speech and expression and on the right to protest, and it would definitely see innocent people who are protesting against terrorism becoming victims of this Bill. It has already been called "the Kneecap clause" by other Deputies, which is the expansion of the definition of the offence of public provocation to commit a terrorist offence. This is the type of law being used against Kneecap right now.

I am sure the Minister will agree that the members of the band, Kneecap, are not actually terrorists, whether we like or dislike their music or what they say. The real terrorist is actually Keir Starmer, who is funding a genocide and arming Israel, not Kneecap. What defines terrorism and who defines it? I would love to hear whether the Minister agrees that Israel is a terrorist state and the US and the EU are standing over that.

The Amnesty International report, *Under Protected and Over Restricted*, published last year examined repression in European countries. It made the point that across Europe "the right of peaceful assembly is coming under severe attack, as states increasingly stigmatise, criminalise and crack down on peaceful protesters, imposing unjustified and punitive restrictions, and resorting to ever more oppressive means to stifle dissent". We have seen that in Germany, in France and in every single country. Italy is talking about introducing a seven-year jail sentence for blocking a road on a protest. In all of the countries that Amnesty surveyed, police impunity was a key feature after having carried out repressive acts along with horrendous injuries to protesters and so on. It is a Continent-wide pattern of repressive laws. I see this Bill in that context. It is a systemic rollback on the right to protest. We have already seen that.

I will give a couple of examples. Right now, Britain is designating Palestine Action, a group that protests against the state terrorism of Israel and the genocide, as a terrorist organisation. I heard the mother of one young woman who is in jail and not even allowed out on bail, after taking part in a protest, because she is a member of that group. That is the kind of thing that is happening right now. There is an Irish branch of that group as well, called Palestine Action, that has carried out protests here. Will it also be designated under this legislation? Obviously, Mo Chara of Kneecap, and the charges he is facing, has been well-documented. It was a very worrying turn to see peaceful women, Mothers Against Genocide, outside the gates of Leinster House on a Sunday night-Monday morning, being carted off by An Garda Síochána. The

Minister has one interpretation of what happened, which he took at face value from the Garda Commissioner, despite the fact that there was no footage to back up what he said.

Either way, it was a completely unnecessary attack on those protestors. It is clear that this legislation is being brought in because the countries that are funding and whose arms companies are profiting from genocide want to ensure they are not protested against.

I also want to mention the Special Criminal Court because I know we will be asked to vote to maintain it next week.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I do not think the Deputy will. It passed yesterday without a vote.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Perhaps I could comment on the general maintenance of the Special Criminal Court and the idea of maintaining trials without juries. It is ironic that we talked last month about the counselling notes issue and the Minister said it would be unconstitutional because of the pressing right to a fair trial in our Constitution, yet we can have non-jury trials. How does he match that up? Rape victims can have their therapy notes, including their private thoughts, taken by the defence because of the right to a fair trial allegedly, yet we can maintain the Special Criminal Court. It does not stack up. I wanted to make that point. There is no need to maintain the Special Criminal Court. We now have technology and many other means of protecting juries should there be a need to do so. We do not have terrorism. The justification that there was for the Special Criminal Court in previous decades is long gone. It is completely undemocratic to maintain the court.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank all Members for their contributions, which I have listened to carefully. I may not be able to respond to each of the issues that was raised. I hope they are not offended if I do not specifically refer to the issues to which they referred. I am conscious that a couple of the issues raised, for instance by Deputies Kelly and Coppinger, do not relate to the Bill so I may not be able to deal with them. If I have time, I will.

The general opposition to the Bill I have introduced centres on the content of section 3, which concerns public provocation to commit a terrorist offence. A number of Deputies have referred to the fact that this is going to be grossly unfair and will interfere with freedom of expression and the right to protest. I dispute that. It is not the case. I will contrast the language in the British terrorism Act with what is contained here. The wording is completely different.

The first and most important point I want to make in respect of section 3, which deals with public provocation to commit a terrorist offence, is that someone does not even get within the parameters of that offence unless what he or she is doing is being done with the intention of inciting a person to commit terrorist activity. When we talk about "glorification" and actions "that could reasonably be construed as inciting", they only arise if the activity of the person who is being investigated or prosecuted is with the intention of inciting another person to commit terrorist activity. The type of activity we are talking about is in circumstances where people are trying to encourage impressionable younger people to incite them to commit a terrorist act. The argument that has been used repeatedly is that these measures are going to block protest and stop people expressing their legitimately held political opinions. Even if they

are political opinions that are supportive of terrorist activity, that is not going to be the case. You have to be inciting somebody to commit or with the intention of committing terrorist activity.

Deputies Paul Murphy and Coppinger may not have been here when I referred to the specific provisions of the legislation in the UK under which Kneecap is being prosecuted. Kneecap is being prosecuted under section 13 of the Terrorism Act 2000. I want to read out again the content of that provision because it is alarmingly wide. It is a provision that would not be enacted by this House. It states: "A person in a public place commits an offence if he ... wears, carries or displays an article in such a way or in such circumstances as to arouse reasonable suspicion that he is a member or supporter of a proscribed organisation".

Somebody who is a supporter of Hamas and who displays that support could be prosecuted in the UK. That would not happen here. The only circumstance in which someone can be prosecuted here is if the activity he or she has been involved in is with the intention of seeking to incite somebody to engage in terrorist activity. There is a full difference between the two Bills. The rights to protest and to freedom of expression are fully contained within our Constitution and the European convention. Those rights are not going to be impinged by this.

Deputy Ward gave a couple of examples. He said he likes to be able to sing rebel songs. He will still be able to do it.

Deputy Mark Ward: Badly.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Notwithstanding his ability as a singer, he is still going to be able to do it. People can sing songs about "The Boys of Barr na Sráide" and "The Men Behind the Wire". In loyalist parts of Belfast, they can sing whatever they want. They can do whatever activity they wish. The only time this legislation will be triggered is if it is being done with the intention to incite people to commit terrorist activity. What Kneecap is being prosecuted for in the UK would not happen here. Under this legislation, people would be entitled to say they support Hamas, although it has been involved in reprehensible behaviour. You can say what you want. The only time your message is going to come within the criminal law and face criminal sanction is if it is being done with the intention of inciting someone else to commit criminal terrorist activity.

We have seen this previously. Deputy Coppinger referred to the fact that this has only been done in recent times because of what is happening in the Middle East. In fairness to the Government, we are belatedly, not unusually, transposing into Irish law a directive from nearly ten years ago. We are transposing into Irish law the directive from 2017. The concern of colleagues that this will have a restrictive impact on protest or freedom of expression is not accurate. People will still be entitled to express support and praise for terrorist activities in the past. I am not suggesting anyone present would do so, but if somebody wanted to stand up and praise terrorist activities that took place in this country in the 1970s or 1980s, for example, the Dublin-Monaghan bombings or the Kingsmill massacre, if somebody wanted to say that he or she supports those acts of terrorism, he or she would be entitled to do so. The only time they will be caught by the criminal law, if this legislation is enacted, is if he or she is doing it with the intention of trying to incite others.

Regrettably, it is the case that terrorist activity takes place around Europe. We in Ireland have been pretty fortunate not to have examples of it in recent times. In other parts of the world, however, which we cannot ignore, terrorist activity takes place. Sometimes, I regret, it is perpetrated by people who have also had mental health issues. To respond to that, we need to recognise that there are people seeking to incite vulnerable, impressionable people to get involved in violent behaviour for their own political means.

Colleagues also mentioned broader issues about what is happening in the world at present. What is happening in Gaza is reprehensible. This legislation is not going to include an attempt to identify which pieces of terrorist activity we regard as good and which we regard as bad. "Terrorist activity" is defined under the 2005 Act. There is a Schedule that sets out the offences covered by "terrorist activity". It does not specify that the activity is carried out by certain political groups and not by others. It is objective in its operation.

A couple of my colleagues have asked if I will consider amendments; of course I will. I presume Deputies will table amendments. I note what Deputy Paul Murphy said about section 8. He was the only Deputy who referred to a section other than section 3 with which he had concerns. That section seeks to deal with the reality that many of the attacks being perpetrated at present by persons who are trying to exert political pressure on governments and states are cyberattacks. That is something we need to recognise and we should be entitled to respond to it.

4 o'clock

Deputy Kelly made a significant contribution about Evan Fitzgerald and I am concerned that if I do not say anything it will be perceived as if I do not have a response to give in this respect. All I want to say is that at present there are still two cases that are live and ongoing. I am conscious I am under the guidance of the Ceann Comhairle, and I am not going to be talking about any cases. In respect of the other two individuals prosecuted with the late Evan Fitzgerald, their cases are still live. One of them has pleaded guilty, while the other case will be back before the courts in July. It would be completely inappropriate of me to make any comments at this stage in respect of those cases because there will certainly have to be some form of a hearing in respect of sentencing for the former and there could be a full trial in respect of the latter. As the Minister for justice, I have certain powers that can be evoked if necessary. I am not going to do anything at this stage until those trials have come to a conclusion.

Since it is fresh in my mind, Deputy Coppinger mentioned the issue of the Special Criminal Court and how we can have non-jury courts. It is provided for in the Constitution. It says we can have special courts that can be put in place when the ordinary courts of justice are inadequate to deal with the administration of justice. That option does exist.

I thank all my colleagues for their contributions. I will take on board what they said. I conclude by stating that section 3 of this Bill is not seeking to restrict protest or undermine freedom of expression. It would not apply to Kneecap and its members could not be prosecuted in this country under this particular provision if this legislation were in place. This is because they clearly did not have the intention of seeking to incite other people to commit a terrorist act. It comes back to the fact that we really need to look at what is in the Bill as opposed to what we think is in it. I thank the Ceann Comhairle.

Question put.

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is deferred until the weekly division time next week.

Estimates for Public Services 2025: Message from Select Committee

An Ceann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Education and Youth has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimate for Public Services for the service of the year ending on 31 December 2025: Vote 26.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Ceann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 39 and the name of the Member in each case:

Deputy Mairéad Farrell - To discuss the spend on new helicopters by the Coast Guard.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss the need to expedite progress on the Killarney bypass.

Deputy John McGuinness - To discuss the N25 road project.

Deputy Brendan Smith - To discuss the need for Bus Éireann to lower the cost of travel on the Cavan-Dublin route.

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss safety in Dublin city centre.

Deputy Albert Dolan - To discuss the enrolment criteria for specific speech and language disorder special classes.

Deputy Mattie McGrath - To discuss the use of buildings, and closure of the swimming pool, at Ferryhouse, Clonmel.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern - To discuss teacher allocations and class mergers in St. Kevin's Boys National School and St. Kevin's Girls National School in Kilnamanagh, Tallaght, Dublin 24.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the level of preparedness for a major cyberattack on the State.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the limitations of the supplementary welfare allowance.

