



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions	139
An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business	148
Disregard of Historic Offences for Consensual Sexual Activity Between Men Bill 2025: First Stage	165
Animal Health and Welfare (Welfare of Pigs) Bill 2025: First Stage	167
Appointment of An Leas-Ombudsman Póilíneachta: Motion	170
Fourth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection: Motion	170
Ceisteanna - Questions	170
Census of Population	170
Review of Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004: Statements	172
GPO and Moore Street Regeneration as a 1916 Cultural Quarter: Motion [Private Members]	206
Teachtairacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad	238
Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions	239
Homeless Persons Supports	239
Housing Policy	240
Vacant Sites Levy	242
Public Private Partnerships	243
Housing Schemes	245
Housing Provision	247
Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions	249
Wastewater Treatment	249
Legislative Measures	252
Housing Policy	254
Local Authorities	256
National Planning Framework	258
Local Authorities	259
Construction Industry	261
Planning Issues	263
Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters	265
Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate	266
Social Welfare Payments	266
Renewable Energy Generation	269
Education and Training Boards	271
Swimming Pools	274
Suicide Prevention	278

DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 1 Iúil 2025

Tuesday, 1 July 2025

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

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

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Tá cinneadh an Rialtais chun táillí coláiste a ardú €1,000 craiceáilte. Is feall scannalach é ar mhic léinn agus ar a muintir. Cuirfidh sé brú sa bhreis orthu fad agus atá siad ag streachailt leis an ghéarchéim chostas maireachtála. For months we have listened for months to the Government telling us how it has students' backs. It has a very funny way of showing it. First the Government decided to hit students and their families with big rent increases and now Fianna Fáil's Minister for higher education, Deputy Lawless, has announced that the Government is going to hike up student fees by €1,000 this September. That is a double whammy.

The Government faces a massive public backlash. As with its madcap rent plan a couple of weeks ago, it is now scrambling around looking for cover. It is total incompetence again from this Government. The Fianna Fáil Minister could not have been clearer. Fees are going up by €1,000 in September. This is just the latest from this Government that is choosing to increase prices for folks in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis. In the past number of weeks alone, it chose to hike up the extortionate rents, to hike up the price of petrol, diesel and home heating oil and to hike up the price of the local property tax. Nobody else did this. These were all Government decisions.

As if families were not hurting enough and as if they were not being squeezed enough, the Government comes along with this mad idea to increase the bill for a family sending their son or daughter to college by €1,000. Does the Minister simply not get it? Sending a kid to college is already costing families an arm and a leg. Many of them are pushed to the pin of their collar just to do that. Hitting them with an extra €1,000 will make going to college impossible for many.

No wonder young people are leaving this country in their droves. This Government is determined to mess things up for them in the here and now, right here at home. It is hell bent on ensuring that this country is no country for young people. All this is happening at a time of a massive budgetary surplus of €8.5 billion. The State has never been wealthier. Yet, the Government comes along with this mad idea about taking an extra €1,000 and hiking student fees

by that amount. We should be scrapping fees not just for students but also for apprenticeships. We need to make education affordable. That is what a Government on the side of young people would do. It would show them that they matter. It would give them the hope that they can build a good future in their own country.

Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn has called this right. The Students' Union of Ireland has called this absolutely right. It was spot-on when it described the plan to jack up third level fees by €1,000 as a calculated betrayal of students. The public needs clarity. Throughout the State, parents and students are worried about this. Last night, for example, we were contacted by a father who is working every hour that God sends him to put his three children through college. He contacted one of the Government TDs and asked a very simple question. In September, will he have to pay €3,000 per child for student fees, or €2,000? The Government TD could not answer. He got no clarity whatsoever; he got no answer. He does not have an extra €3,000. This is a family beside itself with worry and concern. So many thousands of other families are in the same situation. Students and their families have had enough and cannot take anymore. I want the Minister to be very clear, put this issue to bed and give clarity to the parents and students out there. When a student gets his or her bill of fees in September, will it cost €2,000 or €3,000? They demand clarity and the Minister should give it now.

Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Jack Chambers): I will set out the backdrop to this in the context of the measures that the Government has taken over recent years to make permanent and sustained reductions and interventions that are affordable for many students. If you look at the measures that have been taken, more students than ever are benefiting from financial support through the Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI, grant support scheme. One in three students paid no student contribution last year, which is over €44,000, while almost half of students were supported in some way through SUSI last year. Standard rate income thresholds are being increased by 15% from September, one of the largest increases to maintenance thresholds. Households with incomes of up to €64,000 already do not pay a student contribution. There are higher ceilings for families with multiple people attending college at the same time or higher numbers for children. Maintenance grants have been fully restored for eligible postgraduate students and SUSI fee support is now available for the first time ever for specified part-time in-person or hybrid courses.

Despite these measures and permanent changes that were made over a series of budgets, we recognise that many families are under pressure. That is why, in the context of budget 2026, the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Lawless, has said that, in the context of moving away from one-off cost-of-living packages, he wants to see how he can deliver sustained, permanent and costed changes to, for example, the student contribution fee, supports around maintenance and the variety of supports that are there for students. He wants to set that out in the context of the envelope that will be made available. The Minister, Deputy Lawless, will publish an options paper on the cost of education ahead of the budget, setting out the pathways to do this. It will be negotiated in the normal way.

Both the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, and I approach budget 2026 against a backdrop of a huge level of economic uncertainty. I did not hear the Deputy reference that issue in his contribution. We are one week away from the 9 July tariff deadline. The Exchequer returns due to be published next week will give a point-in-time indication of the broader economic position our country is in. We know that the global position is changing. The concentration risks around corporation tax and income tax are there and must be reflected in a cautious

and responsible approach to budget 2026.

The Government is engaging in two important pieces of work. One relates to the summer economic statement and setting out the overall envelope for 2026. The other relates to work on the national development plan - which I know the Minister, Deputy Lawless, has significant ambition for - to drive continued support and capital investment in the third level sector in particular.

With all those major downside risks, we are trying to approach this in a cautious way. We will in the coming weeks agree an envelope that will be made available in terms of current expenditure changes and permanent increases in current expenditure across government. It is in that context that the Minister, Deputy Lawless, will be seeking to prioritise continued supports for students and families and to make permanent changes across a range of supports, whether targeted in nature or around the student contribution fee. It is in the context of the budget negotiation process that we will be able to set out the position for families in the aftermath of budget 2026 and what will be possible. The Deputy knows, as does everyone else in the House, that this is the normal way we engage in the budget process. We are not announcing measures or changes right now. We are engaging in the summer economic statement process and agreeing a new national development plan to set out the broader economic context for 2026.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I asked the Minister for clarity. Does anybody have clarity in respect of the question I asked?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: No, not a bit.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Families are asking if the fees are going to cost €2,000 or €3,000 come September. The Minister went on to say that this was the way things were done but the Minister, Deputy Lawless, has made it very clear that fees will go up by €1,000. He said that if he did not have a cost-of-living package, he could not take the kinds of measure that were taken last year. There is no point blaming Donald Trump's tariffs for what the Government is doing to students. Why are students being attacked? This has been done already with rent increases. They are going to get a double whammy. The Minister does not understand or appreciate the strains families are under. I gave an example but there are countless others and they are bound to be in his constituency. These are parents with two and three children in college. That is €2,000 or €3,000 more that they have not budgeted in. Will the Minister give clarity now that the Government's position is that, when the fees letter lands in September, they will be increased by €1,000 and the fees will be charged at €3,000 per student? What is needed-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The reason this is happening is because the Government has turned its face against a cost-of-living package-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. The time is up.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----because it thinks the cost-of-living crisis is over. We need a cost-of-living package and fees need to be reduced, not increased.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The economic position our country is in cannot just be dismissed. We must approach budget 2026 with caution. We know if we strip away the windfall nature

of many of our tax receipts, there is a potential risk around a deficit position in our economy, which we cannot ignore and the Deputy should not ignore as a finance spokesperson for the main Opposition party.

It is in this context that we are working on the medium-term expenditure strategy and on what targeted, sustained supports we can bring forward and give to families to make public services more affordable and support families when it comes to higher education and the cost of education more generally. It is within this context that we are negotiating budget 2026. I say to families that we will agree an envelope that will be available for changes around taxation, current expenditure and, indeed, the uplift we want to give to capital in the economy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I just asked about fees.

Deputy Jack Chambers: This will form the basis of our discussion with all Ministers on what changes we can make for budget 2026.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister. The time is up.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Will it be €2,000 or €3,000 or does the Minister not know?

Deputy Martin Kenny: Is there an increase or not?

Deputy Jack Chambers: That is a normal part of the budgetary process that this Government is committed to advancing.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister. I call Deputy Ivana Bacik.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: It seems this week we are seeing yet another screeching U-turn from the Government. After its recent U-turns on rent pressure zones and tax and spending priorities for this budget, this time the change of tack relates to the announcement by the Minister, James Lawless, on college fees. On Sunday, the Minister took to the national airwaves to say there would be what will amount to a massive hike in fees this year, apparently from the €2,000 students paid last year to €3,000 this year.

As the Minister will know, this U-turn has caused widespread consternation among students, parents and families because the budgeting plans for households across the country, especially those with multiple children in third level, have now been thrown into doubt, and this during a cost-of-living crisis. The Minister knows the pressure households are under. Grocery prices have risen by more than 5% since this time last year. Average monthly rents are now at €2,000.

It is not just families and students who are concerned about the impact of this U-turn, as it appears the junior partner in the coalition of chaos, Fine Gael, is also in consternation about this announcement. The Tánaiste even suggested this morning, in what sounded like a desperate scramble to row back on the Minister's plans, that third level fees would go up and then might come down again, all within one college year. There was no certainty about it.

It seems Fine Gael backbenchers have gone even further to distance themselves from the Minister, Deputy Lawless. We heard it on yesterday's "Liveline" programme. A Fine Gael TD tried to do the impossible by simultaneously appearing to both defend and criticise the Minister and sounding shocked about the announcement, which is ridiculous, given that Fine Gael is in government and has no right to be shocked. The Minister mooted this in the spring. The Minister, Deputy Chambers, might remember that on 1 April, an article by Pat Leahy appeared

in *The Irish Times* saying that the Minister, Deputy Lawless, had “signalled [that] the €1,000 could be cut this year, meaning an effective increase in fees for many students”. Now, perhaps Fine Gael believed this was an April Fool’s joke, given the date, but this is no laughing matter. On “Liveline” yesterday, we heard the genuine distress and concern among so many families mere weeks before the autumn term begins. Students are now wondering if they will be able to afford to progress to third level at all. This is appalling for people.

At 6 p.m. next Tuesday, Labour has called a protest outside the gates of Leinster House, led by our higher education spokesperson, Senator Laura Harmon. Alongside students, unions and other political parties, we will be calling on the Government to halt this sharp hike in student fees. The Government may have U-turned again by then, and I genuinely hope it will have done so, but I take the opportunity to invite the Minister, Deputy Chambers’s colleagues in Fine Gael to come to the protest. Indeed, he would be welcome, too, but his time might be better spent with the Minister, Deputy Lawless, trying to figure out a way to get out of this latest mess of Fianna Fáil’s making. The Government has a surplus of almost €1.8 billion in the National Training Fund. That money can only be spent for education purposes. Will the Minister consider using that money to keep fees low? Will he commit that students will not have to pay this exorbitantly high increase?

Deputy Jack Chambers: As the Deputy knows, in last year’s budget, we set out a number of measures of a one-off and temporary nature. The reduction that was made on a one-year basis was reflected in that cost-of-living package. We said, as an incoming Government, that the decisions we would take in the context of budget 2026 would be taken on a permanent and sustained basis. It is on that basis that every Minister will be engaging with me and the Minister for Finance on the envelope that is agreed by the Government in July about his or her priorities in the context of each Department. The Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Lawless, has also said that in the context of a pathway on the cost of education, that publication will be made prior to the budget. He has engaged with many student representatives, recognising the costs that many students face. This is why the back-drop is important. There have been sustained cost reductions in recent years. For example, reckonable income is now €64,000, standard rate income thresholds will increase by 15% from September, which is one of the largest increases to maintenance thresholds, and one in three students pays no contribution. In previous years, Governments took sustained permanent action to reduce the cost of higher education.

What we are saying in the context of budget 2026 is that we want to make further changes but it is about what we can do on a sustained and permanent basis. We have to be cognisant of the economic backdrop, something the Deputy dismissed in her contribution. We face significant economic uncertainty. Everyone in this House needs to realise the level and degree of the concentration risk for corporate risks that exists right now. The changes being undertaken by the OECD in the context of corporation tax bring uncertainty. The underlying trade environment and the open trading economy Ireland sits within present significant uncertainty. This is why we need to approach budget 2026 with caution and we must be assured that the decisions we take can be sustained over the medium to long term. It is on that basis that we are trying to calibrate a tax and expenditure package that is appropriate and responsible. This will involve Ministers making choices and setting out clear priorities around their expenditure demands or changes they want to make to taxation. Ensuring we protect the resilience of the Irish economy is central. If we look at the past number of years, we can see that there has been significant growth in public expenditure in responding to the series of crises the Irish economy faced. We

now know many of the downside risks that exist could well crystallise in the short term, which is why we need to be careful around overall expenditure.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I listened carefully to what the Minister said but, with respect, it is a somewhat Alice in Wonderland approach for parents and students listening in because what I think he said was that people may think that this is an increase but really it is an reduction. That is not the reality. What people will feel in their pockets this year is that they will be paying an extra €1,000. That is the reality for people, no matter how it is sugar-coated or explained away. The Minister said that last year's reduction was just for one year but the programme for Government committed to continuing to reduce and contained an explicit statement about doing so at the start of each academic year. We are approaching the start of the 2025-26 academic year and parents and students have no certainty. Indeed, they are now led to believe that there will be an extra €1,000 to be paid. However the Minister explains it away, people are feeling it. They are feeling the shock of this, they are genuinely worried and it has genuinely thrown budgeting plans in disarray for many households. That is why we are seeking clarity and joining with students and others next week to protest and to seek a further Government U-turn on this hugely important issue.

Deputy Jack Chambers: What I have been very clear about is that this issue will be part of the broader discussion on budget 2026. That is how annualised budgeting works in this economy and many other economies around the world. That is what we are seeking to do. We will set out an envelope in the coming weeks and each Minister will have to prioritise within that his or her overall expenditure demands. Of course, I am cognisant of the need to ease the financial burden on students and families over the lifetime of the Government. Part of that is around the student contribution fee but there are other changes that could be made in terms of income thresholds for SUSI and other grants which have targeted and direct support for students. It is examining the broader issue of costs for third level students and, indeed, for other students at primary and secondary levels around the overall costs of education. The past number of years have seen sustained supports on a permanent basis across many areas of our education system. That is what many of my colleagues will be seeking to prioritise as part of budget 2026 but that process is important in terms of what is possible for next year.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: During the election campaign, Fianna Fáil and its coalition partners, Fine Gael, promised to phase out student fees. That is what they promised in their manifesto. The programme for Government promised to reduce student fees. The Government is now breaking the promises it made and is saying the reason it is doing this is because of economic uncertainty. I do take economic uncertainty and risks very seriously. The Social Democrats warned during the election that it was completely irresponsible to promise a whole range of spending increases and tax cuts at the same time. We said the Government would not be able to deliver on them and they ignored those warnings. It is now saying the threats caused by Donald Trump are to blame for this. Donald Trump was elected before our election took place and yet the Government seems to have only discovered those threats after the election. It is fooling no one on this. We are now just weeks away from the start of the new academic year. It is a notoriously expensive time for families. What has the Minister for higher education done? He has dropped a bombshell of student fees going up €1,000 in September.

The Minister does not seem to understand the big deal. He does not seem to understand the very real hardship this will cause. He has tried to brush aside the concerns of students and their families, telling them that all of us in any walk of life have to play the hands we are dealt.

1 July 2025

Anyone listening to “Liveline” will have heard the distress and the anger from a succession of callers all of whom are at the ends of their tether. They are already struggling to pay skyrocketing costs for accommodation, groceries and transport and now they have another bill for €1,000 with no idea where it will come from.

This announcement did not take place in a vacuum. Costs are soaring all across the country. Grocery prices are increasing at three times the rate of inflation. The ESB is talking about slapping an additional €80 on energy bills which are already at a record high. Paying for basics like keeping the lights on and putting food on the table is already putting people under huge pressure. People do not have a spare €1,000. Every penny they have is being spent on trying to keep their heads above water. Families and students are already struggling and cannot deal with any additional costs.

The Government gave a firm commitment in the programme for Government. It promised to continue to reduce student fees. It did not say it would jack up student fees by €1,000. It said it would continue the reduction. Anyone reading that would have reasonably thought that student fees would be reduced down from €2,000 where they had been set for the last three years. This is further evidence that the Government simply cannot be trusted and that promises made in the programme for Government cannot be relied on.

Students and their families do not need a war between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael on the airwaves on this. They need the Government to keep the promises it made in the programme for Government. Will the Minister keep the promises made? Where does he think students and their families will find an additional €1,000?

Deputy Jack Chambers: It is important we are clear on the budgetary context for budget 2026. Many of my Government colleagues have many priorities in their respective Departments and policy areas which they will commence negotiation on at the end of July and through August. The Minister, Deputy Lawless, has been clear that affordability for students is an important priority for him as part of his negotiation for budget 2026. That is the context. We will engage in the overall envelope as part of what will be available for budget 2026 and it is in that context we will be able to see what is possible for supports around the student contribution fees or, indeed, changes to income thresholds, maintenance grants and the breadth of other supports which are important to support students across our third level sector. The distinction between what has happened in the previous three years and the process we are now entering into is that the decisions we will make as part of budget 2026 are about making permanent and sustained changes for households and workers across our economy.

As a Government, we have been clear that the cost-of-living packages introduced in previous years are not part of the budget 2026 process. It is on that basis that different Ministers will set out their priorities. Obviously, bringing affordability to public services, whether in education, childcare or health, is an important component of many aspects of the programme for Government, including the student contribution fee. The Minister, Deputy Lawless, has engaged extensively with the third level representative bodies and directly with representatives. That is why he is developing the cost-of-education paper which will inform his negotiation as part of budget 2026.

I have also been clear that the overall budgetary context is different this year than it was in previous years. We have significant downside risks facing the Irish economy and endless expenditure asks from anyone in the House need to be carefully managed so that we can sus-

tain whatever decisions we make into the medium to long term. We have a lot of competing demands in government, including significantly ramping up investment in infrastructure and housing, along with supporting the ambition in terms of the enterprise economy, social protection and many other areas of expenditure.

As part of budget 2026, we are engaging in a negotiation, in the aftermath of the summer economic statement, and affordability for students will form part of that overall discussion. The Minister, Deputy Lawless, will engage with everyone across the Government around what is possible within the overall envelope. It is distinct from previous years in that one-off measures will not feature in budget 2026.

Deputy Cian O’Callaghan: Did the Minister only discover the economic risks and threats posed by the Trump Administration after the election in Ireland took place? That is a very serious question. To justify breaking promises on the basis of the threats posed by the Trump Administration, when it was already in place and we knew that Administration posed huge threats to our economy by the time of our election, and then use that as an excuse for breaking promises after the election does not cut it with people.

It does not cut it to have student fees of €2,000 for three years in a row and then increase them to €3,000, which sounds like what is happening, and then say that is not a broken promise. How can the Government break promises like that? The programme for Government promised a reduction and not an increase in fees. There should be a reduction in the €2,000 figure if the promise was coming to fruition. If Fine Gael’s promise to phase out fees was coming to fruition, fees would not increase. How can the Government credibly look Irish students and their families in the eye and break these promises?

Deputy Jack Chambers: We will engage in a budget process in the coming weeks, and affordability for students will be a key component of that in terms of trying to continue the permanent changes that were made in recent years. That is the context in which every Government Minister will engage as part of budget 2026. We need to respect that. The measures will be outlined on budget day in October.

On the overall trade environment, the disruption caused by tariffs has been significant since January and has created huge uncertainty in the Irish economy. The changes to the treatment of corporate tax as part of the OECD process bring significant uncertainty. We take those risks seriously. There was discussion during the election campaign about President Trump and the impact the overall trend of deglobalisation would have on the Irish economy. If there are changes to the economic context, the Government or anyone in the political sphere must respond in that context. We want to prioritise the continued affordability of public services for citizens across the State and continue the progress we have made in budget 2026.

Deputy Ken O’Flynn: I raise a matter of grave concern regarding the practical effects of the Protected Disclosures Act 2014. While the Act was conceived with noble intent in the shadow of the experience of the Maurice McCabe case and his testimony, the reality for many whistleblowers across this nation is that the promised protection remains legally at odds with the lived reality of the legislation. Recent findings of the commission of investigation into the Grace case underscore this point. Despite protected disclosures having been made, the system failed with harrowing consequences. The individuals who spoke out were not met with support but with institutional silence and personal hardship.

1 July 2025

One of the most glaring problems with the Act of 2014 is the deficiency of the framework through the absence of legal aid for those who make protected disclosures and subsequently find themselves before the Workplace Relations Commission, the Labour Court or the Circuit Court, High Court or Supreme Court. These individuals are often pitted against a large organisation, such as the HSE and others, with ample legal reassurances and well-resourced legal teams. They are left to shoulder the financial and emotional costs along with this. Moreover, too many of those taking these cases have been bullied, blurred and pushed into a non-disclosure agreement that functions as a de facto gagging clause. Not only does this rob the public of the truth, but it ensures the systemic reform that needs to take place does not take place. It is a chilling message to those who want to be whistleblowers but are afraid to come forward because of the financial implications and risk. I ask the Minister plainly whether the Government will commit to reviewing the Protected Disclosures Act, with a view to introducing statutory legal aid for those individuals who disclose and are deemed appropriate and protected under the 2014 Act?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy O’Flynn. I take with great seriousness the issues he has identified on the experience of individuals relating to the protected disclosures regime. As he knows, we have various legislation from 2014 up to 2022 reflecting the updated reforms introduced, some of which were introduced in the aftermath of some of the cases he has referenced, and reflecting best practice. Under the current regime a review is built in under the 2022 Act, which is due in 2027. We also have the Protected Disclosures Commissioner, who independently has a statutory function in the context of protected disclosures. Support from my Department is given to Transparency International Ireland; its Speak Up helpline is funded by the Department to support those who make a protected disclosure. Strong legislative and statutory frameworks must also be matched by implementation across Departments, which have responsibility at statutory and departmental level for statutory and mandatory disclosures.

In terms of protected disclosures and Deputy O’Flynn’s request for a review, I am happy to engage with him or to get feedback on the experience of the individuals concerned. We need to have a protected disclosures environment which works in the interests of whistleblowers, who should be protected and supported with whatever issue they want to raise. I am happy to reflect on what Deputy O’Flynn has said today in this context, taking into account the fact there is a statutory review period built into the existing legislative framework. I will ask my officials to reflect on what Deputy O’Flynn has stated and what has emanated from what has been expressed by others involved in particular cases.

Deputy Ken O’Flynn: I thank the Minister for his reply but it is a bit like previous replies in that it does not really say much. How many people will come forward as whistleblowers and sign these non-disclosure agreements, and how many problems will be hidden and put under the carpet yet again, before 2027? If we did not have the likes of Vicky Phelan, who decided not to sign a non-disclosure agreement, we may not have ever known of the scandals and the number of deaths. How many things have been hidden in Tusla, the HSE or banking? If whistleblowers had wanted to come forward from the banking sector prior to the collapse in 2007, when we in the House all now know there were people asleep at the wheel at the head of financial regulation, they could not have done so because they had signed non-disclosure agreements. Banking scandals were hidden. So many other scandals are hidden in this country that we are not even able to get to because of the fact that whistleblowers do not have legal support. We have to get this sorted, or else we will be a nation of cover up after cover up, learning nothing from all the cover ups.

Deputy Jack Chambers: My Department works with the protected disclosures national ad-

visory group, a forum of disclosure managers from Departments, public bodies and prescribed persons to share best practice and identify any challenges that are emerging from the existing legislative framework. I will ask them to review what the Deputy has stated and feedback from others in the context of what he has said regarding the existing legislative position. Important reforms were made in 2014 and in 2022, all in the interest of supporting those who make a protected disclosure to Departments. I want to ensure that the framework we have is in line with best practice, both in at domestic and European levels-----

Deputy Ken O’Flynn: Not for the whistleblowers.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I assure the Deputy that this is my genuine intention. A legislative framework must protect whistleblowers and those who make a protected disclosure. I will ask the advisory group, which consists of a number of members across different Departments, to review what the Deputy has said and indeed if there are any reforms-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Minister.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

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

Tuesday’s business shall be:

- Motion re Nomination to Appoint the Deputy Police Ombudsman (without debate)
- Motion re Fourth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection (without debate)
- Statements on the publication of the report of the review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 (not to exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes).

Tuesday’s private members’ business shall be Motion re GPO and Moore Street regeneration as a 1916 Cultural Quarter, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday’s business shall be:

- Statements on All Island Strategic Rail Review recommendations (to adjourn after 1 hour and 30 minutes and resume on 9th July)
- Statements on the Middle East (not to exceed 3 hours and 32 minutes)
- Defamation (Amendment) Bill 2024 (Report and Final Stages) (to be taken no earlier than 6.30 p.m. and if not previously concluded, to adjourn either at 9.12 p.m. or after 2 hours, whichever is the later)
- Social Welfare (Bereaved Partner’s Pension and Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025 (Report and Final Stages) [changed from Social Welfare Bereaved Partner’s Pension) Bill 2025] (to conclude within 1 hour)

Wednesday’s private members’ business shall be the Motion re Nursing Homes, selected by the Labour Party.

1 July 2025

Thursday's business shall be:

- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann for a Regulation amending Regulation (EU) 2024/1348 as regards the establishment of a list of safe countries of origin at Union level*

- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann for a Regulation amending Regulation (EU) 2024/1348 as regards the application of the 'safe third country' concept*

- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann for a Regulation establishing a common system for the return of third-country nationals staying illegally in the Union and repealing Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and the Council, Council Directive 2001/40/EC and Council Decision 2004/191/EC*

- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann for a Council Recommendation on a coordinated approach to the transition out of temporary protection for displaced persons from Ukraine*

*Four separate motions to be debated together and brought to a conclusion after 3 hours and 32 minutes; question to be put on each motion separately

- Statements on the publication of the report of the review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 (not to exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes).

Thursday evening business shall be the Second Stage of the Ministers and Secretaries (Attorney General) Bill 2023, sponsored by Deputy Ivana Bacik.

Proposed Arrangements for this week's business:

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

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

- (a) the only Parliamentary Questions to the Taoiseach pursuant to Standing Order 47(1) which may be answered shall be those under the aegis of the Government Chief Whip, with consequential effect on the commencement time for Government business; and

- (b) private members' business may be taken earlier than 6.12 p.m. and shall in any event be taken on the conclusion of the Statements on the publication of the report of the review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004, with consequential effect on the commencement times for the items following in the ordinary routine of business, namely, oral Parliamentary Questions to the Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and topical issues, and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil;

2. the proceedings on the Motion re Nomination to Appoint the Deputy Police Ombudsman shall be taken without debate;

3. the proceedings on the Motion re Fourth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection shall be taken without debate; and

4. the Statements on the publication of the report of the review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 shall not exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes and

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

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

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

(c) members may share time.

	<i>Gov</i>	<i>SF</i>	<i>Lab</i>	<i>Gov</i>	<i>SF</i>
<i>Mins</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>3</i>
	<i>SD</i>	<i>Gov</i>	<i>SF</i>	<i>IPTG</i>	<i>Gov</i>
<i>Mins</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>10</i>
	<i>SF</i>	<i>ITG</i>	<i>Gov</i>	<i>SF</i>	<i>OM</i>
<i>Mins</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>5</i>

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

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

(a) the Dáil may sit later than 9.30 p.m. and shall adjourn on the conclusion of the weekly division time; and

(b) the time allotted for Government Business shall be extended in accordance with the arrangements for that business, with consequential effect on the commencement time for the weekly division time, which may be taken on the conclusion of proceedings on the Social Welfare (Bereaved Partner's Pension and Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025 [changed from Social Welfare Bereaved Partner's Pension) Bill 2025];

2. the Statements on All Island Strategic Rail Review recommendations shall be interrupted and stand adjourned after 90 minutes and the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:

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

(b) any speaking slots which are not reached may be taken on Wednesday, 9th July, 2025, in accordance with the agreed sequence; and

(c) members may share time;

	<i>Gov</i>	<i>SF</i>	<i>Lab</i>	<i>Gov</i>	<i>SF</i>
<i>Mins</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>3</i>
	<i>SD</i>	<i>Gov</i>	<i>SF</i>	<i>IPTG</i>	<i>Gov</i>
<i>Mins</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>10</i>
	<i>SF</i>	<i>ITG</i>	<i>Gov</i>	<i>SF</i>	<i>OM</i>
<i>Mins</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>5</i>

1 July 2025

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

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

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

(c) members may share time;

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

4. the proceedings on Report and Final Stages of the Defamation (Amendment) Bill 2024 shall be taken no earlier than 6.30 p.m. and shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted and stand adjourned either at 9.12 p.m. or after 2 hours, whichever is the later, and shall not be resumed on Wednesday; and

5. the proceedings on Report and Final Stages of the Social Welfare (Bereaved Partner's Pension and Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025 [changed from Social Welfare Bereaved Partner's Pension) Bill 2025] shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 1 hour by one question, which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Social Protection.

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

1. the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders shall be modified to the extent that topical issues may be taken earlier than 7.24 p.m. and shall in any event be taken on the conclusion of the Motions on Participation by Ireland in the Adoption and Application of New Proposals in the Field of Return of third-country nationals, International Protection and Temporary Protection, with consequential effect on the commencement time for Second Stage of the Ministers and Secretaries (Attorney General) Bill 2023 and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil; and

2. the proceedings on the Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann for a Regulation amending Regulation (EU) 2024/1348 as regards the establishment of a list of safe countries of origin at Union level, the Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann for a Regulation amending Regulation (EU) 2024/1348 as regards the application of the 'safe third country' concept, the Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann for a Regulation establishing a common system for the return of third-country nationals staying illegally in the Union and repealing Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and the Council, Council Directive 2001/40/EC and Council Decision 2004/191/EC, and the Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann for a Council Recommendation on a coordinated approach to the

transition out of temporary protection for displaced persons from Ukraine shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 3 hours and 32 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

(a) the four motions shall be debated together, with separate questions put on all proceedings thereon;

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

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

(d) members may share time.

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

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

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: No. Last Friday, on Highland Radio, the Minister of State, Deputy Marian Harkin, stated that she secured a surgical hub for Sligo University Hospital as part of the Lowry Independents' negotiations for Government. In Donegal, we have been standing together to look at a surgical hub. Our services are in absolute crisis and our emergency Department is threatened. Will the Minister clarify if a deal has been done with the Lowry Independents for Sligo University Hospital to have a surgical hub? Is the Government seriously looking at a surgical hub in Letterkenny?

Deputy Conor Sheehan: After a very successful Pride at the weekend, and given the fact that we are coming up to ten years of the Gender Recognition Act being passed, I am calling for statements on Pride, particularly regarding the issues in trans healthcare and the fact people have to go abroad when they should not have to.

Deputy Michael Collins: We need to have statements today on higher education, especially on the confusion regarding fees. Since the announcement, lot of parents have told me that they are having discussions around their tables about whether their child will go to college and whether they can afford to send the child to college or not. That is not a discussion that families should have. Our children and young people want to educate themselves. We need to have statements in this House. I have been asking for statements on education regarding class sizes and capitation grants at primary level, but this relates to higher level.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Under Standing Order 35(3), I wish to propose an amendment to the Order of Business-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We are not there yet, Deputy. We will hear Members dissenting

first.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I support for the call for statements on Pride. I also call for a debate and a motion to be brought forward by the Government, if it wants us to sign up to this European armament programme called SAFE. It is part of ReArm Europe, and entails €150 billion worth of loans, effectively to be paid for by the public into the pockets of the armaments industry in Europe. It was announced on Friday that the Irish Government and State intends to participate, but it does not intend to bring it before the Dáil for a vote or a debate. Surely, at the very least, people should have the right to vote on whether we participate in this arms race.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I propose an amendment to the Order of Business in relation to statements on LNG. It was reported today that An Coimisiún Pleanála has written to the Minister seeking a clear position from Government on commercial LNG. It is time for the Government to stop talking out of both sides of its mouth with regard to LNG. We need clarity on that.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: Hear, hear.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Whips for the issues they have raised-----

(Interruptions).

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sorry to interrupt the Chief Whip. Members, please put your phones on silent. That is about the fourth mobile phone to go off in session. The Chief Whip, without interruption, please.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank the Whips for the issues they have raised. I will take on board everything that has been raised, but we had a meeting of the Business Committee last Thursday morning. The Ceann Comhairle was present at the meeting. Apart from one issue with regard to the time allocated, the Order of Business for this week was agreed. I will, however, take on board comments that have been made. There will be statements on the Middle East tomorrow afternoon for three and a half hours. Next week there will also be post-European Council statements, which have been scheduled in. I agree wholeheartedly on having statements in the House on Pride and transgender healthcare. I would welcome that very much. I will work with the Whips and with my office to see what we can fit in for next week but as everybody knows there is only a limited amount of time. If some of the various parties and groupings would like to use their Private Members' time for some of these issues, they would be more than welcome.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: What about the surgical hub issue?

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: And the LNG issue.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sorry Deputy.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: There was no response on it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Deputies, the Chief Whip-----

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: It is not a matter for the Order of Business.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: It absolutely is.

An Ceann Comhairle: I will ask the Chief Whip if she wishes to address Deputy Mac

Lochlainn.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Apologies. Deputy McAuliffe seems to be responding instead of the Ceann Comhairle.

Deputy Mary Butler: What was stated on Highland Radio in Donegal last week is not a matter for the Order of Business but-----

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Of course it is.

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Deputy.

Deputy Mary Butler: -----we can discuss having health statements, if the Deputy so wishes, on the issue. An amendment to the Order of Business was moved under Standing Order 35(3). I will not be accepting the amendment today.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister of State.

Question put: "The amendment proposed to arrangements on the Order of Business is hereby negated and the proposed arrangements for the week's business are hereby agreed to."

<i>The Dáil divided: Tá, 84; Níl, 63; Staon, 0.</i>		
<i>Tá</i>	<i>Níl</i>	<i>Staon</i>
<i>Aird, William.</i>	<i>Ahern, Ciarán.</i>	
<i>Ardagh, Catherine.</i>	<i>Bacik, Ivana.</i>	
<i>Boland, Grace.</i>	<i>Brady, John.</i>	
<i>Brabazon, Tom.</i>	<i>Buckley, Pat.</i>	
<i>Brennan, Brian.</i>	<i>Byrne, Joanna.</i>	
<i>Brennan, Shay.</i>	<i>Carthy, Matt.</i>	
<i>Brophy, Colm.</i>	<i>Clarke, Sorca.</i>	
<i>Browne, James.</i>	<i>Collins, Michael.</i>	
<i>Burke, Colm.</i>	<i>Connolly, Catherine.</i>	
<i>Burke, Peter.</i>	<i>Conway-Walsh, Rose.</i>	
<i>Butler, Mary.</i>	<i>Coppinger, Ruth.</i>	
<i>Butterly, Paula.</i>	<i>Cronin, Réada.</i>	
<i>Buttimer, Jerry.</i>	<i>Cummins, Jen.</i>	
<i>Byrne, Malcolm.</i>	<i>Daly, Pa.</i>	
<i>Cahill, Michael.</i>	<i>Devine, Máire.</i>	
<i>Callaghan, Catherine.</i>	<i>Doherty, Pearse.</i>	
<i>Calleary, Dara.</i>	<i>Donnelly, Paul.</i>	
<i>Canney, Seán.</i>	<i>Ellis, Dessie.</i>	
<i>Carrigy, Micheál.</i>	<i>Farrelly, Aidan.</i>	
<i>Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.</i>	<i>Farrell, Mairéad.</i>	
<i>Chambers, Jack.</i>	<i>Gannon, Gary.</i>	
<i>Clendennen, John.</i>	<i>Gibney, Sinéad.</i>	
<i>Collins, Niall.</i>	<i>Gould, Thomas.</i>	
<i>Connolly, John.</i>	<i>Graves, Ann.</i>	

<i>Cooney, Joe.</i>	<i>Guirke, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Crowe, Cathal.</i>	<i>Hayes, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Cummins, John.</i>	<i>Hearne, Rory.</i>	
<i>Currie, Emer.</i>	<i>Kelly, Alan.</i>	
<i>Daly, Martin.</i>	<i>Kenny, Eoghan.</i>	
<i>Dempsey, Aisling.</i>	<i>Kenny, Martin.</i>	
<i>Dillon, Alan.</i>	<i>Kerrane, Claire.</i>	
<i>Dolan, Albert.</i>	<i>Lawlor, George.</i>	
<i>Donohoe, Paschal.</i>	<i>Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.</i>	
<i>Dooley, Timmy.</i>	<i>McGettigan, Donna.</i>	
<i>Feighan, Frankie.</i>	<i>McGuinness, Conor D.</i>	
<i>Fleming, Seán.</i>	<i>Mitchell, Denise.</i>	
<i>Foley, Norma.</i>	<i>Murphy, Paul.</i>	
<i>Gallagher, Pat the Cope.</i>	<i>Mythen, Johnny.</i>	
<i>Geoghegan, James.</i>	<i>Newsome Drennan, Nata- sha.</i>	
<i>Grealish, Noel.</i>	<i>Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.</i>	
<i>Harkin, Marian.</i>	<i>Nolan, Carol.</i>	
<i>Healy-Rae, Danny.</i>	<i>O'Callaghan, Cian.</i>	
<i>Healy-Rae, Michael.</i>	<i>O'Donoghue, Robert.</i>	
<i>Heneghan, Barry.</i>	<i>O'Flynn, Ken.</i>	
<i>Heydon, Martin.</i>	<i>O'Gorman, Roderic.</i>	
<i>Keogh, Keira.</i>	<i>O'Hara, Louis.</i>	
<i>Lahart, John.</i>	<i>O'Reilly, Louise.</i>	
<i>Lawless, James.</i>	<i>O'Rourke, Darren.</i>	
<i>Lowry, Michael.</i>	<i>Ó Broin, Eoin.</i>	
<i>Maxwell, David.</i>	<i>Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.</i>	
<i>McAuliffe, Paul.</i>	<i>Ó Murchú, Ruairí.</i>	
<i>McCarthy, Noel.</i>	<i>Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.</i>	
<i>McConalogue, Charlie.</i>	<i>Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.</i>	
<i>McCormack, Tony.</i>	<i>Quaide, Liam.</i>	
<i>McEntee, Helen.</i>	<i>Quinlivan, Maurice.</i>	
<i>McGrath, Séamus.</i>	<i>Sheehan, Conor.</i>	
<i>McGreehan, Erin.</i>	<i>Sherlock, Marie.</i>	
<i>Moran, Kevin Boxer.</i>	<i>Smith, Duncan.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Aindrias.</i>	<i>Stanley, Brian.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Michael.</i>	<i>Tóibín, Peadar.</i>	
<i>Moynihan, Shane.</i>	<i>Wall, Mark.</i>	
<i>Murnane O'Connor, Jen- nifer.</i>	<i>Ward, Charles.</i>	
<i>Murphy, Michael.</i>	<i>Whitmore, Jennifer.</i>	
<i>Naughton, Hildegard.</i>		
<i>Neville, Joe.</i>		

<i>O'Brien, Darragh.</i>		
<i>O'Callaghan, Jim.</i>		
<i>O'Connell, Maeve.</i>		
<i>O'Connor, James.</i>		
<i>O'Dea, Willie.</i>		
<i>O'Donnell, Kieran.</i>		
<i>O'Donovan, Patrick.</i>		
<i>O'Meara, Ryan.</i>		
<i>O'Shea, John Paul.</i>		
<i>O'Sullivan, Pádraig.</i>		
<i>Ó Cearúil, Naoise.</i>		
<i>Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.</i>		
<i>Ó Muirí, Naoise.</i>		
<i>Scanlon, Eamon.</i>		
<i>Smith, Brendan.</i>		
<i>Smyth, Niamh.</i>		
<i>Timmins, Edward.</i>		
<i>Toole, Gillian.</i>		
<i>Troy, Robert.</i>		

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

Question declared carried.

An Ceann Comhairle: We move to Questions on Policy or Legislation. We will begin with Deputy O'Rourke. I ask Deputies to pose their questions within their time of one minute.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: It is scandalous that, every year, schools are forced to rely on so-called voluntary contributions from parents to plug funding gaps due to the Government's failure to provide proper investment. Parents already pay €54 million in contributions and now, as the funding crisis in schools escalates, it looks like they will be asked to pay even more. The Catholic Primary School Management Association, CPSMA, says it has never been contacted by as many schools in financial distress as it was last year. It says that voluntary contributions will have to be increased unless the Government steps up with realistic funding. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, has committed an extra €24 per child in capitation, but this goes nowhere near covering increased insurance, energy and electricity costs. As with the €1,000 third level fee increase, if last year's cost-of-living package is not repeated, schools will be down funding next year. Will the Minister assure parents that schools will be adequately funded and will not have to bear the financial burden of so-called free education? Will there be a cost-of-living package for schools?

Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy is aware, this Government and my Department are committed to supporting our schools and ensuring that they have adequate funding. Capitation increased only in the last few weeks. This was secured in last year's budget. Any negotiations and agreements on next year's budget will be happening in the coming weeks.

3 o'clock

I am also interested in not only providing more supports for schools but also making sure we can, where possible, reduce costs. That is why our climate action plan is so important in making sure we retrofit buildings and reduce bills. We should also look at other costs schools are incurring around insurance and in other areas. The Deputy can be assured that we are absolutely committed to supporting schools in as many ways as possible.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: In response to a question I put to him a number of months ago regarding autism supports and services for children in my constituency, the Taoiseach said he was of the view that many of these services should be provided through schools, and I agree. That being the case, why are so many schools in Dublin South-West being denied additional special needs assistants, SNAs, despite a clearly identified need? I have been contacted by many schools in my constituency, such as Firhouse Educate Together, Cnoc Mhuire Senior School in Killinarden and Scoil Aoife Community National School in Citywest, to name but a few, which have all be denied additional SNA allocation by the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, despite significant evidence of need being submitted and despite recommendations by special educational needs organisers, SENOs, who carried out the reviews. I would like to clarify why so many schools in Dublin South-West and around the country are being denied the additional SNAs they desperately need. Is there in effect a recruitment freeze in place?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. SNAs are an integral part of schools in supporting children and I acknowledge the work they do. By the end of this year, we will have more SNAs than we have ever had before. There will be more than 23,000 SNAs, including the 1,600 additional SNAs provided for in last year's budget. They are allocated through the NCSE and that is based on recommendations by SENOs who look at the needs of the entire school, as opposed to individual children. As the Deputy will be aware, in recent weeks, schools were written to by the NCSE highlighting the allocations they would receive. Schools that are to see a reduction will not see it until next year when we have a redeployment scheme in place to make sure we provide stability and clarity for SNAs and schools. I am aware that some schools received an increase in their SNA allocation while for others the allocations remained the same. It is important that it is done through the NCSE and is based on the needs of individual schools. A further increase in SNA allocations is something I will work towards with my colleagues through the budget negotiations.