Deputy Pat Buckley - To discuss the flood relief programme for Rathcormac, Castlemartyr, Killeagh and Mogeely in County Cork.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly - To discuss the national childcare scheme for children with disabilities.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss implementation of the legislative timelines for assessing and reimbursing medicines applied for by pharmaceutical companies,

Deputy Barry Heneghan - To discuss the challenges facing schools in Dublin Bay North.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí - To discuss the reduction in teacher allocations to Belgrove Infant Girls School.

Deputies Dessie Ellis and Denise Mitchell - To discuss the continuing closure of the Kilmore community centre.

Deputy Erin McGreehan - To discuss the establishment of a surgical hub for the north east in the Louth county hospital in Dundalk.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - To discuss funding for cancer support groups in County Wicklow.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke - To discuss the need for traffic calming measures in Carlanstown, County Meath.

The matters raised by Deputies Michael Cahill, Brendan Smith, Dessie Ellis and Denise Mitchell, Gary Gannon and Naoise Ó Muirí have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Road Projects

Deputy Michael Cahill: The town of Killarney is choked with traffic almost daily. This is causing mass frustration for residents, local businesses and visitors alike. Members of the public are missing trains and buses, along with GP, dental and hospital appointments, and many others, because of the gridlock. Killarney in County Kerry is the capital of tourism in Ireland and is the main reason for visiting this country for many foreign travellers. Killarney has been catering for tourists since Victorian times and is renowned for its professionalism in the sector due to its long years of experience. This success that Killarney has at attracting visitors to the town has brought about a chronic traffic gridlock problem that must now be dealt with via a planned new road or bypass from Lissivigeen just outside Killarney and onwards to Farranfore. It is of the utmost importance that the Government continues to support the Killarney to Farranfore project financially, planning-wise, etc. A sum of €3 million has already been allocated this year by my colleague, the Minister for Transport, Deputy Darragh O'Brien.

Local residents in Killarney regularly miss trains and buses and doctor and dentist appointments. It could take six or seven minutes to walk from St. Mary's Cathedral in Killarney to the railway station, but 35 minutes or 40 minutes in traffic. Taxi drivers have told me that to get around the town is a nightmare daily. Delivering goods to retail outlets is also a nightmare. I have experience of spending well over an hour getting from Lissivigeen to Fossa, a distance of just a few miles. This is a priority for the Killarney Chamber of Tourism and Commerce and for all of us, including Kerry County Council. Killarney is a tourism flagship and attracts visitors in their hundreds of thousands, bringing much-needed foreign currency to these shores. The Government must support our tourism industry by forging ahead with the bypass from Killarney to Farranfore, or the Kerry-to-Cork economic corridor as the Taoiseach called it. Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, must provide the funding at the earlier possible date. As Fianna Fáil's spokesperson on tourism, this is also a priority for me. I have raised this

issue on several occasions in this House and I am pleading for this important infrastructure to be expedited.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney): I thank Deputy Cahill for raising this matter. The new programme for Government acknowledges "that good connectivity within the country ... is essential to foster continued economic growth, for communities, and our tourism industry". We have committed to investing in all road projects in the current national development plan, NDP, and to work on improving infrastructure to key tourism spots, making travel more convenient for visitors.

The Minister for Transport has responsibility for overall policy and Exchequer funding in relation to the national roads programme. Once funding arrangements have been put in place with TII, under the Roads Acts 1993-2015, and in line with the national development plan, the operation and management of individual national roads is a matter for TII in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. TII ultimately delivers the national roads programme in line with Project Ireland 2040, the national planning framework and the NDP. The Government has earmarked €5.1 billion for capital spending on new national roads projects from 2021 to 2030 as part of the NDP. This funding will enable improved regional accessibility across the country as well as compact growth, which are key national strategic outcomes. The funding will provide for the development of numerous national road projects, including the completion of projects already at construction stage and those close to it, as well as the development of several others. As the greater portion of this funding becomes available in the second half of the decade, this means there was a constraint on the funding available for new projects in 2025. However, approximately €502 million of Exchequer capital funds were provided for national roads through TII to local authorities in 2025. This includes approximately €1 million in funding for the development of the N22 Killarney to Farranfore project.

This project is currently at the route options selection stage. Kerry County Council presented the preferred transport solution for the N22 Farranfore to Killarney scheme to the general public as part of public consultation No. 2 held on 11 and 12 November 2024. The consultation period ran for four weeks and concluded on 6 December 2024. The options selection phase is complete, design works are ongoing and ground investigation works are expected to commence shortly.

The N22 Killarney to Farranfore project would deliver improvements to approximately 27 km of the N22, as well as a bypass of the village of Farranfore and an outer bypass of Killarney. It is important to point out the project remains part of the national development plan, and sufficient funding has enabled the route options phase of the project to be concluded with a preferred route selected. As with all national roads projects in the NDP, the delivery programme for the N22 Killarney to Farranfore project will be kept under review for 2025 and in future years and it will be considered in terms of the overall funding envelope available to TII.

Deputy Michael Cahill: Killarney is the best town in Ireland for a town of its size. It is also the best town in Europe for a town of its size.

Everyone goes to Killarney. I cannot emphasise strongly enough how important this project is. It is in the making for quite a number of years but it has come to the point where action is

required right now. It should be at the very top of the political priority list. It should be at the very top of Transport Infrastructure Ireland's priority list. I am again pleading for the funding to be made available and to expedite this hugely important piece of infrastructure.

It is Kerry County Council's top priority also. I mentioned the Chamber of Tourism and Commerce in Killarney. This is hugely important to the chamber. Its members see on a daily basis the effects of the chronic traffic jams and delays, etc. One cannot get around the town. I am repeating myself by calling it a nightmare because that is exactly what it is.

I plead with the Minister of State to take it up with Transport Infrastructure Ireland to make a case to the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien. I have already mentioned it to Deputy O'Brien on a number of occasions and, obviously, the Minister for Finance and the Minister for public expenditure. I will be hammering this issue again in here until such time as it is delivered.

Deputy Seán Canney: I have been to Killarney as well, like most people in Ireland, on a number of occasions and had good memories coming away from it.

The N22 project is included in the NDP, and has received a significant funding allocation for 2025. As I said, approximately €502 million of Exchequer capital funds was provided to TII for national roads this year. In line with the NDP and Government policy, TII sought to allocate national road funding to local authorities in a manner which seeks to achieve the following key outcomes: protection and renewal of the existing national road network; progressing major projects in or near construction; and progressing major projects which are pre-construction but well advanced in the development pipeline.

A number of new roads projects which are included in the current national development plan have already been delivered. The national development plan is the vehicle by which projects are delivered. This includes the N22 Ballyvourney-to-Macroon project, the Dunkettle interchange upgrade, the N5 Westport-to-Turlough road project, and bypasses of Moycullen and Listowel. The programme for Government commits to increased funding for new roads as part of the national development plan review and to the maintenance of existing roads. I met with TII today to discuss funding and projects into the future.

This project has commenced and I do not believe we would be spending money on a project if we were not going to deliver it. I hope that it will get through all of the processes it needs to get through in order for it to be delivered. I will be talking again to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, about it. He is fully aware of the importance of this project for Killarney.

An Ceann Comhairle: I say "Hello" to Deputy Sherlock up in the Gallery with a contingent. The Deputy has her hands full.

Departmental Funding

Deputy Denise Mitchell: St. Luke's Youth Club and community centre in Kilmore West has been closed since 2023. The centre was used by many groups within the community, from football clubs to ladies groups and summer projects. In 2023, I contacted Dublin City Council, DCC, regarding the closure of the building. I received an email - I have it here for the Minister of State - informing me that a report into the works that were needed would be completed by

the first week in January 2024. Rolling on, it is June 2025 and still no works have been completed there.

Expressions of interest were opened for groups who would like to use the premises. Two local groups came forward and expressed interest. It seemed like we were having movement on it and then, all of a sudden, it stalled again. We were told that the council was going to meet the groups but nothing happened. We have received no timeframe for when this work will be completed and in the meantime, we have young girls changing on the side of the road for football matches. Local summer projects had to find new premises. The Minister of State will agree that is simply not good enough.

Kilmore West has amazing volunteers who want to better their community. They give up their own hours - many hours - for the children in Kilmore West. This area is badly in need of amenities. We have seen our local swimming pool closed. We have seen Kilmore Celtic fighting for years for amenities. I want to give the Minister of State an indication of the situation. When I was on Dublin City Council in 2014, one of the main campaigns from the local councillors was for a playground. Fast forward 11 years, we only got our playground now. We cannot sit around for another 11 years waiting for this to be completed. What can the Minister of State do to make sure this is done as a matter of urgency?

Deputy Dessie Ellis: St. Luke's community centre was built decades ago. At the time, the community of Kilmore and surrounding areas fought tooth and nail to get this badly needed facility. For the best part of a year and a half, it has been closed by Dublin City Council. With little or no consultation with the community, the building was blocked up and closed and access refused. The building itself is in good condition except for a number of works to be carried out, which would cost in the region of €150,000.

There is no shortage of people looking to use this building. There is a huge increase in the population locally, with hundreds of new apartments and houses built and being built. Kilmore Celtic, a local football club across the road, has young girls and boys with no place to change, go to the toilet or even have a shower. It is a huge embarrassment and a terrible indictment that visiting football teams, especially young girls, have to change out in the open and cannot even go to the toilet or have a shower.

At a time when young children are going on holidays, summer projects and activities should be taking place in this community building. Senior citizens and community groups are crying out for facilities. People and those with disabilities have nowhere to go while attending football matches across the road from the centre - so much for disability-proofing our communities.

I have engaged with Dublin City Council personnel on a good number of occasions. I have repeatedly been told that we are moving ahead but there is still no movement. It is frustrating that excuse after excuse has been put in the way.

This is a vital community facility which we urgently need. There seems to be an unwillingness to move ahead with this project and that is part of the problem.

Deputy Seán Canney: First of all, I am shocked to hear that girls and boys have to change their clothes out in the open. It is fairly archaic and dangerous.

The Government recognises the important role that community centres play in community life in Ireland, particularly in bringing people together and engaging with those who may be marginalised or disadvantaged. Over the past four years, the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht has prioritised the development and enhancement of community centres across the country through a new dedicated funding stream for community centres.

The community centre investment fund, CCIF, was introduced to respond to the funding needs of community centres, in both rural and urban areas, so that we can support the provision of high-quality, accessible, community spaces. The CCIF has provided more than €109 million since 2022 for the enhancement and refurbishment of existing community centres and the construction of new centres. Under the first fund launched in 2022, over €45 million was committed for improvement and refurbishment works on over 860 existing community centres across Ireland. This includes 78 projects in County Dublin with funding of over €4.6 million. I have been informed by the Minister, Deputy Calleary, that the majority of these projects are now complete and benefiting communities all over Ireland.