Deputy Liam Quaide: The scale of the crisis in primary care services for young people is so serious that the HSE is avoiding parliamentary questions about it. Only after 11 weeks did I receive a response from the HSE Dublin and north-east region on its psychology waiting lists, and no wonder. The longest waiting time there involves a child who was initially referred to disability services an incredible nine years ago. I have not received any response yet from the HSE Dublin and midlands region 12 weeks after submitting a parliamentary question, despite repeated follow-up by me. Primary care services for young people were neglected by successive Governments, long before the current recruitment restrictions and long before the official embargo. In addition, many young people are being redirected from children's disability net-

work teams to primary care without the necessary staff being recruited to see them. Families are being passed from one waiting list to another for services that are so out of reach that they may as well not exist. Will the Minister commit to a comprehensive recruitment drive for primary care child and adolescent services? We cannot continue with a Government ideology-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy Quaide. I call the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill.

Deputy Liam Quaide: -----that sees staffing of essential services as a cost, not as an investment.

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I will repeat some of the things that have been said about recruitment. The numbers are up by 25% over that period. The pay and numbers strategy resulted in a net increase of 2,000 people into the health system, with 2,000 people who had temporary contracts made permanent, 2,000 vacancies and a net uplift of 2,000 people. I will be happy to provide the detail to the Deputy.

Nevertheless, we continue to recruit. We have several thousand more people to recruit this year. We are doing our best to meet the targets. I met CORU as recently as yesterday in respect of trying to get people onto the register as quickly as possible to be able to meet many of the therapeutic needs children desperately need.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Does the Minister remember the promise of €200-per-month childcare that vanished into thin air, which he and Fine Gael promised before the election? The problem is that there is no childcare available to parents in any case. In the Blakestown area of Dublin West, we hear that Ready, Steady, Learn, a not-for-profit early learning childcare service catering for 43 children, could close. A parent from the Blanchardstown-Castleknock area contacted me who is a full-time working parent and despite best efforts cannot get any after-school care for her daughter. Does the Minister agree that private or for-profit childcare cannot work? Can you run a school or college at a profit? No, you cannot, and you cannot do it with childcare either. Parents, the children or the workers will end up paying for the Government's broken promises and lack of investment.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Deputy is completely ignoring what is after happening over the last number of years. Childcare investment has quadrupled from €260 million in 2015 to €1.37 billion in 2025. This is significant State investment in childcare, along with the affordability supports that underpin it. The Minister, Deputy Foley, is ambitious to continue to do more to support parents with the affordability of childcare. It is unfair to dismiss many small and medium enterprises that provide a really important service in the communities we represent in west Dublin or elsewhere.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I did not dismiss them.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Deputy dismissed them in how she described them. They provide a really important part of supports for childcare across communities in this country. They also need to be supported in how we manage the budget process.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: This is a terrible deflection. I did not mention that. I said there were not enough.

Deputy Michael Collins: Island funding is crucial for many of our islands but its distribu-

tion needs closer scrutiny. The Bere Island Projects Group, which covers Bere Island, Whiddy Island and Dursey Island, has three full-time staff and must manage office, utilities and running costs from a budget that saw only a 2.1% increase. This is insufficient for standard cost-of-living requirements, in comparison to smaller islands like Inishturk and Inishbofin which received much higher increases of 28.4% and 16.6%, respectively, despite Bere Island having approximately 100 more residents than Clare Island, which received a 23% increase. We do not begrudge these islands the extra funding they get, as all non-Gaeltacht islands face sustainability challenges. Bere Island simply asks for parity with other islands. Without adequate investment, Bere Island, Dursey Island and Whiddy Island face further depopulation and loss of culture and sustainable business and tourism projects. Will the Government reconsider the funding allocation to better support the Bere Island Projects Group and ensure parity with other islands?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy Collins. The Government and the Minister, Deputy Calleary, are committed to continuing support for the islands. This is reflected in his submission to me as part of the national development plan but also in advance of budget 2026. I do not have specific detail relating to the individual allocations for the different islands the Deputy referred to but I will ask the Minister to revert to the Deputy directly. I know the Minister of State, Deputy O’Sullivan, has been similarly reflecting the need to support Bere Island.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: In the past decade, according to figures provided by the Minister’s Department, the number of civil servants has increased from about 36,000 to 53,000, which is an almost 50% increase. In figures provided to me by the HSE with regard to whole-time equivalents, the numbers employed by the HSE have increased from 107,274 to 148,268, a 38.2% increase. We have seen today a report from the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council that overspending by Departments this year is set to top €2 billion. While I totally agree that, with a growing population, more complex needs and a traditional under-resourcing of certain areas of government and the health service, we need to expand. I have two related questions. How can we ensure that these increases in both staff resources and spending are resulting in improved delivery to citizens? Second, in the event of a global economic downturn, how can we ensure that public current expenditure will be kept under control?

Deputy Jack Chambers: Since 2015, the population has been growing significantly and we have had a clear policy intent to support increased provision of public services in health, education and disability services. Part of the work we are doing as part of the medium-term expenditure framework is assessing what the appropriate number is in for the medium term in the context of the pay and numbers strategy, and what the envelope will be to fulfil that need. Separate from that piece of work, there is a need to drive and focus on outputs and delivery across public services, which is something we are all centrally focused on.

The Deputy referenced that IFAC has pointed out potential overspends this year. Some of the interventions we have made are on education, for example, with respect to the increased demand, provision and need in special education, and also additional supports around social and affordable housing, which is a pressing need, as we know, across communities. How we calibrate and assess the broader medium-term need of pay and numbers will be an important decision as part of our medium-term expenditure strategy.

An Ceann Comhairle: I welcome our guests in the Public Gallery from Cushenstown Women’s Shed.

Deputy Edward Timmins: The N81 national road runs from Tallaght in south Dublin through west Wicklow and onward to Carlow. It functions as the principal transport artery for west Wicklow and parts of counties Kildare and Carlow. I will make two major points. The N81 is one of the most dangerous roads in the country, as proven by several studies. Second, the N81 is the only national road out of Dublin that has never been upgraded. It carries major traffic volumes. A preferred route option was chosen but shelved in 2018. This needs to be put into the national development plan, NDP. I ask that it be considered for inclusion in the new NDP.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy. A number of road safety interventions have been made and are being made to the N81. Funding of €400,000 has been provided for realignment of the section near Stratford-on-Slaney and technical advisers have also been appointed to develop this scheme through a planning application. Funding has also been allocated to provide for traffic calming measures on the N81 adjacent to Hollywood village as well as for smaller safety interventions at Blessington and Baltinglass. When it comes to the national development plan and the prioritisation of roads projects on which the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, will engage, we are clear that we want to see many of the roads projects in the NDP, which are important across our country, advance. The Minister will have to revert to the Deputy directly regarding the N81. However, it is important that we continue to support the measures being taken around the existing road and the road safety interventions which will make a difference.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: We have a domestic violence epidemic in this country, North and South. Every single week now in my weekly clinics, women disclose domestic violence to me. Reporting of domestic violence has increased everywhere, including in Domestic Violence Response Galway. It is clear that something needs to change. I understand and recognise that is an enormous task to undertake, as domestic violence is an epidemic. However, there are certain things we can help with, especially when it comes to housing being a particular barrier for women who have left a domestic abuse relationship. Councils do not deal with women who have left an abusive relationship as a category under their hardship terms. This is something that the Government needs to look at. There should be more help in place for women who have left domestic violence.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy for raising this really important issue. I will start by acknowledging the bravery of so many victims of domestic and gender-based violence in speaking out. These voices are a stark reminder that although improvements have been made, we need to keep the momentum going to achieve our objective of zero tolerance of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. This topic was discussed at the North-South Ministerial Council and is obviously an issue reflected throughout our island. There have been significant increases in funding, which has tripled since 2020. With the establishment of Cuan, we want to continue to build momentum. There will be an additional 80 refuge spaces by 2026. We are happy to work with the Deputy in driving that in the coming period.

Deputy William Aird: Will the Minister today commit to honouring the programme for Government promise to continue to reduce the student contribution fee during the lifetime of this Government? The policy has had a real impact, reducing the cost of education and easing pressure on families. This Government must stick to our commitment to support working families, deliver on the student contribution fee promise and build on the progress already made.

Does the Minister realise what has happened with regard to this €1,000? It is putting 100 hours extra work on all young students who are working hard during the summer in fast food

takeaways and shops, milking cows or driving tractors. That is what this €1,000 is doing. Not every student, indeed not many at all, has parents with deep pockets who can come up with this €1,000. There are young kids in every one of our communities who now have to work an extra 100 hours during the summer in order to pay the extra €1,000. The Minister referred earlier to extending SUSI grants and all of that but the bottom line is that they have to have that money when they go to college in September. I am pleading with the Minister not to go ahead with this.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy. I am not sure whether he was here during Leaders' Questions when I responded to many of the Deputies who raised this issue. What has been stated up to this point is that the one-off temporary measures taken in the past 12 months are not continuing in the context of budget 2026. However, there will be a real focus on affordability of public services in education, childcare and healthcare. That is something many Government Ministers want to prioritise. In the aftermath of the summer economic statement, we absolutely acknowledge the need to support students and those in an education setting, whether at primary or third level. The Minister, Deputy Lawless, will engage in that as part of the budget process. We have to respect the budget process in advance of it actually occurring. We are due to commence that over the coming weeks. We will be able to set out on budget day what decisions we will take for budget 2026.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I ask that time be provided for a Private Members' Bill I introduced before Christmas, colloquially known as the right to be forgotten Bill, in order that it could proceed to Second Stage. The Bill seeks to prohibit financial service providers from discriminating against cancer survivors who have completed treatment and have reached key milestones. It aims to ensure that a person's past illness does not continue to unfairly restrict their access to life insurance or other financial products. The Bill progressed to Committee Stage in the previous Seanad in Private Members' time with strong cross-party support, support from the Irish Cancer Society and the backing of a former Minister for Finance. It also gives effect to a clear commitment in the programme for Government to enshrine the right to be forgotten for cancer survivors in Irish law. Cancer survivors deserve to move on with their lives without facing ongoing barriers rooted in their medical past. I urge the new Minister for Finance to prioritise this legislation and ensure time is allocated for its advancement.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I acknowledge the good work Deputy Ardagh has done in this area, both in this Dáil and in the last Seanad. She galvanised support across the various political parties to ensure that cancer survivors who have come through cancer for a prolonged period can access life insurance when availing of a mortgage. Owing to the good work the Deputy has done and the legislation that has been drafted, I am pleased to advise that my Department will be uploading an electronic submission for the Cabinet's consideration next Tuesday. If the Cabinet is duly minded, I would hope that we would be able to introduce the legislation before the summer recess, recognising a commitment in the programme for Government. We would not have been able to move it at the pace we have moved it were it not for the Deputy's work. I acknowledge that and thank the Deputy.

Deputy Pa Daly: Jordan Devlin is an Irish citizen. He is one of the Filton 18. He has been held on remand in Wormwood Scrubs since August 2024 on charges, among others, of criminal damage and violent disorder. The charges relate to dismantling weapons, including a quadcopter drone which is used in the relentless attacks on Gaza.

An Ceann Comhairle: A question, Deputy. Is this a live case?

Deputy Pa Daly: I am coming to the question.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is it a case that has been prosecuted?

Deputy Pa Daly: He is being held on remand at the moment in Wormwood Scrubs.

An Ceann Comhairle: I urge caution.

Deputy Pa Daly: The trial is not until later in the year. I am asking the Minister to take up this case with the British Government because Mr. Devlin is being held on charges which are not counter-terrorism charges, even though that is the method being used to keep him on remand. He and some of his co-accused will be in jail until next year. I ask the Minister to take up this case as urgently as possible to have him released on bail.

Deputy Jack Chambers: This issue obviously involves specific, individual circumstances which relate to the Ministers for foreign affairs and justice. I can ask the Ministers to respond to the Deputy as appropriate.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I raise the issue of students. It has been a bad couple of weeks for them. I listened carefully to the Minister's earlier answers. He framed this in the context of a once-off measure, as did the Minister, Deputy Lawless. However, the programme for Government states that the Government will continue to reduce student contribution fees over the lifetime of the Government, to ease the financial burden on students and families, at the start of each academic year - not some academic years. Some of the Government Deputies are jumping up and down about this as well. That is no harm but we need some real discussion about this because the Union of Students in Ireland, USI, is saying students will be deferring degrees as a result of this or even studying abroad. We are back to the €3,000 fees.

An Ceann Comhairle: A question please, Deputy.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I have the question. I ask the Ceann Comhairle to bear with me for a moment. The rest of the Deputies got good latitude.

An Ceann Comhairle: They did not, I will have you know. The Deputy's time is up. I thank him. Will the Minister respond? It is the same question.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Was the reduction just for last year because there was an election?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is way over his time limit and did not ask the question as prepared.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Was it just an election stunt for last year or is the Minister going to turn this around and do the right thing? That is the question.

An Ceann Comhairle: Everybody else is entitled to fair time and everybody got fair time. The Deputy is out of order. I call the Minister.

Deputy Brian Stanley: They try to work part-time jobs.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. Many others have raised it and as I have said to others, this is a matter for budget 2026. We will engage with the Minister, Deputy Lawless, in that context. All measures and priorities are reflected in the budgetary discussions that the Government will undertake in advance of budget 2026. The same applies

1 July 2025

to the issue the Deputy has raised, as it does to many of the other priorities reflected across this House. The parameters we will set in July will outline what is possible for 2026. That is how the Government will proceed over the next period of weeks.

Deputy Brian Stanley: All the money was just for the election.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's question time is over. I call Deputy Cummins.

Deputy Jen Cummins: Some of the parents in our school system are having to act like fundraisers because the schools are not fully funded. I know the Government has increased the capitation grant, which is welcome. However, having spoken to many different schools, DEIS schools in particular, I know that fundraising is very difficult because families are struggling with general day-to-day costs. The same is true in special schools. Parents are exhausted from the level of care needs. At what point in the future will we be able to get rid of these voluntary contributions altogether? They are there to help schools. We would love for the funding raised to pay for the icing-on-the-cake stuff but it is the bread-and-butter stuff the money is covering, including the heating, lighting and all that stuff. At what point will we be able to eliminate that altogether and be fully funded? I totally appreciate everything that has been said about budgets-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. Time is up.

Deputy Jen Cummins: -----but I am wondering about forward planning. I thank the Minister.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister to respond.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy. Voluntary contributions are by their nature voluntary. It is up to each individual school to decide what it asks parents for. My objective as Minister is to ensure they have the support, funding and capitation they need for the day-to-day basics. That is why we recently increased the capitation. For next September, the rates for primary and post-primary schoolchildren will increase. Of course, there is a clear commitment in the programme for Government to increase that further. As I mentioned earlier, I want not just to see how we can increase funding for schools but also how we can reduce their overall costs. I do not just want to reduce the cost of electricity, lighting and heating but also the cost of insurance and costs in other areas. It will always be up to the school to decide whether or not it wants to ask parents for voluntary contributions, whether for school tours, technical equipment or otherwise. My objective is to ensure that in respect of the day-to-day costs of books, ICT equipment and other things, schools are supported and provided for through the annual budgets. Of course, this year's budget will be no different.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: When will the Government publish the long-awaited policy framework on the use of commercial drones in this country? It was due in 2023. It is now 2025 and we still have nothing. All the while, Government Ministers, when abroad on trade missions, have been promoting Ireland as a destination for unmanned aircraft or drones. Of course, drones can have a positive impact, particularly in the area of health, but there is a reality that communities are crying out for some sort of protection. All the while the Government has been stalling on introducing that policy, while inviting companies into the likes of Blanchardstown and Glasnevin, the communities the Minister and I represent, and treating them like guinea pigs.

I submitted a freedom of information, FOI, request for some of the briefing notes that the

Minister got in his time in the Department of Transport and elsewhere. Those notes described Ireland as a prime unmanned aircraft system, UAS, testing environment. They state that Ireland has the edge of an uncluttered airspace. I could go on. When will the Government finally publish the policy framework for unmanned commercial drones in this country?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy. As she knows, this issue is regulated by the Irish Aviation Authority in the context of the EU legislative framework that exists for drones. I know the Minister for Transport, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, is working on finalising the draft policy framework and expects it to be published this summer. There was previous consultation on the framework and extensive work has been carried out in the aviation division of the Department of Transport. That is the latest position I have been given relating to the publication of policy.

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher: The programme for Government pledges to explore the provision of an additional surgical hub for the north west in a timely manner. On 24 February, I attended a meeting with HSE executives, who, after pressing, indicated that Sligo was the preferred choice. Shortly after that, the Minister visited Letterkenny. She came in listening mode. She listened to the professionals there and met the TDs and Oireachtas Members. She had a meeting with the consultants and representatives of the 171 GPs who favour a centre in Letterkenny. She is again meeting them this evening. I thank the Minister for doing that. She was in listening mode. I have every confidence that she will take the right decision for the people of the north west.

Of course, we took all of that in good faith. We had meetings with the-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Deputy.

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher: I know I am being squeezed out-----

An Ceann Comhairle: You are not.

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher: -----but this is important.

An Ceann Comhairle: That was the Deputy's minute.

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher: The Ceann Comhairle would appreciate if this-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Under Questions on Policy and Legislation, Deputies have one minute. The Deputy's time is up. We are over time so I am giving the Deputy latitude by taking the question at all. I ask him to pose his question to the Minister.

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher: Will the Government confirm that a decision was taken in a back room with the Lowry supporters? Was a decision taken that the additional surgical hub would be in Sligo at the expense of Letterkenny?

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher: Lo and behold, the Minister of State, Deputy Harkin, is here in the House-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister to respond.

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher: This is important to Donegal.

1 July 2025

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy should understand the format. There is one minute-----

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher: I do understand it.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is over time.

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher: I understand it, but the Ceann Comhairle was not as severe with others.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, I am not being severe. I am asking you to stick to the format.

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher: Can I ask the Minister, the Government-----

An Ceann Comhairle: To be fair to all colleagues-----

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher: I could have placed the question now.

An Ceann Comhairle: You could, but you should have placed it in your time. I ask the Minister to respond.

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher: I want to say very clearly in this House that I am a Donegal man and I am not going to accept that people from outside Donegal would take decisions for Donegal. I want to know if this decision was taken by the Government in a back room.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has asked the question. I thank the Deputy. I call the Minister to respond.

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher: Do not thank me at all.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy. I know and understand some of what is being said around Letterkenny and surgical capacity for the north-west region. The Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, has been engaging with the Deputy and other representatives of the north west in the context of the surgical demand that is there. She is engaging in that process in good faith. Over the coming period, we will set out the future plans around surgical capacity for the north west, where there is significant demand. She is listening to the community and the clinicians. She will continue that process over the coming period and will then set out her plans in the context of the capital provision over the medium term.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Would the Minister of State, Deputy Harkin, not respond?

Disregard of Historic Offences for Consensual Sexual Activity Between Men Bill 2025: First Stage

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to make provision for a process for the disregard of certain historic criminal convictions arising from consensual sexual activity between men; to amend the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014; and to provide for related matters.

Tá fir aeracha fós ag fulaingt mar thoradh ar choiriúlú atá 30 bliain thart.

As Dublin marked Pride this weekend, LGBT+ people faced slurry in Ballymena, bans in Budapest and shootings in New York. We think of them as we work to undo the past criminalisation of consensual gay sex in this State with this disregard Bill, one of the 95 recommendations of the working group's report. I thank the six parties that have signed this Bill. I thank, in particular, Deputies Nash, Rice, Paul Murphy, O'Gorman and Catherine Connolly for cosigning the Bill, as well as the LGBT restorative justice campaigners. Curim fáilte roimh those in the Gallery today. To them I say "Well done". I also thank the legal drafters, Ms Céile Varley and Mr. Ciaran Bracken, the law firms Goodbody and Clifford Chance, and everybody else who contributed to the legislation.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Many men live with the trauma inflicted upon them by a society that told them they should not exist. Despite an apology in 2018, no action has been taken by Government to put a process in place to disregard these convictions. Many men are living with the shame and stigma of these convictions. The shame and trauma drove many people to their graves. Gay men were driven underground by this criminalisation. This Bill is long overdue and I urge the Government to support it. I stand here as a gay man. I am fortunate to live at a time when I can openly express who I am.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I thank Deputy Ó Snodaigh and the members of the LGBT+ Restorative Justice Campaign, Kieran Rose, Brian Sheehan, Karl Hayden and others, for their work. I am delighted to co-sign this Bill on behalf of the Social Democrats. It is now 32 years since homosexuality was decriminalised, but some men are still living with the negative impact of criminalisation. Let us be clear: the prosecutions and convictions of gay and bi men for consensual sex was a gross violation of their human rights and did immeasurable damage. These arrests and convictions destroyed lives. The laws also had a negative impact on those who were not convicted because the threat of prosecution was used to harass people in the community. The archaic laws also had a major impact on the provision of public services, including HIV-AIDS prevention. The State must right the wrongs of the past. We are running out of time for some of these men. The Government must urgently act to disregard these historical convictions and must deliver true equality for LGTB people in Ireland.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I thank Deputy Ó Snodaigh and the campaigners on this issue. It is outrageous that there are still people today walking around with historical convictions for the so-called crime of being gay. The Government, of course, will say no one should be criminalised for consensual sexual activity, but a working group was set up to examine disregarding those convictions back in 2021 and still nothing has been done. The Minister has promised there will be heads of a Bill in due course, but due course in this case is decades overdue. Here we have an answer. This is not just a matter of righting an historical wrong; it is about sending a message at a time when LGBTQ rights are under attack in this country and globally that love is love and homosexuality is never a crime.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I thank Deputy Ó Snodaigh for bringing forward this legislation and the campaign group for highlighting the issue. I want us to recall the original provision under which these men were convicted. Section 61 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 states that "Whosoever shall be convicted of the abominable crime of buggery, committed either with mankind or with any animal shall be liable ... to be kept in penal servitude for life". It is worth recalling the framing of homosexuality in that legislation from the 1860s, the absolute moral condemnation and the attempts to heap all sorts of condemnation on being gay. We know

1 July 2025

this same approach is adopted today. It was adopted in Poland up to the recent change after the general election there, and it is adopted in Hungary today. We see this same language online. I think this is why it is so important we are moving to disregard these convictions.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the campaigners and Deputy Ó Snodaigh for bringing forward this Bill. It aims to provide for the disregarding of certain criminal convictions that arose from a selection of legislation all through the 19th century and, indeed, one Act going back to the 17th century, as well as the Common Law. It had nothing to do with justice or fairness. It was homophobia at its worst and a set of values that had nothing to do with love between two people. It is high time we got rid of it. We are not only recognising the injustice but actually setting up a process that will allow us to undo that injustice and to finally bring fairness.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

Deputy Mary Butler: No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

I would love if the Government also adopted this legislation as quickly as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Animal Health and Welfare (Welfare of Pigs) Bill 2025: First Stage

Deputy Paul Murphy: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013 to improve the welfare of pigs by prohibiting teeth-clipping, tail-docking and castration, limiting the use of tusk reduction and regulating sow stalls and farrowing crates.

I start by thanking the National Animal Rights Association, NARA, especially Laura Broxson and Dr. Alice Brough. This important legislation could not have been drafted without their help. I also thank the many other campaigners and supporters in the Gallery from NARA, Animal Rebellion Ireland and My Lovely Horse Rescue. We had a lively protest in front of the Dáil earlier, which showed the strength of public opinion on this issue. We have banned fur farming and the use of wild animals in circuses. This Bill can be the next step for animal rights and animal welfare in this country.

NARA and Animal Rebellion Ireland carried out two very important investigations last year into the kind of abhorrent practices going on in Irish pig farms every day. All the pig farms were selected at random and activists recorded extensive videos of the abuses. All of them, not one or two, showed pigs and piglets living in appalling conditions that are very hard for anyone

to watch. The Department of agriculture has seen the footage because it has been sent to it, but there is no sign of it doing anything about it. Sick and dying pigs with open wounds and weeping, open sores were left to suffer and die in filthy conditions. Pigs had their tails painfully docked or cut off, right up to the root. Tail docking is supposed to be banned, but loopholes in the current law are so wide up to 95% of Irish pigs still have their tails docked. Sows were trapped in farrowing crates and sow stalls so narrow they could not turn around or move more than a few centimetres. This is to ensure they never get a moment's break from suckling the 15 piglets now born in each litter. Anyone who has breastfed a baby would wince at the torture of it. Litter sizes have increased from ten piglets in 2000 to 15 today because of genetic selection, again with no regard to sow welfare. The only concern seems to be for the number of pigs produced and the size of the profits to be made.

Most pigs in Ireland spend their whole lives indoors from the moment they are born. People are not used to seeing pigs being farmed and running around on grass because they are inside for their entire lives. The only time they experience fresh air or sunlight is when they are being loaded onto a truck on the way to the slaughterhouse. No animal should be forced to live a life like that, but especially not intelligent, sociable animals like pigs.

The Bill being introduced by People Before Profit today seeks to address some of the worst abuses in the pig industry. Section 1 bans the mutilation of pigs, including teeth clipping, tail docking and castration. Section 2 outlaws sow stalls and farrowing crates.

When I asked the Department of agriculture in April if it would take action to ban sow stalls and farrowing crates, it passed the buck to the European Union. It cited an EU Commission review of EU animal welfare legislation. As part of that, I was told there is a commitment to phase out the use of individual animal confinement, including sow crates and stalls, in line with scientific evidence and pending the outcome of an impact assessment. The Department also said it is taking measures to promote and move away from the use of sow farrowing crates and stalls. This included through grant aid to pig farmers. The Department, therefore, acknowledges that these practices are bad and should be phased out, but it is still dragging its feet. As campaigners and ordinary people, we need to hold those feet to the fire and force it to act. We did not wait for the European Union when we banned fur farming, we did not wait for the European Union when we banned wild animals in circuses and we do not have to wait for the rest of the European Union when it comes to banning pig mutilation, sow stalls and farrowing crates. The pig industry in this country is relatively small. Only a small number of pig farmers would need to be compensated for hardship when these inhumane conditions are banned. They can and should be supported financially to transition to other less damaging forms of agriculture. It is simply unacceptable for the profits of a few to be prioritised over the welfare of so many. Some 3.5 million pigs are forced to live and die in inhumane conditions in Ireland every year. This has to stop and this Bill would stop it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

Deputy Mary Butler: No, it is not opposed.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I reject totally what the Deputy has said.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, this is First Stage.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: We have had Roughty Valley Co-Op-----

1 July 2025

An Ceann Comhairle: Before the Deputy says another word, it is the First Stage.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: -----with 6,000 pigs in Kilgarvan for the last 53 years.

An Ceann Comhairle: Look, Deputy, understand the format of the House. He will have the Second Stage debate to make his statement.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: It is very unfair to make pig farmers out to be bad people, when they have been providing-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy will have Second Stage.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: -----employment for so many people over many years and providing food for our people.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Deputy calling a vote on this?

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am not calling a vote today-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. I ask him to resume his seat.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: -----but I am totally against it.

An Ceann Comhairle: I understand that. Please resume your seat.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I can tell you-----

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputies. Second Stage will be taken in Private Members' time. Second Stage is where Deputies make a statement on a matter.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am entitled to talk about something as important as this.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am afraid that is the problem; you are not because this is First Stage. Before the Deputy comes in and tries to make a statement, I ask him to try to understand when he is allowed to speak.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Was I not left talk the last day about the foxes, when-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I do not believe so. It may have been a different-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: -----they brought in something else ridiculous.

An Ceann Comhairle: Take it up with me, Deputy.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The foxes and the pigs are taking over.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: They are still attacking farmers.

An Ceann Comhairle: We will take it up. I will speak to the Deputy about it privately.

Appointment of An Leas-Ombudsman Póilíneachta: Motion

Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Jack Chambers): I move:

That Dáil Éireann, noting that the Government on the 24th June, 2025, nominated Brian Doherty for appointment by the President as An Leas-Ombudsman Póilíneachta, recommends, pursuant to section 171(3)(b) of the Policing, Security and Community Safety Act 2024 that Brian Doherty be appointed by the President as An Leas-Ombudsman Póilíneachta.

Question put and agreed to.

Fourth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection: Motion

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

That Dáil Éireann, pursuant to Standing Order 33, and with effect from 2nd July, 2025, approves the Fourth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 27th June, 2025, and discharges members from Committees and appoints members to Committees accordingly.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Census of Population

1. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach the date for the next planned census. [26980/25]

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): On 1 March 2022, the Government formally decided to conduct a census of population in 2027 to be carried out by the Central Statistics Office, CSO. The exact census date has not yet been decided. It is expected, however, that census data collection will run in April and May of 2027. Census 2027 will be a major undertaking for the CSO as for the first time in Irish history, the public will have the option of completing the census form online. This is a complex digital transformation programme that involves a fundamental redesign of how the census is conducted. While the majority of the public is likely to avail of the new online option, it is expected that several hundred thousand households will opt to handwrite their census responses

on a paper form. Both online and paper census forms will be available in Irish and English. The CSO continues to advance preparatory work for census 2027. The final date of the census and the final content of the census form will be subject to Government decision in due course.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is vital that we have information about the people we have here and the level of need. We all understand the issues, be they housing or disability. It makes sense that the means of acquiring this information be streamlined so I hope this happens perfectly. Sometimes we must deal with legacy issues involving funding. This is an issue in Louth, where I am from, particularly with regard to the HSE, and the Minister of State's bailiwick of mental health. We have lower bed provision in Louth and Meath than is the case across this State. We need to see movement on the promised ten-bed extension in the department of psychiatry in Drogheda. I welcome the interaction with the Minister of State as regards the Mental Health Bill. We have dealt comprehensively with the issues as regards ensuring people can be admitted to be treated and can get the treatment that is necessary. I have seen where we did not have room in the department of psychiatry in Drogheda. I will not go into any detail but I have heard of someone who was put in a facility in Dublin awaiting space. The space did not open and the patient was released before a proper aftercare plan was produced. We have a very specific issue. It is about having the information, dealing with it and those legacy issues and ensuring we cover all the bases.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: What is the point of having the CSO provide figures and details regarding the population across the country if the Government keeps ignoring those figures when it comes to the delivery of key services? The CSO tells us how many older people we have, but we are not providing enough nursing home beds for them. The CSO tells us the number of younger people, but we are not providing enough school places for those children. We know that the CSO gives information about a cohort of people who are looking to buy houses, but the Government refuses to provide the necessary housing for them. There are certain counties, particularly in the mid-east, that have seen their population radically increase over time yet Government funding *per capita* of those counties has not kept pace. Meath has the lowest number of doctors *per capita* in the country. I am the chair of the Save Navan Hospital campaign and I can tell the Minister of State that a significant number of people who go to the accident and emergency unit in Our Lady's Hospital in Navan are people who cannot get a doctor. Pregnant women who cannot get a doctor have contacted me. People living in Meath for 20 years are still going to their doctor in Dublin because they cannot get a doctor in Meath. I know a person who rang 12 doctors' surgeries in one day trying to get an appointment but could not get into any of them. In the past few days, a doctor in Trim found that her book filled up in the space of half a day as soon as she opened. There is a radical disconnect between the delivery of services and the information the CSO gives us and that has to change.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: It is really important that when we have CSO information, we use it to plan for services in areas. I look at my own county of Meath, which has the lowest number of mental health beds, the lowest number of GPs and the lowest number of gardaí per population; has some of the largest class sizes in the State; and has the lowest number of playgrounds per population. The issue of GPs has been in the news in the past 24 hours. I have written to the Minister for Health and the HSE about a case in Ashbourne where, thankfully, we have a new GP. This GP's practice is at risk because they are not being allowed access to the GMS scheme because they are waiting for a lift to be installed in the practice. A reasonable accommodation has been made in the meantime but the GMS scheme is a firm "No". This needs to change. We are desperately in need of GPs so when we have one, we need to hold on them

and I ask the Minister of State to look at that.

Deputy Mary Butler: The question asked the date for the next planned census. All three Deputies have raised issues relating to health and I am not in a position to answer them. What I will take on board is the importance of the CSO and the data it provides. It is very useful to plan for services.

Deputy Tóibín said we do not have enough nursing home beds. I am very proud to stand here, as the former Minister of State with responsibility for older people over the past five years, and say that we have the same number of people in nursing homes today under fair deal as we did in 2019. This is because of the Government's investment in home care, day care and meals on wheels, which means that people are able to live for longer in their own homes and communities with the correct wraparound supports. We have capacity in private nursing homes of between 5% and 10% where we do not have capacity in HSE-run community nursing homes. I accept that there may not be capacity in the Deputy's area. It might be 20 or 30 miles down the road but there is some capacity there.

It is important to note that we are planning for a move to an online census with the next census. In September 2022, the CSO undertook a small proof-of-concept exercise that explored the feasibility of using an online platform to collect census-type responses. The CSO ran a pilot survey between 2 September and 25 October 2024. The survey was voluntary and took place in 20,000 homes across six counties. Its main objectives were to test the new online census form, the new processes and the technology that were developed to deliver an online census and new and updated census questions. Further development of the data collection and processing systems is under way, taking into account the findings of the census pilot survey and the need to scale up for a full census. Extensive testing of census processes and technologies will take place in 2026. I am happy to take any questions regarding the census.

Review of Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004: Statements

Minister for Education (Deputy Helen McEntee): I am pleased to be here today to share the report of the review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs, EPSN, Act 2004 which was published last Wednesday. It is a significant milestone in our shared work to create a more inclusive and equitable education system. The report allows for a moment of reflection - a moment to honour the hopes that inspired this landmark legislation introduced over two decades ago and to take the opportunity not only to see how far we have come but also how far we still need to go and, most importantly, the steps that are required to get there.

This is a significant step forward in shaping education policy and law based on the real lived experiences of children and young people with special educational needs and helping them achieve better educational outcomes. At the outset I sincerely thank everyone who has been involved in this review. The Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and I met most of them last week. The process has been deeply collaborative. I acknowledge the extensive engagement from advocacy organisations, school leaders, staff, parents representative bodies, professionals, Departments and, most importantly, the children and young people, many of whom have

engaged in this themselves.

The area of special educational needs continues to be a priority for this Government, my Department, the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan and for me. While there is much work to do we have seen substantial progress in recent years with hundreds of new special education classes provided each year as well as new special schools around the country. For the upcoming school year alone, we will have at least 400 new special education classes across the country as well as five new special schools. We are working to ensure that young people are placed in these schools as soon as possible. These will provide up to 2,700 places for children who need them. An additional 1,200 places will become available due to the movement of students which means for the upcoming year alone we will have over 3,900 available places for children seeking a special class or special school place. As I said, the most important thing is that we are making sure children are allocated those places in the place that is most appropriate to them and that their needs are supported in that school. I want to ensure that in the coming year these classes are sanctioned sooner and that places are made available to children earlier. We have brought forward the timelines for the sanctioning of classes even earlier. To do this, we are endeavouring to have all special classes sanctioned by 31 December this year for the 2026-2027 school year. The timeline for parents to register with the NCSE has also been brought forward. This will ensure that the NCSE has an earlier picture of demand that exists to allow for new special classes to be sanctioned sooner, allowing more time for these classes to be prepared, children enrolled, giving more certainty to parents and families. That is what this is all about - how we support parents and children and take away so many of the challenges and stresses that they face.

To ensure that children can access the services they require, we are also establishing the education therapy service which will see occupational therapists and speech and language therapists working in our special schools. Over the upcoming school year, we will see up to 90 therapists working in 45 special schools across the country as part of the initial roll-out of this service. The intention is that very quickly that will spread to the remaining special schools, to mainstream schools as well as special classes in them.

While the progress I have just outlined has been positive for children and families, I remain acutely aware of the real challenges some families still face, whether in securing a school place or accessing the right supports. This review is a critical step in ensuring our education system meets the needs of all children and reflects a renewed commitment to building a rights-based, inclusive system for the future.

When the EPSEN Act was first introduced in 2004 it represented a bold and necessary step forward for Ireland. For the first time, we enshrined in law a commitment to provide for the education of children with special educational needs in inclusive settings, wherever possible. While parts of the Act were commenced, some were never fully commenced in law, owing largely to overly-bureaucratic requirements of the original Act. The EPSEN Act made provision for an inclusive educational environment, an equal right to education, and assistance to acquire the skills to participate in society and live independently and above all to ensure that every child is supported to achieve their full potential. The Act also established the National Council for Special Education on a statutory footing. It is an independent but integral part of making sure we can provide those school places and that our children and schools are supported.

Since 2004, fundamental changes have occurred in the school curriculum and in teaching, learning and assessment practices, which have considerable bearing on children with additional

needs. There have also been considerable changes in how we allocate resources to schools to support children. Early years education has become an integral part of the education continuum, there has been major curriculum reform at primary and postprimary levels while developments in initial teacher education and continuing professional development have promoted active and experiential teaching and learning approaches, collective and collaborative planning and assessment for learning. Importantly, we are going to do more. As of next year, any person who is engaged in teacher training will have to do a mandatory placement in special education which has never happened to date. We are working to make sure the 79,000 teachers currently in schools are supported and upskilled in training around special education.

Inclusion, equality of opportunity and the rights of all children and young people to develop their full potential are central to our education policy. The then Minister of State with responsibility for special education and inclusion, Josepha Madigan, announced the review of the EPSSEN Act in December 2021 as the original legislative intention of the EPSSEN had outpaced its practical implementation. I would like to thank my predecessors in this role, the Minister, Deputy Foley, the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, and Josepha Madigan, who have continued to bring this important work to this stage and I was privileged with the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, to launch the report of the review last week.

The central purpose of this review was to assess whether there is an adequate legislative basis for the current and future educational provision for children with additional needs. It is about more than just structures but is about protecting the rights of children and families, ensuring high-quality educational experiences and that we are meeting students' needs. The review seeks to align policy and law with lived experience. We want to make sure every child with additional needs can access the right supports at the right time in the place that is most appropriate for them.

While the EPSSEN Act was a landmark in its time, establishing the National Council for Special Education and committing to inclusion, as I mentioned, it was never fully commenced. In the 20 years since the Act was passed, Ireland's legal and educational landscapes have evolved significantly. Major reforms have taken place in curriculum, teaching and assessment, as well as in the broader inclusion and equality agendas. Given these changes, fully commencing the Act as originally written was not a viable option. That is why we are now looking forward and why this review was so necessary.

It reflects one of the most comprehensive consultations ever carried out in the area of special education in Ireland and was led by the special education section of the Department of Education and Youth. In conducting the review, we have listened to students, parents, educators, advocacy groups and experts in special education. Their input has been vital and will continue to guide the implementation process. I want to sincerely thank everyone who took part in this review and shared their own experience. Over 28,000 people took part in the initial public survey, a remarkable response that reflects the depth of public interest and experience. A structured programme of focus groups followed, involving students, parents, educators and professionals. These groups helped explore key themes in more detail and ensured that under-represented voices were heard. Children and young people in particular were always at the centre of this work and we really wanted to hear from them about their experiences. We held focus groups with 80 students, 35 English-speaking face-to-face students and 45 Irish-speaking students, who were under the age of 18. Participants took part in adult focus-group meetings with four actual meetings in various locations throughout the country and one virtual meeting. We also engaged in focus groups with younger adults too, aged from 18 to 25 years. We placed

particular emphasis on ensuring children and young people could participate directly. I want to highlight the creation of an easy-read survey. That allowed children and persons of all abilities to share their views in a way that was accessible and meaningful. This was the first time such a process was used by my Department and was a method to ensure that all voices could be included. We received over 900 responses to the easy-read accessible online survey. No constraints were put on the body of work the review group has done. At a very early stages, my Department working with other Departments wanted to ensure every voice was heard, every concern could be raised and that nobody who was involved in the process felt it was constrained. We were not just looking at legislation but also at policy and all aspects of it. An academic review was completed to examine legislation, case law and international best practice. A very significant development captured in the academic review paper is the central position now given to the rights of the child and to the rights of persons with disabilities, as evidenced in legal judgments in Ireland and in international conventions to which Ireland is a signatory, notably the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UNCRPD. Ireland's ratification of the UNCRPD obliges it to ensure that Irish legislation and policy regarding inclusive education are consistent with its core features. The review and the recommendations outlined are fully aligned with this rights-based approach. The steering group, working group and advisory group met frequently, I think it was bi-weekly, to analyse the evidence and develop the recommendations presented in this report.

I will name some of the review's key findings. The process of reviewing the EPSEN Act has brought to light a number of areas where the participants considered that changes or developments in existing legislation, policy or practice were required. In particular, children and young people highlighted the importance of belonging, being respected and having access to life skills, active and experiential learning.

4 o'clock

They placed significant value on relationships, the entire school environment and making sure their voices were at the centre of everything we did and were heard in the decisions that affected them.

The report identified 51 recommendations. It is divided into 16 key themes where policy and legislative reform is required. Among them is a recommendation to consider bringing all school-aged children under a single Act to ensure a legal rights-based approach to inclusive education. We have the admissions Act, the Education Act and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act. We have to consider how we bring legislation together.

Another key area is the completion of the roadmap towards an inclusive education system, one that is proactive and not reactive and supports strong transitions from early years to post-primary and beyond. Much of this work is already happening in order to make sure that we look ahead, plan for the future and do not just react as perhaps we have done in the past.

Other findings related to student support plans, which the review recommends be given a statutory basis to ensure consistency and accountability in meeting individual needs. The report also calls for a review of language used in the area of additional needs, something that we need to be conscious of. Critically, the review reaffirmed the importance of the rights of the child, meaningful parental involvement and closer engagement between Departments and Government agencies. It also points to the need for continued investment in professional learning for the education workforce, something I have mentioned. I wish to stress that we are working on

an SNA workforce plan, which we hope to publish this September. These recommendations offer a comprehensive roadmap for change.

Many of the policy changes are stepping stones towards possible future legislation and can be progressed more quickly. Some of the recommendations we are already acting and moving on. I am committed to achieving these recommendations, working with the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and my colleagues not just in education, but in the Department of children and disability. Before the end of the year, we will publish an implementation plan. It will be grounded in these recommendations, which will guide how we move forward, strengthen the legislative and policy foundations of inclusive education and ensure proper implementation across the Government.

Ongoing engagement will remain a cornerstone of this next phase. It is important that the plan be published and this body of work happen. The most important thing we can do is make sure that all of the recommendations are acted on and we have a very clear plan in respect of who is responsible for the actions, what timelines we are setting out and how we make sure that we all hold ourselves to account so that these recommendations can be fully realised and achieved as soon as possible.

This will help to shape future decisions, positively impact the educational experience of children with special educational needs and their families, and help us to create a more inclusive and supportive education system for all. It is ambitious, but deliverable and absolutely necessary. I again thank all of those who have been involved in this process and look forward to working with them in the future.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I welcome the opportunity to speak on the review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act. I thank my colleague, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, for her opening statement. I wish to thank those who conducted the review and Members of the House for the opportunity to discuss the review.

The review represents the most comprehensive national reflection to date on how we can support children and young people with additional needs in our education system. I want to acknowledge the significant effort by all involved in this process, in particular the thousands of individuals, including school workers, parents, representative groups and, most important of all, children and young people, for their huge contribution in providing us with their lived experience and the views that have culminated the report.

The 2004 Act has been in place for over 20 years, during which time significant policy developments have taken place in the field of special education. The review has been shaped by a commitment to open collaboration, with steering groups, working groups and advisory groups overseeing the process. Consultation with a broad range of stakeholders has been central to this effort, ensuring diverse voices and perspectives are heard. One of the defining features of the review has been the meaningful participation of children and young people. Focus groups and tailored surveys were specifically designed to allow students to share their experience in a comfortable and accessible way. This approach ensured that the voices of the students, in particular those with complex needs, shaped the direction of the review from the very outset.