The latest iteration of the CCIF, in 2024, also supported the enhancement and refurbishment of community centres. Through that round of funding, over €33 million has been approved for more than 770 projects nationwide. This includes funding of up to €100,000 each for category 2 projects that my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Calleary, announced for 369 community centres last March. Again, there were over 60 successful projects in County Dublin, with funding of €2.6 million approved.

The scheme has also supported community groups that are striving to build their own community centres. The 2023 CCIF was opened specifically for applications for new community centres. The 2023 new-build scheme supported communities with shovel-ready projects on greenfield or brownfield sites for the construction of new community centres. A capital grant of between €1 million and €6 million was available to build multi-functional centres in areas that lacked community facilities. Through that iteration of the fund, the Department of the Minister, Deputy Calleary, approved funding of €30 million for the construction of 12 new community centres in nine counties.

Regarding community facilities in Kilmore, I understand that local authority officials are exploring potential arrangements in existing facilities to support the community there. This approach would allow support for community activity in the short term while preserving resources for a more sustainable and integrated solution in the future.

While the Government's immediate priority is to facilitate the delivery of the 770 projects that have recently been announced, we are also committed to delivering further iterations of the scheme in the coming years. This is in line with the commitment in the programme for Government for this to become a permanent rolling fund. Over the coming months, further consideration will be given to what the next round of the CCIF will involve and the types of facilities that will be targeted. I am confident that the fund will continue to play a central role in supporting strong and resilient communities.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: With respect, Kilmore only got four lines in the reply. That is not on the Minister of State - he was given that to read. This was a specific question about a specific area where we feel we are going around in circles. We have been engaging with Dublin

City Council and officials. We are asking for support from the Minister of State's Department to get this over the line.

Councillors on the north central area committee were recently told that the issue would be looked at. What we are asking for is commitment. I thank the Minister of State for the reply but it did not have very much for the people of Kilmore. I ask the Department to please engage with Dublin City Council to finally get this sorted once and for all for the community of Kilmore West.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: It seems there was no application whatsoever made on behalf of the Kilmore community centre, which is so disappointing. No attempt was made to get funding. However, there is funding in Dublin City Council, as well as from the Oscar Traynor development which has a €7 million fund which could be used to the tune of €150,000 in this case. It seems as though Kilmore has not been given a second thought. It is my opinion that there has been resistance from the management in Dublin City Council about this. It is unacceptable for any community centre to be closed down for a year and a half. This is a community centre that was hard fought for and is badly needed in a community that is crying out for services. It is an absolute shame.

Deputy Seán Canney: I know Deputy Mitchell said I had two or three lines in relation to Kilmore. Deputy Ellis has hit the nail on the head. If an application comes in to a Department, it will be dealt with. Deputy Heneghan, who is present, has spoken to me about this before. The Department cannot provide funding until an application comes in. Two application processes have been gone through and there will be further application processes. My advice, and I come from a community background myself, is to get back to the local authority and tell it to get ready for the next call. That advice is not in the reply. I am giving it to the Deputies myself. That is the way I would do it. I was telling the Deputies all the money that has been given out by the Department for the two iterations of the scheme. There was also a scheme for new community centres. Dublin community centres benefited from that, as did hundreds of community centres right across the country. This is not the forum in which this should be tackled. The Department has provided funding. My experience from making applications with my own community is that if you make the application, it will be dealt with fairly.

I would go back to the Deputy's initial point about girls and boys toggling out to play football or whatever else out in the open. I used to do it when I was a young lad, which is not today nor yesterday, in the turlough in Belclare but nobody could see us doing it. I would tell the Deputies to go back and see where the local authority is at with it. That is where it needs to be interrogated first. I appreciate that the Deputies have raised it and that Deputy Heneghan has also raised it with me and others in the group too. Working together, hopefully we will get it over the line.

Public Transport

Deputy Brendan Smith: I appreciate the Ceann Comhairle giving me the opportunity to raise this important issue. I also appreciate that the Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Deputy Canney, is here to reply.

Bus commuters on the Cavan-Dublin route were absolutely shocked to learn on 16 June of a massive increase in fares from that date. A daily return ticket from Cavan to Dublin was increased from €18.50 to €27.30, an increase of almost 50%. I was not aware of the proposed increase and I know from regular commuters on that route who contacted me that they were also unaware.

Over recent years there has been a welcome increase in the frequency of bus services in both rural and urban areas which we all welcome. The policy of successive Governments has been to encourage people to use public transport where possible. That policy has been supported practically unanimously by the Oireachtas. To encourage people to switch to public transport there is a need for reasonably priced fares. The decision by the National Transport Authority in the case of the route I am discussing is not fair and it is not equitable. Those fares must be reviewed and reduced. Typically on a bus any morning there are people going to work, students going to college, people going to hospital appointments and people going about their ordinary business. As the Minister of State will be aware there is a commitment in the programme for Government to keep fares low and affordable. I think the people on that particular route would question how that policy is being implemented.

A young lady who travelled on the route five days a week contacted me and sent me an extract from the relevant website. The question posed on the website was, “What this means for commuters” and the answer was, “From June 16th, fares on commuter services provided by both Bus Éireann and Go-Ahead Ireland are to change with some decreasing, some increasing, and some largely unchanged.” There was no mention of Cavan fares and the massive increase proposed there. That young lady did some research and said it appears to be by far the highest fare increase in recent times.

I am asking the Minister of State to ask the National Transport Authority to review that determination as urgently as possible and to have the fare substantially reduced to the range of what it was until 16 June. As he will know, the three counties of Ulster in this State, namely, Donegal, Monaghan and Cavan, do not have a rail service. When we travel from Cavan to Dublin we pay two tolls on the way to the outskirts of Dublin city. There is a lot of congestion in the outer Dublin area and in the city. People want to use public transport but they want to have it at a reasonable price.

I sincerely request that the National Transport Authority be told to review this matter, reduce the fares and ensure that commuters from Cavan to Dublin and Dublin to Cavan are treated with respect and provided with a reasonable fare structure.

Deputy Seán Canney: The Deputy has spoken to me before about this issue. I really appreciate his bringing it to light.

From the outset, I would like to clarify that the Minister for Transport has responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. However, neither the Minister nor his officials are involved in the day-to-day operation of public transport services. The statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally rests with the National Transport Authority. The NTA works with the public transport operators, which deliver the services and have responsibility for day-to-day operational matters.

The NTA also has statutory responsibility for the regulation of fares charged to passengers in respect of public transport services provided under public service obligation, PSO, contracts.

In this context, the NTA published the national fares strategy in 2023. This aims to create a more equitable, consistent and easy-to-understand fare system based on distance travelled. In line with this strategy, the NTA published fare determinations in January 2024 covering the Dublin city zone, 25 km from the city centre, and the Dublin commuter zone, 50 km from the city centre. This determination is being implemented in two phases. The second phase of this determination was introduced on 28 April 2025 with new multimodal fare caps and revised commuter rail fares.

Phase 2b, pertaining to adjustments to commuter bus fares, commenced on 16 June 2025. I understand these are the fares to which the Deputy referred. This builds on the previous rail fare changes introduced in April. The new zones and fare structures, which have been widely publicised, aim to deliver more consistent and equitable fares and reduce disparities, particularly in the outer commuter towns surrounding Dublin. These are distance-based fares.

The existing fare structures were not always equitable, consistent or easy for passengers to understand, and the new distance-based approach aims to address this by providing a fairer and clearer fare system. In Cavan, fares have seen an increase in the single adult category from €9.45 to €11.40. It is important to note that these fare changes will see increases for some passengers and decreases for others in order to allow for a more equitable fares structure, and it is the NTA's intention to roll out further changes in future determinations during 2025.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I thank the Minister of State for the reply. The figure I have been given, and the fare I know people are paying, is the return fare, which increased from €18.50 to €27.30. That is a somewhat different percentage increase than that for the single fare he cited. He quite correctly said the intention is to have a fair charging system. That is not applicable in the case of the Cavan route I referenced in my introductory remarks.

One issue I have been raising since before the Minister of State was appointed, during the term of office of the former Minister, Eamon Ryan, was the need to introduce a direct Cavan to Dublin service, leaving Cavan in the morning at peak times, 5 a.m. or 6 a.m., stopping in only Virginia and Whitegate on the Cavan-Meath border and then going directly to Busáras. At the moment, most services go through Kells and other Meath towns, which means it takes those wishing to travel from Cavan to Dublin longer.

In the evening time, when people are returning to Cavan, if they leave at around 3 o'clock in the afternoon, when the bus for Cavan reaches Blanchardstown or Phibsborough, it is sometimes full. Many passengers on the bus are passengers going to Meath towns, where there is a welcome frequency of buses to Navan and Kells. Local employees in Bus Éireann are as anxious as commuters and I am to see direct routes leaving Busáras at peak evening times, between 3.30 p.m. and 5.30 p.m., that would stop only at Whitegate on the Cavan-Meath border, Virginia and Cavan town.

As I said, early morning buses from Cavan should leave Cavan, stop at Virginia and Whitegate and then travel directly to Busáras. That would considerably enhance the standard of service for commuters and people travelling every day. I know it is very difficult for Bus Éireann employees to see patients leaving James Connolly Hospital in Blanchardstown having

to wait hours to get on a bus. That is not acceptable. I hope the Minister of State can raise the issue with the Minister.

Deputy Seán Canney: I assure the Deputy the Government is strongly committed to providing all citizens with reliable and realistic sustainable mobility options and public transport plays a key role in the delivery of this goal. To support this objective, in budget 2025 the Department of Transport secured €658 million in funding, an increase from €613 million for 2024.

This funding supports the continuation of the 20% fare reduction in PSO services, the young adult card for PSO and commercial bus services and the 90-minute rail fare until the end of 2025. The Deputy referenced a return fare increase from €18.50 to €27.30. I will check that. It seems like a large increase.

I will examine peak-time morning and evening schedules. People travel from Dublin and board at different stops, and services have to let people off. It is about the experience we want to give passengers if we hope to get more and more people to use public transport. I will, however, bring these matters back to the Minister.

The Department's investment of €658 million in the PSO and Local Link services in 2025 demonstrates our commitment to a sustainable, equitable and accessible public transport network for all. It is also a sign of the times that we are now very exercised about public transport quality because more and more people are demanding it. That is a success in itself. We need to make sure people get a good experience every time.

I again thank the Deputy. I will speak to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, about the issues he has raised.

Crime Prevention

Deputy Gary Gannon: In six years of having been here and having been a regular contributor to Topical Issue debates, this is the first time I have had a senior Minister here to respond. While I will often disagree with the Minister and we will often clash, I do not doubt for a second his dedication to the issues he is in charge of.