One of the strongest messages to emerge was that we must build on lived experience to create effective, responsive and enforceable policies and laws. The objective we all share is a more

inclusive education system, one that enables every student to thrive and feel he or she belongs. This means action on support services, curriculum design, resource allocation, the role of the SNA and school infrastructure, among others.

As in all other countries, though perhaps known by different names, there is always a place for the provision of special classes and schools. As articulated by the many stakeholders, there is support for the current continuum of education provision, which includes mainstream classes, special classes and special schools. The latter two categories are exceptionally important options, in particular for children with complex additional needs and their families.

As evidenced, work continues to be done to ensure the consistent high standards in the provision of special classes and schools. We also need to ensure closer co-operation between mainstream and special schools and classes. This will continue to assist in enhancing education outcomes for children and contribute to a more integrated and inclusive education system for children and school communities.

As the House will note following this extensive review, the steps proposed outline a pathway towards a more integrated and inclusive education system for all. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to all stakeholder groups, including students, parent and guardian representatives, advocacy groups, academic experts, State agencies and Departments. I also deeply appreciate the engagement of students, parents and educational professionals and the wider public, whose contributions have shaped what we know as the EPSEN Act review.

Findings from our consultation process demonstrate that many participants share many common experiences with the special education sector and seek similar actions and improvements. We have gained invaluable insight into key areas such as technology, terminology, transition, lived experience and potential enhancements to support these structures. The findings of the review have resulted in a set of recommendations that fall into two key areas, namely, legislative-based recommendations and policy-based recommendations. Publishing the report, which the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and I were delighted to launch last week, is only one step, though.

The development of an implementation plan before the end of this year is key to delivering on these recommendations. I propose to discuss the recommendations in the report in more detail. Across the consultation, a high level of consistency and consensus has emerged. Key areas identified for improvement include an inclusive education Act. The introduction of one inclusive Act for all children in respect of education would provide for a legal basis and framework for inclusive education. While the preferred method may be one inclusive education Act, other options may be considered. Work on this recommendation can run alongside policy recommendations. The review process overall showed that feedback recommended one single underlying legislative basis to ensure that inclusion was at the very heart of our State and any new laws we implemented.

Mediation or alternative methods for the resolution of concerns relating to education is a recommendation I hope will be of great assistance to parents. Mediation, or a method similar to it, is an alternative step that, once established, would allow parents to have a pathway to seek assistance with matters without having to incur excessive time delays or feel they have to take a legal route to access reports. This is something we are keen on developing over time.

The review also recommended that the Disability Act 2005, with particular reference to the assessment of need review, be reviewed in the interests of promoting timely and effective

assessments of need and intervention processes. This is a priority for my colleagues in the Department of Children, Disability and Equality and we will work with them to achieve this.

Improving transition between early years, primary school and post-primary education pathways is a vital component in improving education for children with additional needs. For a child born with additional needs, there will be a number of key flashpoints with difficulties and challenges when he or she goes to preschool, primary school, post-primary school and then on to post-education settings. Improving transition would allow for a more streamlined process from the time a child starts his or her education journey to the end of that pathway. This will be assisted by the forward planning steps the Department has taken and will continue to develop. The early years education system we now have in place did not exist to the same extent when the EPSEN Act was originally drafted. The review recommends that work be undertaken on providing a legal right of access to preschool for all children.

The report recommends that the term “student support plans” should be used in place of the original “individual education plan” and that this should be legislated for. Support will be put in place to develop an infrastructure for effective student support file management and student support plan implementation. This will build upon the work already under way by the National Educational Psychological Service on the continuation of support models used in schools to support all children.

The report recommends that enhanced workforce training and education, focusing on inclusion, should be adopted. This is an overall recommendation that will be adopted at all levels of the education workforce. It is very important that we acknowledge the large amount of work done by teams throughout school communities, whether in mainstream schools, special classes or special schools. The amount of work done by school leadership, teachers and SNAs is highly regarded by the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and myself. It is very important work and we salute them for the great work they are doing throughout the education system.

The report contains a number of recommendations on the rights of the child. We need to ensure that we strengthen the legal rights of the child in the education system in a way that provides for more inclusive education as well as ensuring consistency in how we support children with additional needs. The review and the supporting reports outline the reasons for all the recommendations, and this evidence has been informed by vast consultation.

As we welcome the review and salute those involved in it, its implementation is how we will be measured. Some recommendations can be processed quickly. Others, particularly those requiring legislative change, will take more time. I assure the House that the political will is there and the Department’s commitment on this is absolute. Implementation of these actions requires ongoing consultation and collaboration across all of Government. I look forward to working with all partners to make meaningful progress on improving the education of our children and young people. We are determined to ensure the review leads to real and lasting change for children and young people with additional needs.

I thank the thousands of individual students, parents, school teams and advocates who gave their honest contributions on the lived experience of special education. They have made this report possible. I welcome the discussion in the Dáil this afternoon. It is clear that there is great will, politically and at departmental level, to ensure we advance education for people with additional needs. My colleague, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and I will continue to work with all Members in the House to ensure we can bring change and develop more inclusive education

of which we can be rightly proud.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the review and the review process. I welcome the publication of the report and the comments of the Minister and Minister of State. I have to say the proof of the pudding will be in the eating and I come to this with something of a jaundiced and critical eye. I accept there is evolution in thinking, in processes and in language but it has fundamentally always been obvious what is needed here. It is a matter of recognising that all children are equal and that the State has an obligation to support them to reach their potential, whatever that might look like. We have moved from review to review, to tweaking the system and tweaking the system again. The sum total of all this effort is to delay, deflect and deny children access to the supports they so obviously need. And the point is they so obviously need these supports.

There is a lot in the report that I welcome but I want to make a number of points in the time available to me. I have a concern about enacting and moving on a number of the positive recommendations by following the recommendation that legislation for all schoolchildren come under one Act. This would be a complex move and I fear it would take a very long time.

As to legislation underpinning student support plans, the same should happen with regard to reasonable accommodations. They should be legislated for.

I want to take issue with the fact that some sections of the Act have not commenced. Page 21 of the review states:

Sections 3 to 12 of the Act prescribed how such [individual education] plans were to be developed, the assessments they would entail, how their implementation was to be monitored, the role of the school principal, the parents and special educational needs organiser (SENO), and the appeals mechanisms that would apply to them. The intention in all of this was clearly to fulfil the Act's aims of providing an appropriate education for children with special educational needs but the apparatus as set out was widely regarded as impracticable.

The Minister said the same. Is this the case? Did children with additional educational needs see it as impractical? Did their parents? The review also states:

In addition to the perceived practical difficulties, there were concerns that bureaucratic requirements would place the demands of the plan rather than the needs of the child at the centre of the process. Sections 3 to 12 of the EPSEN Act relating to IEPs were therefore never commenced.

Let us not forget the rights and benefits these sections would bestow on the child and the obligations they would put on the State, such as the right to an educational assessment for all children with additional educational needs, the consequent development of a statutory individual educational plan, the delivery of detailed education services on foot of this plan, and an independent appeals process. The Minister wants us to believe these sections were not commenced because there were concerns that bureaucratic requirements would place the demands of the plan, rather than the needs of the child, at the centre of the process whereas this was about the needs of the child. The Minister must be joking. In my firm opinion, it was only ever about the Minister, the Department and the State itself protecting themselves, just as they are trying to row back on assessments of need. I note the recommendation to review the Disability Act 2005 and legal framework governing assessments of need and I have a serious problem with it. The Government should meet its legal obligations rather than reviewing them.

What makes me wonder further about the review is the fact it states with a straight face that sections were not commenced for fear of creating unnecessary bureaucracy and taking away from the needs of the child but it says nothing about the bureaucracy the Government has created in the National Council for Special Education despite the compelling evidence that shows this bureaucracy is a significant problem. A total of 49% of parents and 38% of staff said their contact with the NCSE was unhelpful or very unhelpful. A total of 25% of parents said their contacts with the NCSE were very unhelpful. This is a significant finding. I do not see anything in the report that points towards a fundamental root-and-branch review of the NCSE and the SENO model. I see them as gatekeepers and this is reflected in parents and staff saying their engagement with them is overwhelmingly unhelpful or very unhelpful. Ultimately, we need to provide supports for children who so obviously need them.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Fáiltím roimh an deis ráiteas a thabhairt ar fhoilsiú na tuarascála seo. Is cáipéis chríochnúil atá os ár gcomhair inniu. Molaim an rannpháirtíocht leathan le páirtithe leasmhara sa phróiseas, go háirithe ionchur suntasach na ndaoine óga a tógadh san áireamh.

Ag an stad seo, is beag duine sa Stát nach mbaineann an cheist seo leo ar bhealach amháin nó bealach éigin eile. Is fianaise é an freagra mór millteach a fuair comhairliúchán an athbhreithnithe seo - d'fhreagair 28,000 duine an suirbhé ar líne.

More than 28,000 people responded to the review's online survey and more or less everyone agreed on one thing, namely, that there is still dire underprovision of education for children with additional needs in the State. The EPSEN Act sets out clearly that every child in the State should receive an education responsive to his or her particular learning needs regardless of ability. Shamefully, this is still a faraway reality.

The portrait painted in the report is bleak but it is not anything new. It is the same story we all hear, day in and day out, from our constituents and in the media. Families with additional needs face chronic difficulties in accessing appropriate school places in their locale, assessments of need, therapies, SNAs and SET support. Parents and school staff are in a constant uphill battle against an unrelenting, unforgiving and frankly maddening system. A total of 60% of parents said they faced difficulties in getting a place for their child. Some respondents still had their child at home due to a lack of a school place, and 75% of school staff reported difficulties accessing supports. The same percentage said that the supports did not meet the students' needs at all. When asked if they thought Ireland's education system gives an equal right to education for all children, only 20% of students and former students answered positively, while the response from professionals was even lower, at 16.7%. These statistics are damning.

The review raised a number of other key issues that should remain on our radar. Crucially, despite significant progress, a lot of work still has to be done when it comes to attitudes. Children with additional needs consistently rate a compassionate teacher who sees them in their wholeness as most important to their learning. We know that children really value the relational aspect. Sadly, bullying also remains a problem for children with additional needs. An important finding is that many children in mild special schools arrive there on the back of negative experience in mainstream schools. Again, I urge the Minister and Minister of State to reconsider their Department's decision to redesignate those schools that function as a haven for students. Further to this point, the report found widespread support for our current mixed model of provision. The following statement from a teacher stood out to me:

1 July 2025

I think an inclusive model of education is not about pushing all children into the same building to be taught together. [It is] about valuing all types of schools, and allowing children to benefit from the best fit for them at that time ...

I urge the Minister and Minister of State to heed this point. They should stop delaying and taking cover behind the banner of inclusion. We need proper mechanisms to register demand for mild special classes and more special classes of all types to be sanctioned. Investment must continue to accelerate this year to finally put an end to children actively being denied their constitutional right to education. I am pleading with the Minister to bring this message to the Government in the budget negotiations because there can be no greater priority than this. Our children cannot wait any longer.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: The report shows very clearly that the Government has lost control of special education and it is families and children who are paying the price. Instead of support, they are met with silence. Instead of certainty, they are met with delays. Parents in schools are being forced to fight for basic entitlements and children with additional needs are being left in limbo.

In Waterford alone, seven schools have contacted my office in the past three months. One had funding approved and then refused with no explanation. Another submitted a SENO report for increased support, which was ignored. One school is still waiting on a design team to make contact about a special class meant to open this September. Emails are being sent weekly. I have raised these with the Department and the Taoiseach on the floor of the Dáil. The schools are raising them repeatedly, but are getting no response. The anxiety for parents is overwhelming. It is July now and families still do not know if their child will have a school space when September comes. Right now in Waterford, children with special educational needs still do not know if they will have that school space in September. Parents are being told they will hear in quarter 4, which runs from October to December but school starts in September. St. John's Special School in Dungarvan is doing everything asked of it, but the Government still has not delivered the classrooms or supports.

This crisis did not come from nowhere. The Government ignored the warning signs and acted too late. It took parents marching on the streets and sleeping outside this building and Teachtaí Dála from all parties and none raising it on the floor of the Dáil for the Government to pay attention. Families need certainty and children need places. Action is needed now. It is not just mismanagement but a systemic failure and it did not happen overnight. Demand has been growing steadily for years. All the statistics, evidence and feedback show that. The Government should have known that this was coming but it failed to plan, build or deliver.

What followed the protests and the activism by parents, who should not have to take to the streets to fight for a school space for their kids, was a flurry of announcements before the Easter break. The problem has not gone away and those announcements have not solved it. The work has not been done or it has not been done quickly enough. There is a real fear among parents that, come September, their children will be at home or in overcrowded or inappropriate classroom settings. Parents are telling us that they do not want spin, they want answers, delivery and the proof of that delivery come September.

While this review has been a useful exercise and the report is welcome, schools do not want reports. They want resources. They are telling us what they want. The Government must take responsibility and heed what is in the report. It must also heed what parents, schools and my

colleagues are telling it. It must deliver the classrooms, confirm the placements and start treating this for what it is - a crisis, not a communications exercise.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: Most importantly, following the review, these recommendations must be implemented in a timely manner and continue to be reviewed by the Department. I compliment all stakeholders involved in the review, particularly those affected on the front line. I acknowledge the work done by schools, staff, parents and children.

When it comes to additional educational needs, a large cohort of students throughout the country do not have the same access to education as their friends, family members or even siblings have. It is clear from the findings of this review and through our constituency offices that one of the biggest, if not the biggest, issue in additional needs is the severe delays in the assessments of need. The lengthy waiting list for diagnostics and assessments of need can leave parents and children waiting months and months for diagnoses in the first instance. They then wait more months waiting for the assessment of need in order to provide children with the necessary assistive technology and sustainable school place they require.

I am working with a constituent to try to acquire assistive technology for their child. The child falls just below the criteria for assistive technology but requires this resource for their education, according to the child's teachers and the school principal. It is now on the school or the parent to source this technology. While criteria for qualifying for assistive technology must be in place, it is a sad indictment that parents in schools are facing this financial burden just because a child is not ticking every box. This shows that the 18% cut in the ICT grant in 2024, from €79 million to €65 million, will not work. Nobody would deny a child access to assistive technology the child needs. It is needed to support the child's education. In this scenario, the criteria and application process are too rigid and another child may go without the resources needed for his or her education.

We are acutely aware that more than 10,000 children are now waiting on assessments of need and that tens of thousands of children are waiting on essential therapies. These delays ultimately leave children attending schools in places that are not suitable for their education and without the technologies required for their learning. Schoolchildren are attending mainstream schools and losing years in education as a result of insufficient resources and waiting on assessment. These children are being failed by this State. The frustration among parents and pupils is there for all to see. We saw it when protests were being held outside Leinster House and 24-hour sleep-outs were being held outside the Department. Delays in diagnosis and assessment of need have serious consequences for a child. Delayed appropriate education has knock-on effects for almost every facet of education and these continue into adulthood, the workplace and employment opportunities. There needs to be a determined strategy now to rapidly ramp up the resourcing and staffing of these assessments. The really discouraging thing is how long we will all need to have this conversation. I acknowledge there have been developments in this area but children are still being left on waiting lists and are attending school places that are not appropriate for their needs.

I saw the announcement on the inclusion of in-school therapists and I am absolutely delighted that this great initiative will be rolled out in special schools. Will we have the staff ready for September? I hope we do.

Parents of children with additional needs are likely to be travelling long distances every morning and afternoon to get to and from a school that provides for that additional need. This

is, of course, if they can access a special school. In my constituency of Cork North-Central, in the Minister of State's county, we hope a special school will be opened in Carrignavar. Right now, however, the resources are not in Carrignavar to open this special school. This means children will continue to travel long distances to get to school. The Government must focus on the need to provide the resources, be that through Irish Water or the local authority, to get the school up and running. It is unacceptable that every school year hundreds of children with additional needs cannot access a suitable school place near where they live or must travel for long distances.

It is very disappointing that the NCSE has no centralised application system. As policymakers, we do not know whether there are children still waiting for a school place. We do not know this because of the failure of the NCSE to have a centralised application system.

On SNA provision, the Minister of State knows as much as I do that the role of SNAs in schools is pivotal. SNAs do not get the same level of respect as their colleagues in the school setting get. They deserve that respect. We need to get rid of the 72-hour obligation on SNAs. I know the Minister of State agrees with me on that because he understands the role SNAs play in schools. SNAs should not have to clean out school lockers or do administration work, which is not within their remit, at the end of the school year just to meet this 72-hour obligation.

There is an equality issue for children with additional needs and a workers' rights issue for special needs assistants. The dogs in the street know that. We can wax lyrical about how much we value SNAs and their work but ultimately it means nothing unless we ensure that SNAs are well paid, secure in their work and have appropriate conditions to carry out their work.

I also want to look at the special educational needs co-ordinator role. As I have said previously, I have worked with these people and I know the level of work that falls within their remit. The SEN co-ordinator role has to be a stand-alone position in a school, rather than a promotion for a teacher.

I welcome this review which has a lot of recommendations. They need to be tackled immediately by the Department and I have no doubt they will be as I accept the Minister of State's bona fides on this matter.

Deputy George Lawlor: I thank all the stakeholders in this review. I will speak to the proposed changes to the special school system. Circular 39/2025 in part refers to the designation of special schools under the plan. The Department and the NCSE have said they intend to commence work on reviewing the designation of existing special schools to ensure that all special schools respond to the needs of children in their local region. I will use the example of Our Lady of Fatima special school in Wexford town, which caters for children with mild, general learning disabilities. The school has recently offered leaving certificate applied exams to students. This has seen some of its former pupils go on to third level and be accepted to apprenticeship programmes locally. Under the Department's new plans, pupils may be required to attend mainstream schools in their locality rather than travel to the likes of Our Lady of Fatima special school for their education. We need to stand up for the children with a mild, general learning disability because they thrive in places like Our Lady of Fatima school. They thrive in what these schools offer them. Children who attend special schools like Our Lady of Fatima special school would definitely struggle for many different reasons, including mental health or high anxiety levels, if they were compelled to go to a mainstream school.

The students in the likes of Our Lady of Fatima in Wexford town flourish. This school offers the primary curriculum, junior certificate level and level 3 subjects, and has started senior cycle level 2 and the leaving certificate applied. The students receive the same as they would in a mainstream school but the difference is the number of students is smaller. The anxiety they would have felt in a mainstream school has been taken away. Our Lady of Fatima special school can attend to their needs. As a result, the students in this wonderful school and wonderful schools like it across the country are successful in accessing the curriculum.

The argument that no child should pass the school that is right beside their house is understood, but schools such as the one I have mentioned should be an option for parents who want to send their children to them. The policy outlined in Circular 39/2025 creates the risk of students being very unhappy in an environment in which they do not flourish. The success of the children of Our Lady of Fatima special school when they leave school is proof of how it works. There is a strong chance that these students would not have been able to achieve this in a mainstream setting. Our Lady of Fatima special school is a model that works and the feeling now is that this model is at risk and that the education of the children who are content and anxiety free is at risk. Darryl Cogley, the chairperson of the school parents' association, has a daughter who originally attended mainstream school and then moved to Our Lady of Fatima special school. He said that children like his daughter require a specialised school and educational environment, and dedicated support. She got it at Our Lady of Fatima special school and continues to flourish on a day-to-day basis. I ask the Minister of State to re-examine Circular 39/2025 for the benefit of these wonderful schools across the country.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I should have called Deputy Gould earlier. My apologies.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle and I appreciate him letting me speak. The results of this report are no surprise to parents or anyone involved with special education in Cork city. This Government and previous Governments have failed children with additional needs. Schools like Scoil Íosagáin in Farranree are crying out for additional autism spectrum disorder, ASD, classes. Rathcormac National School is crying out for special needs classes, having been passed. I hear from parents whose children now must go into mainstream education because there are not enough places, or no places, in the schools they attend. A new special school was promised in September for Carrignavar. Due to issues, this will probably not be delivered until next year. The children will have to travel from Fermoy. I know families who are living in the heart of the city, in Farranree, Gurranabraher and Ballyphehane, whose children will have to travel to Fermoy. These are children with additional needs. Some of them are going in the opposite direction, down to Rochestown or Carrigaline. They are spending on average of 45 minutes travelling each way. Surely these children should be getting the education where they live. We have pre-verbal children who have never had speech and language therapists. Parents are fighting for everything. They cannot even get basic hygiene supplies for their children. Surely this is just a given. Parents should just have to ask for this and it should be given to them.

The most vulnerable children are being let down again. Parents are asking me why they must fight for everything. Why must parents fight for everything when they have a child with additional needs or a child with a disability? What is this Government going to say to them? Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have jumped from one fire to another when it comes to children with disabilities. Parents have stood outside this Dáil and camped overnight here. They have led marches and protests, fighting for school places and therapies to help their children. These children deserve to reach their potential. By not having the services, school places and assessments

of need, these children will not reach their potential. The Government is ignoring the law when it comes to those children. Children with additional needs are some of the most vulnerable in the State. I plead with the Minister of State and the Government to deliver because it is time. I know the Government is trying to do certain things but it is only a drop in the ocean. We have an emergency in special education. Scoil Eoin in Ballincollig is looking for three additional ASD classes. Some children who go to the school have brothers or sisters who may be on the spectrum but these children cannot go to the school. How can that be right?

Deputy John Connolly: I will start by mentioning the July provision in schools around the country. One of the many successful measures taken by the Minister of State's predecessor was the expansion of the in-school July provision to mainstream schools, which occurred following the Covid years. I am not sure if the Minister of State has the figures but I estimate that tens of thousands of children are currently participating in July provision across the country. Schools have the discretion to extend participation, not only to pupils with additional needs, but to all children whom the school considers to be at risk of educational disadvantage. I commend the mainstream schools that have embraced the measure. This year, the scheme has become more amenable to schools. There is a great emphasis in the programme on well-being, wellness and connection. I hope that all the children who are participating in the summer programme are enjoying it. It was a great measure to take. It highlighted the fact that we have come a long way in terms of the provision for children with additional educational needs. I hope to see this programme grow and that more schools will become involved in the scheme in the coming years.

I welcome the publication of the review of the EPSEN Act. I commend, in particular, how thorough the data-collection process was as part of the review. I will start my own reflections on report by highlighting something that I do not think has been highlighted yet by any other speaker. This is the positive feedback provided by parents on how they rate the quality of the education their child receives in their current school. As I said, the feedback is overwhelmingly positive. A total of 86.3% of parents with children in mainstream primary schools view the education their children are in receipt of as being "fairly good" or "very good". Some 87.6% of parents, who have children in a class for children with additional needs in a mainstream setting, gave a very positive response and see their child's education as being "fairly good" or "very good". In the special schools, 86% of parents said they found that the education their child was receiving was "fairly good" or "very good". This is a very positive thing. It does not surprise me. As a teacher and as a parent, I would have assumed those statistics would be as they are but it is nice to see them written down and to see that they were collated in the manner that they were in this review.

One aspect of school life of the child where the reflections are not as positive is in the area of transition, be that children transitioning from one primary school to perhaps a school for children with additional needs or children transitioning between primary school and secondary school. In the implementation plan brought forward as a result of this report, we should examine this. We need to try to define how we do this well. I am sure there are good examples of this throughout the country, where the transition is done well between schools. We must examine that and try to make sure we implement it across the board.

I welcome the plan and the move to place the development of what was known as the individual education plan, and is now known as the student support plan, on a statutory basis. I expect that there are special educational needs organisers, SENOs, and inspectors who would have seen very good practice in the completion of the student support plans. They have become a very important document in schools. Again it is worth noting the feedback, with 75% of par-

ents saying that they had been “fairly involved” or “very involved” in developing or reviewing their child’s support plan. This is very positive. It highlights the importance the schools place now on the positive relationship between schools, teachers and parents in progressing a child’s education. I will give some more of the data. More than 70% of parents said that they found the student support plan to be “helpful” or “very helpful” and staff really see it as being helpful. The figure for staff who saw the student support plan as being “helpful” or “very helpful” was close to 90%, I think. One of the things I noticed from the student support plans I read and participated in developing over the years was how they also tried to link with the other agencies that might be working with the child. It took the recommendations from other therapists and psychologists and tried to make sure the targets in the plan were included and implemented, and all the while, working with teachers and parents.

I welcome the feedback on terminology in the report. We should be conscious of its findings. Consideration should be given across the board to replace the term “special” with “additional”. We should probably start with the Minister of State’s portfolio. Maybe it is necessary to change the title of that to the Minister of State with responsibility for “additional educational needs” rather than “special educational needs”. We can make all the legislative and policy changes that are planned but, ultimately, resource change is what will have the biggest impact. We need more SNAs and supplementary teachers.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I want to acknowledge the extensive work being done by the Minister of State with responsibility for special education. I have seen first hand his commitment to his brief. He has visited Kildare with me. He has visited the Presentation Girls’ School in Maynooth, Maynooth Community College, An Garraí Beag in Donadea and St. Patrick’s Primary School in Celbridge. The schools’ staff, the parents and I appreciated the Minister of State visiting a few weeks ago.

I also want to acknowledge the extensive work undertaken by the Minister of State in reviewing the EPSEN Act. This is the most comprehensive examination of this Act in nearly two decades. The voice of the child runs deep throughout this review. Some welcome steps are proposed from improved interagency co-operation to strengthening the role of the NCSE and the recognition that children with additional needs should be supported in the setting that best suits them, be that mainstream, special class or a special school.

While the ambition of the report is clear, we must reflect on the reality for families. Many of them feel forgotten or unsupported at key moments in their child’s development. I want to bring a few cases to the attention of the Minister of State. I have contacted the Department and the HSE about these. One concerns a 16-year-old boy who attends a special school in Kildare North. His family feels completely unsupported. They have been sent from pillar to post, pushed from one area to another, in order to try to get some provision for their son. Only two weeks ago, Nua Healthcare Services was sent out to do a review on behalf of the HSE on this young boy who is 16 years old. The family were told it would be able to support them. On Friday, it came back and said that it did not have the staff to support the family. This is completely shocking, because it is giving families hope under false pretences. It is completely unfair on this family and their son. Most of all their son needs routine and to be looked after and cared for. The family needs a little bit of respite. They only get minimal respite. At times the child is very difficult to care for, both for himself and for his family. I would appreciate the Minister of State’s help in trying to find a solution for this family.

Another issue is related to Maynooth Community College. The SENO recommended a 0.5

increase for an SNA. It turns out that the college will not get this increase. Since 2020, the number of students in the school has increased by 400 but there has not been an increase in the SNA allocation. This is tied to the report on the EPSEN Act in the sense that it is trying to do what is best for each school and, more importantly, for each child going through the education system, particularly the special needs education system.

Another is Scoil Mochua in Celbridge, which was issued with a section 37A notice to open another class and which the school is happy to do. However, it transpired that the school does not have the space. It is looking to acquire a space. Again, in this case, the school has been pushed from agency to agency and from the council to Tailte Éireann to find a resolution for getting the space needed.

In all of these situations what stands out is not a lack of will. The political will is there; the will is there from parents and from schools. However, there is a lack of joined-up delivery. This is a problem we see time and again. I would have liked to have seen this report recommend a single body be given responsibility for the most profound cases. Instead of parents being pushed from SENOs to CDNTs to CAMHS to the HSE to special schools and then to different agencies, those particularly profound cases need a single, co-ordinated approach. The CDNT claims it is responsible for building it, but there are also SENOs, and parents are trying to deal with all of these different agencies, which is extremely difficult.

Another proposal relates to the summer programme, previously the July provision. It does not fit into the mix for kids going through special education. I appreciate that the summer provision is in place but we should be looking at it differently from the normal education perspective, so that there is a continuation throughout the entire summer. It is not actually provision; it is a continuation of the classroom.

I acknowledge that the EPSEN review gives us a strong platform. The vision is sound but the delivery now needs to match that vision. I know the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, is committed to that, and there is a commitment across this House. I will do anything I can to support him. I appreciate the efforts he has taken to support me and my constituents in Kildare North and children and families across the country.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: I welcome the publication of this report. However, there is nothing new in it and without political will to implement its recommendations, it will be another report that is left to sit on the shelf. The fact is that the issues and shortcomings in the provision of education for pupils with special educational needs have been identified in the past, and spoken about in this House on numerous occasions. We now need to see implementation of the solutions. This review must be more than a box-ticking exercise. It must place the rights of children with special educational needs at the very heart of our education system. Children are not statistics; they are our future, and every child, no matter his or her ability, deserves the same opportunity to thrive, to learn and to be respected.

The 2004 Act was supposed to guarantee access to assessments and supports tailored to each child's needs, but across this State, parents are battling for months, sometimes years, just to get the basic supports. Teachers are stretched beyond capacity and are frequently utilised to replace missing teachers in other classes.

Let us talk about rural communities. The Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, visited County Clare. I visited rural schools there with him. Rural Ireland is always an after-

thought. I am aware of a case where a whole family moved from another county to rural County Clare in order to access barely adequate services for their child. They are now facing longer waiting lists and further distances to specialist services, as they live in west Clare and all the services seem to be centralised. This is two-tier education and a postcode lottery. That is not acceptable.

Sinn Féin believes in a fully resourced, inclusive education system, rooted in fairness and equality. This means the right to timely assessment, delivering real supports in the classroom, and properly funding special education. It also means expanding teacher training, supporting SNAs and ensuring rural schools are not left out of the conversation.

The assessment backlogs must also be addressed as a matter of urgency. I have raised this before, both in this House and in parliamentary questions, and the answers I received have been wholly inadequate. The findings of the focus groups in this report clearly indicate there is a lack of appropriate school facilities. They also show that children are not treated as individuals and provided with the specific services they require, but instead are forced into a one-size-fits-all system.

Parents also say they are very worried about the lack of facilities for their children when they grow up and leave school. For parents, every step of the process is a struggle, one that they should not have to go through. The fact is that children and their parents are all too often ignored, yet these are the very people at the coalface every day whose insights and inputs should be considered essential. Given that every step of this process is a struggle for parents, we must ensure there is a serious change of ethos.

We have an opportunity to build a system that reflects our values, where no child is left behind, where education is a right and where rural communities like those in County Clare are given the support they deserve. Let us not waste it.

Deputy Jen Cummins: In recent months, since the Government was formed, there have been announcements about additional school places for children and young people with additional educational needs, be it in special classes in mainstream schools or in special schools. There have been promises that special education will improve. I know the Minister of State and his officials are trying their best in every way to ensure that happens. This is very welcome.

I find it very hard to understand that elements of the EPSEN Act, which was introduced in 2004 - 21 years ago - are not fully commenced. I refer specifically to the right to an educational assessment for children with special educational needs; consequent development of statutory individual education plans, IEPs; the delivery of a detailed educational service on foot of the IEP, and an independent appeals process. I find it very hard to believe that after 21 years we have still not commenced parts of the Act. How many hundreds and thousands of children and young people have gone through the education system in those 21 years and have not been supported and protected by the Act? Is this perhaps a scandal that we will look back on in decades to come? I hope we are able to rectify that now. We have a responsibility to every single child in this country.

I welcome some special guests in the Gallery: Debbie O'Neill and her colleagues from a special school in my constituency of Dublin South-Central, Scoil Eoin. It is a school that supports children with mild general learning disabilities.

I have been raising the issue of redesignation for some weeks. I plead with the Minister of

State to reconsider it. I have raised the alarm here and in the committee. We must check what we are doing with schools. I accept he says the children currently in the school will not be affected, which is great, but children are coming up who will be affected. He said last week at the committee that he would look at it. Perhaps a bit of a pause is needed for us to see where we can go with that. I look forward to hearing more about what exactly that looks like.

The rights of the child provide that educational reforms should prioritise children's well-being and safety, recognising that these are enablers of children's educational progress. This also applies to children with mild general learning disabilities. It is not their fault that the Department of education has not forward planned to make sure there are enough places for children with additional educational needs for this September or any subsequent year. I know the Minister of State wants to have catch-all schools but that is fundamentally a mistake. Those working in the schools also feel that, as do the parents. More and more people are speaking against that now.

We must look at the rights of every individual child. We are not talking about millions of people. To be honest, I do not know the number of children in the system, but it is thousands rather than millions. Every single child in the country counts. We must ensure we give them the best education we can. That includes, for example, the proper allocation of SNAs and initial teacher education. I welcome that there is going to be better initial teacher education, but there also needs to be continuing professional development, CPD, and fully trained therapists in schools to support children.

In this country, schools like those for children with mild general learning disabilities are experts at making sure that children progress to the best of their ability and way beyond, because they have got specialist care. It is the same for children who have more complex needs because, when there are experts involved, they will also thrive. We must ensure that every child will reach his or her full potential to learn, grow and thrive.

Deputy Liam Quaide: I have been working with a parents' campaign group in Youghal in recent months, which is seeking the establishment of a new secondary level special education school in east Cork for children whose needs cannot be met by the autism hub in the local secondary school.

As we know, parents can be left in a deeply unsettling state of uncertainty in the lead-up to a decision on their school placement application. Many families in east Cork are facing the very grim prospect of commuting to Dungarvan, into Cork city or even Waterford city for their child's educational needs.

This means families transporting their child very long distances on a daily basis for their basic schooling, dislocating that child, who is already contending with so many challenges by virtue of their disability, from their community. This is entirely at odds with their interests and their rights, and is heaping chronic stress upon so many other challenges. It is also at odds with the UNCRPD.

The parents' group in Youghal had an encouraging engagement with the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, on 28 March. As a group, they could not be more constructive in their dealings with all public representatives and other stakeholders. They identified a possible site for a new school in Youghal. The need for such a school is very obvious and urgent. They also proposed an interim arrangement involving prefabricated buildings for the coming

term while plans for a new school are being developed and progressed. The response from the Minister of State outlined the commitment of the Government to special education provision. He provided general investment figures to back that up, but there was no engagement with any of the detail of the proposals that the parents' group had discussed with him at the meeting in March, and had submitted to the Department.

5 o'clock

These parents are facing another summer of uncertainty. Some are looking ahead to several years down the line before their child is making that very challenging transition to secondary school. Some of the families feel that their children's needs are being met at primary level in their communities at the moment, but what lies ahead is very unsettling for them and, as we know, these years pass quickly. I ask the Minister of State to re-engage with that group.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The failure to implement key parts of the EPSEN Act shows that, while we remain a republic that has a proclamation that sets out to cherish all children equally, we are a republic of inequality when it comes to children with additional needs and children from disadvantaged backgrounds. They are not getting the education they have a constitutional right to and all the broad elements that requires. I am contacted by schools in my constituency that are facing severe difficulties with endless SET reviews, SNA reviews and the cutting of SNA positions and SNA supports. We know there are SNAs who could be employed by schools in this country, yet we have SENOs and the NCSE making decisions to cut SNAs and not allocate sufficient additional educational needs supports within schools. I visited one school that was doing incredible work to create a school in which every student could get support. I saw the parents bringing children with additional needs in and the struggles they faced. I saw the work the principals and the support teachers were putting in. As the teachers, the parents and the principals described to me, they are at absolute breaking point. The Minister of State can say the Government is providing additional places and additional resources, but they are not enough. Come September, we are again going to see children without school places. We are going to see a school system at breaking point in terms of providing supports for children with additional needs and all other children in these schools in classes, because they are all affected. We still need to address this system properly.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I will open with the words of Professor Joseph Travers, who wrote about inclusive pedagogy in Ireland in 2023. He says:

Given the exponential growth in special classes and the increase in special schools since Ireland's ratification of the UNCRPD, a contradiction ... is apparent, which calls for a more radical appraisal of the purpose and role of these classes and schools.

He continues:

... we need to envisage a future where all children can attend their local mainstream schools. This may entail creative responses to the use of space, time, human resources and technology.

While I commend the Minister of State for this work, and thank everyone who has participated in this review, I am not sure we can characterise this appraisal as "radical".

In the best way I can, with the minute I have, I would like to represent the voices of teachers, SNAs, parents, and children I have spoken to, whom I am sure the Minister of State has

also spoken to. It is characterised by saying that it always feels like a fight. It always feels like a contest. It feels like parents, children, principals, teachers and SNAs are always scrapping, fighting through bureaucracy and fighting for resources, and that is if they are lucky enough to get a school place in the first instance. I raise with the Minister of State the area of St. Mark's in Newbridge, which is going through that redesignation process. I ask the Minister of State to please reconsider this if he can.

I take issue with some of the recommendations of this report, such as the policy-based one regarding the efficiency and timeliness of the assessment of need review. There does not seem to be accountability in terms of a timeframe. The same applies with regards to a roadmap for the inclusive education system that should be developed. When, how and by whom should it be developed?

This review was very welcome and I commend the Minister of State on doing it, but we need to know what is next. There is an implication that change is coming, but without a roadmap, we do not know what that will look like.

Deputy Peter Roche: Like others, I welcome the review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004. I commend the Department of Education and Youth on undertaking that critical work. Although many positives have been reported, the findings of the review confirm what some families, educators and advocates have long felt. We still need to work harder on delivering inclusive, equitable education for children with special educational needs, particularly those with Down's syndrome, general learning disabilities, and speech and language disorders. The review also reflects the voices of over 28,000 individuals and organisations. Among the most urgent concerns raised were access to timely assessments, the inadequacy of current placement options, insufficient transitioning planning and glaring gaps in class provision. These realities are acutely felt across east Galway.

One of the most pressing issues is the lack of balance in the allocation of special classes. In 2024, 92% of all new classes were designated for children with autism. While that provision is vital, the limited availability of classes for children with other needs, especially those with speech and language disorders, raises concerns about equality and inclusion. The review underscores the need for a system that reflects the full spectrum of needs in our schools. Circular 0038/2007, which governs access to speech and language disorder classes, remains unfit for purpose and continues to exclude children with learning and physical disabilities from accessing vital therapies and supports. The lack of post-primary planning, the refusal by some schools to accept students with special educational needs, and the overreliance on special schools, many of which have now reached capacity, have left countless families without realistic and fair options. The failure to accommodate children with co-occurring or physical disability contradicts both best practice and the commitments of Ireland made under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Families have shared their anxiety about the transition from primary to post-primary schools. That is critical. Too often, this process is marked with uncertainty and a lack of clear planning. The review calls for better transition pathways, which I support. Every child deserves the right to move through the educational system with stability, dignity and the right supports in place.

The shortage of general learning disability classes is another key issue. In Galway, for example, there are currently 152 special classes for autism. There are just two for children with mild learning disabilities and 13 for children with moderate learning disabilities. These figures

highlight a need for a rebalancing of provision to ensure that no child is left behind due to the nature of his or her diagnosis.

I welcome the review, the emphasis on rights-based and inclusive education and its call for policy and legislative reform. It is critical that the work be matched by action. I encourage the Department to continue listening to the voices of people like myself, some professionals and young people themselves. With thoughtful collaboration and shared commitment, we can build an inclusive educational system that meets the needs of all learners. The challenges are great, of course, but I am asking that we rise to that challenge.

I commend the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy McEntee, on their relentless energy and efforts in that regard.

Deputy David Cullinane: I welcome the review report. I also want to take the opportunity to thank the Minister of State for the work done to provide additional special classes in County Waterford. We had a number of debates in the House over the last number of months and the Minister of State committed to improving services. It has to be said, additional classes were made available. That was a very important development for many parents whose children will benefit from those classes. I thank the Minister of State for his engagement and delivery of those classes.

We still have a long way to go. Unfortunately, there will still be some parents who will not have the appropriate school place for their children. We have to make sure that we are continually improving access to services, putting the capacity into schools, and making sure that we have the type of appropriate school places I know the Minister of State believes every child should have.

There have been several reviews over the last number of years. As my colleague said in his contribution, there has been review after review. The core of what we do has to be equality of access to education and, I would argue, services for each and every child. At the moment, that is not happening. Every child does not have equal access to a school place and certainly not to services. That can be frustrating for parents who have to battle time and again to access services. Sometimes, it is a school place or it might be an assessment of need, access to a therapy or whatever a child may need. In some cases, it might be all those things. That has a real impact on the child and on the family as well.

The Minister's statement and the review talk about the EPSEN Act and bureaucratic problems in implementing all elements of it. The Minister also has to accept the failure of the State in resourcing disability services. Going back to the 2005 Act that provided a legal right to an assessment of need, the logic of that made sense. Each child would have an assessment that would basically identify the health and educational needs of that child. A plan for that child would then be set out and the Department would have to look at the aggregate needs of all children and provide the services. Of course, that never happened. Rather than acknowledge that failure, I see the Government making the Act itself the scapegoat for Government failure. It is saying the Act is the problem, as it created too much bureaucracy. It did not. It created a legal right that should have been vindicated. That is where we need to get to. It is not pie in the sky or overly aspirational to want all children with disabilities to be able to have appropriate school places and get the appropriate services they need. For far too many children, unfortunately, it is not happening.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy David Cullinane: We have a long way to go, although I acknowledge the work the Minister of State has done in the area of additional classes.

Deputy Charles Ward: I welcome the review of the EPSEN Act and many of its findings. Ensuring every child's educational needs are met is imperative. Education should be inclusive and responsive to the needs of all children, but this is not the case in many areas where children with special educational needs are unable to secure school places. I understand the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, is doing what he can to address the situation and I thank him for what he did for Little Angels in Letterkenny. We really appreciate that.

Donegal mothers should never have had to resort to travelling to Dublin to sleep outside Leinster House in order to be heard. We need a proactive education system, not a reactive one. I am glad the review recognises this and I support its recommendation to legislate for the legal right of access to preschool. All children should have the opportunity to attend preschool should their families wish they do so. To do this, we must start actively addressing the capacity and accessibility issues we are seeing in preschools, especially in rural areas such as Donegal.

I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan's comments on developing an implementation plan before the end of the year on delivering the report's recommendations. The annual dilemma parents face every September is that we do not have enough places for our children. Children with special educational needs deserve the same certainty as all other children that they will be able to attend school. We need to strengthen the legal rights of children within the education system and ensure that every child has equal access to education.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the publication of the report. However, school places continue to be a major challenge in County Laois. New classes have been granted and I welcome that. New posts have been granted, but accommodation continues to be a problem and there is no timeline for delivery, despite classes being announced. Schools are asking where they can put the classes. Offices, little school libraries, which are generally small rooms, and storage areas, including cupboards, are being used as classrooms.

Killeshin National School got two special classes. There are very positive staff there and a positive principal in Ms McGuill, but they are struggling now to try to get those classrooms on site and to get work done for September when the two new classes of children will land in on top of them.

I welcome that St. Francis School in Portlaoise has been granted two modular classrooms. It has been approved. The work is due to start in a few weeks. I urge the departmental officials who are here to do everything they can to advance that and give it a sense of urgency. More children are coming in this year than going out. Mr. John Moran, the principal, and the staff are doing excellent work but they only have 12 classrooms for the 19 classes. The modular classrooms need to be completed to get them by this year. Four permanent classrooms have been granted planning permission and sanctioned by the Department. Again, that is welcome, but there will be a huge enrolment in September 2026 and St. Francis School needs the extra space to meet that. Four classrooms have been sanctioned. The work is ready to go and will soon need final sign-off. Planning permission has been granted. That project needs a sense of urgency now to ensure St. Francis School is able to take all those additional pupils in September 2026. The two modular classrooms are needed this September.

Anything the officials can do to advance these projects would be welcome and appreciated by the boards of management, staff and parents.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: There are some positive points in the review, in that children who were appropriately placed felt included and that their needs were being met. It shows that if the resources were put in, many other children and teenagers could feel that. Unfortunately, I have to emphasise the problems. In the review, 60% of parents had experienced difficulty finding a place in an appropriate setting despite the fact that more than 50% of parents had identified the needs of their children before they went in. Some 26% of parents experienced difficulty finding a school place at all. I imagine the percentage is a lot higher in Dublin and other urban areas, based on the figures we have heard at the education committee.

I need to ask again what we asked the Minister of State at the committee last week: how many children do not have a place? The schools are now closed. The Minister said in a previous meeting that 3,275 were notified to the NCSE as needing a school place for September 2025 and 8% remained without a place. Therefore, we take it that there are 260 children who do not have a school place. That is a real failure. It is far too high. We had a task force. We had protests and all sorts of thing in my area and many other areas last year. Every day, the Minister of State's Department is blocking parents in court who are taking cases over their children's legal right under this Act to a proper assessment and proper education.

I will mention Ms Charlotte Cahill, who will attend the committee tomorrow. She received 60 school refusals for her daughter before she found a school place. She was one of the heroic parents who slept outside here. Thankfully, her child has a school place, but she continues to battle for others. There has to be investment in this.

There is a real problem finding teachers. I was shocked that the Minister of State said there was no teacher shortage. We have to call the Government out on this. It is gaslighting to say that. We know there is a teacher shortage. It has been said by all the unions. It is everywhere around the country, but particularly in urban areas, especially Dublin. The Minister of State needs to correct that because it feeds into the inability to find teachers for special education as well.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I welcome the long overdue publication of this report. AsIam has pointed out that it is worrying to see references to amending the Education Act, which could delay the action we need to see. All parents know, and the Government acknowledges in all its statements, how crucial timely intervention is, but for many it is not delivered.

I will take the opportunity to raise an important related issue. It was referenced already, so I will be interested to hear whether there is a response from the Minister of State. It is the proposed redesignation of mild general learning disability, MGLD, schools to focus on students with complex needs. One of those is Scoil Eoin in Crumlin, which many children from Tallaght attend. It seems to be a classic case of robbing Peter to pay Paul. It is the Government failing to provide adequate supports and then pitting children with different needs against one another in a battle for resources. By all accounts, the 30 MGLD schools are working well. They are making a huge difference to the children who go to them and they should be left as they are but with additional resources provided as needed. There must be no question of forcing children out of these places and into mainstream schools in order to free up places for children with complex needs. One mother who wrote to me put it very well. She said: "It risks putting children like mine back into a system that already didn't work for them. Inclusion, when done without the

proper supports, is not inclusion, it is just displacement.”

PBP councillors and activists are working with the affected school communities to organise campaigns to oppose this Government’s attacks on schools for children with MGLD. We demand an immediate pause on all redesignations and proper resourcing of all education so all children have access to school places appropriate to their needs in their local communities, as is their right under the UNCRPD.

Deputy Michael Collins: We in Independent Ireland stand firmly behind the implementation of the EPSSEN review report recommendations. The time has come for long overdue justice for our children with additional needs. We have seen two decades of delay since the EPSSEN Act was passed in 2004, yet here we are with the core rights promised in law, like individual education plans and proper assessments, still unfulfilled. This is not just a legal technicality. It is a moral failing. It means thousands of families are still waiting for timely diagnoses, proper supports and an education system that recognises every child’s potential.

The EPSSEN review has laid out a clear and measured path. It tells us what parents, educators and, most of all, children have been saying for years. The current system is overstretched, overly bureaucratic and underdelivered. I agree completely with the line in the report that says simply commencing the Act as it stands is not enough. We need a system that works, is practical and rights-based and is centred on the needs of the child, not the convenience of the system. It is time to reduce the paperwork and red tape choking our schools. The teachers of Ireland did not stand up to spend their days filling out forms and chasing signatures. They want to teach and support every child, not just those who shout the loudest.

The report rightly demands a stronger voice for children and families in planning their education. We echo that call. Parents must be heard. Children must be seen not as burdens, but as citizens with rights. We as politicians see this daily in our clinics - parents fighting for every little thing. We have Michael in Clonakilty waiting seven years for an assessment of need, and he is still waiting. We have another young lad in Dunmanway waiting eight years for an assessment of need. His older brother, who is 12, was diagnosed with autism at two and a half. That was ten years ago. It is highly likely that this young lad also has autism but he is still waiting. We have a young lady aged 19 who was diagnosed with autism at two years of age but her family has had to fight for any services she got. It was recommended that she have speech and language therapy and occupational therapy over the years but she got very little. She fell behind academically as a result and is now being refused disability allowance. They are only three cases but there are thousands more.

Near my constituency, the Bishop Galvin Central School in Newcestown, Bandon, County Cork, is well known and highly respected for its commitment to all of its pupils in providing a welcoming and inclusive educational experience for children with additional needs. The school has a current enrolment of 230. An ASD special class was opened in September 2021 and six pupils are currently enrolled. A second ASD class will open in September 2025. Over 30% of pupils in the school receive some form of support for special or additional needs and almost 15% of the pupils have diagnoses and recommendations from registered occupational therapists. Many are awaiting services. Despite a growing number of children with complex functional challenges, the school does not have access to on-site occupational therapy services. Instead, the special needs team, led by Mr. Nicholas McCarthy, deputy principal, must navigate a complex web of service providers, including primary care, children’s disability network teams and private practitioners, to gain access to appropriate supports for children.

The Newcestown school is collaborating with University College Cork and trying to secure on-site supports for pupils with special additional and complex needs. University College Cork offers a four-year undergraduate bachelor of science honours programme in occupational therapy. A core part of the four-year programme is 1,000 hours of supervised occupational therapy practice education for placement hours. The head of UCC's department of occupational science and occupational therapy, along with the practice education co-ordinator, visited the school on 4 April 2025. They were very impressed with the school's vision for a school-based occupational therapy service, which will allow occupational therapy students to complete practice education placements and provide a support for the staff and students of the school to benefit from an innovative school-based model. However, in order to establish this project, the school will require funding for the practice tutor role. This costs approximately €20,000 per annum, which is minimal when considering the huge benefits to the occupational therapy students, children and staff in Newcestown. This could become a blueprint for rolling out at national level. I ask the Government to please engage with the school on this particular subject, and I will send the Minister of State the details.

Independent Ireland welcomes the recommendation on how inclusive education should be progressively realised but let us be honest, we are not there yet. Rapid expansion of special classes, mostly for autism, has been a stopgap but not a long-term strategy. We cannot let inclusion become just another buzzword. It has to mean something real and that mainstream schools are properly resourced, teachers properly trained and therapies delivered on time.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Government has had four years to produce a review of the 2004 Act, and God knows how much it has cost. Ultimately, it tells us what we already know. The problem is that the review of this Act is now telling us to review another Act, the Disability Act 2005. It is an incredible situation.

The Government talks about the need for a legal, rights-based, inclusive education system but we all know that when it comes to children with additional needs, this Government disregards those rights and actually breaks the law. It is quite incredible that the Government is a lawbreaking Government when it comes to the rights of children with special needs. It is remarkable that any government would be in that situation. The Taoiseach is on the record as saying that the HSE is not in a position to fulfil the law on assessments of need and that this should be completed within a six-month timeframe, but because of this situation, there is now a chance that 25,000 children will be on that waiting list before the end of the year.

We in Aontú stood with Cara Darmody outside the gates of Leinster House recently when she was involved in that 50-hour protest trying to seek the right to have assessments of need given in a timely fashion. Children without assessments of need are often left without a diagnosis, treatment or supports and locked out of the education system. If children do not have assessments of need or early interventions, it is a significant challenge to them achieving their potential. The Minister, Deputy Foley, told the Cabinet that this was misinformation. She said that information being put out was highly insulting, but listen to the families themselves, the families who are at the coalface of this crisis. The Government would do well just to sit down and speak to the families in this situation.

I will give an example from my constituency. I have been contacted by the foster mother of a seven-year-old boy who presents with very complex behavioural needs. That child has unfortunately been expelled from two preschools and suspended from a primary school four times. He is now being deprived of his rights to an education and has been abandoned by the system

for nearly two years of waiting. The foster mother contacted Tusla, CAMHS, the disability services and social workers and has even tried to contact private psychologists, but everywhere she turns, she is met with a wall of delays. When Tusla found out that she had contacted me, it actually scolded her for contacting a TD in this situation, casting a chilling effect on her and her ability to advocate for her foster son. That is a shocking situation and I come up against it on a regular basis where TDs cannot advocate on behalf of citizens. There should be a constitutional right for TDs to be able to advocate in a situation where the rights of children are being denied and the efforts of parents are being spurned.

What is the Minister of State's advice for my constituent when her foster child is being refused an assessment and his legal right to education? For this child, there is a tragic and direct link between the lack of essential services available to him and his ability to grow and thrive in an educational system. I ask that the Minister talk to me and the parents to see whether there is a pathway for the parent to vindicate the child's right.

An Ceann Comhairle: Some Deputies on both sides of the House missed their slots. I will take them in the order in which they appear.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I welcome the Minister of State to the House to discuss the publication of the review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004. The report is an overdue milestone and a wake-up call. Now, 21 years into that EPSSEN Act, we must be real. Parts of the legislation have never been implemented. The Ombudsman for Children highlighted in 2021 that key provisions, especially those concerning assessments of need, were unactioned and placing intolerable pressure on children and families. As the Minister of State is aware, many children endure long waits for assessments and supports and rely on the interim system which is failing to meet basic legal obligations.

A report by the Ombudsman for Children, Unmet Needs, details delays of well beyond three months. This demonstrates the legislative inertia that is causing serious consequences. This review responds directly to systematic failings. It draws on extensive input from 28,000 responses, of which nearly 1,000 were from children and young people, to agree 51 concrete recommendations. These aim squarely at the heart of the issues flagged, namely, uncommenced legal provisions, delayed assessments, weak accountability and, most crucially, children's rights being overlooked in practice. The review makes a particularly striking call for a unified legislative framework covering all school-age children. Also urgent are statutory student support plans and strengthened assessment of need timelines, which is exactly where the delays have been most damaging.

The publication of the review is not an endpoint but a starting point. We now move forward with this review for children and their families. The Government must produce a detailed implementation plan as soon as possible, with clear timelines, funding allocations and accountability mechanisms. We need to revisit the Disability Act 2005, which was a long time ago. We need to ensure the rights of children and provide therapies alongside that. We must make sure the legislative underpinnings that are secured for the children and their families work for the children. We must not introduce legislation for the sake of it but pass legislation that works for children and their families. Without resources, time and accountability, we are not going to get the answers and children will not get a proper education. We need laws that work for the child, not a system that has failed thousands of children.

The Minister of State knows what the issues are. He and I worked together closely on the

Joint Committee on Disability Matters. He lives with these issues constantly in his new role. Children have the right to an education that fulfils their needs. We have to solve the issue of SNA allocations in schools. There is chaos in the application process. Children and families deserve better.

The review is not enough. It must be a starting point to seriously and without haste enact its recommendations. There is an incredible amount of work to do. The Minister of State has created a number of special education classes in schools. Making sure that every single child in this country has a proper and adequate classroom keeps him awake at night. I congratulate the Minister of State on his work. I wish him the best in his endeavours ahead. He has my support.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I welcome the review. We have been waiting for it for a while. I do not want the House to be in this position again of debating legislation from 2004 and 2005. I do not want to pass legislation that we cannot live up to, as we have done with the assessment of need process. There are timelines in the Act that the State is consistently failing to deliver. Whatever we do with this review, we need to ensure that people can avail of the resources and supports required in the area of special education, schools can deliver those supports to students and we do not find ourselves in this position again as regards the assessment of needs process, where we cannot implement the very legislation we are attempting to introduce.

I have issues with the assessment of needs process and I will use the couple of minutes I have to talk about them. The one thing that gave me a bit of optimism or cause for hope in the past few months is that, despite the legislative changes that might come down the line, we are talking about giving people access to therapies at source and that it will not be contingent on diagnosis. I hope we can continue that.

There is a requirement to expand reading classes. I taught in a school for 15 years. Why have reading classes and early intervention classes not been expanded? These could provide early intervention to students without a requirement for a full diagnosis. They need to be expanded.

We need to look at models. The Minister of State visited the Rainbow Club and will probably visit it again with me. We need to look at how it provides therapies and interventions to students of school-going age. It is not the same model as the HSE uses, the clinical model we have become accustomed to. The Rainbow Club model should be the footprint for what we do providing special education needs into the future.

Deputy John McGuinness: I welcome the review. I wish the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, the best in office. I know he is committed to this area and will ensure that change takes place in the best interests of the children and schools concerned.

While the review is being studied, there is no need for a delay or a waiting process. We have to respond immediately to the concerns expressed by parents and others about what they are not receiving for their children in schools. I always find it difficult to understand the reason Departments tend to wait for legislation and then to act. We have children in very difficult circumstances today. Many speakers have recognised their difficulties and the House has said clearly that we want each child to reach his or her full potential.

I ask the Minister of State to look at where the problems are. That is the obvious thing to do. I have raised Jonah Special School in County Kilkenny on a number of occasions. It was promised a new building but because it could not build it in the way the Department wanted,

1 July 2025

the school was deprived of any form of building or extension. It has a fine site. It is a special school and does fantastic work. The Department is putting the building before the rights of the children who attend the school and those who are waiting to get into it. It is unforgivable that the Department would act like that. The very same Department does not even respond to some of the queries that are put to it. It certainly has not responded to my queries, which I have raised on the floor of the Dáil, and I have now raised a particular query today.

The other issue is transport for children to get to these schools. That should not be put on the long finger. These children should not have to be overly examined. It is obvious that the transport is needed and the child has special needs, yet they are still being asked to wait.

I want to make a special case for foster carers, a group that has not been acknowledged for the work they do. They too look after children with special needs. They should come first and foremost in terms of what is required because foster parents are doing their best. A lot of changes need to be made in that area. I will also be asking that there are changes to the budget in the context of the support for their needs.

I wish to highlight the case of a child in Kilkenny who does not have a place. The child is non-verbal and needs immediate intervention but nothing is arranged for that child. Another child who needs special support has been told he cannot go to transition year in secondary school. That is appalling.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I have read the document and, to be honest, most of it reads as a list of the failures of the systems of this Government and previous Governments and their failure to ensure that children with additional needs get the help and support, and, therefore, the education, they deserve.

I have experienced a number of key ongoing issues. I started working as a family support worker in 2001. I worked with families, many of whom had children with additional needs. To be honest, the situation got worse and worse between 2001 and my election in 2020. Access to therapeutic supports and services has deteriorated to such an extent that children in Dublin 15 are waiting over 72 months for an assessment of need. That is an appalling failure and does not need a review to report to ensure it is sorted out. In fact, the Government, as the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, knows, has a legal requirement to carry out these assessments but this Government and previous Governments have consistently broken the law.

I welcome the work of the autism common application trial group. We had feedback today. I know the Minister of State was at a subsequent meeting. We were at the all-party parliamentary committee on autism. There was positive feedback from parents. I expect the recommendations from the parents to be implemented. More importantly, I ask that every school will get involved in year 2 of the pilot project. That is essential. There were 13 schools involved in this year's pilot project but there are 33 schools out there that have children with additional needs in special classes.

I ask the Department to look at the schools which go above and beyond to give children the support they need. I will give the example of a school in Tyrrelstown that has seven special classes. It is getting an extension but is losing valuable space in the school. It has asked for a sliver of land from the council but the Department has refused to engage with the school and Fingal County Council. I find that astonishing. The school has gone above and beyond to become a leader in working with children with additional needs. It is just looking for a small

sliver of land. I will pass the details to the Minister of State. Perhaps he could try to help with the Department in that regard.

I do not have time to go through all of the recommendations but as a parent of two primary school teachers, I think training is essential for teachers, special needs assistants and ancillary staff, including caretakers, school secretaries and the other people who work in the school, so they can understand, help and support those students when they need it. That is how those students can attain the best education we can give them. I appeal to the Government to ensure that this is not just another case of report after report and that the situation will be reviewed again in a few years' time when nothing of substance has changed. To be honest, this is about children and their education. They get one chance at this and it is important that they are given the best chance.

Deputy Keira Keogh: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, and the Minister, Deputy McEntee, for all they are doing to try to move the dial for disability matters and children with additional needs. Fifty-one recommendations have come out of the review of 2004 EPSEN Act. Two decades ago, the Act set out ambitiously to ensure equal access to an education system that would recognise the potential and rights of our children with additional needs. We must acknowledge that many improvements have been made in those two decades, including an increase in the number of special needs assistants, SNAs, and positive changes in how they are allocated, as well as other resources.

We must also acknowledge the increase in special education teaching hours and an increase in special classes from only 400 in 2010 to 3,400 in 2024. I also acknowledge and look forward to the roll-out of a return to schools of therapists, such as speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and behaviour support specialists, not as HSE staff but as staff of the Department of Education. We are starting with 90 therapists in 45 schools, and I hope they are rolled out in a meaningful way whereby they are actively in classrooms for a period of a day, rather than just being set aside for one-to-one therapies. They can help with what is happening at circle time, physical education, PE, time and academic time by looking at the whole classroom approach rather than just being involved in one-to-one sessions.

We must also consider the fact that sections 3 to 12, inclusive, of the Act were not commenced. They would have seen a legal requirement for individual education plans, IEPs. As a behavioural consultant who worked in the area for 19 years, I understand why we now need a shift to student support plans that are responsive and dynamic, rather than prescriptive and inflexible. Over the past two decades, we have seen some schools carry out IEPs excellently. For other schools, they have sometimes been a tick-the-box exercise. IEPs, when handed over from one teacher to another or one school to another, can be a good roadmap to show what the student has achieved. Sometimes IEPs are not reflective of what was happening on the ground and are just nice documents. We must ensure that student support plans are child-centred rather than bureaucratically centred. All of our children deserve a positive learning experience and an opportunity to realise their full potential when they go to school.

I want to consider some of the recommendations. There was reference to an inclusive environment for our children. What does that really mean? It means that they are able to move flexibly between settings. Killeen National School outside Louisburgh does this very well. It is a small rural school. I worked with one particular kid and from the get-go when he joined the special class, he was included in art, lunchtime and PE. The curriculum may have had to be completely adapted for him, but he stayed with his peers all the way up and graduated from

the school this year. It means that those children are invited to birthday parties and are played with at lunchtime. “Inclusive” must mean that children are included. It does not just mean that support is on offer beside the school or in the same school. It is about interweaving support through all activities.

We must also look at changing the ratios for approving new special classrooms or autism classrooms. I know the ratio was reduced from eight teachers to six teachers, but we must consider rural schools. There are some schools in my constituency in Mayo that will never reach six teachers. I think of Mountpleasant National School, which has already identified three children who would love to stay in the school with their siblings and avoid long bus journeys. By being in that school, as I said, they might be invited to the local birthday parties and become a part of the community. I thank the Minister, Deputy McEntee, who worked with me on this issue. We hope that in 2026, we will be able to open a classroom in the school in a flexible way without the need to reach six teachers.

We also need to consider the language that is used and I was glad to see that point being highlighted in the review. We need to move away from the health view of diagnoses and into an access and inclusion perspective. With that, we should do away with language such as “units” and stick to using “classrooms”. They are not units or clinical settings. They are learning environments and classrooms. We must move away from “autism spectrum disorder” to person-centred language. You do not “have autism” but “are autistic”, and are proud to be autistic and to have a different neurotype. We also need to move away from “special needs”. They are not special needs but additional educational needs. We must help these children to realise their full potential in life.

Deputy Emer Currie: I held a public meeting about the EPSEN Act in 2023 as part of the review. Like anything involving parents with children who have additional needs, it was an eye-opening experience. I thank all the parents who have reached out to me over the years. The most important question we need to ask is whether children are given equal access to education by the system which supports their development. We have come a long way, especially in recent years. The answer is that we still have a long way to go.

I will speak about some of the things I covered in my submission a couple of years ago. At that meeting were parent representatives from Chasing Justice, the Dublin 15 autism campaign, AsIAM and the Children’s Rights Alliance. We will not have an inclusive school environment and culture if inclusion is not supported throughout the education system. The Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, and the Minister, Deputy McEntee, are moving on teacher training. All students teachers need experience in special schools and classes. While inclusive education is covered in initial education training, it is limited and theoretical in its approach. Dyslexia needs far more attention. The Minister of State knows I support the provision of more reading classes.

There should be better access to continued development for qualified teachers and comprehensive training for members of boards of management. Without a consistent approach in the training of teachers, the experience of students will continue to be inconsistent. Despite the investment in special education - and it is significant - we do not have an effective forward planning system for the delivery of school places and enough appropriate supports. We are still in an annual cycle of a scramble for school places for children with additional needs. The Minister of State and I know this needs to end.

I welcome the new timeline the Minister of State has outlined to sanction new classes and the bringing forward of the deadline when students should be alerted to the NCSE who require a special class or special school place, but 1 October is very early in the admission cycle and school year. Parents and guardians must be no doubt about how this process will work. That is why I have already suggested to the Minister of State a campaign that goes beyond the NCSE, schools and public representatives to generate awareness, and not just of the timeline but how it actually works. We should also be planning five years in advance to meet the new projections that the Department has for children with additional needs.

I also wish to talk about trust in the NCSE and the parent experience. Too many parents are still being let down by the system and I continue to be shocked on too many occasions by interactions with the NCSE. I applaud the task force in Dublin 15 for its work. The Minister of State met its members today. The common applications trial and the collaboration between the Department, the NCSE, parents and schools will bring positive change. Yesterday, however, as the Minister of State knows, I was again in the presence of parents in a desperately unfair and unacceptable situation. The school in question has outlined a sequence of events based on its workings with the NCSE that point to a legitimate understanding and expectation that the students had secured places in their local school. Many are already members of the school and school community, but the NCSE seems to have taken a dramatically different approach in recent weeks. For the life of me, I cannot understand how we have ended up where we are. We need to have positive and constructive relationships with our local schools. Whatever promises have been made need to be kept. I know the Minister of State is aware of the situation and is prioritising it as we speak. I urge that there be a resolution and clarity as soon as possible.

I also welcome the student support plans, or the individual education plans as I know them, being put on a statutory footing. I do not want to be talking about securing school places all the time. I want to be talking more about what happens when children get into the school.

I support the AsIAM call for special education policy to be rooted in legislation. That is important. It has been 21 years since the EPSEN Act. We had an implementation plan. We need to start implementing that policy and seeing the benefits and the transformative change that the Minister of State, the Minister and the Government are working on.

Deputy Pa Daly: This is one of the most frustrating issues I am dealing with in County Kerry. It is clear that too many children are being denied their right to education. Parents are contacting me about this issue, including, recently, one parent who has been involved in education for 20 years. Her other children have gone through the system. It is with her youngest child that she has faced the system and the bureaucracy. She feels increasingly frustrated, despite having given every inch she has to obtain an early education class for her child. She is not succeeding and it is of great upset to her. This is a woman in the Killarney area. Other families also feel like there is no light at the end of the tunnel and that their children are being left behind and not getting as fair a chance as other children.

I raise the issue of early intervention for preschool autistic children, who would get a support teacher and an SNA. One child, who has profound needs, is non-verbal and needs 24-7 support, has recommendations from the NCSE and a SENO that he be offered a place but has been denied one in Killarney because none are available in County Kerry. What makes the situation even more frustrating is that there is a school, with the staff, the space and the support of the school principal, willing to establish the early intervention class in Killarney town, but this has been refused. More children are being locked out of appropriate education for yet another

year. The people of Kerry are feeling let down because they see there are only two early intervention classes in the whole county. While I should not look at neighbouring counties, there are way more in those counties. Even one town neighbouring County Kerry has more early intervention classes than the whole of Kerry combined. It is not a very big town either.

When we drill down further into the figures, the situation is bleak. There are six places in each of County Kerry's two classes because many children need to stay on for a second year. The number of school places available at the start of every school year then becomes even smaller. This year, only three or four places were available for the whole county for 1 September 2025. It is not good enough to say this situation is being looked at and a place will be available next year. This is undoubtedly a nationwide crisis and no county has escaped, but the situation in Kerry seems way worse than anywhere else. Children are at a significant disadvantage. One would think the Government would be stepping up to the plate and ensuring the spaces are available early, because - as the mother told me and the research clearly demonstrates - early intervention vastly improves outcomes for children and can negate the need for classes at a later stage. I ask the Minister of State not to ignore them and the other classes in Castleisland, Castlemaine, Moyvane, which I asked the Minister of State about previously, and the Presentation Secondary School.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I welcome the publication of this report. I thank the Minister of State for the fast engagement with the issues I raised with him concerning north Dublin. I have one issue I would like to raise with a simple solution. One of the greatest obstacles we are facing in the delivery of inclusive education is the shortage of therapists. One of the solvable bottlenecks is the delay in recognising foreign qualifications. It is mentioned in the programme for Government that we are going to try to fast-track the recognition of qualifications. The issue is that while CORU's published timeline states recognition will take four months, I have met professionals in my area who have waited 12 months, 18 months and nearly two years to have the qualification they received in the UK recognised. I welcome that the review calls for investment in professional learning but we also need urgent reform of what is blocking these people's qualifications from being recognised. If people are short a single module because they qualified in the UK, let us call a national panel of our country's specialists, hold the event in the National Conference Centre, deliver the module, test it and qualify them fast. This is a crisis. Let us treat it like one. Let us apply a Covid-level response. These professionals are already on the critical skills list. Let us let them get the critical work. The children and parents cannot wait any longer. I would love if the Minister of State would look at this issue.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Special education is one area where we can see a lack of action and a chronic lack of supports for children with needs. On the publication of the EPSSEN review, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, rightly noted that special education should be inclusive, equitable and, more important, responsive to the needs of all children. Unfortunately, what we have now is a system that is far from being inclusive. It is, unfortunately, discriminatory. It is not in any way equitable. Rather, it is deeply inequitable in its funding and resource allocations. Offaly School of Special Education in my constituency is crying out for new accommodation. It is shameful to see what is happening in that school in terms of the lack of therapy supports for children, including the occupational therapy and speech therapy that children so badly need. What is the point of talking about the review's recommendations here and considering bringing all school-age children under a single piece of legislation if we are not going to listen to Offaly School of Special Education and other special schools around this State that need urgent assistance and need to ensure therapists are in place?

Deputy Gillian Toole: Twenty-one years passed between the Act being passed and the report being published. We need timelines and they need to be speeded up. We need the use of data for proper forward planning and multi-annual funding to ensure services reach the children who need them most. I welcome the publication of the report. I suggest a review period of two or three years in future to keep on top of the complexities and the urgency. Student support plans are very welcome. Full inclusion and the change in language will bring out the best in all children.

I draw particular attention to sections 7 and 9 of the report, on the importance of transitions from primary to secondary and so on, and the importance of well-being supports and mental health services. These are areas that could be delivered in the short term, including, for example, nurture rooms.

6 o'clock

I have given details of local projects in County Meath to the clerk to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Disability Matters. Supporting successful local initiatives that can be funded in the short to medium term must be a priority. I look forward to working with the Minister and the Minister of State to expedite that.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: We all know that when a child presents with special needs and needs special assistance, it places a massive burden on his or her parents. The parents would prefer to see something wrong with themselves rather than their child. The Minister of State and I know that we do not need reports. We need funding. We need more specialist teachers and places and we need to speed up the assessment of need process because early intervention is paramount when dealing with these children. It needs to be addressed at as young as possible.

Kerry seems to be very hit very badly. I am sure we all get representations. The Minister of State knows the story. I am not saying anything much about the report because we do not need it. What we need is action. I am depending on the Minister of State to carry out that action as Minister with this portfolio. I am asking him to do his best as I know he will.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I thank all the Members for their contributions. The report was published last week and is before the House this week, which shows the urgency with which the Government treats the issue of special education. The one thing I am always encouraged by is the depth of knowledge of Members of the House about special education and the challenges being faced by families and I compliment them on that. I urge them to continue that because there is a sense of urgency and genuineness across all parties and none. There was a sense of urgency and genuineness in the contributions - not in a confrontational way but in a way that asked Government to ensure there is action. I have taken note of some of the issues and I will follow up as best I can because I believe this is one of the major issues facing us and we will be judged on how we address it.

The report gives us an opportunity to reflect, reassess and realign. It is not just a policy check point but is a reminder of the distance we have travelled over the past 20 years or so and the distance we must go to ensure we meet the needs that are out there. I was Chair of the Oireachtas education committee 20 years ago when the EPSEN Act was going through. At that time, people spoke about mainstreaming and policies we now accept are the norm. We must ensure the policies we are going to bring in will strengthen special education and ensure unmet need is met across communities.

1 July 2025

We have listened to the lived experience of all stakeholders, particularly children and young people in reaching the recommendations. More than two decades ago, the EPSEN Act outlined a clear vision. This vision had ambition and was forward thinking and rooted in the principle that every child regardless of his or her ability had a right to a quality education and an inclusive setting where possible. The overall vision has not changed. The review and the contributions of Members today make clear that our system has not fully delivered on this. There are clear steps that can be taken to address this. Some of the welcome policy recommendations are already in progress and work is under way to publish the implementation plan for the remaining recommendations before year end. I am giving an undertaking that we will work with stakeholders to ensure we have an implementation plan for the report.

While the work of SNAs is greatly valued by students, parents and teaching staff, as evidenced by the EPSEN survey and focus group response, the role has not been consistently understood or interpreted. The role of SNA was developed over 20 or 25 years ago. SNAs have become an integral and valued part of our education system. When public representatives from across the House visit special classes or schools, they see the work being done by SNAs in collaboration with all the other stakeholders in the education system. To that end, the SNA assistance workforce development unit was established in December 2022 within the Department. It brings a strategic approach to special needs assistant policy development with the objective of developing an enhanced SNA service that delivers the best care to students with significant care needs in our schools. The Department has begun on the first SNA workforce development plan with a scheduled completion date of September 2025. Work on this project is nearing completion and will be a welcome step forward with regard to the role of the SNA in our education system.

Inclusive Education Ireland is engaging with Technical Support Instruments, a European Commission programme that will provide a pathway towards inclusive education. In its response, the NCSE's policy advice, the Department has recognised that the advice is consistent with Ireland's obligation under the UNCRPD. The Department has also identified a number of existing and planned initiatives that provide a pathway to inclusion.

To assist with further development of inclusive education and anticipating a report in the NCSE policy advice, the Department's special education section applied for funding in 2022 to the EU, which manages the EU's Technical Support Instruments programme. This programme will enable member states to apply for support in managing large-scale system reforms. The application was successful and €500,000 has been sanctioned in consultation support to assist in shaping the Department's response to policy advice.

A number of issues were raised regarding how families and students are engaging with the challenges that are there. A disability section has been set up in the Department of the Taoiseach while the Cabinet committee on disability meets regularly and has been one of the committees that has met most often since the formation of the Government to develop policy. We are bringing therapists into special schools starting in September 2025. It will involve occupational therapists and speech and language therapists. We must ensure we look at other therapists as well such as those involved in music therapy and behavioural therapists. They are hugely important.

There have been a number of Private Members' motions and statements on special education. I know all Members are sincere about the issues they raised. We have a long way to go and we have travelled a long way with regard to special education. The report underlines two

issues. One concerns the legislative changes we need. That will take some time to ensure we deliver them properly. The other issue is policy change. Many policies are being looked at in terms of how we will have the most inclusive education system. We pride ourselves on education. Ireland Inc. has always supported education, and we have always supported education. We are endeavouring to ensure that we have the best possible education system.

The review of the common application pilot is under way. Many have spoken, including some Members today, of families having to apply for multiple schools for their child. We want to make sure that we have that in place and that it is something that will alleviate the burden for families. As I said, there are specific times for families with additional needs, first when they go to pre-school, then to primary school and post-primary school and then beyond education. We will have to make sure that systems and policies are in place, backed up with resources.

The Government, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and I are hugely committed to special education. We have had numerous meetings. We meet on a weekly basis on school places and on making sure we have appropriate places for children into the next school year. We are desperately committed on it. This is the whole-of-government and a huge amount of time has been spent in the last while to make sure we have the best possible system.

There are a number of other issues. On the summer programme, this is going on in some schools this week or next week. I compliment all the schools that have taken on the summer programme, which has provided places for over 56,000 children this year. That is welcome.

There are other issues and if I had the time I could talk for another hour and a half on this and I probably would not get beyond the tip of the iceberg. All I will say is that the senior Minister, Deputy McEntee, and I are extremely committed to the project. We welcome the report. It is a blueprint for how we will go forward. We will be judged on how we implement the report. We intend to bring that forward as early as possible this year.

GPO and Moore Street Regeneration as a 1916 Cultural Quarter: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes:

— the sacrifice of the men and women of 1916, who fought and died in the General Post Office (GPO), Moore Street, across Dublin and elsewhere in Ireland, so Ireland may be free;

— the status of the GPO as a national monument, the headquarters of the 1916 Easter Rising, and the place where the Irish Republic was proclaimed on Easter Monday, 24th April, 1916, and defended in arms in the following days;

— the central role of the GPO in delivering postal services to the people of Dublin for over two hundred years, since it opened in 1818, as an early home from 1928 of 2RN, which pioneered broadcast media in Ireland and evolved into RTE, and as the historic heart of a

1 July 2025

communications network connecting communities across the nation; and

— the consistent, widespread and negligent destruction of Ireland’s republican revolutionary history presided over by successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments;

expresses:

— dismay at the failure to deliver the promised 1916 Commemorative Centre at 14-17 Moore Street, nine years after it was meant to open for the centenary of the Easter Rising; and

— alarm at the plans announced by An Taoiseach Micheál Martin this past week, to turn part of the GPO into retail and office components;

agrees that any plan involving the GPO must include the entire 1916 battlefield site, of which it forms a part, and that therefore, Ministerial consent must not be given to the current plan by the private developer Hammerson, which would demolish much of the Moore Street 1916 battlefield site around the National Monument 14-17 Moore Street, and the promised 1916 Commemorative Centre at 14-17 Moore Street must proceed without further delay; and

calls on the Government to ensure that:

— the GPO remains in full public ownership and control, and that no part of it be made available for private commercial profit;

— the GPO continues as a public office of An Post, a function it has fulfilled since its construction, and its reconstruction following the 1916 Rising, and which it still fulfils successfully today, enhancing O’Connell Street and the North Inner City;

— Moore Street in its entirety, including the terrace at 10-25 Moore Street, should be conserved, and sensitively developed as a cultural historic quarter, cherishing its 1916 Rising heritage and its street-trading tradition, in line with the vision of the Moore Street Preservation Trust;

— no more of Ireland’s republican heritage is allowed be subject to wanton destruction for private profit, and that the full heritage and cultural potential is honoured and realised; and

— the Ceathrú Chultúir 1916 Bill 2021, is enacted without delay.

The people of Ireland are rightly proud of Ireland’s rebel history, ach go háirithe anseo i mBaile Átha Cliath, where despite the odds, the brave republican forces took on one of the most, if not the most, powerful military force at the time, and struck a blow for freedom.

The GPO is the most iconic site of Ireland’s fight for freedom. It is where Pádraig Pearse read the Proclamation of the Irish Republic aloud at Easter 1916. It was therefore understandable that there was public outcry last week when the Taoiseach, Micheál Martin, announced his intention for a redeveloped GPO to include “first-class retail and office components”. Another clanger from Micheál Martin’s pocket, the man who has backed the destruction of Sráid an Mhúraigh, Moore Street, and whose Government colleague, the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, only last week said the naming of the new children’s hospital in honour of

the most senior-ranked woman of the 1916 Rising, Dr. Kathleen Lynn, who founded the first children's hospital, was "too complicated". Of course, Fine Gael will back Martin's commercialisation of the GPO, given that it wanted the people of Ireland to commemorate the Black and Tans.

Mar a dúirt Pádraig Mac Piarais ina dán "Mise Éire", "Mór mó náir: mo chlann féin a dhíol a máthair". Ba dheis an rún seo don Rialtas seasamh linn agus deimhniú "that no part of (the GPO) be made available for private commercial profit", ach in ionad sin tá an Rialtas ag iarraidh na focail sin a scriosadh.

Clambering around to find a rock to hide under Government TDs have tried to say that Sinn Féin would shut down shops nearby and around the GPO. Nothing could be further from the truth. We want to revitalise the area and bring people into this part of the city. We want the shops on Henry Street and GPO arcade to thrive. We want an end to the State-supported dereliction of the Moore Street battlefield site and the southside of upper O'Connell Street. We want to ensure no part of the General Post Office where the Irish Republic was proclaimed on Easter Monday 1916 is turned into shops and offices for private profit.

Sinn Féin's motion calls on Government to ensure that no more of Ireland's republican heritage is subject to wanton destruction for private profit and that the full heritage and cultural potential is honoured and realised. The Government's countermotion wants to delete that.

It also wants to delete "the status of the GPO as a national monument defended in arms" and "the sacrifice of the men and women of 1916, who fought and died in the GPO, Moore Street, across Dublin and elsewhere in Ireland, so that Ireland may be free". As usual this Government wants to delete, delete, delete. Frascati House, home of Edward FitzGerald was demolished for a shopping centre in 1983. Nos. 124 and 125 Stephen's Green West, home of Robert Emmet, was demolished for an office block in the 1980s. No. 40 Herbert Park, home of The O'Rahilly, was demolished in a dawn raid for luxury apartments in 2020. The historic Moore Street terrace where the leaders of 1916 made their last stand after evacuating the GPO is left to rack and ruin, rotting under an accumulation of tacky phone repair shops and dereliction, with a green light from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael to an English property developer, Hammerson, to demolish part of the historic battle site to build guess what? Another shopping centre. It is a case of delete, delete, delete.

What of the paltry 1916 commemorative centre that was supposed to appear at 14-17 Moore Street to open in 2016 as part of the centenary events? We are still waiting. If that is the timescale for what Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael consider "accelerated delivery", will any of us live to see the planned new museum in the GPO?

The Government's amendment describes their "accelerated delivery ... to drive urban regeneration" in Dublin. That will surely come as a slap in the face to those communities who have waited 15 years, and much more in many cases, for regeneration of their decrepit and unsafe flat complexes, considering this Government is now withholding funding for those essential repairs.

The betrayal of the GPO and Moore Street is symbolic of the betrayal of the ideals of 1916. We will not stand for this betrayal. Was it for a Starbucks that all the blood was shed? Or for Carroll's Irish Gifts, no harm to them?

No other country that fought for its freedom would have a government that is so blatantly

1 July 2025

desecrating its hallowed ground, choosing the profits of private developers over the memories of those who gave everything for Ireland. Ireland's revolutionary history is an asset to be cherished, protected and enhanced as a driver of regeneration. In any other city in the world, we would see visionary, ambitious plans to develop the GPO and the surrounding areas, preserving our rebel history with a national museum, arts and culture, education, tourism and homes to make it a living, breathing space.

I have set out in my Ceathrú Cultúir 1916 Bill what a cultural historic quarter could look like, preserving the Moore Street battlefield site in its entirety and implementing the masterplan of the Moore Street Preservation Trust. The GPO could form the heart of that 1916 cultural quarter, not only as a museum and as a space for artistic and cultural events, but also as the signature headquarters for a vast array of cultural agencies whose offices could be accommodated in its huge 25,000 sq. m expanse. Instead of the State paying extortionate rent to private offices to house public bodies like the Arts Council, Foras na Gaeilge and other agencies in offices spread across this city, we could save money and promote best practice and the cross-pollination of creative ideas by bringing them together under one roof, the roof that gave birth to the Republic.

Tá tús curtha leis an gcath chun Ard-Oifig an Phoist a chosaint. The fight to save the GPO has started; a fight we intend to win for those who came before us and those who will come after us.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I rightfully expected the Government's response in the amendment to this Private Members' motion to be the same dismissive smokescreen which has been thrown up whenever the future of the GPO and our historic buildings on Moore Street where the leaders of 1916 made their last stand is raised. However, let us be clear: this Private Members' motion is only in response to the Taoiseach's statements. His plan to turn the GPO into a mixed-use development and Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Lowry Independent group will support that plan and desecrate the GPO. It will not be the first time that it has done the unthinkable and bulldozed our historical sites or not pursued developers who knocked down historical buildings in a dawn raid. The O'Rahilly house at 40 Herbert Park in Ballsbridge was knocked down despite Dublin City Council councillors voting unanimously to support a motion by Sinn Féin councillor Mícheál Mac Donncha to add the building to the list of protected structures. That is one example in Dublin.

In my home town, Drogheda, Drogheda Grammar School, which was over 250 years old and protected by a High Court order and a ruling of An Bord Pleanála, was demolished in the early hours of the morning. For those who think that a Government, including the Government parties currently in power, would not tear the heart out of such a historic site need only remember the destruction of the Viking settlement at Wood Quay to make way for new civic offices despite tens of thousands of citizens marching against the plan and years of legal challenges. The protesters at Wood Quay included the late great poet Thomas Kinsella, who told the crowd that this was the birthplace of our own city, but it was still bulldozed. The Government is now moving to tear the heart out of the birthplace of our Republic.

Dublin city centre does not need more offices and shops. There is a vacancy rate of almost 20% at present and empty retail units on every street. What O'Connell Street, the GPO, Moore Street and all of Dublin city centre needs is what the motion calls on the Government to do. Among the points we are raising is to ensure the GPO remains in full public ownership and control and that no part of it is made available for private commercial profit. Moore Street in

its entirety, including the terrace comprising 10-25 Moore Street, should be conserved and sensitively developed as a cultural historic quarter, cherishing its 1916 Rising heritage and street trading tradition in line with the vision of the Moore Street Preservation Trust.

This, combined with the GPO and a 1916 cultural quarter, would honour our past, preserve it for the future and give our capital city a place that Dubliners and every Irish person could be proud of, a place where visitors would want to visit and a place worthy of its history. I am not a Dubliner by any means, but I am a proud Irish woman and like many others I am proud of our history and heritage and am outraged by the Government's blatant betrayal of our rebel history. I ask that the Government not repeat the mistakes of Wood Quay, and instead supports the motion as it is and stands up and be counted for our history that makes us proud to be Irish.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: It is fair to say that on the watch of this Government O'Connell Street and the surrounding area have definitely been neglected. I am sick and tired of Government representatives giving out about Dublin city, running the capital down and hiding their jewellery when they walk down Talbot Street. We see them.

The answer to how the Government treat O'Connell Street and the surrounding area is investment and respect. That is what we should see from the Government. It has run down the capital city for too long. Our revolutionary history is important to us in Sinn Féin, the people who have joined us in the Gallery and the people watching this debate. If it is not important to the Government, then shame on it.

Does the Minister of State think it is acceptable to roll his eyes, shake his head and smirk? It is not because when the mask slips with the Government, it slips all the way down to its ankles and we see exactly what it is that it has planned. The breathtaking ignorance of our history on display from the Government is shameful. I would have thought the Government might have learned something after its plans to celebrate the Black and Tans, but it turns out that lessons learned is something the Government says but which does not have any meaning, as we see from its latest stunt which is more of the same, namely ignorant revisionism from a Government that seems almost ashamed of Dublin's revolutionary past.

I am proud of our capital city, proud to be a Dub and proud of the 1916 rebels. How the Government treats the GPO is a measure of its respect for our history. Commercialisation of the GPO will not be tolerated. It is not what the task force recommended and it is not what people want. We want an end to State-supported dereliction of our capital city. My colleague, Deputy Ó Snodaigh, has put forward a plan to create a 1916 cultural quarter. The Government should scrap its amendment and engage with us on our plans for a vibrant city centre.

If the Government presses ahead with its plan, this disgraceful proposal will be resisted and met with strong resistance from people who are proud of our history and ashamed of what the Government is proposing. It might be okay for the Government to stick a Starbucks, McDonald's or something like that in the area, and the Minister of State can shake his head, but the Government is leaving the door open to do exactly that. The Government should shut that down. Deputy McAuliffe will get his chance to speak.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputies.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: The Deputy cannot be telling the House-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I do not appreciate the interruption.