There has unquestionably been an increase in the Garda presence in the commercial city centre of Dublin over the past six months. The Minister and his Department should be commended on that. Many retailers can see the benefits of the increased Garda presence. One consequence of that is the displacement of some of the issues in the commercial city centre, which have now been pushed into the more residential parts of the inner city. We have seen an increase in open drug dealing, the intimidation that goes alongside that and antisocial behaviour. For 30 or 40 years we have heard about the containment of problems. Tony Gregory, long before I was ever in the House, used that phrase to describe parts of the city where there were issues that were tolerated in a way they would not otherwise be.

I will highlight some of the emails sent to me and issues raised with me this week. Today, I received an email from a resident in the Russell Street area, alongside Croke Park. It is 150 m from Fitzgibbon Street Garda station. The person concerned referred to an increase in burglaries in the area. The Russell Street Bakery, a lovely bakery that has been frequented by

new people living in the community, was burgled this week. The understanding is that although there is a Garda station beside the bakery, it is rarely policed or manned, and people who are up to no good have cottoned on to that fact.

The Minister might not know North Frederick Street Court, an apartment complex behind the Gate Theatre and Chapter One Restaurant. Those businesses have said they are overwhelmed by the displacement of people who have been pushed out of the commercial city centre and into laneways. People should always be tolerated, but there is open drug dealing, and the violence associated with that, in North Frederick Street Court.

Mountjoy Square, which for me could become the jewel in the crown of the north side, is experiencing a significant level of violence and gang-related crime. Council workers have spoken about being fearful of going into Mountjoy Square because they regularly find knives stashed in the shrubbery. Open drug dealing also seems to be happening along the canal and people are fearful of walking in the area at night due to the use of electric scooters to transport drugs. The area is seen as an artery for transporting drugs.

I regularly speak about the north inner city. I love the area and it is part of who I am. The issues the area is experiencing are generational and a product of the location in which the community is placed.

The improved policing in the commercial city centre is really welcome, but some of the displacement factors stemming from this seem to mean that some of the issues that were there are now being tolerated in more residential parts. Is this the Minister's shared understanding? Perhaps we can speak afterwards about what we might do about it.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank Deputy Gannon for raising this issue. When there is a Topical Issue that is relevant to my Department, I will hope to be here. If I am available and not off elsewhere out of Dublin, I will be here for them. I thank Deputy Gannon for raising these issues, which are also of concern to me, not only as Minister for justice but as a TD for Dublin Bay South, which is just over the Liffey from the area he represents.

Deputy Gannon is correct; there is increased Garda visibility in the city centre. As he did, I commend the Garda on it. It has been a good development. I encouraged it and I am glad it appears to be getting public recognition. Much of the time people really want to see gardaí on the streets. It gives them a sense of safety and security. As we have said previously, it is a good reflection on the police force in the country that people want to see them around as much as possible.

To give Deputy Gannon some of the statistics, as of April 2025 there were 3,824 gardaí working in Dublin. Of these, 1,413 were assigned to Dublin metropolitan north central and south central. Effectively, the inner city has 1,413 gardaí. The reason for the increased visibility of gardaí in the city at present is not so much that gardaí are being moved out of other residential areas into the city centre. To a large extent, it is a policy decision made by the Commissioner. Great credit goes to the assistant commissioner Paul Cleary because recently 101 gardaí from Templemore were assigned to the city centre north-central and south-central regions. This has had an impact on policing.

I do not believe it is the case, although I will check with the Commissioner, that what has happened is that gardaí have been moved from outer parts of the city to inner parts. I do not think this has happened. In fairness, what Deputy Gannon appears to be saying is that some of the problems and criminality that were ongoing in the inner city have moved out a bit because of the increased policing in the inner city.

Deputy Gannon mentioned a number of areas. I am concerned to hear about the burglary of the bakery in Russell Street. I am aware of Russell Street, an historic street where Brendan Behan was born. The fact there is a Garda station beside a business does not mean it is immune to burglary or criminal attack. In many respects, I want to see gardaí out of Garda stations and on the streets. Certainly any increase in burglary is an issue of concern because it can spiral. Sometimes when the gardaí apprehend people, the number of burglaries reduces because one or two individuals can have a significant impact on burglaries in an area.

Deputy Gannon mentioned Frederick Court in North Frederick Street and drug dealing going on in the laneways there. That certainly used to happen in my constituency, beside Deputy Gannon's constituency, in the laneways off Aston Quay. I hope that the Garda will get up to the laneways off North Frederick Street and I will bring it to its attention.

Earlier today I was down at the Merchants Quay centre. I know Deputy Gannon will be interested to hear this. The project there does excellent work. Every time I get involved with people who have drug addiction, I see the sadness of drug addiction and the terrible impact it has on people's lives. Merchants Quay is doing very good projects. For the past six months, there has been the injection facility downstairs and it is working well. I know it can give rise to contentious views. Looking at it from the point of view of the city, however, it is having an impact in reducing the number of people who have to take drugs in a public setting. They can now do it in a private setting.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I think the Minister misunderstood what I was implying when I spoke about the increased presence of gardaí in the city centre. I was not suggesting for a second that gardaí were being taken from various Garda stations and being brought into the city centre. What I was suggesting was that perhaps there is a policy of containment of problems in residential areas such that they are not coming into commercial areas. That is the feedback I get from residents.

There was an initiative in the north inner city ten or 12 years ago called the small area policing initiative. Gardaí had the responsibility to knock on people's doors and introduce themselves. They were tasked with knocking on every door in the area to introduce themselves and explain that they were the local gardaí. It worked phenomenally well. It created a presence whereby people knew their gardaí and got the sense that the gardaí were there for them. In the decades since, that has been stripped away for a variety of reasons, which I do not want to get into now. When we lost that, we lost our sense of gardaí in the community, tackling issues and building relationships there. We do not have this any more. The prioritisation seems to be angled towards what I refer to as the commercial city centre. I understand why this is. Two years ago, I was here speaking about the issues in that area. We need to get both right at the same time.

Even though we are saying there has been an increased Garda presence in the city centre, I do not know whether the Minister has ever walked along O'Connell Street or gone over O'Connell Bridge at 9 p.m. or 10 p.m.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I have.

Deputy Gary Gannon: It is not something that could be described as safe, even with the increased Garda presence. Next week after the voting block, I will walk across with the Minister. I walk through there every night.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I was there last Thursday.

Deputy Gary Gannon: We can have a look. It is clearly not meeting the standard required, although there have clearly been improvements. I believe we need a different form of policing in commercial areas from that in residential areas. It requires a different strategy and a different approach, not quite a municipal police force but something similar. Residential policing and the policing of more commercial areas are different. We need community gardaí in our communities knocking on doors and introducing themselves, and we need gardaí on the streets and in commercial areas to have a different role.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The gardaí in the inner city are not just there for the commercial sector. In my constituency, and I am sure Deputy Gannon's is the same, there are many residential areas in the inner city. In my constituency there is Glovers Court, which is right beside Aungier Street, as well as York Street and Mercer House. People want to see gardaí in the area. One of the good things about Dublin, unlike capital cities like London, is that we still have communities living in the city centre. It is good that Dublin City Council still has large units for accommodation in the city centre. The fact there are more gardaí in the city centre is not directed at trying to make the city centre a place for the commercial sector. It is trying to make it safe for everyone, including people who come to visit, people who work there and, very importantly, people who live there.

On the point the Deputy made about relationships with the gardaí, a good community garda is like a good politician, in that people in the area know them. This is something I want to see continue. It does happen in areas, although perhaps it is more difficult in cities the size of Dublin, but it is very important that we have community gardaí in the city centre. I hear what Deputy Gannon said about the small area policing initiative. It sounds like a very good thing. I assure him that in certain parts of the city, gardaí are known to the local communities.

Much of this issue comes back to the fact that we need more gardaí. If we have more gardaí, there is much more we will be able to achieve. I am trying to recruit, and we have the funding to recruit 1,000 gardaí each year. I will not give up on that. It really is a requirement. If we have more gardaí available, we will have more gardaí on the streets of Dublin and in other cities. I am conscious that when people hear about increased policing in Dublin, they ask about Wexford, Galway or Cork.

Deputy Gary Gannon: They can raise their own Topical Issues.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: We need to ensure there are as many gardaí as possible so they are around the country and on the streets.

School Staff

An Ceann Comhairle: This Topical Issue is shared by Deputies Ó Muirí and Heneghan.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: This issue comes down to teacher allocation numbers. It is a matter of great concern to parents that Belgrove infant girls' school, which had an intake of 216 in the 2023-24 school year and qualified for nine teachers, is now down to eight teachers based on the 2024-25 intake. The projected number for September is 219, which is above the number at which it qualified for nine teachers previously. This looks like a temporary aberration and the key is to look at a temporary resource allocation so the school can get over this little hump. There is a similar issue in Howth primary school, in the constituency I share with Deputy Heneghan. A class there will go from a pupil-teacher ratio of 18:1 to 35:1 on account of the loss of a teacher, which is also of great concern to parents.

I will share the rest of my time with Deputy Heneghan.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I will reiterate what Deputy Ó Muirí said. Belgrove infant girls' school, located beside the school I went to as a young boy, is being forced to merge two classes together. Hundreds of parents and children who are really stressed by this have approached me as I walk the streets of my local community. I do not understand how the fact that the school's current enrolment numbers for next year are above the threshold but the Department cannot give a temporary solution to this. The school will exceed the numbers. I understand that the rules are set that it has to be on 30 September, but can a temporary solution be given to this school?

I also reiterate what Deputy Ó Muirí said about the Howth primary school, Scoil Mhuire. The two second classes are being merged into a single class of 35 students. This is not a choice; it is the result of the regulation I just mentioned. The Department of education is only looking at the overall numbers within the school, but this can translate into having huge classes or splitting the class levels, which is not ideal for the learning of our up-and-coming generation. I urge the Minister of State and every Member to put as much pressure on this to get a solution. The parents would be really appreciative. The Minister of State would be too if his child were being forced into a school classroom that would affect his or her learning. I hope we can get a solution to this. I thank Deputy Ó Muirí and all the Deputies who have worked hard to try to get a solution to this.

Deputy Seán Canney: I thank Deputies Ó Muirí and Heneghan for raising this important issue regarding the staffing of primary schools, particularly the teacher allocation to Belgrove infant girls' school and Scoil Mhuire in Howth.

The key factor for determining the level of staffing resources provided at individual school level is the staffing schedule for the relevant school year and pupil enrolments on the previous 30 September. The primary staffing arrangements for the 2025-26 school year are set out in Circular 11/25. The staffing schedule operates in a clear and transparent manner and treats all

similar types of schools equally, irrespective of location. It is an important feature of the staffing schedule that all schools are treated equally and fairly.