1 July 2025

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy McAuliffe-----

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: If he interrupts again, I want the clock turned off.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy McAuliffe, the Deputy is entitled to her speech without your interruption.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: She is not entitled to mislead the House.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Absolutely. I am entitled to speak in this Chamber. I have a mandate just as Deputy McAuliffe does. I would appreciate if some time was added at the end for my colleagues for that rude interruption.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: The people of this State should not be surprised that the Government proposes to develop the historic GPO into a commercial centre for office and retail units. It should not be surprising because the Government, especially Fianna Fáil, talks out of both sides of its mouth. It talks about protecting our heritage and revolutionary past, yet despite promise after promise the Taoiseach has backed the big developers who intend to destroy Dublin's historic Moore Street.

Sinn Féin, along with others, including relatives of the heroes of 1916, has campaigned to develop a 1916 cultural and revolutionary quarter which would include Henry Street, Moore Street and the GPO. The centrepiece of this revolutionary quarter would be the buildings along Moore Street. The wealth of history in this area is astonishing.

I am a proud Dub and have spent my entire life in the north inner city. I have taken several tours. I advise the Minister of State to go on a tour with Liz Gillis. She outlines the forgotten history of the women of 1916 who refused to back down from orders to leave the GPO when it was burning after was bombed by the British army and how, when they left the wounded volunteers to go to Jervis Street hospital, they left under intense British fire along Henry Street and refused to stop until they got their comrades medical treatment. Elizabeth O'Farrell, despite intense British army fire, delivered the surrender on Moore Street after Pádraig Pearse and the volunteers tried and failed to break through the homes and businesses along the street.

Hundreds of people take tours of O'Connell Street every day, some specific revolutionary tours. These tours take place despite the fact this and previous Governments have presided over the neglect and dereliction of our main street and country. This shameful proposal to downgrade our revolutionary past is typical of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael and it will not be tolerated by the proud republican people of Dublin.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Over the years, we have lost too much of our national heritage through disastrous developments such as the council offices on Wood Quay, built over a Viking village, or the destruction of the Georgian facades around St. Stephen's Green and Merrion Square because of dubious planning decisions. It was heartbreaking to see the conscious and deliberate destruction of the home of The O'Rahilly. We are not against progress, but we are against progress at all costs with no thought to its impact on what should be regarded as our national treasures.

Rather than seeking to preserve these national monuments, the Government seems intent on flogging them off to the highest bidder. Who could fathom that serious consideration is being given to a proposal that sites as historically significant as the GPO and Moore Street will be

turned into what is basically a big shopping mall with office spaces? We have one opportunity to get this right, otherwise we will lose for ourselves and the generations yet to come what the National Museum described as the most important historic site in modern Irish history.

Governments have made many mistakes with regard to the preservation of our national heritage, but instead of learning from these mistakes the Government seems intent on replicating them. This quarter that encompasses the GPO and the Moore Street battle site is rich in the history of the Rising. Some of the most important events of the Rising occurred in these buildings and on the streets surrounding them. We still see evidence of the fight in the scars of battles on many of the buildings in the area. These buildings are culturally significant as symbols of the courage and sacrifice of the Irish people when facing the might of an empire.

The events that took place in the GPO and Moore Street were pivotal moments which ultimately led to the War of Independence and the fight for freedom. I am probably the only person in the Dáil who had two grandfathers who fought in the 1916 Rising. One of my grandfathers, Peter Doyle, fought in the GPO and on Moore Street with Pearse and Connolly. My other grandfather, Samuel Ellis, fought in Jacob's factory. For me, my family, republicans and others throughout the country, we see the Government proposals as a deep insult and desecration of their memory and sacrifice. These sites belong to them, the people and men and women who fought and died for Irish freedom. To preserve these historic sites and honour the memory of those who fought in 1916, Sinn Féin has alternative proposals for the area surrounding the GPO, encompassing O'Connell Street and Moore Street. Such an area would include a living museum that would recreate the historical events of the area and provide visitors with a practical interpretation of the Rising. Such a development would revitalise the area, increase tourism and bring much-needed employment opportunities. The Government needs to designate the area as national monument to preserve the historical quarter. Otherwise, it is an exercise in destruction.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are no strangers to hollowing out our cities and public spaces for corporations. There is no such thing as public space in our capital any more. Scandalously, there is but a single public bathroom in the entirety of Dublin city today. Selling off our dearest national monument as corporate prey is one more step in that direction, and another in a series of affronts to our national history and republican legacy.

Tá Ard-Oifig an Phoist mar cheann de na suíomhanna stairiúla is tábhachtaí in Éirinn. D'imir an suíomh ról lárnach in Éirí Amach 1916. Is ar na céimeanna a léadh an Forógra, agus is ann a thug Cogadh na Saoirse casadh cinniúnach. Dá dtiontófaí Ard-Oifig an Phoist ina haonad gnó, bhainfí ó shuntas stairiúil an tsuímh agus chaillfeadh na glúnta atá le teacht an nasc leis an miotais náisiúnta. D'aithin an tAire, an Teachta O'Brien, an méid sin in 2015. Mar Sheanadóir, thug sé Bille chun cinn a chosnódh ceantar Shráid an Mhúraigh.

The Bill of the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, to protect our cherished public heritage in the Moore Street area reached Committee Stage in 2015 but, strangely, never became part of his agenda when he took over the reins in the Department with a remit over housing and heritage in 2020. As usual, when the developers descend, Fianna Fáil steps aside and lets the vultures have at it. Where does Fianna Fáil draw the line? Clearly, nothing is off limits, not even the birthplace of our Republic of 1916. Sinn Féin will not let any English developer plunder our national heritage.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

(Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan): I move:

To delete all words after “Dáil Éireann” and substitute the following:

“notes:

— the ongoing commitment of this Government to honouring the men and women of 1916;

— the hugely successful and inclusive Decade of Centenaries programme, and the Government’s investment in key capital projects in that regard, including the seminal 1916 Museum and Exhibition at the General Post Office (GPO), and the purchase by the State of the National Monument at 14-17 Moore Street; and

— its affirmation of the status of the GPO as the headquarters of the 1916 Easter Rising, and the site at which the Proclamation of the Republic was read on Easter Monday, 24th April, 1916;

acknowledges the central role the GPO has played since 1818 in delivering postal services, and its historical significance as an early home for the predecessor of RTÉ, 2RN;

recognises the enduring role of the GPO as a hub of communication, connecting communities across the country;

further notes:

— that the Government has approved the overall approach as outlined by the Interdepartmental Group on the recommendations of the proposed Roadmap for Delivery: Dublin City Taskforce Report;

— the accelerated delivery of several landmark capital projects in Dublin’s core area, forming part of a broader strategy to drive urban regeneration and sustainable development as a result of the work of the Interdepartmental Working Group and the Dublin City Taskforce;

— that this commitment will be reflected in the review of the National Development Plan (NDP) and aims to help build delivery momentum across priority projects;

— that the NDP 2021-2030, published in 2021, included the GPO redevelopment and clearly sets out the intentions relating to the GPO that the building will remain in public ownership, and the rich cultural heritage of the building will be preserved through continued operation of the historic post office and the museum on the ground floor, and, sympathetic to development elsewhere on O’Connell Street, the upper floors will be refurbished to provide office accommodation for civil servants; and

— that a detailed proposal for the future use of the GPO will be developed by the Office of Public Works (OPW), and submitted for approval by the Government in due course, and it is acknowledged that there will be a need to consult on design, and that the consultation would be wide ranging given the emblematic importance of the GPO, not only to Dubliners but also to the public all over Ireland;

endorses the intention to reflect the national historical and cultural significance of

the GPO in any development plans, creating a dynamic and respectful reuse of a key historical civic landmark; and

furthermore, notes:

- the acquisition by the State of the National Monument at 14-17 Moore Street;
- the significant stabilisation and weathering works undertaken by the Government to preserve and save the buildings from further deterioration, and, in particular, the preservation works relating to the historic tunnels;
- the extensive engagement with relevant stakeholders, including political parties, through, inter alia, the work of the Moore Street Advisory Group and other fora; and
- the more recent progress made by the OPW on the restoration and conservation of the National Monument at 14-17 Moore Street.”.

The General Post Office complex site, the former headquarters of An Post, remains the principal post office of our capital city. It is one of the most prominent and well-known buildings of our capital and country, perhaps the most well known. It has secured a place in our history and in our country’s future due to its role in the 1916 Easter Rising and the hallowed space from where this republic was born. It is not just a building. It is a witness to our struggle, our sacrifice and our rising. It was here beneath the Tricolour flying defiantly over the colonnade that the Proclamation of the Irish Republic was first read aloud to the world. Here the plum of our nation’s great dream turned red with the blood of patriots who dared to imagine a free Ireland.

As things stand, it comprises just under 24,000 sq. m of mixed-use accommodation, including office space, the post office itself, the Witness History exhibition centre, as well as some retail units and the GPO shopping arcade. While there has been a range of minor conservation interventions over many years, the condition of the fabric of the building has deteriorated in places and the building management system needs to be upgraded. In late 2023, the majority of the GPO staff moved to new premises in the north docklands and a reduced cohort of approximately 300 staff remain at the GPO complex.

The interdepartmental group on the Dublin city task force held its first meeting in October 2024, with a number of Departments and agencies represented at senior level. The recent report of the group provides a path to implement the Dublin city task force recommendation, including governance and oversight. The report outlines the engine for delivery and the required partnership that, with the right expertise and focus, can deliver actions to make Dublin city more thriving and attractive, a safe cityscape and a desirable location to live, work and visit.

The report includes recommendations for the future of the GPO. It proposes that the redevelopment of the GPO complex be an ambitious national flagship project. It proposes a mixed-use development, with a combination of cultural, retail and office components befitting the national historic and cultural importance of the site, all to be the subject of a detailed proposal to be developed and led by the OPW. The OPW has already undertaken a preliminary assessment of the building fabric and services, including a detailed survey of the entire complex. Detailed topographical surveys and internal and external digital scanning of the entire property have been completed, as well as subsurface surveys, which will provide information critical to the future detailed design process. This technical work will inform interventions to safeguard

the property in future.

The project has been included as a key project of the OPW's submission on the revised national development plan, which affirms that the GPO will remain in public ownership. The rich cultural heritage and essence of the building will be preserved through its continued operation of the historic post office and the museum on the ground floor. Sympathetic to development elsewhere on O'Connell Street, the upper floors will be refurbished to provide office accommodation for public servants, a key piece of infrastructure for modern government administration.

It is acknowledged by the OPW and by us all that there will be a need to consult on design, and that this consultation will be wide-ranging, given the profound symbolic and real importance of the GPO, not only to Dubliners, but to many in our nation and among our diaspora. In addition, the redevelopment of the complex affords us an opportunity to further enhance a space for the public with new visitor attractions and a city centre venue with cultural, education and recreational facilities.

Redevelopment of the GPO complex will, of course, need to be considered in the context of the surrounding urban landscape. We will need to ensure that various envisaged projects work together in harmony to revitalise the area and address some of the wider urban and social challenges facing this area of the city. Conservation-led development of the national monument at 14-17 Moore Street is one such project, where detailed work into the refurbishment of the national monument is well progressed.

As all well know, legal proceedings from 2016 thwarted the State's hope and stopped all works, apart from essential stabilisation and preservation measures that were agreed by the High Court. Since the Court of Appeal overturned the earlier judgment in 2018, the Moore Street advisory group to the Minister has advised on how best to proceed with plans for the monument as well as a visitor centre to the rear. It was to liaise with stakeholders with a view to securing agreement for the redevelopment of the area in a way that is sensitive to its history, its culture and its traditions. This group went through three iterations and comprised 1916 relatives and Moore Street traders as well as Oireachtas and local authority members. The group provided three separate reports to the Minister, all of which contained a number of suggestions. The key recommendation was that work would begin on the monument as soon as possible.

Plans for the refurbishment of the national monument, along with a visitor centre to the rear, are well under way. A steering group of officials from the Department and the OPW is guiding the complex process involved in a project such as this. Considerable work has been done to ensure all preparatory work for any redevelopment has been thoroughly carried out, and all public infrastructure guidelines have been adhered to. A design team for the project has been appointed and an application for ministerial consent for investigative works has been received, which will inform the full ministerial consent application, which is anticipated to be submitted shortly.

I am pleased to say the interpretation stage of the project, with detailed design of the exhibition, has been signed off and the appointed consultants are in the process of preparing tender documents for the exhibition elements of the commemorative centre. The project was awarded €12.17 million under the urban regeneration and development fund and the balance will be funded through the Exchequer. I am glad to say that works to the national monument are completely independent of works to the surrounding area and will proceed under ministerial consent as soon as possible, once all of the plans have been made.

I stand before the Dáil not merely to speak of bricks and mortar, and not simply to honour the fine neoclassical building that has graced O'Connell Street since 1818. I speak of a living symbol, a sacred place that still resonates with the fierce unyielding rhythm of Irish freedom, identity and resilience. To walk through the GPO doors today is to walk through time. Each echo on its stone floors is a whisper of Pearse, Connolly and Clarke, a chorus of voices who would not be silenced and who gave their all so that we might inherit a nation proud and free. The bullet holes still etched in its columns are not scars - they are scriptures. They are reminders of what we owe and to whom, and what we must never forget.

I plead with Sinn Féin not to put out an incorrect narrative on this. We are all connected to this period of our revolutionary history. Many TDs and Senators have a direct link to this revolutionary period, not just Sinn Féin.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: No one said that.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: There are people whose family members participated through different periods of this revolutionary period. Sinn Féin does not own this narrative. We all have an invested role here. To hear things such as “betrayal” and to hear the Government being accused of the “wanton destruction” of this revolutionary period is completely outrageous and untoward. There was no mention of the investment in Kilmainham Gaol and the incredible visitors' centre that we have there-----

Deputy Paul Donnelly: It is run by volunteers.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: There was no mention of-----

Deputy Paul Donnelly: Volunteers did that for decades.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: -----the €10 million spent on the exhibition that we already have in the GPO. There was no mention of the decade of centenaries. None of that was mentioned. It was completely wiped out for Sinn Féin's narrative. The Government is invested in this. With anything that happens to the GPO, there will be an absolute focus on the cultural importance of the GPO.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Hear, hear.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: There will be a focus on the historic importance of the GPO. There will be a focus on the role this period played in this important part of Ireland's history. The reason the State bought and owns 14-17 Moore Street is to protect it and to commemorate what happened in those houses on Moore Street. To hear descriptions such as “betrayal” and “wanton destruction” is-----

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: The Minister of State said that.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: ----- completely out of order.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: Look at Moore Street.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Cultural vandalism.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: Has the Minister of State been down Moore Street recently?

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: That is why we are strongly opposing-----

1 July 2025

Deputy Paul Donnelly: Has the Minister of State been down Moore Street recently?

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Sinn Féin does not even know what it is opposing.

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: That is why we are strongly opposing this motion.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: Has Deputy McAuliffe? Has he seen Moore Street recently?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: The Deputies have mentioned retail outlets such as McDonald’s and Carroll’s. First, there is already a retail element to the GPO complex. The Deputies cannot deny that a GPO complex is already there. Sinn Féin is trying to put across this argument, in its Members’ own words, that it will be turned into a “giant shopping mall”. That is absolutely not the case-----

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: There are no plans for a shopping mall.

Deputy Louise O’Reilly: That is what the Government is doing on Moore Street.

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: -----and it is completely unfair to describe it as such.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: There will be a new apartment block on Moore Street

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: At the centre of anything that happens to the GPO will be the museum and the cultural and historical aspect of it. I would love if Sinn Féin were to co-operate on this project because we have an opportunity to create something wonderful. Yes, there will be a retail element to it. Yes, there will be-----

Deputy Denise Mitchell: Retail.

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: -----civic offices. At the centre will be-----

Deputy Louise O’Reilly: No civic offices.

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: -----the role this beautiful building played in Ireland’s history, in the revolutionary period and in 1916. That has to be acknowledged and it has been acknowledged.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I honestly cannot think of anywhere else in the world that would treat a major historical site, one that is so central to the modern history of their country, in such a disrespectful manner.

Deputy Louise O’Reilly: Hear, hear.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: The GPO should be preserved for generations and should become a focal point, along with the preservation and restoration of nearby Moore Street. They should be part of a historical and cultural quarter of the city that respects the importance of the history of 1916. I do not know about the other Deputies, but I could not believe my ears when the Taoiseach spoke about putting first-class retail into the GPO. Holy moly. The place is already surrounded by retail. Has the Taoiseach not seen that?

This is the main street of our capital city. Every single day, it is full of people from all over Ireland and the world. Let us use this opportunity to educate people on the history of the Easter

Rising. Let us showcase our Irish culture, our music, our literature, our dance and our language. Yes, the GPO should continue to do what it does best: to operate as a post office. At the moment, O'Connell Street and Moore Street are full of phone shops, vape shops and decaying buildings. The area has been falling into despair for years. We clearly need to take bold steps to revitalise this part of the city. I believe that Deputy Ó Snodaigh's motion and the Moore Street Preservation Trust's plan are what can do that. The GPO is where our freedom was proclaimed. We should be protecting and preserving it. It should be a focal point for our history.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: When we speak of the GPO and the Moore Street area, we are not just talking about buildings and laneways, but of the cornerstone of our rebel history in a city that fought an empire. The GPO is not architecture; it was the battleground of striking for Irish independence. It is a monument to selfless sacrifice, and, when heavily shelled by the British forces, leaving much of it in ruins, it now appears Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and their Independents seek to rebrand that history and what it represents. At Easter 1916, it was ordinary men and women who stood and fought there, not for commerce or for convenience, but for a vision of a republic that was free, proud and sovereign. To now consider converting this sacred historical area into more shops, regardless of class, and office space is quite frankly an outrage and an embarrassment. We are the stewards of this nation's legacy. Legacies are not preserved by erasing them. They are preserved with purpose. Other nations do this as a matter of pride. They enshrine their revolutionary heritage into civic spaces. Why should we do less? Why should we do less with Irish revolutionary heritage?

This motion sets out a vision of a 1916 cultural quarter, a living, dynamic cultural space that would educate and inspire, a place where young and old engage with history, not as a distant memory, but of our living heritage, where tourists come not just to buy, but to learn and understand who we are and how we got here. It would be a cultural development with soul and a cultural investment with return. We cannot allow history to be overwritten - not at Moore Street or the GPO, which should be spaces that honour our past, enrich our present and shape our future. If we reduce our most historic sites to units of rent, what message are we sending? That profit outweighs our rebel history and our patriot dead. Let us not forget those ordinary people who stood in the GPO in 1916. They did not do it for shops or offices. They did it for an Irish Republic. The least we can do is to ensure that the place that became iconic in that rebellion remains a space worthy of their fight and sacrifice.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank my colleague, Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh, not only for bringing this motion to the House, but for the battle he continuously fights to protect our rebel history and respect our patriot dead and their families. Sinn Féin has set out a clear vision in Aengus's Bill to develop the 1916 cultural quarter in line with the Moore Street Preservation Trust. The GPO and the surrounding lanes and houses of Moore Street are hallowed ground for Irish people. The Government's proposal to sell off this incredible piece of history to private proprietors is beyond comprehension to most Irish citizens.

It is on the steps of the GPO that Pádraig Pearse read the words of the Proclamation, and it is from within that building that the revolutionary Government of 1916 led the 1916 Rising, a Proclamation that after more than 100 years is yet to be fully realised. That tells us a lot about the Governments we have had in the interim. Dublin became the city that fought the biggest empire in the world from the epicentre of the GPO. The question people have been asking this evening and in the last week is about why Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are hellbent on extinguishing the memory of those who died for Irish independence.

1 July 2025

This Government plans to ignore the vote of the Dáil to name the national children's hospital after Dr. Kathleen Lynn. It is outrageous.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Hear, hear.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: At every turn, this Government chooses to denigrate our history. Why will it not name the new hospital after Kathleen Lynn? It would be a fitting tribute to the Mayo woman who served as the most senior ranking woman in the 1916 Rising, who set up Ireland's first children's hospital and who led efforts to eradicate TB.

The Government should choose a fitting name for the national children's hospital and it must protect and develop the GPO and the Moore Street cultural quarter. The Government is not going to get away with this. The people of Ireland will rise up to make sure that it does not, that it honours our patriot dead and that it does the right thing. Aengus Ó Snodaigh talked earlier about the Government's strategy of delete, delete and delete. The Government will not be allowed to delete this.

Deputy Réada Cronin: When Pádraig Pearse stood outside the GPO on Easter 1916 to read the Proclamation, he read it not in the hopes that he might one day live to see it, but in the knowledge that the generations of republicans to follow would. The Proclamation of the Republic is not just a script to put in a picture frame. It is the inspiration of a republic that found a voice in our Proclamation. It was a document so ahead of its time that it still remains an aspiration to all of us who love our country today, the sacred promise of a 32-county republic.

Not only has the Government failed to live up to the spirit of the Republic declared in 1916, but it also now seeks to destroy its legacy by commercialising our sacred site and turning our rebel quarters and our national shrine into a shopping centre and a tourist gimmick. Should we be surprised? This is the same Government that in 2020 sought to commemorate the Black and Tans. It is the same Government that, to our shame, has done nothing to unite Ireland and nothing to advance the 32-county republic that was declared in 1916. A Fine Gael TD spoke last week about making the GPO a place filled with people again. It was not really people he wanted to fill it with, but consumers. A constituent said to me last week that by the time this Government is done desecrating the sanctity of the hallowed grounds, the next commemoration of 1916 will see our Proclamation read in front of a Costa Coffee. Let me remind this Government that it is a steward, not auctioneer. It inherited the promised Republic not built on property deals, but on principles. The Government's duty is to protect our heritage where Irish rebels once bled, not to commodify their sacrifice. Let us stand as the 1916 leaders once did, not for profit, but for purpose and pride. This is more than history. This is our identity. This is Ireland and it is not for sale. The souls of our patriot dead are not for sale either.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: The General Post Office is one of the most respected sites on this island. It allows us to remember and reflect on the sacrifice of the 1916 rebels. It is our responsibility, as the generations who come after them, to commemorate their sacrifices and to work to realise the aspirations of the 1916 Proclamation. Therefore, the Government's plans to redevelop parts of the building into a mixed-use precinct, which would include retail and office units, are outrageous. Is this really the best idea the Government could come up with for a building of such cultural and historical significance? Sinn Féin has advocated for the GPO and the wider Moore Street area to become an historical quarter. Such a quarter would commemorate the sacrifice of the 1916 rebels in a way that was respectful and ensured that the GPO was a living, breathing institution.

I come from the town of Athenry where the local community holds enormous pride in our revolutionary history. Athenry was one of the main focal points outside of Dublin during the 1916 Easter Rising. It was where Liam Mellows led hundreds of Volunteers to revolt against British rule. I commend the work of Athenry Tidy Towns and the Relatives and Friends of Galway 1916 to 1923, who have created a fantastic garden in Athenry to commemorate the men and women of the 1916 Rising who took up arms for the cause of Irish freedom.

The respect and honour shown by the local Athenry community stands in direct contrast with these recent moves by the Government. What was the sacrifice of the 1916 rebels for? Was it for Carroll's Irish Gifts or Krispy Kreme doughnuts? The Government must put a stop to these plans for making the site where the 1916 Proclamation was recited into yet another bland retail space. Stop hollowing out our national monuments and act to preserve the GPO as a memorial to the sacrifices of the 1916 rebels.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: The GPO is more than just a building. It is the beating heart of Dublin city and of our history. It is the centre of civic memory with a 200-year history and, crucially, it is a site with enormous potential. The GPO stood witness to the events of 1916 but the walls have seen far more than that. It bore witness to the 1913 Lock-out, which was a defining moment for workers' rights. It has stood through both world wars when thousands of Irish men were away at war and their families waited anxiously for letters from the front line. It was a telephone room that connected people to loved ones as they emigrated to England, Australia and America. In a very real way, the GPO has been the front room of the nation, a place where people gathered, where stories were shared and where history happened. It has been a focal point not just for rebellion, but also for protest, celebration and connection.

It is remarkable that the GPO has never stood still. It has always been reinventing itself. Now it is up to us to ensure that its next chapter serves people just as powerfully as it did in the past. The Labour Party hopes that the Government is not prepared to trade imagination for inertia, heritage for market value, or public good for private gain. We are standing at a crossroads and we must ask if the GPO will become just another office block or, worse, a home for retail chains. Worse again, is it at risk of being handed over to the highest bidder? Or will we have the courage to make it a living, breathing public institution, one that honours our revolutionary past while building for our cultural future?

The GPO must stay in the hands of the State and be developed for public use, the Minister of State has said. The alternative would be to allow market logic to dictate what happens on one of the most symbolically important pieces of land in the country. This would be a failure of political imagination and a huge missed opportunity. For years, Dublin has seen the relentless erosion of its artistic and cultural life, driven out by commercial rents, developer greed and political neglect. The GPO should be transformed into an artistic and cultural hub, complete with artists' studios, performance venues, education spaces and, critically, housing. Any hollowing out should stop and the GPO offers us a lifeline here. Its courtyards are flooded with natural light and its walls are steeped in history. This could house workshops, performance spaces and residences. With the right investment, former office units could be converted into affordable apartments for artists and cultural workers, something truly groundbreaking for a city desperate for both housing and creative spaces. If offices are truly necessary, why not offer space to local start-ups and grassroots enterprises?

When it comes to the GPO, we are facing deeply contentious issues and, frankly, I believe the current plans miss the mark to some degree. Time and again, we hear about "meanwhile

1 July 2025

use”. If that is truly the intention why do we not actually test those uses before locking us into something permanent and potentially regrettable? Meanwhile use is one of the latest phrases from a Government seemingly allergic to long-term vision. If it truly believes the GPO can be used temporarily while long-term plans are figured out, well, let us prove it. Open the space, host exhibitions, support community theatre and open-air historical re-enactments, facilitate youth workshops, create performance venues, and make a commitment here and now that the GPO gets an event space and that it will be a public venue, accessible, affordable and alive with the cultural energy the city is crying out for.

This entire district of Moore Street to the GPO and to Parnell Square should be reimaged as a 1916 revolution quarter, a place of remembrance, regeneration and renewal. This site does not belong to any Government or Opposition party, or to any Minister or development firm. It belongs to the people.

It is deeply disappointing that successive Governments have ignored reports with plans for the area and instead facilitated a private profit-maximising vision that erodes rather than enhances the historic fabric. It is a dereliction of civic duty. A city without culture is a city without soul. A capital that forgets its revolutionaries is a capital that sidelines them. A State that abandons public assets to market logic is a State that has lost sight of the public good. This is not just about a building, but about our values. It is about whether we are shaping a city for profit or for people and whether we honour our history in building a living legacy or sell it off piece by piece to the highest bidder.

Let me be clear. The Labour Party is completely opposed to the idea of long-term office space or a parade of big retail brands setting up shop on this historically significant site. This is not just another building. It is a cornerstone of our national story. That does not mean it should become a static museum piece. Far from it, but surely there is a richer and more meaningful cultural and educational use that should take precedence within the building that uses and serves the public, not just the market. If the plan includes an event space, let us demand real commitment that it be truly a public venue, accessible, inclusive and alive for live events. In a city sorely lacking in performance spaces, this is a chance to address this need, not to ignore it. The future of the GPO must still be written but it is more than just property value. It is more than just square footage or euro signs. It should be about creativity, remembrance and public purpose.

7 o'clock

Deputy Marie Sherlock: In *Ulysses*, James Joyce referred to O'Connell Street from the GPO to Parnell Street as “the dead side of the street.” Some 102 years on, not much has changed. Indeed, things have got worse if we think of the wasteland of the Carlton Cinema site and Moore Street, where the top floors of many buildings are held up by bricks.

I thank Sinn Féin and an Teachta Ó Snodaigh for this important motion. While I agree with the vast majority of it, there is an issue regarding the need for ideas as to what we now do with the massive complex that makes up the GPO. I have read the Government amendment and aside from the ridiculous clap on the back it is trying to give itself, I am even more confused as to its intentions. Last November, in the task force, we were told we would have a detailed plan for the GPO in the first quarter of this year. This has not happened. Last week, the Taoiseach said it would be a historical project with first-class retail and office space. Now we are told that the clear intentions were set out in 2021, the detailed proposal will come in time and it will be a

post office and offices. This is an appalling lack of commitment to the GPO as a landmark and one of the most important historical buildings in our country's history. It also shows an appalling lack of imagination about what the building could become. We do not need any more shiny, new offices in Dublin. We know there is an office vacancy rate of 18%. We do not want and we do not need any more big-brand retail outlets, particularly in a place like the GPO.

The Labour Party firmly believes that we should not confine the GPO to being a shrine to the past. When we think of the Proclamation and its promise, the signatories to it, including James Connolly, would have very little patience for this in the face of a glaring need prompted by housing distress in Dublin and the devastating, unfulfilled promise of the Proclamation. Instead of having the GPO as a relic to the past, it would be best remembered as a living, breathing institution. At 25,000 sq. m, it is almost two thirds bigger than the pitch in Croke Park. Beyond our beloved post office, which in some ways is the beating heart for many of our lives, those of us who have lived in Dublin a long time and those new to Dublin as well, there are two internal courtyards and five floors of office space. We need to make sure this space is utilised.

As an immediate starting point, we should utilise the office space in the GPO for artists' studios. There is a glaring and pressing need for such studios in the city. We have the office space available. Artists will say they do not need a fancy set-up. They just need natural light and a basic room. Many of the offices in the GPO would fulfil those needs. It would be scandalous to think that two years after the majority of the staff moved out of the GPO, the offices would remain vacant for longer. They should be put to use.

The other key issue is that when we have a discussion about what the GPO should become, we need to set in context that funding for this project is not likely any time soon. As a Dublin Central TD, I know there is already a long list of commitments by the Government that have yet to be fulfilled on the northside of the city and in the north inner city, in particular in areas such as the Parnell quarter and the fruit and vegetable market. Do we really believe Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael will allocate the necessary millions to convert the building and bring the office spaces up to date any time soon? Do we really believe they will put in place the necessary historical projects that should go in to the GPO any time soon? I do not believe that will happen. This is why our immediate call is to put the building to use now and then put in place a plan of between five and ten years for the appropriate development of the GPO. We need, rightly, to recognise its history and we also need to ensure it can be an artistic hub into the future, remembering the past but also, crucially, representing the best of the present and what might be in the future for Dublin.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing this timely, welcome and debate-worthy motion to the Chamber. The motion asks us to do something that successive governments have failed to do, namely, treat the GPO and Moore Street as if they matter. I am not just referring to this Government but the previous one and the one before that. Going back to the 50th anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising, the GPO played very little part in the celebrations, and Moore Street none at all. I understand there have been plans and court cases but I walk past the GPO and through Moore Street on most days and the impact of those plans is to be seen right in front of me as I tread the streets. The GPO is not just a landmark; it is a physical foundation of the Republic itself. It was ground zero for a vision of Ireland that still dares to speak of equality, self-determination and cherishing all the children of the nation equally.

I support the motion but I will also go further. What is being offered by the Government is not just inadequate to the history, meaning and symbolism of the structure and its place in

our history; it is nauseating in its limitations. A so-called cultural space wrapped in offices and retail outlets. That is not a legacy project or a tribute and it will not be functional. It is a failure of imagination. It is the kind of gesture a person makes when they do not believe in anything real, when the best a person can hope for is compromise and the worst is a cheap deal, dressed up in heritage language. What makes it worse is where it is happening, at the GPO, on Moore Street, on the very spot where the Republic was declared, not only in theory but in action.

What we speak of tonight is not just nostalgia; we are seeking clarity. When we talk about Moore Street and the GPO, we are talking about two places that are soaked in meaning. We are talking about a week in 1916 when a group of women and men, many of them poets, trade unionists, teachers and dreamers, stood in defiance of empire and declared a Republic on that spot. We are talking about the homes, laneways and tenements that surround them, where ordinary Dubliners paid the price. Too often we forget that more civilians than soldiers or rebels died during Easter week. We forget that women fetching water, children sitting by windows and elderly men trying to get to safety were all shot in the streets surrounding the GPO on that fateful day. On Moore Street, in the final hours of the Rising, when the GPO was burning and the rebel leaders were seeking to escape, local families were the ones caught in the crossfire. John O'Duffy, a pensioner in his 70s was killed crossing the street. Brigid McKane, 15 years old, was accidentally shot in the head by a volunteer who burst into her home in Henry Place. An infant, not yet two years old, was shot in her mother's arms.

When we talk about Moore Street and the GPO, we are talking not just about a battlefield site but about the community heritage and about the people who lived and died in the shadow of the Proclamation. We are talking about the unfinished business of that Proclamation. The Republic that was declared and the one that promised equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens has very clearly not yet been realised. We see this every single week with the protests that happen outside Dáil Éireann and the people who come into the Public Gallery for the vindication of a basic right, such as a wheelchair or a school place. This does not scream of a Republic fulfilled. We see this in housing, poverty, immigration and in how we have treated children, women and minority groups in the State. We see it in the fact that the most sacred civic space in our country is being treated like a planning headache, instead of a national opportunity.

The GPO should not be reduced to an architectural backdrop for a few retail units and a modest gesture towards history. It should be a national civic space, a living, breathing museum of the Irish Republic. It should not just be a museum of the 1916 Easter Rising, although that of course should be central, but something far more ambitious. It should be a place that tells the story of this Republic and its origins, promise, betrayals, heroes, silences, possibilities and complications, all housed within the space. It should be a museum that includes hunger strikers and the women who fought for their suffrage, the revolutionaries and resisters, the trade unionists and the campaigners for civil rights, repeal and marriage equality. It should be for the language movement, the immigrants, the Travellers, the queer community, the migrants and for all of those who call it home. We should also have a space where we can discuss the most difficult parts of our history, be that the Civil War or the Republic that was fought for and then relinquished to the church and other more conservative entities.

There is no cultural quarter in Dublin without Moore Street. There is no museum worth building that does not start with the people who are already there. A statue of Cú Chulainn also stands inside the GPO. A warrior lashed to stone so he could die standing, it is a symbol that has taken on meaning within the Ulster cycle. The statue was placed there with the attached

symbolism of sacrifice, but it is also crucial to be aware that it is a place that has now developed meaning in the Ulster tradition, which gives us one more layer of tradition and meaning at the location. This was later adapted by the Unionists too, with the myth that he died defending Ulster from the rest of Ireland. Whether we believe in that myth or not, or hold it as part of our identity or values, that is okay, but even in our most sacred national building, we have this moment of shared symbolism, complexity and contradiction. That is what a republic should be able to handle. It is also what this museum, a museum of our Republic, past, present and undelivered, should be able to cater for. A civic quarter could represent something far more than just the building, not a sanitised version of Irishness, nor a tourist-friendly package of 1916 memorabilia, but a brave, honest ambitious telling of who we are, who we have tried to be and who we can become.

If we look around Europe, in Amsterdam, the Dutch Resistance Museum does not just tell heroic stories, it asks visitors to reckon with fear, complicity and courage. In Riga, the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia tells the truth about Soviet and Nazi atrocities and does so in the city centre, not tucked away from sight. I refer to both of those museums for a specific reason. We talk about the fact that the GPO is a fairly massive site of nearly 25,000 sq. m, but both of those museums, in cities of similar size, scale and population, are bigger. Those countries understand that difficult history belongs in the public, that honesty is patriotism and that memory is not something to outsource to developers, so why can we not do it? Why, in Ireland, is our instinct always a compromise to commercialise and to put offices where civic ambition should be? The answer, of course, is political, cultural and ideological because at some level this Government, in particular Fine Gael-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy should conclude.

Deputy Gary Gannon: -----does not believe that public memory, public space or the ideals of the Republic should be entrusted to the people. They believe in markets, mixed-use developments and PR exercises. However, there are those of us who believe in something bigger, something more and something more truthful than that. I believe the GPO and Moore Street can be the centre of a living Republic, not one frozen in bronze-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy to conclude if he is sharing with his party colleagues.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I will finish by saying we should build something grander - something bigger that is a true reflection of the Republic.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward this motion. I am proud to stand beside Deputy Gannon, who speaks with such a strong voice for Dublin city centre. He always has done, in particular on issues related to how we make Dublin a place for all people and really protect our culture and heritage.

I want to briefly cover three key points. The first is that the GPO is such a vital part of our heritage and a historical site of the greatest importance to the Irish nation.

Second, when I am on the doorsteps and people talk about safety in the city centre, they also talk about the lack of space as a factor contributing to that.

Finally, I want to reflect on the question of what we want our city to be. Is le gach uile dhuine ar an oileán seo ár stair, ár gcultúr agus ár n-oidhreacht. Many people criticise the

city centre as being devoid of personality and of history. We must look at our city as not just somewhere for commerce, but somewhere for culture and history. There are plenty of retail and hospitality spaces in the city centre already. What there is a lack of is community space, cultural space, spaces that connect us as individuals and as a nation with our own history. It is not unique to Dublin to have historical sites in the middle of the city centre. What is unique is that we have not protected them. Other cities are able to balance that history with corporate and private interests and it is time we did that for our capital.

I want to speak about safety because I have heard from countless people in my constituency, Dublin Rathdown, which is a Dublin suburb, about how they worry coming into Dublin city centre. They do not just talk about Garda numbers or street lighting but about the fact that there is nowhere for community or that is dedicated to community. Not only does this proposed development for O'Connell Street erase a key part of our history but it replaces it with just another shopping centre and it does not fix any of the issues a lot of people have around safety in our city.

That brings me to my final question, which is what we want our city to be. When people look back on us in 100 years, we do not want them to say we knew the price of everything but the value of nothing. In every part of the city we are seeing privatisation - in healthcare, housing, public services, childcare and bin collection. That takes what should be for everyone and makes it just for some. That process is also incredibly difficult to reverse. Dublin city centre should be for everyone. The GPO, as a vital part of our history, should be for everyone. It should be somewhere that encourages people to engage with that history and that inspires art and culture, not somewhere that dismisses it as irrelevant or unprofitable.

Deputy Jen Cummins: It is a defining moment for the preservation of our history. The GPO is fundamental to our past but it is not a relic. It has huge potential. I am lucky to live in Dublin South-Central, where Deputy Ó Snodaigh also lives and where history and historic buildings are preserved and celebrated. They include the Royal Hospital Kilmainham, Kilmainham Gaol, and St. Patrick's Cathedral. Of course we do not always get it right. I also live in a constituency where Kilmainham Mill has yet to see the preservation and restoration that it so well deserves. We must have a vision about things like this.

What I do not want to see is the GPO becoming some sort of a theme park where we have multiple shopping opportunities, like we do in other theme parks around the world. We want to preserve its history by providing learning spaces. I would love to see primary school children, secondary school children, researchers and third level students using that space to learn more about our history. I would also love to see a place where our historical crafts can be protected and celebrated and where there is space to thrive.

Whatever we decide, let us remember that our attractions and historical buildings are for our citizens as well as for the visitors who come here, so let us not commercialise our history but celebrate it.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion. I commend Deputy Ó Snodaigh, who has not just introduced this proposal but over the years has done great work, as has his family, to make sure the cultural and historical heritage of Ireland and this city is maintained and enhanced.

In the course of this debate we think about the sacrifices of those who fought in the GPO

and the fact that Pearse read the Proclamation, an chéad Uachtarán Phoblacht na hÉireann, from the steps of the GPO on Easter Monday in 1916. All of that shows the historic nature of this building. As somebody from the country - a *culchie* - even when we were going to school we were always brought to see the GPO any time we came to Dublin. It has a special place in the hearts and minds of Irish people at home and abroad.

The GPO is also where RTÉ started off with Radio Éireann. It is hugely important. What is missing from the Government side is a bit of honesty around what is going to be defined as a commercial area. There is a small number of commercial units on one side of it, but we must be clear on what is being proposed. How many square metres are involved? Where is it to be located in the complex? Will it be a public-private partnership, PPP, as beloved by previous Governments? Will there be private sector involvement? They are the questions I have in this regard and I have not heard any of them being answered or coming up in the discussions.

What we do know is that an English developer owns the site around the back of the GPO. Some years ago, when I was only a number of months in the Dáil, Members went on a tour of the battlefield site around Moore Street. I was shocked to see the derelict state of the national monument and the terrace of houses along each side of it. The last meeting place of the Provisional Government was 14-17 Moore Street. It is a disgrace the way these buildings have been let fall into dereliction. Action should be taken on it immediately. It is a shame on all of us that this happened, but it is particularly a shame on the Department of culture and heritage under this and previous Governments.

Retail space and commercialisation should not happen. The city centre is full of commercial space. It is full of Costa Coffee outlets, takeaways, McDonald's restaurants and everything else. They have their place, as do department stores, etc., but there are lots of such buildings around. I would not object to some of the proposals that have been made.

Most people in this State are republicans to some degree. Most people aspire to a 32-County Republic. Most people take their cue from the 1916 Proclamation. There are elements of that Proclamation that are not yet implemented - that must be said. Having an enhanced museum at the GPO and using the site for artistic and cultural purposes should be explored. The Government and its agencies are renting and leasing buildings here, there and everywhere around the city. Could some of those, particularly those used by the Office of Public Works or for other similar functions, be partially located in the GPO?

The national monument at the rear of Moore Street needs urgent action. I frame that in the context of the discussion here. When I first heard about this, I thought that this issue is not just about the GPO because the Moore Street sites have been allowed to fall into dereliction. Now the GPO is going to have increased commercialisation. There are plans for Bodenstown churchyard. I have been on to Kildare County Council and the Department of heritage about the plans to build a commercial graveyard beside it. Many Members go to Bodenstown churchyard every year under one guise or another. Different strands of Irish republicanism go there. Nobody and no political party has a monopoly on that. Bodenstown is another important site. The founding father of Irish republicanism is buried there and it is where the whole foundation of republicanism is honoured and remembered and where people recommit themselves to it. It is a national disgrace that there will now be a commercial cemetery adjacent to it. It will not be called Bodenstown cemetery but Wolfe Tone cemetery. If I have the details right, the proposals include one that the closer a person is buried to the actual Bodenstown cemetery and the grave of Wolfe Tone, the dearer the burial plots will be. People can buy plots there but the

1 July 2025

highest prices will prevail. It will be an absolute disgrace if that happens. Bodinstown is a national monument. As the Minister of State knows, if I were to seek to build a house, cattle shed or something else close to a national monument, for example, a ring fort, or something less important than that, all sorts of conditions would be attached and I would not be allowed to do it. Here we have a commercial development, with apparently some kind of commercial visitor centre, that is going to be landed adjacent to Bodinstown churchyard.

To move on to the debate around the naming of the national children's hospital, Kathleen Lynn was a volunteer in the Irish Citizen Army in 1916. Despite all her work and what she dedicated her life to, it seems Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Independents in Government could not bring themselves to call the hospital after Kathleen Lynn. We make a bag of the children's hospital and Bodinstown churchyard. The battlefield site on Moore Street is in decay and dereliction, and now we are going to commercialise the GPO further. I am all for using that large space purposefully. I would be flexible enough regarding civic offices and some similar matters, provided there is a significant museum and cultural dimension to it and An Post retains its place there. As some Deputies said, it could also be used for artistic purposes. Some of those suggestions are well worth thinking about. It is now time to put a stop to all of this.

I ask the Minister of State and the officials present to take note of what I have said about Bodinstown. Kildare County Council will say its job is to grant planning permission and not make a judgment on national monuments. However, the Government, which the Minister of State is a member of, has a responsibility to protect sites of national importance. The burial place of Wolfe Tone in Bodinstown is a national monument. I have checked this out. The existing Bodinstown graveyard is owned by the county council. Beyond its walls, the land is private. Trying to commercialise Wolfe Tone, profit from the graveyard or turn it into any kind of commercial entity must not be allowed. It would be a disgrace if that happened.

It is still not too late to call the children's hospital after Kathleen Lynn instead of giving it the crass name of "The Children's Hospital". What is next? Will we have a proposal to put McDonald's and Costa Coffee up on the Rock of Cashel? Are we going to have something like that? Pearse read the Proclamation from the steps of the GPO. I have no doubt he had an input into the wording. He also wrote poetry. In one of his poems, he wrote: "Mór mo náir: Mo chlann féin a dhíol a máthair." Some of us will remember the words of that poem, "Mise Éire". It is unfortunate now that Pearse, the other leaders, the young working-class men and women of the Citizen Army and the young volunteers went in and took on the empire. They knew the odds were stacked against them before they went in there, but they knew what they were doing. They were prepared to put their lives on the line, with all of the disruption and heartache that caused for their families and everything else. We are now prepared to allow that to be desecrated. To do so would be a national disgrace. We need to revisit the words of Pearse, Connolly, Mellows and people like them and bring a bit of reality back into this debate. Some things are more important than money.

When I heard the term "mixed development" used, I recalled some of the most obnoxious developments I saw during the so-called Celtic tiger period. I am not against commercial development. Commercial developments have their place. I, and I am sure everyone in this Chamber, could bring the Minister of State around our constituencies and show him bad examples of mixed developments. We had apartments piled upon shop units, shop units piled in on top of residential areas and all sorts. We finish up with just vape shops, Costa Coffee shops, takeaway joints, etc., and nothing else. If that is what we are talking here, with mixed development being used as a cover for everything, it is a disgrace. It would be helpful for everyone to be upfront

here and for us to be notified of what exactly is happening. Show us the detailed plans for these sites. I would like to see them. What exactly is being proposed here? In the meantime, I will support the motion.

Deputy Peadar Táibín: I move amendment No. 1 to amendment No. 1:

To insert the following after “restoration and conservation of the National Monument at 14-17 Moore Street”:

“; and

commits to:

— respecting the heritage and legacy of the leaders of 1916;

— ending the destruction of key National Monuments such as the O’Rahilly Home and Moore Street;

— implementing the Moore Street Preservation Trust plan for Moore Street;

— developing the GPO as a national cultural museum of the national struggle for independence; and

— purposing part of the GPO to pursue implementation of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic across the 32 counties of Ireland.”.

Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta Aengus Ó Snodaigh as an rún seo a chur faoi bhráid na Dála inniu. There will be a protest outside of the GPO on Tuesday, 8 July at 7 p.m. All political parties are welcome to speak at the event. Issues of this importance means that petty political differences should be set aside. We need to work together to make sure we send a strong statement to the Government that this is completely unacceptable. I thank all the campaigners who have been working in the Moore Street area for decades, especially the Moore Street Preservation Trust and the other campaigners who have dedicated so much time to try to lift Moore Street out of the squalor it has been left in and to raise it up to the heritage and cultural quarter that it could and should be. I was very proud to serve on the consultative forum for many years along with those campaigners and some of the traders from Moore Street.

Aontú will table an amendment to the Government’s amendment simply seeking that the Dáil commit to respecting the heritage and the legacy of the leaders of 1916; ending the destruction of key national monuments such as The O’Rahilly home and Moore Street; implementing the Moore Street Preservation Trust’s plan for Moore Street; developing the GPO as a national cultural museum of the national struggle for independence; and proposing that part of the GPO be used to pursue the implementation of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic across the Thirty-two Counties. In many ways, the most significant use of the GPO should be to make sure it is the engine of delivery of the Proclamation. The Proclamation is the foundation document of this country. It embodies many of the values Irish people hold and yet it remains unfulfilled. It remains a document that is still in the making. It is our objective to make sure that happens.

We need to understand the significance of the GPO and the Moore Street area. It is a national monument. It is one of, if not, the most important battle field in the country. It was the headquarters of 1916. It is seminal in the moment of the birth of this nation, the ground zero of the independence struggle. One hundred and ten years ago the Union Jack flew over this

city and every county across the country. That flag, or some version of it, flew for approximately 500 years in this country. It represented the largest empire the world has ever seen and it seemed immovable.

The generation that came in 1916 was probably one of the weakest generations Ireland had ever seen. It was a generation not far from the damage of An Gorta Mór, the Famine, when 1 million people died and 1 million people were forced to emigrate. The Irish nation at that time was on its knees and yet this generation set the objective of trying to remove a flag - and all it stood for - that was in this country for 500 years and they succeeded in lighting the fire that led to the War of Independence success for the Twenty-six Counties. They did not do it for a pipe dream. They did it because there was an existential threat, that if Ireland was ruled from abroad, the rulers would not take into consideration the needs of the country. They knew that London's rule over the country had an enormously damaging effect. That is the case. Self-determination is one of the key aspects of a proper, progressive, functioning society and if London, Brussels or Berlin makes decisions, they will not be as good as the decisions made by the Irish people.

It is interesting that every Minister in the Dáil has the power to be a Minister because of the sacrifice that was made in the GPO. The very sovereignty they are using to turn the GPO into a shopping centre comes from the death and destruction that happened to the revolutionaries in the GPO. It is an amazing insult that the Government would use that sovereignty in such a disgusting way, by destroying the GPO and what it stands for. One of the reasons I think this is happening is that the Government is embarrassed by the GPO, the Proclamation and 1916 because when it holds itself up against the objectives of 1916, it fails massively. The current Government does not hold the same objective as the people of 1916. The biggest issue for the people of 1916 was self-determination and sovereignty. Micheál Martin has said even in this Chamber that he does not agree with backward looking aspects of sovereignty. His disagrees with the idea that the Irish people are sovereign. Another example of why I think the Government is embarrassed by this is that the Union Jack still flies over Six Counties in this country. Just 70 miles away, the Union Jack flies. Again, it stands for other people making decisions for Irish people. It stands for people in Islington making decisions around Brexit, for people in Finchley making decisions about taxes or people in Birmingham making decisions about how royalties for resources in the North of Ireland are paid to the British Crown. The very fact Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have divorced themselves from the objective of the Proclamation to make sure self-determination is a 32-county experience is another reason the southern Government is so embarrassed by all this.

To recognise the value the Government places on these objectives and the heritage sites, it is important to look at the actions of the Government in how it treats those heritage sites. Deputy Stanley mentioned correctly what is happening to Bodinstown at the moment. It is an incredibly cheap abuse of such an important site in Irish history. What happened in Moore Street is unforgivable. Moore Street was meant to be completely redeveloped, fixed and sorted out in 2016. That was the original promise of the Government. Right now, Moore Street is a location for alcoholism, drugs, urination and defecation. That is what the Government thinks of the national monument that is Moore Street. The Government actually went to court to take away national monument status from Moore Street. That is what it thinks of Moore Street. Here we are again, treating the very centre or ground zero of the revolution, the GPO, badly by turning it into some tatty type of shopping centre. It is an incredibly poor thing. The Government allowed The O'Rahilly's house to be completely demolished overnight. I made pleas directly over and over to then Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, to stop it happening and the Govern-

ment sat on its hands. Then a few weeks later, Micheál Martin said it should not have happened, but when he had the power to do something, he remained completely silent about it.

The problem I have in all of this is that the particular site that includes the GPO and Moore Street offers wonderful opportunities to this country. It offers an opportunity for a heritage, cultural centre that could be the heartbeat of both the city and the country. It offers an opportunity for the use of the Irish language and for theatre, writing and the arts to have a home, yet the Government has allowed a building contractor to develop plans to smash through the terrace which the soldiers of the Republic tried to tunnel through to make their escape, beside where The O’Rahilly was killed in a hail of bullets by the British. It is just bonkers.

The reason I do not believe the Government is that one of the attributes of the Government when it says “No” is to say “Yes”. I have seen Ministers go out to the gates of Leinster House on a regular basis putting their hands around campaign groups, saying “Yes” to them, getting into the photographs and giving big smiles and then coming into Leinster House and vote against them. The same happened when I tabled a Bill to make sure Moore Street would be recognised as a national monument. Fianna Fáilers and Fine Gaelers got up one after another to say they supported the objective, yet they voted against my Bill. There is a deep level of cynicism and lack of truth when it comes to the Government on developing Moore Street.

I had the opportunity, thankfully, to visit the Anne Frank museum in Amsterdam and I remember it. It is an immersive museum. When you look out the window, you feel like you are in 1944. You expect to see German soldiers on the street because the museum is so powerful. It is in phenomenal demand from locals and international tourists. It is extremely educational with regard to what happened during the Second World War. The educational use alone is profound, yet when we ask the Government to do something similar with our national heritage, it is ignored.

I will talk about one other aspect of national heritage, namely the Irish language. The Irish language is another thing the Government treats like rubbish. There are fewer children going to Gaelscoileanna now than ten years ago. Is that not an incredible statistic to trot out? The level of money going into Foras na Gaeilge is reducing every year. It was at one stage the same as the Arts Council and now the Arts Council receives multiples of the amount of money the Irish language does. The values that seemed to be hard-wired into the revolutionary period and the Proclamation of the Republic were to cherish “all of the children of the nation equally” - 600,000 children are in poverty at the moment - and the right of the Irish people to own this country, yet the Government is handing it away lock, stock and barrel. It is handing over sovereignty as regards neutrality. It is currently looking to get rid of the triple lock mechanism. All the political aspirations for independence are being removed. That is why I believe this Government has no meas for the heritage of the country and why I think it is embarrassed by it. If you hold that generation up against this generation, there is a massive chasm between the two. It is a chasm that, unfortunately, I do not believe the Government will bridge. I urge the Government at this stage to not treat the GPO like Moore Street. Do not treat the GPO like Bodenstown. Do not treat it like The O’Rahilly House. Lift it up into the cultural asset, educational opportunity and wonderful heritage that it is, and allow the people of Ireland to enjoy it for generations.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I, too, support this motion. I would question some aspects of it but the theme of it is very important. Are we going to abandon our forefathers and foremothers, people of our heritage? We had the Éamonn Bulfin Legacy Pipe Band from Argentina in

1 July 2025

Tipperary at the Liam Lynch national commemoration cúpla bliain ó shin. I thanked An Post because it obliged by giving the band a tour in there and allowing it to play in there. It was a wonderful occasion.

I refer to our Irishness, culture our heritage, “tír gan teanga, tír gan anam”, and our soul. Where is the soul of this Government? I believe it is all over the world. Where is the Taoiseach tonight? Is he in Timbuktu, or somewhere in Japan or China? It does not matter. It is not Tipperary, Cork or Ireland. We seem to be acting for many other agencies, not serving the people under the Constitution those brave men and women fought for in that building. It is an iconic building, and it has to be held as a museum and a semi-sacred space to remind our politicians that this is Ireland. We represent the people. We are not leaders of the world. Our neutrality is an outdated concept according to the Taoiseach. We are putting money into a European army now, and God knows what next.

It is time for a wake-up call here regarding our language, heritage, culture and the iconic building of 1916, the GPO, and all that went on there with the brave men and women and the bloodshed. They took a stand to free us from peril, and what are we doing now? We are changing our country with migration and everything else, changing our culture completely. We are trying to turn ourselves inside out, and that is very bad. It is fatal, and people are waking up to it. Níl siad sásta, and why would they be sásta with that because it is a total betrayal of what the men and women of 1916 fought for in that building and all over Ireland as well.

Deputy Gillian Toole: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Leas Cheann-Comhairle, an Aire agus an Teachta Ó Snodaigh as ucht an díospóireacht seo anocht. I have read through the report of the interdepartmental group on Dublin city and the task force recommendation. Pardon me if I am beginning to wonder if I am getting mixed up here. I see a reference to OPW management and a transfer. I do not see a mention of privatisation so if there is another document, can somebody please send it to me? I see a reference to Government offices and public services.

In the spirit of, or in reference to, culture and a possible use, the following is a suggestion that has been put to me by Mr. Evan Connon, a neighbour who is a master craftsman in the area of stained glass. The suggestion is that the GPO may be used as an Irish academy and house of fine art similar to Stockholm and the École des Beaux-Arts en Paris. Something like this would be an appropriate use when we think of the poets’ rebellion of 1916. It would revolutionise art education in Ireland. It would give us an institution that would rally our national pride and our identity and it would be a catalyst for regeneration of the north inner city.

If we think of the connection to stained glass, the Harry Clarke studio that was founded on North Frederick Street and that mini-studio incorporated into the Hugh Lane Gallery, perhaps that is a fitting suggestion for a hybrid that would encompass the objectives of all Members of the Dáil.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to talk on this motion this evening. To start, we all have to honour, respect and remember those leaders, men and women who fought for our country in 1916 and around that time, including during the Civil War, and all those who died along the way so we could be here having our own democratic Parliament. Everyone is entitled to talk and say what they believe in here.

My ideal for the GPO would be to maintain it as far as possible and to modernise and develop it. I am sure we need to keep some section of a post office there as part of what it was at

that time and to maintain much of what is there. I know it has to be modernised but we should develop it into a modern-type visitor centre where we would attract all our own people, including those from all over the world wherever they have gone to. It would be an attraction for all those who learn going to school what those leaders went through. I do not think it should be commercialised by any entity but the State should have some kind of heritage things there. Whatever way the State could help to fund and maintain it would be fine but selling some other commercial stuff would not be in line with remembering it as it was.

It is sad to see people fighting here over what should be done with it. We should try to work together to ensure it is nice and that the people who fought there in 1916 are remembered properly.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Tá Ard-Oifig an Phoist ar cheann de na foirgnimh is cáiliúla in Éirinn. Tá a fhios ag gach duine sa Teach seo cén fáth. Deirim i gcónaí le turasóirí chun dul chuig Músaem Ard-Oifig an Phoist i mBaile Átha Cliath. Foghlaimíonn siad faoi stair na hÉireann, ón Éirí Amach go dtí an lá atá inniu ann. Cloisim na rudaí sa nuacht faoi láthair. Céard faoi réiteach cruthaitheach? Caithfear an stair a choimeád agus a chruthú.

The GPO is not just a building. It is the beating heart of our country's revolutionary history. The worrying thing for my constituents, when they reached out to me when I knocked on doors at the weekend, was the vagueness of the plans. I welcome what the Minister of State said in this House today but we need to be clearer when we are making statements about the GPO. It is really shocking to these people, especially people who are really concerned about our history, which is all of us. People are worried and rightly so. Má táim chun caint faoi rud éigin i mBaile Átha Cliath thuaidh, is gá dom caint faoin tsráid timpeall an chúinne, Sráid an Mhúraigh. I really welcome the recent decision by Dublin City Council to back the State's purchase of Moore Street. I went to Moore Street and spoke to the campaigners. They have been campaigning for 25 years to preserve it and they should not have had to do that. It is a site of immense historical significance.

Dublin has enough shops. We need to give spaces for the arts and spaces where people can come into the city and nurture our history. The GPO and Moore Street should not be sold off. They should be protected, preserved and passed on to future generations.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: The GPO is the hallowed place where our republic was born. It is our GPO, a witness to our struggle, sacrifice and Rising. However, there are many aspects of our fight for freedom that also need to be recognised.

My grandfather was James Feely. He was a member of the Irish Volunteers in Boyle, County Roscommon, and a commander of the IRA in north Roscommon. He was imprisoned during the War of Independence, released after the Anglo-Irish Treaty, and he was one of the first gardaí in our State. Our family is very proud of his role in the War of Independence and his role as a garda, setting up the institutions of the State, defending them and protecting our people, which is continued many years on by the brave men and women of An Garda Síochána.

I have his statement from the Bureau of Military History here. In one aspect of it, it says:

In 1914, a company of the Irish Volunteers was formed in Boyle and I joined them. The company was about 100 strong, but about 40 of them went to the British Army when the first Great War started.

[...]

When Redmond finally split the Volunteers by recommending the Volunteers to take service in the British Army, all but a dozen men went over to the Redmondite side and became members of the new Irish National Volunteers.

Of the 100 men who were marching for the Irish Volunteers, 88 went to fight in the First World War and 12 remained. My grandfather was on the pro-Treaty side. Some 200,000 men went to fight, and the reasons for enlisting varied from poverty and a sense of duty to supporting Home Rule, which was postponed due to the First World War.

Up to 50,000 Irishmen died in the First World War and the rest who survived were treated with disrespect and airbrushed out of history. They were patriotic to Ireland and many were family, friends and colleagues of those in the GPO and those fighting for freedom. We have a duty to remember that, and like the GPO heritage, it should be respected. Their sacrifices and patriotism to Ireland should not be forgotten.

Deputy James Geoghegan: On 6 April last year, Simon Harris, then the Taoiseach in waiting, made a clear commitment to convene a Dublin city centre task force bringing together the council, retailers, business, community groups and An Garda Síochána to chart a path towards a safer and more vibrant Dublin. He delivered on that commitment. The city task force was established, chaired by David McRedmond, and one of its most important proposals was to make the redevelopment of the GPO the centrepiece of revitalising O'Connell Street and the surrounding area. Last week, for the first time in decades, Dublin city centre received the kind of focused attention it has long needed, thanks to the task force Simon Harris established. The city centre can and should be clean, safe and vibrant, a capital we are all proud of.

The Government announcement includes a commitment to additional investment and to the redevelopment of the GPO as an ambitious and historic flagship project. In my view, that project should be nothing less than a world-class historical museum honouring the legacy of the GPO while breathing new life into the heart of our capital. Year one of the roadmap for delivery includes a clear commitment to conceptualise and decide on the future use of the reimagined GPO. That process will be led by the OPW, with support from a new special-purpose vehicle under Dublin City Council to drive delivery. The interdepartmental report published alongside the roadmap makes clear a detailed proposal for the future use of the GPO will be developed by the OPW and submitted for approval by the Government in due course.

Let us be clear. The sacrifices of the men and women who stood in the GPO in 1916, ordinary people who laid the foundations for the freedom we enjoy today, deserve better than to be dragged into a cynical and false debate manufactured by Sinn Féin to divide and distract. Drop the charade. Let us work together for the betterment of our capital city and for a GPO redevelopment that lives up to its history and to our hopes for the future.

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne): I want to start by thanking all Members for the contributions to this discussion. The Government is absolutely committed to the redevelopment of the GPO complex as an ambitious flagship project and plans are well under way for the refurbishment of the national monument at 14-17 Moore Street. It is our commitment to honour the men and women and indeed the children of 1916. It is our ambition to create a commemorative centre marking the 1916 Rising and the historic time period that it was.

I rise today to defend not just the policies of this Government but the integrity of our approach to the preservation and the commemoration of our shared history. It is a history that includes the heroism and the sacrifice of the men and women of 1916, stories that many of us know well today, but stories we want not only to preserve and celebrate but ones we want to make accessible to the coming generations here in Ireland and those who visit.

Let me say at the very outset, the Government unequivocally honours the legacy of the 1916 Rising. We are deeply committed to the preservation of the General Post Office and Moore Street, not merely as some sort of relics to our past but as living, enduring parts of our national story. I agree that this genuine commitment must be matched by responsibility and action, not grandstanding nor sloganeering. That is why I must directly address the Private Members' motion tabled by Deputy Mary Lou McDonald and her Sinn Féin colleagues. It is long on accusations but short on solutions, heavy with symbolism but light on substance. It accuses successive governments, and by implication this Government, of negligence and even of widespread destruction of a republican heritage. That claim is not just disingenuous; it is demonstrably false.

Let me put on the record exactly what we have done. First, this Government secured and preserved the national monument at 14-17 Moore Street. After years of delay, including under local authorities and political parties now making accusations, we purchased this site and undertook critical stabilisation and weatherproofing works. More than that, we have progressed the restoration and conservation of these historic premises and underground escape routes. We have advanced many of our programmes. This is what we want. We want to welcome people into this space, to invite them in to learn and hear from the lives gone before for the country that we have now. Unlike the vague and politicised vision Sinn Féin offers, our approach intends to be practical and, importantly, deliverable.

As for the GPO itself, let us be clear, it remains in full public ownership. It will remain a functioning post office for the time being. Its museums will remain open for the time being. Any redevelopment will preserve its central place in the cultural and historical fabric of the nation.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: For the time being.

Deputy James Browne: No part of the GPO has been sold off, no part is being desecrated and there is no secret deal. These are all myths, and worse, they are deliberate distractions from the real work of heritage preservation and essential urban renewal of a changing city.

What we propose is a respectful, imaginative redevelopment of the wider GPO complex, including its cultural, the retail and office spaces that complement and enhance the historical function of the site. In the same way as many other cities have blended modern purpose with historical preservation, we too can steward heritage and opportunity side by side. This vision is drawn from the Dublin city task force, the interdepartmental working group, years of public consultation, stakeholder engagement and architectural assessments. It is rooted in our NDP. It is not a whim or an afterthought; it is a clear national priority. Sinn Féin's position on the other hand is simply to freeze the GPO, turn Moore Street into a simple museum piece but offer no route to regeneration, no strategy for sustainability and no roadmap to funding or delivery.

Good heritage policy must be adaptive and thoughtful, not locked into ideology. Let me remind this House of our decade of centenaries, one of the most inclusive, thoughtful and commemorative programmes ever undertaken by any government in the history of the State. We

1 July 2025

marked the 1916 Rising with respect, balance and dignity. We honoured all those who took part, from the volunteers to Cumann na mBan to those who died defending our city and our country.

Deputy Matt Carthy: And the Black and Tans.

Deputy James Browne: We commissioned the 1916 exhibition in the GPO which is now visited by thousands each year. We funded heritage grants across every county and we engaged with young people, artists, veterans and communities in every corner of Ireland. We made sure these commemorations belong not to any one party or ideology but to the Irish people as a whole. That, I believe, is what real respect looks like. It is what honouring the past looks like.

My own great-grandfather fought in 1916. He helped to take Enniscorthy town. He was taken to Frongoch and to London for further questioning and examination. He fought for this country. My family knows the history of our own family and the fight for our freedom. By the way, Enniscorthy lasted until Easter Monday. We celebrate every Easter Monday, in a very honourable and respectful manner, what our forefathers and foremothers fought for.

Let us contrast this with the language of Sinn Féin's motion today, language like "wanton destruction", "negligent" oversight and "alarm at the plans". These are all sloganeering designed for social media bites, not for honouring our history or our heritage. These are not phrases of stewardship but ones of division. No one has a monopoly of the memory of 1916. No one political party owns the Rising, certainly not the Provisional Sinn Féin, a party founded in 1970. No one group can speak as the sole voice for the battlefield sites of Moore Street or the historic heart of the GPO.

This Government's countermotion makes our position clear. We affirm the historic status of the GPO as the site where the Proclamation was read aloud to the entire world. We recognise its enduring role since 1818 as a hub of communication and civic life and we endorse the development of 14-17 Moore Street into a state-of-the-art visitor centre. We commit to keeping the GPO in public hands, operational and active, and we include this work in our NDP and to creating a sustainable city. We do not want it to be preserved in name only, not with shuttered units or derelict facades. We want it to thrive as a cultural quarter and as a place of commerce, life and local pride where the living city meets its revolutionary soul. We do not seek to replace history with retail. We seek to ensure history is honoured in a way that is real, accessible and embedded in our urban future.

Let us live up to the vision of an Ireland rooted in democracy, shaped by dialogue and proud of its past without being trapped by it. Let us remember the words of the Proclamation still echoing through the columns of the GPO, "Cherishing all the children of the nation equally." That includes cherishing their history but it is also about building their future. That is the Government's commitment and that is my commitment.

8 o'clock

Deputy Máire Devine: Deputy Geoghegan called this a "charade". Ouch; that really hurt. I ask for respect.

For what died the sons, and probably daughters, of Róisín? Luke Kelly wrote the poem on the 50th anniversary of the Rising in 1966. It reflected on where Ireland had arrived since Easter 1916. It was a lament of the direction this nation took, opting to shift towards a dominant

capitalist society, often at the expense of our cultural identity and social well-being. Sixty years hence, the shift has solidified, arriving today at the “For Sale” sign posted outside the GPO. It is an insulting attack on our national identity and an erosion of our cultural heritage and sense of ourselves - who we are, what our build is and what our make-up is like.

For what indeed died the sons of Róisín? For “the faceless men who for Mark and Dollar betray her to the highest bidder”. The Government welcomed, encouraged and relied on the hedge funds and created a market that has gone completely bonkers. Foreign investors now hold hundreds of billions in property and our resources with no restrictions and no tax. We have sold enough of Ireland to be but strangers in it. We see the consequences all around us. Some 15,000 people are homeless. Rents are skyrocketing. Lives are being lived precariously as homes become commodities. Did the Government ever stop to ask what it has done? It has given the elites what they ask for. It has bended the knee to the god of profit and damned the people of no property. The members of the Government would almost sell their own grannies. That is the word on the street and that is what the Government needs to be careful of.

Who owns this country? What are the Government’s priorities for this nation? The rule of the wealthy has been imposed on the people, who are the owners of this nation. Our national treasure, Kilmainham Gaol, was let go. It nearly went to rubble until good volunteers, both men and women, stormed the gates in the 1960s and took it back. The Government will not do the same to the GPO so it should not think about it. It should say it is sorry and put its hands up yet again.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The people do not trust the Government to honour the patriot dead, the men and women and their families. Those families must be remembered. The volunteers and heroes died but their families had to live on through the pain and suffering. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have disrespected those men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice. The Minister comes in here and talks about turning it into a retail space. My God, man. It is the heart and soul of the Irish people and of this country. Does the Government not understand what it means to the ordinary men, women and children in the street?

Right now, tens of thousands of Irish people are emigrating to the four corners of the world. The one thing they all know is that on Easter weekend of 1916, Irishmen and Irishwomen stood up and fought, and led a cause for Irish freedom. Pádraig Pearse stood on the steps of the GPO, read one of the greatest documents in the history of the world - I am not exaggerating - and outlined the vision that he and his comrades had. The Government is talking about turning the GPO into a retail space.

Dr. Kathleen Lynn, another lady the Government has tried to erase from history, wrote in her diary about the men who were shot following the 1916 Rising: “God bless them, they did not fear to die for Ireland”. This Government would do well to remember that.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Ba chóir go mbeadh náire ar an Rialtas seo as an méid atá á dhéanamh aige. The Government’s attitude to the GPO is part of a long history of failure in respect of O’Connell Street, its history and heritage. The street where the Irish Republic was declared and where the workers of Dublin fought the Dublin Metropolitan Police, DMP, during the 1913 Lock-out has now been taken over by fast-food chains, litter, dereliction, crime and drug-dealing. Despite the protestations we have heard from Ministers and Government representatives, the truth is that there is a litany of examples of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael destroying, neglecting and ignoring our republican and revolutionary heritage.

1 July 2025

The GPO, as the headquarters of the Easter 1916 Rising, should be part of an historic and cultural quarter that would include the entire Moore Street 1916 battlefield, as proposed by Sinn Féin. If anyone wants a reminder that these parties do not value our history, it is the fact that Thomas Clarke's shop at the top of O'Connell Street is now a Londis. Who knows what commercial premises will be in the GPO if the Government gets its way?

For all the Government's practical approaches, I ask the Minister to contemplate the following. On O'Connell Street, Ireland's main street, the site of the GPO where the Irish Republic, still unfulfilled, was declared, there is not one statue to an Irish republican leader, including the 1916 leaders. In any other capital city, the GPO, an historic building so centrally located, would be the site of a state-of-the-art museum charting the struggle for Irish freedom and independence. Instead, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are content to turn it into a glorified shopping centre. For all the Minister's propositions, he may back down now because he will not get away with it. Republicans the length and breadth of Ireland will battle to save-----

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: It is about the fifth time it has been referred as being like a shopping centre.

Deputy Matt Carthy: -----the GPO and the Moore Street site.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: That is furthest from the truth of what it is.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Where else in the world would a building from which a rebellion was led and from which the independence of a country in its entirety was proclaimed be the subject of an attempt by the government of the day to get rid of that historic tradition by having the commercialisation of the building as its mainstay? Would the French commercialise the Bastille? This is one of the proudest buildings in our history, our fight against colonialism and our Proclamation as a nation to the world. A building which bears such significance should be treated as the national historic monument it is.

Some people have said here this evening they are shocked that the Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, would make such a commitment. Having seen his record and heard his words in this House, I am not shocked one bit. Is it not telling that as Fianna Fáil heads into its centenary year, it chooses the commercialisation of the GPO as its flagship celebration? Perhaps it is so clear the Proclamation of 1916 has not been fulfilled that there is a sense of embarrassment within the Government. As the conversation on Irish unity and self-determination continues to grow, the Government continues to hide from the issue.

The Proclamation stated: "We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible." It did not exclude a certain section of Ireland or its people. It is quite clear that anywhere else in the world, the GPO would be a national historic museum, as it should be.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Gabhaim buíochas leis na Teachtaí ar fad a ghlac páirt sa díospóireacht seo agus leo siúd san Áiléar atá ag féachaint ar an díospóireacht. Is léir go bhfuil gá le díospóireacht agus tá sé go maith go raibh díospóireacht againn sa Teach. Is trua go raibh orainn díospóireacht a dhéanamh de bharr an chacamais a tháinig as béal Mhicheál Martin. Tá deis againn díriú isteach ar an gceist seo.

We have an opportunity. We should be considering the future use of the GPO. That debate should have started in this Chamber when An Post decided it was pulling out of the offices in

the GPO. What has been presented thus far has shown, as Deputy Gannon said, a failure of imagination. We have set out our ambitious and unapologetically patriotic vision for the GPO. The Government has not done that thus far. I appeal to it to stop fumbling in the greasy till and adding the halfpence to the pence, and encourage it to embrace the vision of a vibrant, visionary, inspirational, cultural, historical and artistic quarter, not just in the GPO but also in the area of the Moore Street battlefield.

I ask the Government to correct history. The national monument now comprises 14-17 Moore Street but at one stage, until a previous Government went to court, the national monument comprised the whole terrace. The Government was forced to expand beyond 16 Moore Street, which it had first, only because of public pressure to include 14-17, and part of 18. The Government has denied 10 Moore Street. There is a whole load of other inaccuracies. Enniscorthy did hold out. It did not hold out until Easter Monday, but until the Monday after Easter Monday. Let us remember that Easter Monday was the date the Rising started. The Rising did not finish in Enniscorthy on the day it started; it continued thereafter. There is a whole load of other inaccuracies. Sinn Féin was founded in 1905. I am sorry, but that is even before Fianna Fáil. Maybe the Minister does not know that history.

Deputy James Browne: That was not the same-----

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: There is a whole range of other aspects. The one concerning Kilmainham was corrected by my party colleague Deputy Máire Devine. The State was forced to act because the people moved in. It is the same in terms of Moore Street and many other places around the country that this and previous Governments sought to destroy. I urge people to support this.

Outside the debate tonight, I urge the Government to rethink this, sit down and embrace other ideas. I was one of those on the Moore Street advisory committee and the centenary committee. In fact, I was one of those, like many other Deputies, who put forward many imaginative ideas, some of which were accepted and some of which were not. I was not hurt by that. I am hurt, though, by the fact that Micheál Martin thinks he can put first-class retail units into the GPO. I am sorry, I cannot have that.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Amendment to amendment put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the next weekly division time tomorrow evening.

Teachtaireacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): The Seanad has passed the Finance (Local Property Tax and Other Provisions) (Amendment) Bill 2025, without amendment.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Homeless Persons Supports

2. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to provide an update on the review of section 10 funding for homelessness service providers; and the changes he intends to make to this funding stream, in light of the near financial collapse of an organisation (details supplied) in 2023. [36134/25]

Deputy Thomas Gould: I am taking this question on behalf of Deputy Eoin Ó Broin. Will the Minister to provide an update on the review of section 10 funding for homelessness service providers and the changes he intends to make to this funding stream in light of the near financial collapse of an organisation in 2023?

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne): I thank the Deputy very much for requesting an update on the review of the section 10 funding for homelessness services and the changes I intend to make to this funding stream. Supporting individuals and families facing homelessness is a priority for the Government. I recognise the vital work of the NGO sector and its valuable contribution to the lives of those experiencing or at risk of homelessness. My Department regularly engages with the sector on all aspects of homeless policy, including funding arrangements.

Significant progress has been made in addressing concerns raised within the NGO homelessness services sector about the adequacy of funding. A number of uplifts to cost-of-living increases have been agreed and applied to service level agreements over the past two and a half years, including pay increases on foot of negotiations at the Workplace Relations Commission. Last year, my Department conducted an internal review of the section 10 funding model, focusing on issues of governance and public expenditure oversight compliance. The final report of the review will be finalised in the coming weeks. In addition, a recent review conducted by the City and County Managers Association examined the funding provided to NGOs for homelessness services. The report was presented to the Department in March 2025 and I have asked officials to progress implementation of the recommendations, including costing of recommendations and consultation with stakeholders.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Peter McVerry Trust almost went bankrupt in the summer of 2023. The core issue was the use of capital funding to cross-subsidise the day-to-day running costs of the organisation. It ran up a liability of almost €20 million. There have been two independent regulator reports on the issues. It is totally unacceptable that the provision of homelessness services has been privatised and commercialised out. Why is 100% of the funding not given? Why is it 90%? Why is it that homelessness service providers must outbid each other? What is that about? It is the Government's responsibility to look after homeless people and provide emergency accommodation and services. Why is the Government not doing this? Why has it been turned into a commercial system where providers are pitted against each other? This was always going to happen. The question is why it was allowed to happen.

Deputy James Browne: As the Deputy knows, efforts are ongoing to reduce the reliance on commercial hotels to accommodate families, with the preferred model being the provision of supported accommodation operated by NGO providers. The increasing numbers in emer-

gency accommodation have led to increased pressures on housing authorities to provide sufficient accommodation. To increase provision, housing authorities are heavily reliant on private emergency accommodation. Capital funding of €25 million is being made available to housing authorities and NGOs for the delivery of high-quality, supported emergency accommodation for families and individuals experiencing homelessness.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I asked the Minister a couple of questions and he answered none of them. Why is 100% of the funding not being given to homelessness service providers? Why are they put into a bidding war with each other in trying to provide homelessness services for people? Was there any oversight of what was happening? There had to be a €15 million bailout of the Peter McVerry Trust, a trust that was set up to support homeless people. Government policy over the years has been to farm these services out and to do a Pontius Pilate and wash its hands of it. We need funding now. What we should have is funding to 100% and providers given the support they need to provide the services. What changes does the Minister intend to make to ensure this does not happen again? I know he said a report is coming shortly. How many private contractors or suppliers have not been paid by the trust arising from its near collapse? What is the value of these liabilities and what are the Minister and the Department going to do to ensure these liabilities are cleared and paid off?

Deputy James Browne: I hear the Deputy saying he wants to trust the NGOs more but also to have more oversight of them. The NGOs here do phenomenally good work. We are providing record funding to address homelessness. What we want to do, though, is to prevent homelessness occurring in the first place and that is why we are making rapid decisions to significantly increase the supply of housing right across the country. Until we can address the homelessness situation, however, we will continue to support the NGOs and the local authorities to provide the housing needed for people who find themselves in need of emergency accommodation. We do not want to be relying on the private sector but the accommodation is simply not there now. The most important thing is that people have the emergency accommodation they need when they need it, and that is what we are doing.

Housing Policy

3. **Deputy Conor Sheehan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to provide an update on the development of the Government's housing plan; if it will be published before the summer recess; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35894/25]

Deputy James Browne: I thank the Deputy for asking this question in relation to an update on the Government's housing plan. The programme for Government commits to the introduction of a new all-of-government national housing plan to follow Housing for All, underpinned by multi-annual funding. Work is well under way in my Department on the development of this new housing plan. A programme of targeted stakeholder engagement has been undertaken. Written submissions have been received from across government and from a range of external stakeholders, including State agencies, the community and voluntary sector and industry and academics. These submissions are being carefully considered and I have also met with many stakeholders to hear at first hand what actions they think should be reflected in the plan. I am committed to its finalisation and publication as soon as possible.

It is essential, however, that this plan align with the timing of the outcome of the national development plan review process being undertaken by my colleague the Minister for Public

Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Sector Reform and Digitalisation. This will allow for the plan to be underpinned by the required multi-annual funding across not just my Department but across government. This will ensure a whole-of-government approach that tackles the challenges we are facing to support people who are experiencing homelessness or trying to access a home to buy or rent. In the meantime, as Minister, I remain focused on ensuring that we bring forward urgently every measure possible to support housing delivery in the short term and to place us on a longer-term sustainable pathway that will meet the housing needs of all our people and communities.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: The plan was supposed to be published in July. I understand from the Minister said and what we have seen in the media that it will be delayed until September. We know the Government has a target to deliver 303,000 homes by 2030 and that the target will be missed again this year by around 10,000. Will the Minister give the House an outline of what measures to scale up delivery are being considered and what he will do about uncommenced planning permissions? Can he guarantee in line with the NDP review that the funding needs of the utilities such as Uisce Éireann will be met on a multi-annual basis? A key recommendation of the Housing Commission was that social and affordable housing be scaled up to 20% of all housing stock. Will that recommendation be heeded in the new plan?

Deputy James Browne: We are engaging with all the stakeholders regarding our new housing plan. The housing plan will follow the NDP. When that is finalised, the NDP will clearly set out the funding available for the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and other Departments that are key in delivering the infrastructure we need to deliver the housing we need. It is in that context that the housing plan will be developed. We have already taken significant measures. We are not waiting for the housing plan to start taking the measures we need to take. We have already agreed to preserve the existing planning permissions for properties that may be about expire. We have established housing activation offices and increased the powers of the LDA. In the autumn, we will have a clear suite of planning exemptions to free up the time of our planners. We have also established An Coimisiún Pleanála. This week, there was further agreement to minimise the workload of local authorities by reducing the four-stage process for delivering social housing down to a single stage.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: The Minister did not address the recommendation from the Housing Commission to increase social and affordable housing to 20% of all stock. This badly needs to be done. It is a key plank of the commission's recommendations. I hope the Minister might be able to give us an outline of when each section of the Planning and Development Act will be enacted, including timelines, and whether he intends to look at tweaking the croí conaithe and secure tenancy affordable rental investment schemes to make them more viable for developers in smaller cities outside Dublin.

Deputy James Browne: The vast majority of the Act will be commenced by the end of this year. We have already started to commence it with the commencement of the urban development zone sections and the establishment of An Coimisiún Pleanála. The State is delivering approximately 50% of all housing solutions, including from the private sector Part V. Our ambition is to continue delivering as much social and affordable housing as can be delivered by the State. We really believe in the delivery of social and affordable housing but if we want to get housing delivery for this country, we have to activate the private sector and that is why we are engaging with many decisions to not only facilitate the quicker delivery of social and affordable housing but also activate the private sector so we can get up to the delivery of 50,000 or 60,000 homes per year, which is what we need to do so that everybody has the housing solution that

they need and can afford.

Vacant Sites Levy

4. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the derelict sites levies levied, collected, owed and cumulatively owed; the number of sites subject to a CPO in the previous 12 months; the number of sites for which a levy was applied; and the number of sites on their register on 31 December 2024, by local authority, in tabular form. [36135/25]

Deputy Thomas Gould: I wish to ask the Minister about the derelict sites levies that have been levied, collected and owed; the number of sites subject to a CPO in the previous 12 months; the number of sites for which a levy was applied; and the number of sites on the register on 31 December 2024, by local authority.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter, which he consistently does. The Derelict Sites Act 1990 imposes a general duty on every owner and occupier of land to take all reasonable steps to ensure that land does not become, or continue to be, a derelict site as defined in the Act. The Act also imposes a duty on local authorities to take all reasonable steps, including the exercise of appropriate statutory powers, to ensure that any land within their functional area does not become, or continue to be, a derelict site.

Each local authority maintains a derelict sites register under section 8 of the Act for sites which they consider are derelict under the Act. Sites entered on the derelict sites register are subject to an annual derelict sites levy of 7% of market value, which will continue to apply until the site is rendered non-derelict. However, the placing of sites on the register and the collecting of levies on those sites are part of the overall process that local authorities undertake with the owners of derelict sites they identify. Local authorities will engage directly with site owners to try to bring these sites back into productive use and out of dereliction before they are formally listed on the register. This direct engagement can often lead to those units being brought back into productive use, which is what we all want.

Local authorities are required to submit an annual return to my Department providing information on the operation of the Derelict Sites Act in their functional areas. The derelict sites returns are collected in quarter 2 of the following year so we are my Department is still collating the 2024 returns and will publish them shortly. I propose to circulate with the Official Report a tabular statement setting out the information requested regarding the 2023 returns.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Minister of State and I sat on the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage for four years. There are local authorities that will not put sites on the derelict sites register; some local authorities will not impose the levy, which is the law; and other local authorities will not collect the levy. Millions of euro are owed on derelict sites on the register but there are more sites that have not been put on it. This Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Government has allowed local authorities to not enforce the law. If a man parks his car illegally outside this House and gets a ticket, he has to pay it but the Government believes that a building falling down in the centre of Dublin, Cork, Waterford or Limerick should attract no attention. If one walks out of here and walks down the quays of Dublin, one will see the dereliction so how can one say things are being done? It is a scandal. There is a

1 July 2025

place on North Main Street in Cork that is falling down around us. Cork City Council has tried to CPO it but the landlord is blocking it. It is a scandal.

Deputy John Cummins: The Deputy does not have to shout in order to make his points. We can all make valid points without shouting across the Chamber at one another. It is true to say that dereliction is a really important issue. It is not one that local authorities or Government are ignoring. The Deputy knows full well because we both sat on the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage all of the measures that are in place to assist those. They include the vacant property refurbishment grant, buy and renew, repair and lease and CPO. The Government provided local authorities with €150 million to allow them to CPO properties. We do need to see more local authorities activating such sites and they do have obligations in this respect. Where levies are levied, when the unit is ultimately disposed of, those moneys are collected by the local authority. There is an onus on local authorities to place properties on the register. The Deputy should not dismiss that. The approach involves using the carrot and the stick. What we all want in this Chamber is to see those units brought back into productive use.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The facts are the facts. There are derelict sites in every town, village and city in this State. Between them, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have been in government for between ten and 14 years. These are the facts. I am not making this up. If the Minister of State wants to walk down the street with me, I will walk down with the three Ministers and a couple of Members of the Opposition and we will show him the dereliction. The Minister of State should not come in here and say he is doing this and he is doing that. There is unbelievable dereliction, which is destroying communities, and he says the onus is on local authorities. I recall the pressure that myself and Deputy Ó Broin in opposition put on the previous Government. There was no section within housing to tackle dereliction until we came at it non-stop over recent years and now there is. There is one person in each local authority - one person. Would the Government not give the local authorities the funding to hire the staff to do the work? The Minister of State spoke about a fund of €150 million. Why are there so many derelict buildings? Will he answer that?

Deputy John Cummins: As I said, the Government has put in place a number of schemes to empower local authorities on the exact thing the Deputy just mentioned. There is a revolving fund through URDF call 3 for the compulsory purchase of properties. It is true that some local authorities are doing better than others. We want to mainstream best practice across all local authorities. There are also other schemes such as repair and lease, buy and renew and the vacant property refurbishment grant, which are all there to be able to activate those properties. Where they are not being activated, yes, the stick of the CPO and of the derelict sites register has to be applied by local authorities. I do not disagree with the Deputy on that. Of course, they are there to be used. What we all want is for those units to be brought back into productive use. If engagement with the owner of those properties and availing of some of the other schemes does that, that is great; if it does not and we use the CPO or the Derelict Sites Act then so be it.