Under the programme for Government, there is a commitment to aim to reduce the general pupil-teacher ratio at primary level to 19:1 over the term of the Government and introduce targeted measures in schools with very large classes. This will build on the progress made by previous Governments. The general average of pupils to teachers in the primary staffing schedule improved from 26:1 five years ago to 23:1 for the current school year, the lowest ever ratio at primary level. Teacher allocations for DEIS urban band 1 schools have also been improved and now stand at averages of 17:1, 21:1 and 19:1 for junior, senior and vertical schools, respectively. In addition, there has been a three-point reduction in the retention schedule, which has helped schools that would otherwise be at risk of losing teaching posts. Average class sizes in primary schools have improved from 24.1 to 22.5 in that time, while the ratio of pupils to teachers has improved from 15:1 to 12.8:1 with the investment we are making in schools.

The two schools referred to by the Deputies, Belgrove and the school in Howth, are to have a reduction in teaching posts for the 2025-26 school year due to a fall in enrolments. The staffing arrangements include an appeals mechanism for schools to submit a staffing appeal under certain published criteria. The staffing appeals criteria, which are set out in Circular 11/25, include specific appeals for small schools, enrolments in the previous October, projected enrolments, accommodation difficulties, infant class sizes and language support. Belgrove infants girls' school submitted a staffing appeal to the March meeting of the primary staffing appeals board under the projected enrolments criteria. Having considered the staffing appeal from the girls' school, the primary staffing appeals board determined that the grounds of the appeal did not meet the requirements set out in the circular. The primary staffing appeals board operates independently of the Department and its decision is final.

Class sizes in schools are affected by a variety of factors, including enrolment fluctuations and the accommodation available. Schools are best placed to determine the appropriate numbers in any class. The configuration of classes and the deployment of classroom teachers are therefore done at local school level. The Department's guidance to schools is that the number of pupils in any class should be kept as low as possible, taking all relevant contextual factors into account. School authorities should also, where possible, use their autonomy under the staffing schedule to implement smaller class sizes for junior cycles.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I appreciate his acknowledgement that Belgrove has been through an appeals process. I understand it is an independent process. I welcome the statistics on the improvement of class sizes in primary schools. In this instance, however, Belgrove will go backwards for a period because of this aberration in teacher numbers. I think it is a unique case because the school's numbers are clearly going up again this year. They are actually already up but, with the way the system works, the calculation is behind. I encourage the Department to see whether we can find some temporary solution, such as some sort of allocation. The school stands ready to help. As Deputy Heneghan said, the parents are willing, ready and able to help to see whether we can find a solution to this. I appreciate that Scoil Mhuire, the Howth national school, was not raised at the time of the submission of the Topical Issue, but it is probably in a similar situation. Hopefully we can find a solution.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I reiterate what Deputy Ó Muirí said. We need to get a temporary solution for this. There was clearly an error with the appeals. Is there any way to find an alternative solution for these parents and the children who will be put into a class size such as this? It will affect their learning and their experience. These are young girls who are already under enough stress. There has to be something here. Can an exemption be made for the school? Can a different funding source be used to keep this teacher on board? Both schools are under real stress. All the parents would like some update from the Department. I understand the Minister of State's reference to the programme for Government and the ratio we are looking at, but this school will go backwards on that. It will not reach that ratio or anywhere near it, and the kids' learning will be affected by this.

Deputy Seán Canney: The Minister for Education and Youth is considering how best to make further progress as part of the annual budgetary process in reducing the primary pupil-teacher ratio in the context of the programme for Government. With regard to the appeal for Belgrove, the primary staffing appeals board operates independently of the Department and its decision is final. I do not know if there is an appeals process to that independent board, because it meets some of the criteria, such as projected school numbers for next year. I do not know if there is a mechanism to go back there.

I will ask the Department to correspond with both Deputies in that regard to see if there is a mechanism within the independent process to appeal the appeal. It is hard on the parents, the children and the board of management to try to work through this. It deflates the buzz that should be in schools when they lose a teacher and staff member. I thank both Deputies for bringing up this important issue and will see whether an appeal of the appeal can be made.

Transparency and Social Value in Public Procurement Bill 2024: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

This Bill comes at a timely moment, as I am sure the Minister of State will agree, when her Department has launched a review of the public procurement system. I hope this review will be constructive, that it is not just a box-ticking exercise and that we look at the nuts and bolts of this issue. How the Government deals with this Bill and the review will be really important.

5 o'clock

I have worked with a number of Ministers, depending on the Department in question. When I introduce legislation, I have always told them that I am open to working with them. I do not just complain about the issues I see. Rather, I bring forward solutions. I have introduced numerous Bills during my time in the Dáil, some of which have been accepted and others that have not. I am here to work with the Government on these issues. I hope it is willing to work with me. There can be a reflexive attitude whereby the Government is unwilling to agree to things that come from this side of the House solely on the basis that they come from this side of the House. I hope that will not be the case with this Bill. What I have always said is that if the legislation is good, then it is good legislation no matter who introduces it and we should work with it.

We are talking about the Transparency and Social Value in Public Procurement Bill 2024. The Minister of State and I discussed procurement yesterday at the finance committee. The Minister of State acknowledged that there were serious deficiencies when it came to data collection on the spending on public procurement. People would be shocked if they realised that we spent €22 billion per year on public procurement and that the State was the biggest spender in the State. We have a responsibility when it comes to how that money is spent, not only in ensuring we spend it wisely, correctly and within budget, but in how it impacts on all of society. We know there is a money multiplier effect. When money is spent within a local economy, it can have an impact on that local economy. We always need to make sure we have that in the back of our minds when we talk about this.

We do not have timely data on the number of contracts that ran over cost last year versus the number of contracts that came in on cost. We do not have the total level of cost overruns in big contracts. We have no idea how many of the contracts that concluded last year came in on time versus how many came in behind schedule. We have no idea what the most popular type of procurement procedure was last year, such as how many contracts were awarded directly versus how many went to competitive tender. How many SMEs won contracts? We do not have this information to hand. How many contained social clauses to promote some social labour or environmental objectives? We do not have the data on that.

In the previous Dáil term, I contacted a range of local authorities and State bodies asking them about their use of social clauses in public contracts. A huge amount of them did not know what I was talking about. Some responded to my survey saying they adhered to the minimum wage. That is the law; it is not a social clause. That just shows how much we are operating in a system where we do not know what is going on. We are operating within a black box system when it comes to public procurement. The situation currently is one of “No data, no problem”.

My Bill is not going to revolutionise the procurement system. It would, however, provide a reformist Minister with an important tool of oversight with which significant reforms could be made. The *laissez-faire* attitude when it comes to public procurement in this State is hopelessly outdated. I drafted the Bill in such a way that a money message should not come into the equation. The information the Bill would like to see as part of the report is already largely being collected by the individual contracting authorities. It is just not being collected centrally in a timely fashion. It is not published, presented or analysed in a strategic way. We are talking about €22 billion. We should be able to know what is happening with that money.

There is an analogue approach to public spending in a digital age. While I hear great things from this Government about AI, the digital transformation and so forth, when it comes to a public spend of €22 billion per year, the most up-to-date report we have is from 2019. That was six years ago. I had not even been elected to this House at that stage. It seems nothing has changed since. If the director of a major company asked the chief financial officer, CFO, for information on the number of contracts awarded directly last years versus the number that went to competitive tender and the CFO was unable to tell the director that information and only had data from six years ago, that CFO would not be long in the job. I am not equating the public and private sectors to the same extent. I am just making the point that we do not have that data to be analysed.

I understand that the review of the procurement system was probably put in train some time ago, perhaps before Deputy Higgins was a Minister of State, but she is the Minister of State

with responsibility for this area now. I hope she is serious about the reform that needs to happen and that we can work together on this Bill. Not only is it timely legislation, but we have a duty in this regard, given our positions in this House. The Bill is not a party political one. It is a Bill that tries to get a certain amount of work done. I do not know anyone opposed to the concept of having more data on a €22 billion spend, considering the lack of any kind of concept of what exactly is going on.

This Bill is compliant with EU directives, so there is no issue there. It follows on from some of the recommendations of the European Commission about using our public procurement system to promote industrial policy purposes. What those purposes are will depend on the Government of the day, but I cannot imagine the Minister of State would disagree that it is better to have such tools at her disposal than to not have them.

This Bill would not even involve the Minister of State with responsibility for the Office of Government Procurement, OGP. As the Minister of State rightly mentioned yesterday, the OGP is not a regulatory body. The Bill would involve the Minister using his or her powers to have this report compiled. The Bill also sets limits so that contracts of a small value would not be included. Therefore, it is not creating some unnecessary administrative burden on contracting authorities. If the Government is serious about tackling wasteful public spending and the prudent management of the public finances, it should support this Bill. If the Government is only interested in staying on the old "lessons will be learned" merry-go-round, then it will not support this Bill. In issuing external value for money reports and going about business as usual, I am sure some excuses will be found to oppose it.

When I first got elected to the Dáil, I became my party's spokesperson for public expenditure. The first thing I wanted to do was look at the issue of procurement. I met the OGP and looked into the issue. The first thing that shocked me was that we did not have the information. In the context of better public spending and everything else, this Bill makes sense. It also means that State bodies would have a lot more information as to what worked and did not work. We can always learn from one another. At the moment, we are relying on freedom of information requests or an investigative journalist to uncover large cost overruns or wasteful spending of public money. As the Minister of State with responsibility for this area, I imagine she does not want to be answering questions about issues she was not aware of due to a lack of data and that she only ever became aware of because someone got a tip-off or found out the information some other way.

It comes down to how we look at the money we spend for the public and economic good of our citizens across this State. Looking at different parts of this State, I think of areas like Donegal that are infrastructurally far more difficult to get to than others. Conamara is another example of an area with bad infrastructure leading out to it. We are trying to get private capital into these areas to get businesses started in order that there be more and better job opportunities for people. If we are the biggest spender in this State, then we need to look at how we spend that money to employ people and get people on apprenticeships. For example, when I was on Galway City Council, we put forward and passed a social clause in terms of labour activation to include the apprenticeship model. That means for some young fella or girl who has decided that he or she wishes to do an apprenticeship, there is a big capital project. The Government is saying it is big into the infrastructural aspect and wants to invest in that space. No matter who

is awarded the contract, a big capital project just up the road from that young person would give him or her that opportunity because of the labour activation element.

This would ensure that there are not only the jobs but the apprenticeships. I do not need to labour the point because the benefits of this are quite clear. I do not think there is any reason not to support this Bill. I will listen to what the Minister of State has to say and I will see what comes out of that. Sometimes, we need look at how things can be done differently and more simply and not just think that this is the way we have always done it and not change it.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform (Deputy Emer Higgins): I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after “That” and substitute the following:

“Dáil Éireann resolves that the Transparency and Social Value in Public Procurement (Bill 2024) be read a second time this day 24 months, to allow for consideration of the complex legal issues in the Bill and how they interact with the Companies Act 2014 and the EU’s eForms (electronic procurement notices) Implementing Regulation; and also to allow for the European Commission to have completed its revision of the Public Procurement Directives, which the Commission have timetabled to commence in early 2026; and for such considerations to be taken into account in further scrutiny of the Bill”.