Deputy Thomas Gould: It is not happening.

Public Private Partnerships

5. **Deputy Rory Hearne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the reason he decided to withdraw funding for social housing PPP bundles shovel ready this

week; and the measures he will take to ensure the 3,000 social homes planned as PPPs are going to be delivered in the original timeframe. [36246/25]

Deputy Rory Hearne: The Minister will be well aware that he and his Department decided to withdraw funding for up to 500 social homes that were due to be delivered through public-private partnerships. Will he set out the rationale that underpins that decision and give detail on it? How many value for money assessments were undertaken before the final decision was made? Will he outline the measures to ensure the 3,000 social homes set to be delivered as PPPs will be delivered as social housing in the original timeframes?

Deputy James Browne: It is the clear focus of this Government to increase the supply of new build social and affordable homes. As such, the decision not to proceed with the contract award for bundle 3 was not taken lightly and was made after much careful consideration of the costs involved and is ultimately the correct decision.

I cannot comment on or discuss the tendered costs for PPP bundle 3 as these numbers are part of the preferred tenderer's tender submission covered by confidentiality clauses in the procurement documents and are commercially sensitive. The costs for the earlier completed PPP bundles 1 and 2 will be released in the coming months as part of the public sector benchmark process. However, I assure the Deputy that my Department, the National Development Finance Agency and the relevant local authorities remain fully committed to delivering the social housing that PPP bundle 3 was designed to provide. These 486 social homes are very much needed and remain a priority for all parties and will instead be delivered by way of an alternative procurement and delivery strategy.

I wish to highlight that the investments already made in preliminary design work and securing planning consent is not lost and will in fact facilitate delivery of the 486 homes as expeditiously as possible under a new procurement and delivery strategy. All six sites in PPP bundle 3 have full planning permission and my officials, in conjunction with the stakeholders, will now consider and agree alternative procurement and delivery strategies for these homes.

There are three sites from PPP bundle 3 with a potential of 244 social housing homes in Dublin City Council area ready for tendering though a design and build construction programme and my Department are working closely with DCC and the NDFA to advance these tenders immediately.

I want our largest local authority, Dublin City Council, to bring forward new social housing projects on its own land using the various new-build funding schemes including design and build construction projects using the social housing investment programme. In recent years, DCC has had very low delivery rates on its own land, with 177 units delivered in 2022, 323 in 2023 and only 35 completed in 2024. As part of this decision the officials in my Department will initiate, in collaboration with the NDFA, a review of PPP bundles 4 to 7.

Deputy Rory Hearne: It has confounded and upset many people in communities where these social housing projects were due to be delivered. Two are in my constituency, Ballymun and Whitehall. These areas have high levels of social housing need. It is deeply upsetting and disappointing. Can the Minister guarantee they will be delivered according to the original planned timeframe?

I wrote my PhD and a book 14 years ago critiquing the public-private partnership model as an expensive model that would lead to delays. Unfortunately, Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael did not

1 July 2025

listen to me or the proposals we made. Will the Minister clarify whether is this the end of the PPP model for delivering social housing?

Deputy James Browne: I understand people's upset and frustration. My duty is to deliver the maximum number of homes we can but that means maximising the value so we can maximise the delivery of those homes. I will not blindly sign off at any price for social homes. These homes were frankly at an astronomical price. No doubt had I signed off on them, I would be before the Committee of Public Accounts answering questions on how I could justify approving this kind of costing for social housing units. We will deliver those social housing units as quickly as possible because I want those homes delivered. However, the PPP model is not the only opportunity for Dublin City Council to deliver social homes. I welcome more applications from DCC to be able to deliver as many social homes as possible in the city.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The Minister did not answer how many value for money assessments were undertaken before the final decision was made. How was it let get to this point where he now says it is too expensive? Public-private partnerships involve lifetime maintenance costs and not just the delivery cost. I have been heavily critical of this model of delivery of social housing. The Minister still has not answered the question: is this the end of PPPs for future bundles? Up to 3,000 homes were planned to be delivered through PPPs. What is the Department's plan for those? Are they now scrapped as public-private partnerships? Will they be delivered by new ways? If so, will the original timeframe be maintained? Will Dublin City Council and local authorities in counties Wicklow, Sligo and Louth, which were due to deliver through PPPs, be allocated the funding to deliver them through direct build, as should have been the case originally?

Deputy James Browne: It is not the end of PPP but we will review the processes to see how we can ensure that when the PPP process is used, there is value for money for the delivery of homes. We will use every method available to maximise the delivery of social homes. We will do that and we will continue to review it. We will deliver these homes as quickly as we can. We are reviewing the entire situation.

On value for money tests, one was carried out by myself. I looked at it as a Minister, as I should when it arrives on my desk. It was an outrageous cost to deliver these homes, which I was not going to stand over, and I decided this was not the way to do it or to approve it.

Housing Schemes

6. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his views on the growing unaffordability of cost-rental schemes funded by his Department; the measures he intends to take to address this growing unaffordability; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [36136/25]

Deputy James Browne: Cost rental is a key element of the Housing For All strategy to improve affordability in the rental sector and to provide secure, long-term homes for moderate-income households. Though it was only introduced in 2021, cost-rental delivery is accelerating, with over 3,600 homes delivered by the end of 2024 and a substantial pipeline is now in place.

My Department is providing significant funding to delivery partners for cost rental. As well as making delivery viable, this State funding drives down rents. All cost-rental projects must

achieve cost-covering rents that are at least 25% below comparable market levels. All cost-rental homes therefore present a significant saving to the tenant, relative to new market rental properties.

Cost rents are different depending on the size of dwelling and location as these have different capital costs. As rents for cost-rental homes are set according to the actual costs of delivering, managing, and maintaining the homes, recent inflation in costs has proven challenging.

All delivery partners are actively managing costs to ensure that these new homes are provided at the best rent possible. For example, last week I attended the launch of the new cost-rental homes being provided by South Dublin County Council with the support of just under €20 million from my Department at Innovation Square, Tallaght, with rents starting at €950 per month.

Cost-rental units provide a significant saving of the tenant and tenants who benefit from cost-rental homes are very appreciative of the rents and security of tenure these homes provide.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Minister stated the Government has delivered 3,600 units. That sums up its delivery. There were no cost-rental units in 2020. There were 65 in 2021, 684 in 2022, 869 in 2023 and 2,027 last year. That is still below the Government's targets. The Government has never delivered and has in fact missed every target it has set over the past four or five years. On top of that, in respect of so-called affordable cost rental properties, in O'Devaney Gardens tenants are paying from €1,490 to €1,900. In Donabate, they are paying between €1,327 and €1,547. In Lota More, Cork, rents are between €1,200 and €1,407. It is not affordable if people are paying more than a third of their income in rent, no matter what the Government wants to call it.

Deputy James Browne: I thank the Deputy. As he is fully aware, the cost-rental scheme did not exist in 2020 and that is why no units were delivered. On cost rental, some people cannot afford those rents and that is why we are providing a number of different solutions for people in order for them to access the homes they need at an affordable price. That may be purchase or rent and may involve cost rental, affordable purchase or social housing. We are trying to sure that everybody, at whatever income level, has housing available to them. We are doing that across the system. The number of cost-rental units has increased over the past number of years. It is an important measure, albeit only one, of Housing for All and delivering the housing we need for people across the country, whatever their needs may be.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Minister referred to people on moderate incomes and viability. There are people who cannot get on the social housing list because they earn too much, but they are not earning enough to qualify for cost rental because the rent is more than one third of their income. Individuals, couples and families are trapped in the middle. They are earning too much for social housing and not enough for cost-rental or affordable housing. What is the Government going to do about that? How will it help those people? The Government put those rents in place.

The Minister referred to rents which are 25% below the market value. Last week, the Government made a decision to drive rents up over the next number of years with its housing policy. Rents which are 25% below market value do not make a cost-rental property affordable. All it does is reduce rents by 25% for unbelievably expensive properties. Affordability means that people can afford to rent. It is not that someone's rent is 25% below the market value. A lot of people cannot afford these rents.

1 July 2025

Deputy James Browne: Last week, we extended rent pressure zones across the entire country, effectively creating a national rent control, which the Deputy voted for. In terms of the 25% before market-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: There was no vote taken.

Deputy James Browne: The Deputy supported it.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: The Deputy supported it.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I will correct the Minister-----

Deputy James Browne: Did the Deputy oppose it then?

Deputy Thomas Gould: If I said something like that the Minister would-----

Deputy James Browne: We are in a housing crisis. Coming in here and being snide is not the solution. If the Deputy will let me give the answer-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: I had solutions two weeks ago.

Deputy James Browne: The Deputy supported it.

Deputy Rory Hearne: We supported the extension of RPZs but not the increase in rents. We did not support that.

Deputy James Browne: I clarified what the Deputy said. We did come in here. I will deal with the Deputy's question rather than shouting over him.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): We have clarity now. We can move on.

Deputy James Browne: Cost rental is only one measure, as I have already outlined.

Deputy Thomas Gould: What about the people in the middle?

Deputy James Browne: We are putting measures in place in order that everybody has the solution they need. Ultimately, we have to increase the supply of housing across the country. That is the only way we will address homelessness, high rents and ensure that people get the homes they need. We have gone from 20,000 to 30,000 homes. We will make the next step change. That is why we made rapid decisions over the past number of months and will do so again over the next few months. Rather than coming in here and criticising everything we do, perhaps the Deputy could come up with a few solutions.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I brought solutions to the House three weeks ago. The Government voted against that.

Deputy James Browne: Cost rental is only one measure, as I have already outlined.

Housing Provision

7. **Deputy John Clendennen** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his Department has undertaken a review of utility infrastructure deficits in rural towns

and villages; how these deficits are currently limiting the delivery of rural housing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [36137/25]

Deputy John Clendennen: Is the Department undertaking a review of utility infrastructure deficits in rural towns and villages and on how such deficits are currently limiting delivery of rural housing? Will the Minister make a statement on that?

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan): I thank Deputy Clendennen for raising this important issue. Unfortunately, it is still the case that some rural towns and villages across the country require investment in infrastructure, be it in my area of west Cork or the Deputy’s area of Offaly. It is something that to which the Government is committed to addressing.

Under section 10 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, it is a statutory requirement for each planning authority to include objectives in their development plan for the provision or facilitation of infrastructure. For new housing in smaller settlements, it is important to consider the type of appropriate infrastructure options that may support growth in these locations. Where no public wastewater network is available, individual homes may be provided with suitable individual wastewater treatment facilities, subject to compliance with the relevant environmental standards and requirements. Further information is available in the EPA’s code of practice for domestic wastewater treatment systems.

It will be a matter for the respective local authorities to identify any other infrastructure deficits that may constrain housing delivery through their development plans. The Government is committed to investment in rural water services. As part of this commitment, my Department is investing in infrastructure to deliver improvements to water services in areas of rural Ireland where Uisce Éireann services are not currently available. More than €243 million is provided under the National Development Plan 2021-2030 over the period 2021 to 2025 for investment in non-Uisce Éireann water infrastructure. In addition, Uisce Éireann has a small towns and villages growth programme which will provide growth capacity in smaller settlements that would otherwise not be provided for in its capital investment plan.

Deputy John Clendennen: I appreciate the reply but I want to give an example of a rural town in my area. Edenderry has a population of 8,000 and is within commuting distance of Dublin. Towns within its environs have grown, yet there will be no development from Uisce Éireann there until 2029. There is a key issue whereby theory and practice are not aligned. Offaly County Council referred to the delivery of wastewater capacity, as did Irish Water, and now Uisce Éireann is referring to the delivery of wastewater capacity by 2029. First and foremost, I would like reassurance from the Minister of State that there will be delivery. How are we holding Uisce Éireann accountable where it is not delivering?

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: I again thank the Deputy and appreciate him raising these concerns on behalf of the people of Offaly and specifically Edenderry. My understanding is that quite a bespoke approach is being taken in Edenderry. A wastewater treatment plant that would be sufficient to serve the population of Edenderry will be designed. In the meantime, consideration will be given to an interim solution through a developer-led process which would be designed with the intention of connecting that to the wastewater treatment plant once it is designed and finished.

The Minister, Deputy Browne, and the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, recently brought

1 July 2025

forward the national planning framework. There is a clear commitment in that to address regional development, including some of our smaller and larger towns and villages, in terms of ensuring there is investment in those areas. It recognises the need for balanced regional growth, which is a priority for the Minister, Deputy Browne, in respect of housing as well. I will come back to the Deputy with specifics on Edenderry, if that is okay.

Deputy John Clendennen: I welcome the developer-led initiative, but a viability element has to be taken into consideration. Where developers are expected to provide an interim measure, Uisce Éireann has to engage and liaise with them to ensure that it remains economically viable for them to do so. The Uisce Éireann website is not developer friendly. The capacity register on the website provides an option of green or red. I firmly believe that lacks transparency and clarity. Where something is green, there should be identifiable measurements on the numbers for development. Where it is red, we should have a date and timeframe for development. That indicative capacity outline needs to be there to let developers know where they can build and seize an opportunity. One question that Uisce Éireann should be able to answer, and quite frankly I do not believe it is, is what it will deliver next year in connections. I appreciate that other factors come into play but what are its current capacity and current resources to provide connections this year or next year?

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: On the tenet of the Deputy's original question on assessment, I really believe that is the role of a county development plan. It assesses towns and villages with regard to the various infrastructural needs within them. The national development plan will be announced shortly. Funding for Uisce Éireann will be formed, modelled and moulded around this. This is very important also.

We have seen significant increased funding for Uisce Éireann. Deputy Clendennen is absolutely right that we need to start seeing a return for this increased investment and the increased funding of the utility. With regard to Edenderry, certainly we could look at some of these projects and designs taking anything between five and seven years, but for towns such as Edenderry and other towns of a similar size this is not good enough. We want to see houses built and delivered now. The interim solution in Edenderry is, once a design is finalised, to look at the potential of developer-led infrastructure which could then be connected to the new wastewater treatment plant. This is an opportunity and it could be rolled out as a model throughout the country if it worked.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Wastewater Treatment

8. **Deputy Joe Cooney** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the steps his Department is taking to deliver the extra funding identified by local authorities, his Department and Uisce Éireann, as being necessary to deliver the measure 8 rural water programme; when that funding might be forthcoming; and if he will make a statement on the

matter. [35594/25]

30. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the pilot scheme announced by his Department to provide for sewage in unsewered villages in 2024 requires additional funding; if he has made this funding available; if he will provide an update on all schemes that have received initial approval; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35545/25]

Deputy Joe Cooney: The lack of wastewater treatment is highlighted as one of the biggest blockages in the delivery of Government housing targets. In 2022, the Minister announced €50 million under the rural water programme to deliver treatment systems in towns and villages that are not serviced. Three years on, none of these projects have begun. Will the Minister distribute these funds to any local authority that has sites ready to move to design and delivery and which has committed in writing to match funding for the projects. Will he ensure that any shortfall in the overall funding from the scheme will be forthcoming from the Department in future?

Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan: I propose to take Questions Nos. 8 and 30 together.

I thank Deputy Cooney for raising this issue. Clearly the need for investment in infrastructure, particularly wastewater services in our towns and villages, is a priority and a recurring theme that we hear. It is a priority of the Minister, Deputy Browne, of the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, and of mine, in terms of delivering housing in this regard.

The Government is committed to continued and ongoing sustained and strategic investment in rural water services across Ireland. As part of this commitment, the Department is investing in rural water infrastructure to deliver improvements to water services in areas of rural Ireland where Uisce Éireann services are not available. More than €243 million is provided under the National Development Plan 2021-2030, covering the period 2021 to 2025, for investment in non-Uisce Éireann water infrastructure. Included in this is €50 million specifically for demonstration projects to address the requirements of villages without public wastewater infrastructure.

In April 2022, under the Department’s multi-annual rural water programme, a dedicated funding programme, measure A8, was announced for the wastewater collection and treatment needs of villages without access to public wastewater services. The strategic objectives of the measure are providing opportunities for rural housing development, addressing risk to public health, and preventing water pollution. The measure was designed to support an initial portfolio of demonstration projects that could inform a longer term strategic approach to the issue of wastewater infrastructure in small villages not served by Uisce Éireann.

In December 2023, approval in principle of €45 million of funding was given to a number of projects under the programme. I believe this is the programme to which Deputy Cooney is referring. The local authorities are responsible for the delivery of the projects. However, they are required to work in consultation with Uisce Éireann, reflecting the fact that the infrastructure being built will ultimately be owned and operated by Uisce Éireann.

Since the funding announcement, the local authorities and Uisce Éireann have jointly undertaken and completed a reassessment of the projects to confirm the most efficient construction options and to provide certainty to the local authorities on the funding contribution required from them for each project. The local authorities concerned have been asked to ensure that all

1 July 2025

necessary arrangements are in place, and responses in this regard have been recently received by the Department. These responses will be considered over the coming weeks and decisions will be made in due course.

As I have said, responses have been received from each local authority and there are seven projects under consideration. They have been reassessed in terms of effectiveness and efficiency. The responses have all been received and, as I have said, the Department will be assessing them and a response will be issued in due course. I hope we can get movement on these very important infrastructural projects as soon as possible.

Deputy Joe Cooney: I understand from speaking to colleagues from other counties involved in this scheme that some are much further along in the process than others. I know that Clare County Council can progress if the Department confirms funding for the two projects in Broadford and Cooraclare. These two settlements have demonstrated significant commitment to the proposal of public treatment systems. I asked Clare County Council whether it had confirmed in writing to the Department that the matched funding requirement is available and it has done so. It would appear that some local authorities, and the towns and villages they propose, are being held up because other counties may not have been able to proceed for whatever reason. It is not acceptable in the middle of housing crisis that a scheme with public moneys allocated for more than three years for vital public infrastructure is being managed in this way.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: The Deputy is absolutely right that there are two projects in Clare and it is very important that these projects in Broadford and Cooraclare are being considered. I was in Clare the other day and I have to commend the proactive nature of the local authority. It is important that it got these two schemes in for consideration for the €45 million funding. As I have said, there has been back and forth communication between the Department and local authorities, for example, Clare County Council, and responses have been received. They will be assessed. I will certainly be making it a priority that we get an answer on how we proceed and fund these, and how quickly we can get the solutions built in these very important villages and towns.

Deputy Joe Cooney: In Minister of State's own words, the housing crisis is an emergency. The lack of a treatment system in towns and villages is one of the causes of this emergency, yet the money to develop such systems in towns and villages that are not serviced has been sitting in the Department's bank account for the past three years. The county council is clearly committed to delivering this scheme in two towns in Clare. They could be a demonstration for others, as once one county gets under way, others will follow. This is my belief. The alternative is to backtrack on the commitment given by the Minister of State's predecessor, destroy any hope the communities in Broadford and Cooraclare have of a treatment system, and accept that rural towns and villages do not matter and cannot contribute to a solution to the housing crisis. This would be outrageous. Will the Minister of State begin the distribution of the funds from this scheme to local authorities such as Clare County Council, which are committed to delivering this scheme? It is vital infrastructure for those villages that do not have it.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I reassure the Deputy that there is absolutely no backtracking on the commitment to provide solutions for these rural villages. As I have said, the Minister, Deputy Browne, and the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, recently brought forward the national planning framework, which gives a clear commitment on regional growth and regional development and allowing people to live in rural parts of Ireland. As I have said, the national development plan will inform funding for Uisce Éireann going forward. There has

been a significant increase in funding for Uisce Éireann in recent years and, as I have also said, we have to start seeing results from this.

In recent months the Minister, Deputy Browne, announced the establishment of the housing activation office. A key goal of the housing activation office is to unlock as much land for development as possible. This includes some of the urban areas in more regional parts of Ireland. This will remove impediments, whatever they may be, such as infrastructure or wastewater infrastructure. This move will accelerate development for many of our rural towns and villages.

Question No. 9 taken with Written Answers.

Legislative Measures

10. **Deputy Roderic O’Gorman** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage for an update on the progress of the legislation to underpin the apartment defects remediation scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35771/25]

36. **Deputy Donna McGettigan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to provide an update on the defects remediation scheme for apartment owners. [35765/25]

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: The Minister will be well aware of the anguish, worry and stalled lives of families living in apartments with structural defects, be they fire safety issues or water leakages, which they experience through no fault of their own. The defective apartment remediation scheme is a lifeline that will finally allow these families to move on.

9 o’clock

The Minister will appreciate how important that particular scheme is. We need a clear timeline for the legislation and a drawdown date for the money for both the statutory and the interim remediation schemes.

Deputy James Browne: I propose to take Questions Nos. 10 and 36 together.

The drafting of the apartment and duplex defects remediation Bill is progressing. Various issues requiring legal advice are under consideration. The Bill is included in the Government legislation summer programme and I intend to seek Government approval to publish it shortly. The general scheme will be made available to undergo pre-legislative scrutiny as soon as is practicable and I anticipate this happening in autumn 2025. When established, the statutory scheme will provide supports for the remediation of relevant fire safety, structural safety and water ingress defects in purpose-built apartment buildings, including duplexes, constructed between 1991 and 2013. It is envisaged that 100% of eligible remediation costs will be funded under the scheme.

The interim remediation scheme for the funding of emergency fire safety defect works in apartments and duplexes, constructed between 1991 and 2013, opened to applications from owners’ management companies on 11 December 2023. The interim remediation scheme is being administered by the Housing Agency on a nationwide basis and provides for the full funding of interim measures to provide an acceptable level of fire safety in buildings, pending completion of the full remedial works under the statutory scheme. As of 31 May 2025, a total of 207

applications to the interim remediation scheme are being progressed across 29 local authorities, representing a total of 19,574 residential units.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I thank the Minister. There are three real elements here. There is the statutory scheme, which will look after fire safety, structural issues and water ingress. The interim remediation scheme is solely for fire safety works. We then have the pathfinder projects, which are under way and are probably a subcategory of the interim remediation scheme. Has any money been paid out under the four pathfinder projects or under the interim remediation scheme? If not, when does the Minister expect money to be paid out under those schemes?

There is an issue to do with EU public procurement on the interim remediation scheme. I was talking to someone who was at an AGM of their management company recently who was told no money is being paid out because it is caught up in EU issues. Will the Minister explain clearly what the procurement issue is, when it will be addressed and when money will be drawn down under the interim scheme?

Deputy Donna McGettigan: We know this is a crucially important matter, given that defects were first detected in 2011. The scheme is intended to cover apartments and duplexes built between 1991 and 2013. I accept that an interim remediation scheme was introduced, but this was for the first of the fire safety defects, which still leaves thousands of apartments in need of remedial works. Families are being raised in some of these apartments.

Many of these homeowners are in my constituency and have been in touch to express their concern. I am sure the Minister has heard from a lot of the homeowners himself. Children are being raised in substandard conditions with problems such as water ingress, less serious fire hazards and structural defects. Will he confirm how many apartments have had remediation work carried out under the interim scheme? What is the latest estimate for the number of apartments and duplexes that will require remediation in total? Will he provide an estimation of when all of the work on all affected apartments and duplexes will be completed?

Deputy James Browne: The aim is to get the work done as quickly as possible. Regarding the interim scheme, four pathfinder projects covering almost 600 residential units have been identified. These projects are progressing and will allow the mapping of the application of the remediation process into simple steps to identify the pinch points and their solutions and to provide consistency across the submissions by competent professions and related local authority fire services. The pathfinder projects identified some issues in terms of it. That was the whole idea of the pathfinder projects, as they progressed, to see where there was going to be pinch points where there may be issues with the remediation scheme.

The Department is working with the Housing Agency to co-ordinate and oversee the administration of this scheme. There have been some issues, including with tendering. We got some clarification on that today, but I am happy to brief both Deputies on any further clarification and on progress. It is being updated on a daily basis at this point. We can try to resolve the tender issue without it leading to further delay. The indication last week was that it might lead to some significant delay. The sense is that this has been rectified but I will have further clarity in the coming days. It is a live issue at the moment. I am happy to keep both Deputies updated as we move along on it.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I appreciate the Minister’s offer of a briefing. I will certainly

take him up on that because residents are really worried. They are getting this information from their management company, which says there is a blockage. The Minister made a number of comments that if any of them are listening will probably make them even more nervous in terms of delay. There needs to be clarity. I accept his point that it is a live situation, but it is really important to understand. My understanding is that no money has been drawn down under the interim scheme as yet. The Minister might clarify that in his concluding reply. I will definitely take a briefing on the interim scheme.

There was some newspaper coverage over the weekend, based on documents prepared by the Minister's officials, that stated there was a belief that the scheme would open to applications before the end of the year. If the Minister is saying he wants to bring it to pre-legislative scrutiny in the autumn, I presume that was a massively optimistic read of the situation. Are we looking at a drawdown date in 2026 for the statutory scheme? Will he confirm whether he expects the statutory scheme to be up and running in 2025 or 2026?

Deputy Donna McGettigan: It was recently reported in the media that the remediation scheme will not come into effect until 2027. Will he give an assurance that this is not the case and that the scheme will actually commence in 2026? We cannot have a repeat of the defective blocks scheme fiasco, the details of which we do not need to go into. Will he guarantee there will be 100% redress for all apartment and duplex owners? Will he guarantee there will be a full refund scheme for anyone who has had to undertake remediation works at his or her own expense while waiting for the scheme to commence? The latest update we received on this was that the Government had agreed in principle to give 100% refunds. Will he confirm that this will definitely be the case? I will also take the Minister up on his offer of giving me an update along with Deputy O'Gorman.

Deputy James Browne: I acknowledge that there has been some delay with the drafting. Some of that has arisen as a result of the Housing Agency receiving legal advice outlining the provision of the funding by the agency to oversee it is likely to trigger a requirement to comply with public procurement law. The Attorney General subsequently confirmed the need to align the application process in compliance with EU procurement rules. The application process has subsequently been amended and the dynamic purchasing system for appointment of competent professionals has been developed for launch within the next few years. Contract builders will now be procured via the e-tender system using a public works contract. This change and other clarifications have led to the delayed drafting of the Bill.

I understand these people are living in a sense of fear. I have engaged with several of these families and the representative body. I am determined to get this resolved. I do not want this delayed any further. I am personally dealing with this situation because I understand the stress and the worry that people are going through. We will get this resolved as quickly as possible. No funding has been drawn down yet.

Housing Policy

11. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to provide a date for when his revised housing plan will be completed and published. [35826/25]

Deputy James Browne: The programme for Government commits to the introduction of a new, all-of-government national housing plan to follow Housing for All, underpinned by multi-

1 July 2025

annual funding. This plan will take a whole-of-government approach, as Housing for All did. My Department is engaging across government to agree the high-level measures to be included in the plan. They must be supported by the required funding in the national development plan. The timing of its publication will be aligned with the outcome of the national development plan review process currently being undertaken by my colleague, the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Sector Reform and Digitalisation. I am committed to its finalisation and publication as soon as possible.

Meanwhile the important work of this Government proceeds, and as Minister supporting the delivery of new homes, it is my key priority, and I am looking at using every means available to do so. Almost €6.8 billion, a record level of funding, has been provided by the Government for the delivery of housing in 2025. In recent months, the revised national planning framework was approved, An Coimisiún Pleanála was established with a new chairperson appointed and rent pressure zones have been expanded and extended nationwide as part of measures to secure the supply of rental accommodation and promote investment in housing. I have also recently issued the next call for expressions under the croí cónaithe cities scheme. The new national housing plan, which will be published in the coming months, will build on the measures we have introduced to date and set us on a sustainable path to meeting our housing needs nationally. We do need the national development plan first. It is simply common sense publish a housing plan that includes the NDP, finalised after its publication. Then we can publish the new national housing plan.

Deputy Thomas Gould: In response to an earlier question, the Minister made a comment about bringing forward solutions. We can come in here and fight every week - we could fight for the next five years - but we have taken the decision to come in and try to work with the Government and bring forward solutions. Three weeks ago, I brought forward a solution. While it will not fix the housing crisis, it would bring in thousands of empty and boarded-up council houses that are owned by the State. We now own enough boarded-up council properties that we could house every family living in homelessness accommodation. That could be achieved. All we need is funding and staffing for local authorities. We also need local authorities to get back to building houses directly. I ask the Minister to reverse the decisions taken by Fianna Fáil in the 1990s to take local authorities out of building homes and to return us to a system that worked. On a final point, the Government slashed funding to the tenant in situ scheme. I am dealing with families who are still feeling the effects of that.

Deputy James Browne: The Deputy's proposal a number of weeks ago was simply to write blank cheques for local authorities. That is not a solution. We have to manage our finances and we have only a certain amount of funding. We want those voids brought back in but, as the Deputy will recall, one of the properties was a property that could not be let because it had not had a stairs for five years. There is no reason or rationale for that to be the case.

On the rest of the housing plan, we will have this housing plan done as quickly as possible. We have gone back to building social houses. We are encouraging local authorities to build as much social housing as possible. Today we published the delivery rate of various local authorities. It is extraordinary to see with some local authorities, even side by side to each other, how some can deliver as little as 3% own-build housing while others are above 40%. The ability is there. The local authorities that are actually delivering large amounts of social housing own-builds show that the Government is backing the local authorities where those local authorities are determined to build those social houses. We will continue to back those but we want to encourage the other local authorities to rise up to meet the top standard that some of those other

local authorities that are delivering.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Minister talks about local authorities delivering on target and delivering social housing and cost-rental and affordable housing. Cork City Council is probably one of the best local authorities in the State for delivering social and cost-rental and affordable housing, and yet the housing list goes up. It is because the Minister's Government has set targets so low that even when local authorities do hit the targets they are supposed to hit, the numbers of people looking for social housing are going up. The homelessness figures are going up every month. I believe the figure we are at now is 4,844 children, off the top of my head. I asked the Minister's predecessor, Darragh O'Brien, how many children must become homeless before he and this Government will accept that the policy has failed. I do not want it to get to 5,000 and I do not think the Minister does either, but 5,000 children will be homeless in the lifetime of this Government. We were in here two weeks ago with a cross-party proposal in relation to the Raise the Roof rally and fixing the housing emergency. This is an emergency and the Minister is not treating it like one. I ask him sincerely to grab this Government and say, "This is a housing emergency, so stand up and deliver the solutions that we need."

Deputy James Browne: I am treating it as an emergency. The number seeking social housing is increasing, as it is for cost-rental and affordable and private housing, because the population of this country is exploding as a result of the successful economic steerage of this country. It is a good thing that our population is increasing as a result of our economy. It puts more pressure on me and the Government to deliver even more housing and we are going to do that to meet the increasing population needs. I acknowledge that we need more social housing. There is no question about that. I am determined to deliver more. That is why today I got Government agreement to end the four-stage process and the three-stage and two-stage processes. We will have only a single-stage process for local authorities to deliver social housing so that those local authorities that are determined to build social housing will be able to do so. We have increased the ceiling from €8 billion to €200 billion, which is a significant increase as well. The local authorities that want to build can build. They can build at the moment, but now they will be able to build even more quickly.

Local Authorities

12. **Deputy Joe Neville** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his Department has plans to increase local government funding in areas of rapid population growth, such as Kildare north, to meet its demands, as it directly affects the levels of service provisions that can be made; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35893/25]

Deputy Joe Neville: My question for the Minister of State today is on behalf of the people of north Kildare, and indeed the entire county of Kildare. What plans does the Department have to increase local government funding to County Kildare, considering its rapid population growth, to meet its demands? The demands of the people there have been directly affected by the decrease in the provision of services.

Deputy John Cummins: I thank Deputy Neville for raising this matter, as he regularly does in this Chamber. His advocacy for Kildare is certainly well noted. As he will be aware, I was in Kildare last Thursday, when I visited the local authority and engaged with the executive team. Much of what the Deputy has raised here in his question was the subject of the discussion we had.

1 July 2025

The system of funding of local government in Ireland is a complex one. Local authorities derive their income from a range of sources, including commercial rates, charges for goods and services provided, the local property tax, and grants from various Departments and State agencies for both capital and current expenditure purposes. The central government grant funding to Kildare County Council increased by more than 60% from €168.3 million in 2018 to €271.9 million in 2023, according to its audited annual financial statements. Across all schemes and funding sources, the Department provided €164.9 million in 2020, €218.6 million in 2023 and €233.2 million in 2024.

With regard to local property tax, LPT, which makes up approximately 6% of the sector's locally raised income, a review of baselines was completed by a working group in 2023, which resulted in an increase of €1.5 million to the baseline LPT for Kildare County Council.

We have established a local democracy task force, which had its first meeting last week, where funding for local authorities is an important stream. I will give further detail on LPT allocations in my follow-up replies.

Deputy Joe Neville: I thank the Minister of State. The simple fact is that the population of Kildare has increased by 50% in the last 20 years. Although the State has grown, Kildare and especially north Kildare has outpaced that and grown rapidly. Unfortunately, the delivery of funding to the local government in Kildare, Kildare County Council, has not been kept at the same pace. That means we do not have the delivery of facilities we should have and which nearby counties have. Kildare has been at the lowest spend *per capita* among the councils in all other counties. It has been behind in how services are delivered. Obviously, there is always the debate that more can be done from within the councils themselves but, ultimately, funding is a key aspect.

I welcome the point the Minister of State made about the LPT and how we can maybe keep more funding within rapidly growing county councils. I look forward to hearing his further detail on that.

Deputy John Cummins: It is the case that, through a decision made in Cabinet today on the LPT model, there will be a significant increase in LPT for Kildare County Council as part of its 2026 figures. That will be made up from an increase in the baseline figures but also from the retention element moving from 22.5% to 31%. It means that Kildare County Council will have an additional €4.9 million in funding in LPT for 2026 over and above what was provided in 2025.

Deputy Joe Neville: I wholeheartedly welcome that number and €5 million extra per year is welcome news. I am also conscious that the LPT is ultimately paid by the people in the county. Much of that money is hard earned and it is welcome that we are now in a position where more of it can be retained. This money will go back towards the playgrounds, the parks and the delivery of basic services that we have all around the county. We know that we need to do more. The population is growing. Our estates are full. We can discuss a lot about housing in places like Leixlip, Maynooth, Clane, Naas and Kilcock, where a lot of houses are being built, but with this housing we need services. Every extra bit of LPT that we can retain in the county is welcome. The news is good tonight but I will keep fighting for the cause of the people of north Kildare, because I know we have been behind. Hopefully, I can continue to be able to raise these issues and to push on behalf of the people of the county.

Deputy John Cummins: I have no doubt that the Deputy will continue to use this Cham-

ber to be a strong advocate for north Kildare and the county as a whole. The Deputy is right about the LPT; there is a recognition in the Government of the increased pressures on areas like Kildare. That is why we are saying as a Government, in line with the decisions that have been made by the Cabinet and the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, that we will allow for a higher retention rate in areas that have a growing population, additional housing and increased pressure to provide services for the people. That is why an additional €4.9 million in LPT will be available to Kildare County Council to put towards the capital infrastructure projects that are required for the growing population in County Kildare.

National Planning Framework

13. **Deputy Edward Timmins** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage following the publication of the national planning framework, if he will advise when the local authorities will receive their revised population figures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35827/25]

Deputy Edward Timmins: Following the publication of the national planning framework, NPF, will the Minister of State advise when the local authorities will receive their revised population figures? It is important that these guidelines are rolled out to county councils as soon as possible to allow them to amend their county development plans and local area plans. Because of the delay, I have seen a planning application for 335 houses in Blessington, County Wicklow, which is supported by the council and all elected representatives, being refused by An Bord Pleanála, because the local area plan was not up to date with the new housing targets.

Deputy John Cummins: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter, as he has done previously. As I do, the Deputy recognises the importance of translating what we have approved in this House in the national planning framework into getting it implemented by local authorities in their development plans as early as possible. That is why the Minister, Deputy Browne, has written to local authorities telling them to prepare and start work on their variation processes. We will be writing to local authorities very shortly about their housing growth requirements for the interim years, up until the next revision of their development plans. We are engaging with the Attorney General on this matter. We want to ensure that any of the housing growth requirements that we give to local authorities are legally robust and stand up to scrutiny. The point made by the Deputy about local authorities being able to zone a sufficient amount of land in order to deliver much-needed homes for individuals and families is a key priority of the Minister and me. We have done an extensive amount of work on this issue with our planning officials. We want to get this right in order to ensure we have sufficient zoning of land to be able to provide houses for individuals and families in Wicklow and across the country.

Deputy Edward Timmins: On a related matter, I want to bring up the issue of headroom. At this stage, no guidance has been issued on this. From my experience of development plans, the previous directive from the Office of the Planning Regulator was 0% headroom, which is very misguided. It is imperative that there is a considerable percentage headroom because in practice many sites will not be developed for various reasons. All landowners are not ready to be developers and in the real world, site development often has many obstacles, including costs, and may lead to planning refusals. I suggest a headroom of the order of 70%.

Deputy John Cummins: I can assure the Deputy that there will be headroom in the housing growth requirements. Obviously, there will be the base, in line with what is in the national

1 July 2025

planing framework, which is to provide about 54,000 homes per annum. This is a significant increase compared with the 33,000 previously. There is a requirement in the base for a significant additional zoning requirement. As we know that not every parcel of land is brought forward for development, there is a requirement for headroom in terms of that. The Minister and I have been very clear with our officials on this matter. Local authorities will have clearer understanding of what that will be very shortly.

Deputy Edward Timmins: From a national point of view, councils must be closely involved in the delivery of housing. Delivery must be micromanaged. These county targets must be drilled down further, with monthly figures produced by all local authorities of actual homes built versus targets and explanations given. This is the only way to deliver large numbers of houses. The Minister must then meet the CEOs of the councils and the heads of planning on a quarterly basis. This method is exactly the way a business would aim to achieve its targets. Tiered zoning refers to lower tiers with fewer services. However, in many current plans, it is tiered, even when they both have access to services. There should be no tiered zoning in these cases. If tier 1 is not developed, it often stops tier 2 from being developed.

Deputy Colm Burke: Regarding forward planning, we need to address the concentration of development in Dublin and the greater Dublin area. We need to focus very much on places like Cork, Limerick and Galway. There is clear evidence that the growth in jobs continues in Cork. Therefore, we must develop the housing in order to accommodate those new jobs. I do not believe we are working hard enough to develop areas outside of Dublin regarding housing and the infrastructure required. In the last census, the population of Cork was 581,000. It is now more than 600,000. In a very short time, if we do it correctly, it will be more than 650,000. The industries are there. They want to stay there and grow but in order for this to happen, more housing is needed. It is extremely important that there is forward planning for areas outside of Dublin and the greater Dublin region.

Deputy John Cummins: I thank both Deputies. Increasing housing supply in all parts of the country is critical. The variation process in terms of the county development plans is a very important part of this. That is why such extensive work has been done in the Department to ensure that the housing growth requirements are aligned with the NPF and that they also allow for additional headroom in terms of zoning requirements for local authorities. We want additional land to be brought forward for housing across the country.

On Deputy Timmins's point, the Minister met the CEOs and directors of services for housing and planners very recently. I have met up to now about ten local authorities in my engagements around the country. We are discussing forward planning and delivery of housing units across all of the streams. We will continue to do so as a Government.

Local Authorities

14. **Deputy Conor Sheehan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when funding will be released for a project (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35898/25]

Deputy Conor Sheehan: When will €5 million of funding be released for infrastructure at the Mungret site in Limerick? This is a partnership between Limerick City and County Council and the Land Development Agency, LDA. Essentially, it is funding for a plaza and a link road

to allow them to proceed to tender and construction for 250-plus homes.

Deputy James Browne: I thank Deputy Sheehan for asking when funding will be made available for a project. This is the shortfall of €5 million to cover infrastructure for the Mungret LDA development of 250 units in Limerick. The Deputy's question relates to the development of the lands at the former Mungret College, which is a key strategic priority for Limerick City and County Council. The site will see the delivery of 250 affordable and social homes, together with community and crèche facilities over a three- to four-year period. This includes the proposed development of 181 affordable purchase homes and two community dwellings for people with disabilities in partnership with the Land Development Agency and homes for older people and a crèche being delivered by the approved housing body Clúid.

Funding approval from the affordable housing fund is in place to support the delivery of the 181 affordable purchase homes by the LDA. However, Limerick City and County Council has advised my Department that an additional funding requirement has arisen for enabling infrastructure. I understand that Limerick City and County Council is considering the matter in conjunction with its delivery partners. I also understand the strategic importance of this development and will work proactively with Limerick and its delivery partners to support the work.

It is envisaged that the housing activation office will manage a multi-annual housing infrastructure investment fund under the national development plan. The scope of this fund will be determined as part of the review of the national development plan, which is due to be completed in July. This will inform the programme of investment. While I cannot comment on any individual sites in advance of the opening of that fund for infrastructure proposals, there will be engagement with stakeholders, including local authorities, to identify priority areas for support.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: From the substance of the Minister's reply, it sounds like this funding is being delayed until the new infrastructure fund is active. Is there a way he can frontload the delivery of the infrastructure fund to release the funding? As far as I understand, there was a proposal from the LDA that the €5 million shortfall would be added to the purchase price of the affordable homes, which is totally unacceptable. Through the framework, there is potential to deliver 1,950 homes in Mungret. From talking to the local authority, as far as I understand, a funding ask has been with the Department, the Department of public expenditure, and it has even been sent to the Department of the Taoiseach, since March. I sincerely urge the Minister to clarify whether this has been delayed until the infrastructure fund is up and running or to release the funding soon.

Deputy James Browne: Funding for the housing activation office will come under the national development plan, which is currently being agreed. Limerick City and County Council has received local infrastructure housing activation fund, LIHAF, funding for the delivery of the first two phases of a new distributor road at Mungret. LIHAF funding approval of €22.1 million was given, of which €6.6 million was funded by the Department and the balance by Limerick City and County Council. Both phases funded by LIHAF are now complete, with the second section of the road opening in April 2024. Up to the end of 2024, this road has allowed 203 homes to be delivered, including 99 cost-reduced units. Funding approval of more than €18 million is in place to support the delivery of 181 affordable purchase units by 2027 with the support of the affordable housing fund. In total, the proposed mixed tenure development will comprise 181 affordable purchase homes and two community dwellings for people with disabilities, which are being delivered by the Land Development Agency, together with 69 social houses for older persons and a crèche to be delivered by Clúid AHB. I welcome Limerick's

ambition in this regard.

Limerick City and County Council has informally advised the Department that a funding shortfall of €5 million has been identified. It is understood that this funding requirement relates to the infrastructural realm. We will work with Limerick City and County Council to help meet its ambition.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I thank the Minister. From my point of view and that of the local authority, this entire project is essentially being held up because of €5 million, which is a very small sum of money in the grand scale of things. This project has been in planning since last year and was first announced in May 2024. We have had the highest percentage increase in house prices in Limerick in the past year because we have such a shortage of housing. From the Minister's response, it sounds like the release of the €5 million will be delayed until after the review of the NDP. Will he confirm whether the funding will be released soon or if it will be deferred until the NDP review is published?

Deputy James Browne: The Department has not received any formal submission on funding. We have been made aware that there is a funding issue and we are engaging with the local authority to see what is the best way forward to address it.

Construction Industry

15. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the efforts he and his Department have made to encourage new technologies in the construction sector; the role he believes modular housing can play in the current crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35401/25]

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: Will the Minister outline the efforts he and his Department have made to encourage new technologies in the construction sector, and the role he believes modular housing can play?

Deputy James Browne: I thank Deputy O'Sullivan for raising this question about the encouragement of new technologies in the construction sector, including modular housing. I understand he has raised this issue on numerous occasions.