As the Minister for State with responsibility for public procurement, digitalisation and e-government, I thank Deputy Farrell for giving us the opportunity to discuss public procurement on the floor of the Dáil Chamber. I have tabled a timed amendment to the Deputy’s Private Members’ Bill, primarily for the following three reasons. First, because a review of public procurement directives is happening at an EU level and it is imperative that our national legislation is in compliance with EU directives, and indeed with our own legislation such as the Companies Act 2014.

Second, because, as the Deputy mentioned, we are in the middle of drafting our first ever national public procurement strategy and I firmly believe that any new national legislation needs to be drafted in the context of the feedback we have got from our public consultation. I thank the Deputy for her submission to that consultation. Third, because - and I hope this is good news - a lot of what is asked for in this Bill is actually already happening through eForms and I will speak a little bit about that shortly.

In addition, there are some legal concerns with the language in the Bill, in particular with definitions and I can elaborate on those. That is why I am asking that my officials be given two years to work at EU level to review and update legislation at a national level to transpose directives into Irish law and to finalise and implement our first ever national public procurement strategy to shape the future of public procurement in Ireland.

As Members know, public procurement is a fundamental, crucial component of democratic governance, of economic well-being and of sustainable development. From building roads and power stations to purchasing pharmaceuticals and securing waste-collection services, efficient use of public resources contributes to better delivery of services. Public procurement also serves as a significant policy instrument, which Governments can use, as the Deputy said, to propel changes in public service delivery, to create jobs, and stimulate private sector growth in a balanced way.

A well-performing public procurement system increases citizens' confidence in Government and private sector competitiveness, especially by levelling the playing field for small- and medium-sized businesses, including micro-enterprises, start-ups and social enterprises. I thank Deputy Farrell for her work in this space, which I know has been based on a shared desire to achieve better outcomes when it comes to procurement.

The 24-month deferral is necessary to allow for consideration of the complex legal issues in the Bill and to allow time for the European Commission to have completed its revision of the public procurement directives. The previous revision of the 2004 directives commenced in 2012 and was not completed until 2014. We do not know how long it may take for the European Commission to look at its revisions but it looks quite likely that Ireland may well - as I said in the committee yesterday - hold the pen on this, as this may happen while Ireland has the Presidency in the second half of next year. Once the directives have been made, time would then be needed to be allowed for the Office of the Attorney General to review the legal text for transposition into EU law. Hence, a timeframe of at least 24 months for the deferral is required for the legislative process, for when the EU directives become national law.

In relation to the data elements of the Bill, Ireland has implemented EU regulations on eForms, which are electronic public procurement notices. They already capture much of the information the Bill is seeking to introduce. I will focus now on three key areas in making the case to the House for the deferral of the Second Reading for 24 months. The Bill has the potential to contravene EU law and second, there are concerns over amendments to the Companies Act 2014. This Bill would pre-empt the new public procurement strategy and would duplicate current regulations on data capture.

Regarding the potential impact of the Bill when it comes to law, the Bill's scope is related to that part of public expenditure which is covered by the EU procurement rules, deriving from Directive 2014/24/EU. However, that directive covers the procedures to be followed in relation to the award of a public contract and not the terms or the performance of the contract itself. The Bill therefore is erroneous in seeking to extend a legal application to give further effect to the terms of that directive into aspects outside of and beyond the provisions of those directives. There is no corresponding reference in the title of the Bill to the statutory instrument which transposed provisions of the EU directive into Irish law. These regulations are SI 284/2016, that is, the European Union (Award of Public Authority Contracts) Regulations 2016, which I will hereafter call the 2016 regulations.

It should also be noted that in October 2017, Ireland signed up to the Tallinn declaration on e-government. A key aim of this declaration is to create a more efficient digital public administration across Europe. This marks a new political commitment at EU level on significant priorities towards ensuring high-quality, user-centric digital public services for citizens and seamless cross-border public services for businesses. The "once-only principle" provided for in this declaration sets out that citizens and businesses should only have to provide information to public administrations once, with data being reused across different services. The provisions of this Bill in respect of data gathering and reporting might not align with this "once-only principle".

As mentioned, the Bill pre-empts the European Commission's revision of Directive 2014/24/EU. The Commission has commenced the evaluation phase of the revision process, which has been ongoing for several months, and the Commission is focusing on competition,

cost benefit, internal and external coherence of the legal framework governing procurement, relevance and EU added value, as well as transparency and integrity.

The evaluation will be followed by a regulatory impact assessment of the proposed legal text. Following the impact assessment, the Commission intends to publish the draft legislative proposal in early 2026 and has indicated it wants the legal process completed by end of 2026 or early in 2027, which may fall under Ireland's Presidency. At present, it is difficult to see how this ambitious timeline will be met, and the revision of the legal framework will extend beyond these current parameters. Work is already under way by the EU Commission that will impact on reporting requirements, eForms and the public procurement data project and it may also introduce conflicts with the current EU legislative framework. It is imperative that any domestic legislative proposals do not conflict with the current or future EU binding legal requirements on reporting in public procurement. Further consideration of such legal issues is required. Therefore, Deputy Farrell's Bill would seem premature to this ongoing process. There is the potential that by the time the Bill is enacted, it may contravene the new EU directives.

It also has the potential to add to the complexity of the public procurement regime, which is against the trajectory of the European Commission and its intended reform of the public procurement regime in response to concerns on falling competitiveness in the public market, a deregulatory environment in Brussels and a desire to match public expenditure through procurement to the strategic needs of the EU.

I welcome the continued focus on simplification of EU regulations to boost EU competitiveness and to provide legal certainty to businesses. It is important that the implementation of EU regulations becomes more effective, striking the right balance between sufficient regulations to protect consumers and EU citizens while allowing our firms to innovate. The Bill has far-reaching effects beyond procurement, as it seeks to amend the Companies Act 2014. Section 8 of the Bill seeks to create an entirely new framework whereby the Registrar of Companies will be given a new, as yet unclear role in relation to public contracts and disqualified persons. This will require the sharing of information on all public contracts within the scope of the legislation and introduces new requirements whereby the Courts Service, the Registrar of Beneficial Ownership of Trusts and the Examiner of the High Court will be obliged to report to the registrar of companies.

The registrar of companies has extensive functions under the Companies Act 2014 in relation to the incorporation of companies; the registration of a range of post-incorporation documentation throughout the company lifecycle; the enforcement of the Companies Act 2014 filing obligations of companies and the making available of company-related information to the public.

All of the information filed with the Companies Registration Office is company specific and filed individually in respect of each company. As the fundamental role of the Companies Registration Office is the maintenance of a central repository of statutory information, as required by the Companies Act, it is not considered appropriate or desirable that the registrar have any function in relation to public contracts. There are in excess of 320,000 companies on the Register of Companies and it is considered likely that the majority are not engaging in public procurement with the State. Accordingly, only a small cohort of those on the register are likely to come within the scope of the Bill.

Section 8 also provides for the provision of prescribed information from the registrar of beneficial ownership of trusts. This information is held by the Revenue Commissioners and a matter for the Department of Finance but it should be noted that what is being proposed appears to involve a duplication of effort in that such information would also be maintained by the registrar of companies. Furthermore, there are limitations on access to trust information held by the Revenue Commissioners and restrictions would also apply if such information was to be provided to the registrar of companies.

The section also provides for the provision of information by an examiner of the High Court in relation to public contracts involving a person who is an undischarged bankrupt. It should be noted that section 132 of the Companies Act prohibits an undischarged bankrupt from being a director, a secretary or otherwise involved in a company unless he or she has the leave of the court.

This highly complex framework will need careful consideration and extensive consultation with the Companies Registration Office, the Department of justice and the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment in order to understand the impact and extent of the proposal. Further consequential legislative change may be required. The requirement for contracting authorities to report on contract performance for all above-threshold competitions will be burdensome and would raise the potential for legal challenge, particularly if these reports are to be used in relation to access to future competitions.

The Government is already progressing programme for Government commitments to increase transparency and embed sustainable - including green and, as the Deputy specifically called out, social considerations - in public procurement. The programme for Government identified developing Ireland's enterprise base as a focus over the next five years, from backing small businesses and start-ups to scaling up indigenous firms. The role that public procurement can play in this is emphasised by the Government's commitment to review the public procurement process to ensure greater participation from SMEs, including micro-enterprises and social entrepreneurs.

This is why the Minister, Deputy Chambers, and I are leading on the first ever national public procurement strategy. It will set out the strategic direction of public procurement over the next five years. While public procurement can be a key lever in bringing about wider Government and societal objectives, it is not the primary lever. Therefore, a collaborative and unified cross-government approach is required to join up the use of public procurement to achieve greater value for money - not just price and sustainability but also the social clauses the Deputy mentioned, economic well-being and resilience.

The public consultation for the strategy was launched in March and ran until recently. We also held three strategy roadshows in Dublin, Cork and Athlone, which were attended by a variety of stakeholders including public bodies, industry bodies, utilities, suppliers, social enterprises and SMEs from across the country. Key themes consulted on included strategic public procurement, transparency, informed delivery, digitalisation and value for money.

Deputy Farrell made a submission to the consultation for the strategy, setting forth her plans for her Bill, which would allow me to produce a report for all contracts above a given threshold and that this information would be connected to other freely available public registers, thus improving the overall interoperability of the system. I thank her for making that submission.

There are some really good ideas in there. It was one of 143 submissions we received and my officials are reviewing those in addition to the feedback we received from our regional workshops, which gave us the opportunity to delve into those issues in more detail. We will be using those ideas and the lived experiences of SMEs and central purchasing bodies to help shape Ireland's first ever national public procurement strategy and I hope the Deputy agrees that it is important that those views are reviewed and responded to in terms of being included in the strategy before we implement new legislation in this space.

A clear ask from that consultation was the removal of red tape and unnecessary bureaucracy. That leads me to our third area of concern, which is that this Bill appears to duplicate current regulations on data capture. The duplication of legislation or of requirements is something we would like to avoid, in terms of the businesses that have been in touch with us. The data that the Bill seeks is already being captured under the European Commission's implementing regulation 2019 for eforms, which are digital standard forms used by public buyers to publish notices on Tenders Electronic Daily, which is the official tendering platform for the EU. The primary purpose is to enhance transparency. The secondary purpose is to capture the data the Deputy mentioned. That is why we badly need them.

I have further information, which I am sure can be read into the record, on eforms but I will conclude because time is against me. The Commission continues to evolve these eforms as part of the longer term strategic objectives within the European Public Procurement Data Space, PPDS. It is expected that Ireland will in due course participate in the PPDS initiative which will further increase transparency of public procurement.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister of State may make a further contribution. Deputy Nash will be aware speakers are called in order of who was in the Chamber first, so Deputy O'Reilly is next. She has ten minutes.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: There should be no difficulty there. I thank my colleague, an Teachta Farrell, for bringing forward this legislation. I also thank her, as the Minister of State did, for all her work on this issue.

I cannot quite make sense of the Minister of State's amendment to postpone the Second Reading of the Bill for 24 months. I operate according to the principle that it is never the wrong time to do the right thing. The Minister of State said it is necessary to put it back to allow for consideration of complex legal issues. We are legislators and the committee process is supposed to allow us to do that and to deliberate. Nobody on the Minister of State's benches or these benches has ever brought legislation to the Dáil assuming that every word of it was perfect, nor would anyone be arrogant enough to do so. Ministers as well as members of the Opposition frequently say we recognise there will be a need to tease out issues, but that is what the committee process is for. It is regrettable that the Minister of State seeks to postpone the legislation.

The Minister of State also mentioned we could be in danger of collecting too much data, yet she nodded, as I did, when an Teachta Farrell went through how tortuous it can be to get that information because it is not collated. I respect the fact the Minister of State might be concerned there could be too much information collected but I do not think we are anywhere near that space yet. In fact, we are a million miles away from it.

Before I was elected, as Deputies will know, I worked as a trade union organiser. We used to say repeatedly to Government that the State should be careful to spend its money where workers' rights are protected. We in the trade union movement recognised the State is not just a big spender, but can be a driver of employment policy and a driver of and positive agent for workers' rights. Unfortunately, in the rush to privatise essential public services, using, as we knew it would, the vehicle of the Office of Government Procurement at times, taxpayers' money is spent in areas where workers' rights are not only not being protected but are being absolutely ripped up. There are companies in receipt of massive State contracts that think it is okay not to recognise trade unions. All they have to do is the minimum. All they have to do is write back and say, "We're paying the minimum wage." That is really the only legally enforceable right a worker has. The State could use its money to drive decent pay and conditions or it can take a hands-off approach, which is frequently what happens. I have been in the Labour Court with employers who have judgments and decisions against them and know there is no way they can be compelled. I know from the data, and it perhaps can be seen in newspapers as well, that companies with a really bad record on human rights know they can ramble back into another Government contract without there being any comeback at all. I have said in the Labour Court and in other forums that the irony of this is high-paid civil and public servants, who are union members and have benefited from trade union membership, are working on these contracts.

There are employers who will not implement Labour Court recommendations. A Labour Court recommendation is made and employers will not implement it because they do not have to. One arm of the State is providing the contract and giving big money to this company and another arm of the State is saying that they need to come halfway to do something decent for their workers. However, there is no compulsion on them to do so. While this is happening, the data is not being collated. If the Government has no data or information, then it cannot be the driver for decent terms and conditions for workers. These companies know that when the Government is spending the €22 billion, and they are getting some of it, there is a continuous pipeline that they are going to be able to tap into again and again. It does not matter if there are outstanding Labour Court judgments against them.

Deputy Nash will recall that I was on the picket line with Patricia King outside a major Department where the cleaners were being treated appallingly, but the Government was funding that company. The Government recognises trade unions but this company would not recognise the union. Not only would they not recognise the union, but they would not pay the appropriate rate. When the workers went on strike, the company threatened to lock them out and sack them. The women who were cleaning said to me that this is the Government, and the Government is paying for their jobs essentially. The Labour Court is an arm of the government, yet we have a situation whereby there is absolutely no onus on it to respect workers' rights. The State is a massive player.

Deputy Farrell's Bill seeks to ensure that the State has information to act ethically. It is literally giving the State and the Government the benefit of the doubt on the basis that perhaps some of the stuff that goes on happens because people are not aware it is going on in a systematic way. Effectively, Deputy Farrell's legislation gives the Government the data and information that it can use to then act in the interests of workers and, indeed, in upholding workers' rights. It does not make any sense for the State to have, as the Minister of State and other Members have said, sophisticated industrial relations machinery. We have said it many

times, and it does exist. The Government is on a hiding to nothing if it gets a Labour Court recommendation that an employer simply will not fulfil. That employer knows, whether they fulfil the Labour Court recommendation or not, it can still get another lucrative Government contract. If this data is collected and analysed properly, the State will realise it is not acting in the interest of workers. It is not using its massive spending power in the market as a driver for decent terms and conditions and for workers' rights. However, equally it is using its money to fund organisations that are essentially disrespecting another arm of the State because Labour Court recommendations are being ignored. In some instances, we have established rates of pay in industries and those too are being ignored.

It does not make any sense to put this off for 24 months because that time could be used by us in committee and in the Chamber to debate and tease out those complex legal issues. No legislation is ever without its consequences. We cannot simply snap our fingers and either change the law or bring in a new law that is not going to have consequences. That is the purpose of committees and debate. We were elected here to have those discussions. As it stands, the State does not use its massive spending power as a driver for decent terms and conditions for workers. Perhaps, some of the reason it does not is it is not aware to the extent to which this is going on. The collection of data would be useful in that regard but it equally would provide the State with valuable information to harness the power. It is €22 billion - that is not nothing - which is a lot of power that could be directed in a positive way. That is simply what an Teachta Farrell is seeking to do with this legislation. I urge the Minister of State to consider withdrawing her amendment and working with the Opposition on what is essentially decent and worthwhile legislation.

Deputy Ged Nash: I congratulate my colleague Deputy Farrell for bringing this Bill forward. It is significant legislation. It very much aligns with the work that the Deputy has done since she entered this Chamber in 2020. She is very much focused on the question of public procurement and driving economic and social change through the development of responsible public procurement systems. It is quite extraordinary when we consider that €22 billion of taxpayers' money, generated by the hard work of Irish citizens, will be spent on public procurement this year. To put that in context, that comes in at approximately 20% of what we expect the State to spend next year. That is a significant amount of taxpayers' money. We could be doing much more with the resources we have to generate the kind of change environmentally, socially and from an employment of view in this country that many of us in the House believe ought to occur. In the context of Deputy Farrell's chairing of the Oireachtas joint committee on finance, we will deal with procurement issues over the next period. It is very much on our work agenda because we all believe that improvements need to be made to how services and goods are procured in this State. We are not using all the opportunities provided to us to drive the kind of change we need.

I have studied this area carefully over the years. A number of initiatives can be taken to improve the situation for everyone. I think the Minister of State will agree, given she referenced this broadly in her remarks, that public procurement can be used as a way in which we can drive better outcomes, for example, for SMEs. I sought to do that a number of years ago in a different set of circumstances when the country was in greater difficulty economically than it is now to try to make sure that indigenous enterprise was assisted in obtaining a greater share of the pie through public procurement. SMEs with limited staff, facilities and supports

available to them found navigation of the public procurement system quite difficult and quite onerous from an administrative point of view. There are ways in which we can simplify that. The House often divides when we talk about regulation. I believe in regulation but not overregulation. I believe in smart regulation. One side of the House appears to think that deregulation is a good thing; I do not. I believe in smart regulation and certainly not burdening SMEs or anybody else with ridiculous forms of regulation. Smart regulation supports good business and good business practice. It ensures a level playing pitch.

That is why I want to move on to some of the remarks made by Deputy O'Reilly. We also ensure that there is a level playing pitch for SMEs, and indeed, for workers in this country when we use public procurement better, when we drive social and economic change and when we embed the principles, for example, of collective bargaining. As some other states that we like to compare ourselves against in the European Union do, we need to ensure that we do not provide lucrative contracts to companies that do not, for example, recognise trade unions; frustrate the right of people to join trade unions; that do not welcome the concept of collective bargaining - it is quite the opposite; they are actively hostile to it; or that routinely ignore Labour Court recommendations while, at the same time, enjoying all of the benefits of the State's largesse when it comes to public procurement. I recall a number of years ago reintroducing employment regulation orders, EROs, that levelled the playing pitch, for example, for good contract security and cleaning companies and for their staff. This is when we take questions of pay out of the public procurement issue where employers compete on quality and standards rather than pay. Through replies to parliamentary questions, doing some additional research and uncovering the facts a number of years ago, it was found that a considerable number of contractors at that point providing services to the State were ignoring EROs and simply paying staff what they wanted.

Very little action was taken by line Departments to bring those contracted companies into line. In many ways, we speak out of both sides of our mouths when it comes to public procurement and driving change.

I noted that in her remarks, the Minister of State mentioned that public procurement can propel changes in public service delivery and create jobs to stimulate private sector growth. There was very little about how we could drive environmental improvements or economic change and level the playing pitch for working people. That has to be at the heart of any review of public procurement in this country.

This is not something that should divide the House on philosophical or narrow ideological grounds. Questions of good public procurement and driving the change we need through public procurement should not be exclusive to those who describe ourselves as being on the left. Good government, value for money and responsible public spending should be matters that those who regard themselves as being on the centre or centre right should also value. It does not make sense. This is something we should all unite on. A huge amount of public resources go into public procurement every year and the outcomes are not what they might be. No one should be afraid of transparency. We can differ all we want on policy goals. We have these debates, as we should, on the floor of this House, in committees and through the media, but transparency should be something everyone is interested in.

On a number of occasions in her remarks, the Minister of State - I accept she said this in good faith and I have no doubt she was well advised by experienced officials - said we are

talking all the time about simplification and deregulation and how that is the agenda of the European Union. This is actually about driving simplification. It may be in a way the Minister of State disagrees with, but I hope she should concede that the principles of what Deputy Farrell is trying to achieve and which we support are positive. That is why I am disappointed that we have not only a 12-month delay but a 24-month delay, which, in the context of how the Government tends to deal with Private Members' Bills these days, is unusual. I understand a review is ongoing at European Union level and that the national procurement strategy is also under way. The Minister of State also made the point that the e-form system in some way simplifies the situation and makes information publicly available. It does, but to the best of my recollection, it does not make all that information available in one place that is accessible in a way that those of us who are interested in these things can navigate and which other firms can see.

I remember a number of years ago that an organisation was supported in being set up by my party colleague then Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Brendan Howlin. It was called Benefacts. It drove a huge amount of change and transparency in the not-for-profit sector. The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform allowed this organisation to grow from itself - it is now known as the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation - and it provided lots of interesting information about levels of State funding for NGOs and other not-for-profit organisations, the number of staff they had, contracts they had and so on. It was buried a number of years ago, ridiculously. It brought great transparency to that sector. It is a similar kind of effort we are trying to talk about today, bringing greater transparency to an area of public expenditure we should be much more interested in than we are. I had hoped the Minister of State would work with us and allow the Bill to get to Committee Stage for further interrogation and examination, in parallel with the processes that she referred to in her remarks.

I again thank Deputy Farrell for bringing this important legislation to the House. It is a debate that does not get as much attention as it should, given the value of the resources we are talking about and the potential for a progressive public procurement system to drive change at every level of our society and economy. The Labour Party is pleased to support the principles of this legislation and the contents of the Bill.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Emer Higgins): I thank Deputies for their engagement on the Bill and in particular Deputy Farrell who worked on it. It has been useful to have the opportunity to discuss public procurement on the floor of the Dáil, important considerations for it and how the Government can ensure better services for the people who come here to live and work and who are born and live here. It is important that we make sure that public procurement is in the best interests of all our citizens.

Public procurement is a key priority for the Government. It is vital to ensure we deliver better public services for everyone. As Minister of State with responsibility for public procurement, digitalisation and e-government, I will take this opportunity to close by sharing with the House my vision and ambition for public procurement. Before I do so, I will respond to some of the comments made on the floor of the Dáil.

I will start with Deputy Farrell's remarks on social clauses and local authorities. I assure the Deputy that I am engaged with the Local Government Management Association, LGMA, and I have directly met three of the four procurement officers in the three Dublin local authorities. I have also met local authorities while I have been doing roadshows up and down the country and I remain open to meeting more. I have been taking on board the feedback they are giving me from the ground. They are the people telling me that they are very mindful of the social clauses and they are pushing for more and more clarity on what social clauses mean. While the Deputy's experience may be different in different local authorities, from what I have seen, they have been really engaged in this. I am pleased with that.

From a data perspective, on the points the Deputy made around key performance indicators, KPIs - whether it is delivered on time and on budget - I agree we need to see more happening in this space and that will be part of what happens through our data collection and our national procurement strategy.

Deputy O'Reilly mentioned the benefits of Committee Stage of Bills. I absolutely agree. However, the EU is now revising its directives, so if we go to Committee Stage and make whatever changes we make to the language of the Bill, we will still be left in a situation where the Bill may contravene EU legislation when it is enacted. That is a clear concern.

Deputy O'Reilly also spoke about collective bargaining, as did Deputy Nash, and employers' rights. I take that on board. Some of that was already provided to us through our public submission. Deputy Nash talked about how we can use public procurement to drive better outcomes for SMEs. As I previously served in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, that is something I am keen to do. That is why I have gone out and met SMEs and taken advice from the SME procurement advisory council. We also have the new public procurement advisory council within our central bodies, which is also providing that information to me. We are getting advice from both the SMEs and public buyers, which is important.

Every year, as has been said, billions of euro are spent by the State on goods, services and works. This brings obligations, but it also brings huge opportunity. Public procurement has significant potential to support SMEs and, with that, regional development and the wider economy. The awarding of a public contract can act as a springboard for emerging micro-enterprises and SMEs to expand and export. I was delighted to meet some of the SMEs in that boat in recent months.

The Department continues to work to ensure value for money is at the heart of all decision-making. That is not partisan and does not relate to the side of the House you sit on; it is what the Government is committed to doing. I am keen to use this strategy to explore ways to promote efficient and effective public procurement that achieves the best possible value for money for the people of Ireland. By doing this, I will also look at social clauses and environmental clauses, which Deputy Nash mentioned, and we will shortly be bringing new green public procurement guidelines to Cabinet. That will be in the next month or so, I hope before the recess. They are with the Minister, Deputy Chambers, at the moment and we hope to get them through because we need to make sure we are doing as much as possible in digital, green and social and also when it comes to transparency and value for money.

Ireland has implemented EU regulations on e-forms and that captures much of the information this Bill seeks to. The European Commission's focus is, like our own, on the simplification of the current complex legal code and a reorientation of procurement to act as a tool for steering investment and increasing competitiveness. That is what I want to see as Minister of State. I want to make sure that we are using our public procurement process to make Ireland a more competitive place and to give our SMEs a bigger slice of that pie while always protecting our transparency and having value for money at the core.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: First, I will mention the survey results. The Minister of State mentioned that she dealt with the Dublin local authorities. I cannot remember - I would not say it in this House anyway - exactly who responded in what way but there was a very clear lack of understanding. I am happy to meet with the Minister of State and share my results in a way that shows her how little information is out there, not in the sense of trying to land blame on any person. That is not what that is about. It is more about the fact that the information is not there. The focus has not been there. That focus does, I think, have to come from the Government. It has to come from the Minister of State, in my view.

To be honest, I am quite disappointed that the Minister of State will not be supporting this Bill, or that she is putting a 24-month stay on it. The 24 months in itself baffles me, to be perfectly honest. I have had this done to me on numerous Bills I have had. I have had it done with my protected disclosures Bill and my lobbying Bill, and now I have it with this. To be clear, I do not take Bills lightly. It takes a huge amount of work over several months. I think it took well over a year, maybe a year and a half, to do this particular Bill because when I put a Bill forward I want to do it right. Of course there are going to be issues that will have to be teased out on Committee Stage. That is the nature of it. Unfortunately, as Deputy Nash mentioned earlier, it is probably not the most emotive topic. It is probably not the snazziest topic that really catches people's attention but if people realised the impact €22 billion can have and the way that money is spent, I think it would be quite a snazzy topic for people.

What I do not understand is the concept of kicking this down for 24 months at a time when there is a review of the public procurement system going on. That is ridiculous in a sense because what the Minister of State is saying is that in the midst of a review where we have been told it is the time to consider a progressive reform of the system, this Bill is here to do just that. As a result of that, I think it should be considered. The fact that this has now been pushed back for a two-year period, well after the review will have been concluded, I would imagine, does not make sense to me either. If the Minister of State was saying that the review will be concluded in a certain amount of time and we will revisit it then, that would be fine but if the review is going to take two years, how long is it going to take the Minister of State to make the reforms subsequent to that?

I have to say I am disappointed. I probably should not be because it is something I have come across before in this Chamber. I was hoping we would look at tangible actions. Even if the Minister of State felt there were certain issues that needed to be teased out, changed or whatever, we could actually look at tangible actions that we could do. I am worried that there does not seem to be the will there. This is about waste of money and how money is spent. It is also about how we can better spend the money.

With regard to some of the comments the Minister of State made, the EU Commission is currently engaging in proceedings against Ireland for failing to properly enact the fifth anti-money laundering directive because of the manner in which it was transposed. This relates to the issue of trusts the Minister of State was talking about. The State was also in the spotlight due to the use of trusts for listed financial activities, and this Bill would help to improve that. It is bizarre to hear that this is being used in an area where we have been found wanting. This does not make sense to me. When we talk about beneficial ownership, that is a no-brainer, in that we should know where our money is being spent. We should know who the money is being spent on. I think that is incredibly important, and that is what the whole issue of beneficial ownership comes down to. The concept that we do not know just baffles me completely. If the majority of companies in the CRO, as the Minister of State said, are not using public contracts, it is clear there is no massive creation of work here. If the majority in the CRO are not, it should not be really about creating huge amounts of work, and finding out who we are spending the money on should absolutely be a no-brainer.

The Minister of State was also talking about equality budgeting before the committee yesterday and her support for this, and I do not doubt that. On the use of social clauses, I welcome the fact that the Minister of State met with certain Dublin authorities. That is maybe too Dublin-centric in my opinion because we need to look at how our money is being spent across the State to promote both social value and equality. My Bill would help to highlight where that reluctance is because we need to know. If we have the data we can look at where the reluctance is.

We are talking about being prudent with public finances. There is talk about AI and digital transformation while at the same time, we are relying on procurement reports from 2019. It is like a Sunday league football team talking about preparation for qualifying for the UEFA Champions League. The words just have little relationship to reality. Even if the Minister of State never intended to allow the Bill to pass the last Stage, if we had the opportunity to talk about and go through this, the Minister of State would have the opportunity to tease out the issues in the midst of her review. By the time these things get to Committee Stage or get through it, it will have taken a huge number of months rather than waiting the 24 months. The Minister of State is telling us that she has to wait for the EU to tell us what is what, while at the same time the EU is telling us that national governments need to improve the functioning of their own procurement systems. That is what this Bill intends to do. What we are saying, however, is that we have to wait for the EU to tell us what to do.

It has also been found by the Information Commissioner that once a contract is awarded, the contractor and price are no longer confidential, so there should be no issue with connecting procurement systems to other public registries because the commercial sensitivity has, at that point, gone out the window.

The Minister of State also talked about deregulation. We do not even have the data on how the regulations would be applied because there is this black box I was talking about. I do not understand that either. We also had the Draghi Commission, and I know the Minister of State has not spelled it out. Undoubtedly this is part of it but the Draghi Commission was about promoting a new industrial policy. If we are serious about looking at a new industrial policy, there is one arm of the spending in the State that we have control of, and that is spending by the State, which again is the biggest expenditure in the State. We are talking about €22 billion.

This is a tool. I have given the Minister of State a tool by which she could use the system for industrial policy purposes but she is saying "not right now". That just does not seem to make any sense to me at all, especially given that we often hear that lessons will be learned. We have often heard, when it comes to an overspend or wasteful spending in the State, that lessons will be learned. Lessons cannot be learned if we do not have the data to look at. We will often hear Ministers come back and say that we never talk about the spending that has come in on time or on budget, and all of those things, but we do not have the data. We need to have the data. In order for anything to work with regard to changing how we do things, we need to have the data.

This information would also be of use to the Minister of State specifically in this instance because she would have those data readily available to her. The Minister of State is at the start of her ministerial journey in this Department but she is going to continue. When she has all of that information to hand, she may come across things where she will think, "Do you know what? I want to do X. This is done well in this place, or this is done well in that place". Somebody might come to her with an idea, or she might come across it through her own research or whatever it may be. Then she could say, "Well at least now I have the data so I will be able to look at implementing it because I have the data to hand".

I am very disappointed because this has happened to me a few times when I have introduced a Bill. I am trying to work with the Government on this. It is not just about giving out. I will give out when needs be but it is also about working with the Government. I take that aspect of this job very seriously and I make sure I am offering solutions. We have a Bill here. It makes sense to me. I have only been in this House five years but at the very start, it came to me straight away and I thought, "Why in the name of God do we not have that information to hand? Why can we not work collaboratively?". It makes zero sense to me, to be honest, that this is being pushed down the road for 24 months. I hope the Minister of State does not regret this in future when she does not have the information to hand to make it easier for herself to make changes that need to be made. I am sure she has her ideas about what she wants to change, and things will come up over time, but if she does not have the data to hand it will be far more difficult to implement it.

Sin é. Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach agus leis an Aire Stáit. I thank the other speakers.

Amendment put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins): In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the next weekly division time.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 5.59 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 1 Iúil 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 5.59 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 1 July 2025.