The use of modern methods of construction, MMC, is a key policy measure to boost construction sector productivity and to support the scaling-up of delivery of new housing supply. MMC is a collective term which describes a number of innovative alternatives to traditional on-site construction methods. It does include 3D volumetric modules, which are commonly known as modular houses, but also includes a number of other systems, including 2D systems like timber frames, light-gauge steel or insulated concrete formwork, all of which have the potential to increase productivity in construction.

We have already made a good deal of progress under Housing for All in terms of promoting the use of MMC in both public and private housing. We are supporting local authorities to adopt MMC in social and affordable housing, including through the publication of the 2023 roadmap for increased adoption of MMC in public housing and by providing real opportunities to deliver homes using MMC. For example, my Department has an accelerated delivery programme which will deliver more than 1,500 social homes through local authorities, all being

built using modern methods of construction.

In terms of modular projects, Wexford County Council is progressing a pilot social housing project for 22 modular homes at a site in New Ross, with funding support from my Department, and that will present an opportunity to examine the potential of this type of MMC through this and other modular projects. I am keen to continue the progress the Government has made to date in encouraging the use of MMC and it will form an important aspect of the next housing plan.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: The Minister referenced the fact that the Department has made a good deal of progress on MMC. Will he quantify that for me if he has the figures available? How many units have been built since 2023 or whatever date he referenced? I understand a target of 1,500 was mentioned, but will he quantify the number of units that have been delivered via this method?

A much-maligned project took place in Mahon in Cork two years ago that turned out to be more expensive and took longer than a conventional build. It is very easy for us to react negatively to MMC and modular housing but my belief is that it has a crucial role to play in the future. A company was established in my area in recent years which deals with a specific type of modular housing, namely, the conversion of shipping containers. It is something we must consider, not perhaps as a long-term solution for housing but at least as a temporary solution.

Deputy James Browne: I fully agree with the Deputy that MMC is critical to housing delivery in this country. When modular units were first proposed for schools, for example, there was a little bit of pushback from school principals, who were concerned as many of them had grown up with very poor prefabs and perhaps they thought that was what was coming. I was chair of a school board of management at the time, and when the modular building arrived, we saw the high quality of the build. School principals then raced to get them because they could be got at such speed.

A similar change of mindset is required for housing. It is the way forward. Our tradespeople are getting older and it is becoming more and more difficult to replace them, so if we want to build housing at scale, it must be done through modern methods of construction. One of the things the Government did today was to get agreement to end the four-stage process and reduce it to a single-stage process, but also to make it mandatory for local authorities to use a housing design manual from the Department of housing, which contains 60 designs. What that will also do is help those providing MMC across the country to know they can now scale up because there will be consistency of style specifications for the delivery of social housing throughout the country.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I am someone who is about to embark on a journey with my family to build our first home. If there was a genuine modular offering for us as a family, we would look at it but, unfortunately, it is just not there for us as one-off house builders. I am lucky to be in that position. Still, there are significant barriers there. I was at a lunch today with the Estonian ambassador and she spoke to me about a conference she attended, which I believe a number of colleagues attended as well as part of a trade mission in the past few years, where there had been issues with certification. They are able to build these houses to scale in central and eastern Europe. Obviously, a house being built in Estonia will be different from one being built in Ireland. I assume climate plays a role in that. The Estonians speak about our inability to get over the bureaucracy and how we are strangled by certification. It is necessary but this is

1 July 2025

three years after she first flagged it as an issue. That is something that frustrates me. Between the Custom House and Department of public expenditure we get bogged down in bureaucracy and administration. Hopefully some day we can break free from it and get on with delivering these units.

Deputy James Browne: I agree. It is simply taking too long to get certification for the use of modular builds in this country. The Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, is engaging with his counterpart in the Department of enterprise. We are determined to get to a situation where we can get certification done at a much quicker pace. We need it done. We have an ageing workforce. It is getting more difficult to replace them. If we want to go from 30,000 houses a year to 60,000 houses a year, it has to be done using modern methods of construction. That is modular build. I was in Hong Kong in March. There, 45-storey apartment blocks are being built purely using modular. They can do it at an extraordinary pace. We need to do it. It is also about productivity. We have very low productivity in the building sector in Ireland. Again, that is because we are not using modern methods of construction compared to other countries. We are behind the curve on this. The Minister of State and I are determined that we will catch up very quickly.

Planning Issues

16. **Deputy Shane Moynihan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if new EE-zoned land will be identified in tandem with industrial land rezonings for housing to enable relocation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35806/25]

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Will the Department issue guidance on the need for enterprise and employment zoned land to be identified in tandem with the industrial land rezonings that are being rezoned to enable further provision of housing and if that will then be used to enable relocation?

Deputy John Cummins: The zoning of land is an exercise undertaken by planning authorities as part of their development plan process. The making of a development plan is a reserved function of the elected members of each planning authority who are required by legislation to be consistent with the established statutory national and regional planning policy and legislation, including, as identified in the national planning framework, regional spatial and economic strategies and ministerial planning guidelines. Development plans have to set out planning policies and objectives to provide for proper planning and sustainable development in their area over the six-year lifespan of the plan. We are moving to ten-year development plans. They must also include mandatory objectives for regeneration. It is up to local authorities to decide the quantum and location of zoned land, for whatever purpose. In the context of the guidance I referred to earlier that the Department will issue regarding the housing growth requirements, it will be a requirement for every local authority to vary their development plans. It will be a matter for the members in terms of the quantum and the exact location.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I thank the Minister of State for that reply. The context for this question is in the fact the Dublin local authorities are advancing development frameworks that involve the rezoning of existing industrial land to residential or mixed use to meet housing supply targets. As the Minister of State said in his reply, that is a function of the local authority but done under the auspices of the national and regional strategies. The most recent example is the Ballyboggan masterplan, where Dublin City Council will rezone approximately 77 ha of

industrial land between Cabra and Glasnevin to deliver an extra 6,000. Similarly, in south Dublin county, Cookstown and Ballymount are part of the city edge project. While this rezoning is welcome and makes sense from an urban development point of view, I have also raised in the House a number of times the need for space for indigenous SMEs to scale up. They are coming to me and other representatives around the country saying there is a shortage of industrial land and enterprise and employment zoned land. While I respect the right of planning authorities to set the development plans, we also know they are done within the context of national strategies and guidance issued from the Department. Will it specifically call out the need to ensure there is sufficient industrial land as well as the more than necessary zoning of housing land?

Deputy John Cummins: It is the requirement of local authorities and the reserved function of members to decide what locations and what specific zoning objectives they determine for each land bank. They are required to include mandatory objectives regarding regeneration and to provide zoning for residential, commercial, employment and enterprise, industrial and other uses to such extent as the proper planning and sustainable development of an area requires. The Minister and I will write to the local authorities in the context of their housing growth requirements and the variation process, but we do have to respect the reserved function of local authority members in setting their development plans where they feel it is appropriate for those given uses, be they very important industrial uses, residential, commercial or other uses as they see fit.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: One of the reasons I am raising this is the shortage of land. If we want to promote compact growth, or initiatives like 15-minute cities, it is important with large-scale housing developments we have adequate amounts of industrial and commercial land there as well. While I fully take the point that planning authorities do set their own development plans, we are also familiar with instances where either the Office of the Planning Regulator or a ministerial order has been put in place to vary or alter a development plan, as happened in my own county. I encourage the Minister to consider issuing guidance to local authorities in terms of thinking of the amount and quantum of EE land available in their counties to support employment in the large housing developments that are going to happen, to encourage compact growth and to be complementary to the transport-led planning, which we require as well. In the context of a vacancy that has been identified by Ministers in this House, there is not sufficient space for companies and SMEs in particular that want to scale up. We need to support their growth as the backbone of our economy in these uncertain global times.

Deputy John Cummins: I appreciate the comments the Deputy made. It is not just for residential purposes; it is for industrial and commercial. While we do not instruct local authorities on specific areas, it is obviously a requirement to forward planning teams to look at the overall picture within a local authority area and determine where they feel residential, commercial, industrial zoning is appropriate and ensure there is an appropriate quantum of all of those uses within their local authority area. We will write to local authorities in terms of their housing growth requirements. That does open the variation process. The forward planning units within local authorities have a responsibility to ensure that full spectrum of uses is contained in any development plan.

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Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): 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 Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the limitations of the supplementary welfare allowance.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss the need for improved respite services at St. Mary of the Angels and St. Francis Special School, Whitefield Beaufort, County Kerry.

Deputy Pat Buckley - To discuss the flood relief programme for Rathcormac, Castlemartyr, Killeagh and Mogeely, County Cork.

Deputy Louis O'Hara - To discuss the need for updated wind energy development guidelines.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly - To discuss the development of a new suicide reduction policy and related matters.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae - To discuss planned roads infrastructure changes in Killarney.

Deputy Colm Burke - To discuss the need for a national nursing home care policy.

Deputy Donna McGettigan - To discuss issues affecting students, including fees, the accommodation crisis and the cost-of-living crisis.

Deputy Alan Kelly - To discuss the need for regulations and planning guidelines for biogas plants.

Deputy Erin McGreehan - To discuss making Louth County Hospital a location for a surgical hub for the north east.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny - To discuss a review of the policy on the provision of incontinence products by the HSE.

Deputy Michael Murphy - To discuss the closure of a swimming pool at the Ferryhouse complex, outside Clonmel.

Deputy Rory Hearne - To discuss the roll-out of multidisciplinary teams in Ballymun.

Deputies David Cullinane and Conor D. McGuinness - To discuss funding for capital developments at ports and fishery harbours in Waterford.

Deputy Thomas Gould - To discuss the closure of the tenant in situ scheme in Cork city.

Deputies Ruth Coppinger and Roderic O'Gorman - To discuss provision of places in the newly opening ASD classes in St. Mochta's National School, Clonsilla.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke - To discuss the current and estimated future shortage of GPs.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss the SNA allocation at Rampark National School, County Louth.

Deputy Mattie McGrath - To discuss funding for local training initiatives through the Tipperary ETB.

The matters raised by Deputies Louise O'Reilly, Alan Kelly, Mattie McGrath, Michael Murphy and Aidan Farrelly have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Social Welfare Payments

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank the Minister of State for being here to take this Topical Issue matter. I will use an individual case, but I will not say the woman's full name. I am raising the case on behalf of a person to highlight the issue I have, which is about the limitations of the supplementary welfare allowance and the manner in which it is applied. It often seems that a decision is made by the Department of Social Protection that a scheme will be put in place to respond to a need, but the scheme is then not changed and not adapted. I will illustrate my point with an example.

I am raising this issue on behalf of a woman by the name of Diane. She has survived cancer twice and during that time the mortgage on her apartment was, unbeknownst to her - let us be fair; she had a lot going on - sold to a well known vulture fund. She was struggling to repay her mortgage. A payment plan of €597 per month was agreed. She was in receipt of the other supplement, the former mortgage interest supplement, which meant she was able to keep a roof over her head. Diane has been under a lot of financial pressure on top of the fact that she is very unwell. One thing is feeding the other. The financial pressure is feeding the ill health, etc. On 17 June 2025 she received a letter from the Department of Social Protection telling her she is to be excluded from receipt of the supplement because the arrears outstanding on the loan are of such magnitude that the payment of a supplement is considered inappropriate. This puts her in a very precarious and scary place, as I am sure the Minister of State will agree. The woman is gravely ill. She has to have equipment fitted in her house and now she is in danger of losing the house.

I used this as an example because we are in the middle of a housing crisis. If this were 25 years ago, the Minister of State might say it is tough, but she will have to rent and there is support available for that and so on. However, the truth is that there is nowhere for her to rent. She is too sick to go into emergency accommodation. I do not know whether the Minister of State has seen it. This is with no disrespect to the people who work in it, because I am sure they are doing their best, but you would not want to be in it in the whole of your health, never mind gravely ill.

I have engaged with the Department of Social Protection on her behalf. The response I got

is that she can appeal the decision. The Minister of State and I both know what the result of the appeal will be. I understand she will tell me she cannot pre-empt it and I do not want to either, but I have a feeling the appeal will go the same way as the application because the grounds on which it was refused still stand. This is the scheme of last resort, if you will. This is where people go when they have been everywhere else. There are currently 26,000 people in mortgage arrears. Some of them have a mortgage that has been sold to a vulture fund, others do not. Illnesses and personal circumstances are a really big push factor in people going into long-term arrears. Everyone deserves to stay in their home. This example is somewhat of an outlier, but it illustrates the fact that the supplementary welfare allowance is not adequate for the demands being made on it at the moment. It has not kept pace with what is happening currently and it is not fit for purpose in the housing crisis we are in at the moment.

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Marian Harkin): I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. The Deputy will recognise that I am taking this on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Calleary, and I hope she will recognise that I cannot answer on a specific individual. It is not because it is not important. It is. It is absolutely crucial and I would never say in response that it is tough. However, it is a specific case and will have to be dealt with in that way. The only answer I can provide is more generalised. However, if the Deputy would like me to speak to the Minister, I would be happy to do so.

To come back to the supplementary welfare allowance scheme, as the Deputy said, it is the scheme of last resort, the safety net in the overall social welfare system. It provides assistance to eligible people in the State whose means are insufficient to meet their needs and those of their dependents. Supports under the scheme can include a basic weekly payment, rent supplement, other weekly or monthly supplements in respect of certain expenses or additional needs payments. The basic supplementary welfare allowance provides immediate assistance for those in need who are awaiting the outcome of a claim or an appeal for a primary social welfare payment or who do not qualify for a payment under other State schemes. Basic supplementary welfare allowance is paid at rates up to €242 per week with increases for adult and child dependents. Currently, there are approximately 11,000 recipients of the payment.

Rent supplement provides short-term income support to eligible people living in private rented accommodation whose means are insufficient to meet their accommodation costs and who do not have accommodation available to them from any other source. There are approximately 6,600 recipients of this supplement. An additional ongoing supplement may also be provided to help with ongoing needs, including for heat, travel and other ongoing costs. The Department of Social Protection may also make additional needs payments to help to meet essential expenses people cannot pay from their weekly income or other personal and household resources. This payment is available to anyone who needs it and qualifies for it, whether that person is currently receiving a social welfare payment or working with a low income.

Approximately, 83,000 additional needs payment were issued in 2024. Payments are made at the discretion of the officers administering the scheme, taking into account the requirements of the legislation. The community welfare service in the Department administers the supplementary welfare allowance schemes and can enable a flexible approach to meet the income needs of vulnerable individuals and families. The community welfare service is committed to providing a quality service to all citizens, ensuring applications are processed and decisions on entitlement are made as quickly as possible. Where a person has an urgent or immediate need, every effort is made to ensure the claim is processed on the same day. Community welfare of-

ficers are very experienced and can generally assess when a case is so urgent that it requires an immediate response.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I appreciate that the Minister of State is here. She listed the qualities of the scheme, including flexibility and so forth. However, here is the thing: ESB Networks considers Diane to be a vulnerable customer. It has put her in the category of a person who should not have her electricity cut off because she is a vulnerable customer and person, not due to any wrongdoing on her part. It is because she is sick. She has not done anything wrong. Some 16,000 people are homeless. She does not want to have to join them. However, it seems that the scheme is not fit for purpose if it is not able to encompass people who have a need of that nature. If it is the case that she cannot pay her mortgage, we both know what the consequences will be. The State will have to examine emergency accommodation. I can tell the Minister of State now that her health needs are such that emergency accommodation would not be appropriate for her. She is not eligible to go onto the social housing list because she currently owns a home. The point I am making is that there are lived realities for people. This is the scheme of last resort, and this is her last resort. The first thing she did was not to pick up the phone to me. She has tried everything.

10 o'clock

It is not the case that she has just simply picked up the phone. She has been trying to fight this herself but it is really hard.

I will send the details to the Minister's office but I also ask that the Minister of State would raise with the Minister for Social Protection the need for not just flexibility but responsiveness to the lived reality of people.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank the Deputy, and I can hear that this is an issue of real concern for her and the people involved. I thank her for raising the matter. I wish to assure the Deputy that the supplementary welfare allowance scheme is kept under review. The issue is to ensure it continues to support those most in need of assistance.

The delivery of crucial community welfare services to meet the challenges and needs of citizens across the country remains a priority for the Minister, Deputy Calleary, and his Department. As I said, I will bring this specific issue to his attention because it is important that the community welfare service remains an accessible, flexible and responsive service to meet the varied needs of vulnerable people, particularly in a time of crisis or emergency. I think that is what the Deputy is speaking of here this evening.

The Department of Social Protection is committed to a community welfare service that remains flexible to meet the varied needs of vulnerable people and the current availability of local access to a community welfare officer is a key feature of the service. Community welfare officers are available at over 50 Intreo centres nationwide. Consultations with community welfare officers can be arranged via phone or at their offices or a direct home visit can be facilitated depending on the customer's needs.

As I have already mentioned, the scheme is there to provide immediate and flexible assistance to those in need. Officers within the service are very experienced in assessing the needs of each applicant and providing the relevant payment for their specific needs. Any person who considers he or she may have an entitlement to supplementary welfare allowance is encouraged to contact their local community welfare service. There is a national community welfare

1 July 2025

contact centre in place. I have the phone number here, but it is easy to find, and that will direct callers to the appropriate office. It is 0818 607 080.

If the Deputy has any particular cases, the Minister, Deputy Calleary, invites her to share those details with his office.

Renewable Energy Generation

Deputy Alan Kelly: I thank the Minister of State for being here but I have to start by saying the tradition of Topical Issues being dealt with by the appropriate Departments and Ministers needs to come back. It is not fair on the Minister of State, Deputy Harkin. She is not in that Department. It is a retrograde step that any time there are Topical Issues here, the chances of having a Minister from the Department are few. There are three Ministers in this Department and not one of them could be here in front of the House. I do not think it is right.

I raise the issue of biogas plant across Ireland. We have a commitment with regard to 5.7 TWh of production by 2030. I was at a public meeting in Ballymackey outside Nenagh recently with other public representatives, and the idea of putting an industrial-scale plant into a small location like that, where you have to stop on the road to let another car pass, is absolutely bananas. It does not have the infrastructure for it.

I actually believe in these renewables and in this whole technology but given that we are going to have between 200 and 250 of these plants all over the country, we have to start asking serious questions about why we have not got regulations on this before we start doing it. Why have we not got planning guidelines on these before we start doing them? It is absolutely incredible that in 2025, we do not have planning guidelines or regulations regarding this technology, which we need. However, we also need to ensure communities understand and have rules around which they can engage on where these plants are going to be put in place, and that is not happening.

With regard to a number of these plants, whether they are currently economically viable is very questionable. The locations where some of these plants have been proposed are being fought across the country because there is a lack of public and community engagement. I have been a local TD and public representative of various strands for the last 20 years. The developer of this industrial plant just outside Nenagh, where I am from, never came near me. He may have gone to other Deputies but he did not come near me. The community has not been engaged with in any way, shape or form that is worth talking about.

We really need to look at how we are going to ensure there is a system in place for the regulation and planning of these. We also need to look at the economic modelling of them; what tariff is going to be in place; how many of them we need; how much they should be spread geographically with regard to our agricultural production across the country; where are they needed more than other places; what types of locations they should be in; or whether they should be urban or rural, on the edges of towns, out in small and isolated areas. We also need to look at the whole issue of regulation as regards European law, the water framework directive and the nitrates directive; how health and safety will come in here; and the role of the EPA, and the fact that the EPA does not have the regulatory powers with regard to this area either. We also need to look at the whole issue of food production and how this will impact food production into the future.

This needs a mapping plan. It also needs a regulatory plan and planning guidelines. None of this is in place. I have no doubt, as the Minister of State represents a rural area, that it will come to her home as well. Communities up and down the country are basically saying they respect that these technologies are needed and that we have targets to get as a country. However, let us not put the cart before the horse. Let us put in place the regulations, planning framework and the totality of what is required here on a national level, and then we move. At this moment in time, it is impossible for communities to actually do that.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank Deputy Kelly, and I am happy to respond on behalf of the Minister. I am sure the Deputy, as a former Minister, will know the calls on Ministers and in some cases they cannot be here. In that context, I am happy to be here.

What the Deputy said is right. Biomethane will play a crucial role in Ireland reaching its decarbonisation targets and security of energy supply, and Ireland is uniquely positioned to develop a sustainable biomethane sector due to the nature of the agricultural sector in our country. I know the Deputy recognises that.

Government has committed to deliver up to 5.7 TWh of indigenously produced biomethane per annum by 2030. The national biomethane strategy is Ireland's first major policy statement on biomethane and is an important milestone in the development of this indigenous sector.

The strategy sets out 25 actions to be delivered in the coming years to enable the development of the sector. Along with providing supports and policy certainty, these actions aim to improve the development timelines and economics of projects in order to meet the 5.7 TWh target by 2030.

Delivery of this ambitious target will require the development of a significant number of anaerobic digester, AD, plants throughout the country. Biomethane within our energy system will have multiple cross-sectoral benefits. Biomethane can replace natural gas in various sectors, reducing the need for imported fossil fuels, and I think the Deputy will agree that is an important objective. Biomethane is a carbon-neutral fuel, contributing to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. Biomethane production offers a sustainable way to manage organic waste, another crucial issue for Ireland. The development of biomethane industry can create jobs and stimulate the rural economy, and having an indigenous source of renewable gas improves energy security.

While ADs used to produce biogas and biomethane can bring significant benefits to the communities and local environment in which they are located, they are, as the Deputy rightly said, significant infrastructure that will impact on the environment, biospheres and local communities. The Government recognises the urgent need for the introduction of planning guidelines for suitable locations for biomethane plants. Priority deliverables under the national biomethane strategy include actions 5F and 5G which will see the development of planning guidelines to support local authorities when assessing AD plants with planning applications and a review of resourcing requirements of key Government agencies to support development of the industry.

We need a clear understanding of AD technology and consistency of approach by our planning authorities when they are assessing AD projects to improve our planning and permitting processes. These guidelines of which the Deputy spoke will be developed by the biomethane implementation group, chaired by the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment and in close collaboration with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Teagasc and the SEAI.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I am aware of the group. I also have a degree of sympathy in the sense that I believe the previous Government, of which the Minister of State was not part, did very little on this. The new biomethane group was set up. However, I would like the Minister of State to answer the following. When will the regulatory framework be put in place? What are the timelines on it? She has not told us. Second, in regard to planning, every county development plan in Ireland says something different on this. I have gone through a few of them and they say totally different things. How is that right? How can a national strategy be implemented spatially, and there is a spatial element to this given the nature of our agricultural country, when there actually are no planning guidelines? We need regulations in relation to a whole range of different things such as emissions and noise among others. However, we also need spatial planning. There is a tariff required here for how things are going to operate. None of this is done, and yet we are expecting local authorities to process planning applications on this in isolated rural areas where massive industrial plants will be put in place. It is nuts; it is crazy; it is bananas; it is just stupid.

I support this technology, but I want to see a plan where we know spatially and geographically where we need to put all of these, what size we need to put in each place, what tariff will be in place to make it economically viable, and what type of waste is going into all of these plants. We need to do so through a regulatory framework that exists, an economic framework that is viable and planning guidelines so that local authorities are not looking at this and saying they want to do the right thing from a climate change point of view but they literally do not have a clue or any guidance on it. I know the new Coimisiún Pleanála has basically said it needs advice from the Government in regard to the gas plant proposed for liquid gas in Foynes. Something similar needs to happen here. An coimisiún also needs to tell the Government in this regard that it cannot make decisions unless regulations and planning guidelines are in place.

Deputy Marian Harkin: Ireland is recognised as having one of the greatest potentials for biomethane in Europe *per capita* due to our substantial agricultural sector. The Government's target of producing 5.7 TWh of indigenous biomethane by 2030, which is a little over 10% of our current natural gas use, will remain a Government commitment. The Deputy will know that an Irish anaerobic digestion and methane sector will bring highly significant benefits to the Irish economy, to our energy security and climate targets.

The Deputy asked for a timeline. I cannot give a timeline, I do not have it here, but I did say already that guidelines are being developed by the biomethane implementation group. I can certainly pass on the Deputy's request to the relevant Minister. The Deputy also mentioned about the type of waste. By using sustainably produced feedstocks, including grass silage, animal slurries and food waste resources, we will increase our circular bioeconomy, helping to build resilience in our local biological resources and environment.

It is recognised that these AD plants are significant infrastructure and, as the Deputy quite rightly said, require a full planning and permitting process to ensure consideration of a range of factors, many of which he mentioned. These include location, visual impact, land zoning plans, ecology, and the Deputy mentioned the economics, etc. As such, a key priority is the development of centralised planning guidelines for AD plants to support our local authorities. When finalised, these will be available on the biomethane information hub.

As I said, I do not have a timeframe but I will certainly pass on the request to the Minister.

Education and Training Boards

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach for allowing me to share time with my colleague in south Tipperary, Deputy Michael Murphy, on this issue as it is of concern to both of us.

Management of the Tipperary ETB shared devastating news with the local training initiative co-ordinators, LTIs, at four centres in south Tipperary. It informed them that due to budgetary constraints from SOLAS, the LTI programmes will cease at the end of this existing term. This is shocking news. Tipperary ETB made it clear that it has received a challenging budget allocation from SOLAS for 2025. Despite ongoing engagement, it has been unable to secure enough funding to sustain the current level of further education and training programmes. Following a review of the funding, it has taken the decision to discontinue the LTIs. This is a retrograde step.

I understand the Minister of State met the chair and some officials of the ETB in Tipperary yesterday. Cahir Development Association, the Spafeld Family Resource Centre in Cashel, Knockanrawley Resource Centre in Tipperary town and Littleton community programme are the four concerned. However, the LTIs cannot be lost. They are an essential lifeline and pathway to continuing education for early school leavers, some who might not have been suited to mainstream education and some who are returning to education. Many have progressed successfully. I have spoken to many people today who are affected by this decision, whose futures have been pulled from them with the news that the course they enrolled in has been pulled like this. The tutors, and I salute the tutors, are very dedicated and interested in these people progressing. It is sad. I met former LTI participants who completed the programme in Cahir Enterprise Centre. They now work in the very same enterprise centre and are so pleased that they got that second chance, the opportunity to better themselves when they might not have been able to do so at mainstream school.

I am pleading with the Minister to engage with SOLAS to review the funding allocations for Tipperary ETB and this programme to have it restored. I believe Tipperary ETB is a victim of its own success because there are so many different courses and programmes. This is not the one to take away. No one wants any of the further learning courses to be taken away but these are the very people we talk about who are on the margins and have not been able to come through. It gives them a second chance. It is wonderful. I have been at so many ceremonies and presentations of certificates and have seen the pride on their faces and on their families' faces that they have got a second chance and are now back in full-time employment, thanks to the lifeline of the LTI. It is so important. I know the Minister of State understands that through her own area of Sligo, and she is very compassionate on this issue. I appeal to the Minister of State that we have to go back to the drawing board.

Deputy Michael Murphy: I agree with Deputy McGrath. This decision by the ETB to cut vital local training initiative programmes across Tipperary should be urgently reversed. I acknowledge the critical role played by these programmes in our communities, particularly those delivered at the Spafeld Family Resource Centre in Cashel, the Knockanrawley Resource Centre in Tipperary town, the Littleton community programme and the Cahir Development Association. These are not just training schemes; they represent essential pathways for the most vulnerable in society. I am deeply concerned about the impact of these cuts on the most vulnerable in society. I am, therefore, appealing to the Minister of State and to the ETB to reverse

the decision.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank the Deputies for raising the issue. I had a positive meeting yesterday with representatives of Tipperary ETB. I was encouraged to hear about the good work ongoing. We had a good conversation and agreed that there are challenges. We are trying to work to manage those challenges in the best way possible.

To come to the issue raised by the Deputies, ETBs, as they know, support community-based groups by providing funding for intervention projects that provide a range of learner-centred training and related services. These initiatives aim to assist individuals or groups experiencing exclusion and labour market disadvantage to either enter or re-enter the labour market. As both Deputies said, these are important initiatives. Local training initiatives, LTIs, are one example of this kind of initiative. However, LTIs, by their nature, are temporary and often high-cost initiatives designed to meet specific community needs.

As the State agency responsible for the further education and training sector, SOLAS allocates funding to 16 ETBs and other agencies to deliver further education and training, FET, programmes. Each ETB must prioritise and manage delivery of further education and training programmes strictly within its allocated budget. SOLAS has provided an allocation of €35.5 million to Tipperary ETB for 2025. This is an increase of nearly 22% of funding provided since 2020. This funding supports over 9,600 learner enrolments in FET. Activities funded range from post leaving certificate, PLC, courses, to Youthreach, apprenticeships, reskilling and upskilling courses, and adult literacy courses, including English language tuition.

Tipperary ETB has advised my officials that a comprehensive review of all FET provision was undertaken to ensure alignment with the available budget. Further to this review, Tipperary ETB has advised it has made the difficult decision not to continue funding several LTIs. This decision affects four LTIs located in Littleton, Cahir, Cashel and Tipperary town. These LTIs are funded on an annual basis and subject to a business review. Tipperary ETB has met with all four LTIs in question and informed them of the funding position for the remainder of 2025. It is now a matter for the each LTI board to consider its options.

Tipperary ETB informed my Department that no current learners were impacted as all have completed their programmes. The impact is on the availability of places for new learners for the remainder of 2025. I am not minimising the effect, but am telling the Deputies what the situation is.

I hope the Deputies will appreciate that the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has no role in the day-to-day operational management of ETB boards, which are independent statutory bodies. In line with its functions set out in the Act of 2013, it is the responsibility of each board to plan and deliver services throughout the year, subject to its available budget and local needs. Tipperary ETB has advised the Department's officials that due to the high costs and low learner numbers associated with delivering these four LTI programmes, it has taken the difficult decision not to renew funding for 2025, while it assesses priorities and community needs in line with available funding.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am disappointed to hear that. There is clearly a misunderstanding because there are students who have enrolled for courses in September. That is inaccurate information that Tipperary ETB has supplied to the Minister of State.

I will quote the comments of a student, who said the course made them come out of their

shell a lot. The student said it is the best thing they have done and went on to say that everyone was friendly and the work was fun. The student said that the course helped them to become more confident and to find a path. Those were the words of just one of the participants.

A second student said that looking back at the person they were last year and the person they are now, they realised there had been a big change. The student thanked the LTI co-ordinators. They have done so much. I have spoken to them today. There are students who have enrolled for September so that is not true information. I am pleading with the Minister of State.

I will say a focal scoir because I am sharing time with Deputy Michael Murphy. The National Training Fund was established by the National Training Fund Act 2000 as a dedicated fund for schemes. It aimed to raise the skills of those in employment and provide training to those who wished to acquire skills. This fund now can be used by the Department to support Tipperary ETB and the other ETBs throughout the country. I appeal to the Minister of State to go back to the drawing board and ensure these people are allowed to continue on their career paths.

Deputy Michael Murphy: We need to be very honest here. One of the reasons we find ourselves in this position is that while the most recent national wage agreement included a 3.5% increase, only 2% of the funding was provided by the Government. The other 1.5% must be absorbed from the existing budget.

I ask the Minister of State to urgently rethink this decision and to engage with the ETB in Tipperary. I spoke to some of those students who have enrolled for September. These are vulnerable students who are devastated by this decision. I appeal to the Minister of State to intervene.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I fully recognise the value of these courses. To be clear, what Tipperary ETB informed my Department is that no current learners are impacted as they have completed their programmes. However, Deputy Mattie McGrath was right to say that the impact is on the availability of places for new learners for the remainder of 2025. The Deputy was quite right to say that.

My Department is committed to supporting a FET system that helps individuals succeed, boosts economic growth and prepares our workforce for the challenges and opportunities ahead. This commitment is underpinned by a significant investment of over €1 billion in 2025. While the FET system is demand-driven, ETBs must operate within their allocated budgets.

As I outlined in my opening remarks, planning and delivery of services by ETBs is rightly a matter for each individual board, taking into account its allocated budgets and the specific needs of its local community. The Deputies would agree that it would be neither practical nor appropriate for a Minister of State to become involved in the day-to-day operational decisions of these autonomous bodies. However, I recognise what the Deputies are saying. As I said, I had a great meeting yesterday with representatives of Tipperary ETB. I see the valuable and important work they are doing. However, the ETB has made the decision at this point within the resources that have been allocated to it. That is its responsibility. However, I hear what the Deputies are saying. I thank them for their intervention and for highlighting these important courses and their value and impact on people's lives.

1 July 2025

Swimming Pools

Deputy Michael Murphy: I will be sharing time with Deputy Mattie McGrath.

I want to speak about a reply I received from Tusla to a parliamentary question I asked of the Minister regarding the future of the swimming pool on the Ferryhouse campus, just outside Clonmel. The reply stated that unfortunately, due to significant mechanical and electrical issues identified, Tusla deemed the pool at the end of its life and unsafe to use. The decision was made in the absence of the full consultant's report, including the magnitude of the costs involved.

I fully understand and recognise the importance of safety. I understand the technical issues raised. However, I must express in the strongest possible terms the devastating impact this closure will have on the people of Clonmel and the wider region. Until its closure in February this year, the pool served more than 500 children each week, many of whom were learning essential life-saving swimming skills. Among them were children and adults with disabilities, members of the great Dolphin Swimming Club, who depended on this facility for inclusive and therapeutic physical activity in a safe and supportive environment. It was the highlight of their week, and it was taken away from them by the leadership team at Tusla that made that decision. The swimming pool was far more than a recreational amenity. It was a vital community resource that promoted well-being, inclusion and social cohesion. For decades, it has brought children, families and local swimming clubs together in a healthy and positive space. Its loss will be profoundly felt across generations.

In parallel, I ask Tusla to immediately engage with local stakeholders. Transparent and collaborative dialogue is essential if we are to identify a path forward. Moreover, within Tusla's own operations at the Ferryhouse complex, a functioning swimming pool offers considerable value, not just to the community at large but also as a facility that supports the physical and mental well-being of its service users and staff. As a matter of urgency, I urge the Minister of State to intervene and to reconsider this disheartening decision. I am calling for the exploration of all possible options, whether through investment, refurbishment or interim measures that will allow this critical facility that is Ferryhouse swimming pool on the Ferryhouse campus to be brought back into use.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I thank the Ceann Comhairle and her team for allowing both of us to contribute on these Topical Issue matter tonight. I also thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach for his latitude. I also appealing to the Minister of State regarding this issue. I have many question about Tusla and its operations. This facility we are talking about has been renowned for half a century and more. The Dolphin Swimming Club and many others have done tremendous work there. The two issues we are bringing to the floor of the Dáil tonight issues concerning people with certain disabilities and from vulnerable backgrounds. If we are to be any good to ourselves and our constituents, then these are the very people we have to look after. They need that support.

I want to see the report Tusla is saying it has. We have been told this is about an electrical problem. A full report, however, is supposed to have been done but it has not been published. It has not been given to anyone. Frankly, I do not actually believe the situation here. It is a contrived issue to try to remove all activities from Ferryhouse and to allow more and more offices for Tusla. It is not acceptable. This is a facility that has looked after deprived children for more than half a century. The Brothers were there first and then the staff, and they did a wonderful job. We need honest answers. Why is Tusla taking over this property? I have other calls to

make this property into a special needs education facility for County Tipperary but this is not the topic we are discussing tonight. We are talking about the Dolphin Swimming Club and the jobs and employment. More importantly, this is about the children using the swimming pool - including young adults and everyone - and learning to swim. I brought my own kids there when I was young. We are asking the Minister of State to please intervene.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank the Deputies. I can hear that both of them are greatly concerned about what has happened. Regarding the length of time the pool has been out of action, significant mechanical and electrical issues have been identified at the Ferryhouse pool and sports complex. The pool was closed due to a failure of the electrical periodic testing in response to a notification of hazard issued by the electrical contractor on 20 February 2025. On receipt of this information about a significant issue with the pool, it needed to be drained and, unfortunately, will remain closed until further notice.

Turning to the reopening of Ferryhouse swimming pool, Tusla commissioned a mechanical and electrical consultant to carry out further investigations, which saw significant mechanical and electrical issues identified during an assessment. Regrettably, due to these issues, the mechanical and electrical plant serving the pool and sports complex has been deemed to be at end of life and unsafe for continued use. Tusla received an initial cost report at the end of June from the mechanical and electrical consultant, which includes an estimate of the associated costs for mechanical and electrical works only. Tusla has since requested a detailed breakdown and prioritisation of the works required. Tusla fully understands and regrets, as does the Minister, the closure of the facility to members of the public. However, at this point in time and awaiting more details on costs involved, Tusla is not in a position to provide further information regarding the future of the complex. The delay in resolving this matter is primarily due to the complexity of the sports and pool facilities at the Ferryhouse campus. The assessment conducted by the mechanical and electrical consultant required considerable time to complete, followed by the drafting of the preliminary report. Additionally, compiling the full scope of associated costs requires input from various specialist services.

Tusla's core priorities lie in the delivery of essential services for children and families, including child protection and welfare, educational welfare, psychological services, alternative care, family and community-based supports, and early years services. In this context, significant investment in a public sports complex and pool may not align fully with the organisation's primary remit. As such, any decisions regarding the future of the facility will need to be carefully considered in light of the more detailed final report and cost analysis.

Tusla is in the process of developing a capital plan to invest in Tusla services on the Ferryhouse campus. This investment will see the campus utilised by various services across Tusla, including, but not limited to, social work services, therapy services, regional services, work-force learning and development and separated children seeking international protection. Those are just some of the services. All these services will benefit the local community.

Moving to the next steps, which I know are what the Deputies are interested in, further discussions with the local authority and the local sports partnerships will now be required on the future operating model and appropriate funding mechanisms given the scale of investment required and the ongoing operating costs associated with the operation of the swimming pool. Tusla welcomes suggestions from local authorities or sports partnerships to work together to find a way forward to the resolution of the closure of the swimming pool. Tusla will continue to engage with all stakeholders to find an appropriate solution for the long-term future of the

swimming pool at Ferryhouse.

Deputy Michael Murphy: I have to ask where the report is. There has been no engagement with local stakeholders. This is the reality of the situation. I fully accept Tusla's core competencies in respect of looking after children, but is there a greater gift to give to a child than the opportunity to learn how to swim? The wonderful thing about most activities in the water is that in many cases mobility issues as a result of a disability are greatly reduced. Exercise is often a challenging topic for an individual with a mental or physical disability. Swimming, though, is not only fun and rewarding but also a great way to keep fit and healthy, and without the challenges that would normally be found with outdoor exercise or in a gym environment. The nearby Clonmel swimming pool is at full capacity. There is a five-year waiting list for swimming lessons. I again urge the Minister of State to intervene, to engage with the facilities manager in Tusla and reconsider this disheartening decision. I am calling for the exploration of all possible options, whether through investment, refurbishment or other interim measures that will allow this critical facility to be brought back into use as it has been for the last 25 years, with 500 children a week, some of them with disabilities, getting lessons.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I too support my colleague and implore the Minister of State in this regard. I have an issue with Tusla. God forgive me, it cannot even account for the approximately 50 children who have gone missing in State care in recent years. There is a meeting here to discuss this tomorrow as well. Why is Tusla involved in this premises at all? It is a wonderful facility. As I said, we have two wonderful schools in Cashel, Scoil Aonghusa and Scoil Chormaic, with great records of providing special needs education but we need another such school in south Tipperary. Nenagh is getting one and that is badly needed. The area we are talking about is on the border with west Waterford. I think Tusla needs to be removed from this institution. It has not engaged, as Deputy Murphy said, and is not listening. It has no intention of engaging with stakeholders either. I am, therefore, pleading with the Minister of State to intervene and keep this facility. The people providing the lessons are employed and have contracts. Surely they have some rights as well. Clonmel swimming pool has a five-year waiting list. I thank Rockwell College, which is helping out, but it just cannot function. It is a big town and a big part of Tipperary so this is not acceptable.

Deputy Marian Harkin: All I can say is what I said in response to the Deputies earlier, which is that further discussions will be required on the future operating model. I cannot say more than that. The appropriate funding mechanisms will have to include the local authority and local sports partnerships given the scale of the investment required and, as the Deputies are aware, the ongoing costs of operating a swimming pool.

The Deputies asked about a report. The report received by Tusla, which was from the mechanical and electrical consultant, just includes an initial estimate of the associated costs of the works that are needed. Tusla requires a detailed breakdown and prioritisation of the works that are required. It regrets the need to close the facility to members of the public but awaiting more details of costs, it is not in a position to provide further information regarding the future of the complex. The Minister emphasises that the core priorities of investment for Tusla lie in the delivery of services that are essential to meet Tusla's functions, including child protection and welfare, educational welfare, psychological services, alternative care, family and community-based supports and early years services. In this context, significant investment in a public sports complex and pool may not align fully with the organisation's primary remit and, as such, any decisions regarding the future of the facility will have to be carefully considered in light of the final report and cost analysis. The Minister again stresses that further discussions will

be required on the future operating model and appropriate funding mechanism with the local authority and sports partnerships given the scale of the investment required and the ongoing costs associated with the operation of the swimming pool. Tusla welcomes suggestions from the local authority or sports partnerships to work together to find a way forward to resolve the need to close the swimming pool.

Suicide Prevention

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I thank the Minister of State for taking the time to be here this evening. I am really grateful for the opportunity to raise the very important issue of suicide prevention. I am raising it from a place of concern and from a place of care - care for anyone who is grieving the loss of a partner, a family member or a friend and care for everyone who has dedicated their professional life to contributing to better outcomes when it comes to suicide and mental health in Ireland.

The most recent statistics available to us are from 2021. In that year, 512 people died by suicide. For every ten people who died by suicide in Ireland that year, eight were men, yet several studies have shown how less likely men are to seek out mental health supports. Research by Queen's University from last year showed that 70% of male victims of domestic violence had considered suicide. Ireland ranks in the bottom half of 42 countries in terms of adolescent well-being, while our youth suicide rate is above the international average.

Statistics, however, are not what matters in this debate. I am sure the Minister of State will point to the decreasing number of deaths by suicide in Ireland in recent years. I acknowledge the wonderful work being done by the HSE and by youth workers, therapists, school communities, social workers, volunteers, communities and society and I take this opportunity to commend the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, on her commitment to mental health, especially when it comes to capital investment.

My considered concern this evening, however, is for the men of Ireland, be they young, middle aged or older, who feel like they cannot say something out loud about their mental health and who feel like they cannot seek support. In their *Journal* article, Shane O'Donnell, Noel Richardson and Aisling McGrath contend that conformity to masculine norms within university settings has been attributed to men's reluctance to seek help for mental health problems. These norms could be described as toughness, emotional control and self-reliance so I raise this issue to encourage anyone who might stumble across it, be they young or old. I wish to remind us all, but especially the eight in ten men, how normal it is to be the opposite of tough, to be reliant on others and to be supported. If and when people do seek out such potentially life-saving supports, we must ensure they are there and that Government policy and Government funding ensure they are readily available.

Deputy Marian Harkin: On behalf of the Minister of State with responsibility for mental health, who regrets not being able to be in the Chamber this evening, I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter. I will pass on his comments to the Minister of State. I fully accept that he comes from a place of care. That is very clear from what he said, especially when he powerfully articulated the specific issues relating to men who take their own lives.

Each death by suicide is a profound tragedy that has a devastating impact on individuals, families and communities. It represents the heartbreaking loss of a life but also the loss of that

person's unique potential, dreams and what their life could have been. The ripple effects are deeply felt by families, friends and entire communities, leaving lasting pain and grief. One death by suicide is one too many and, as the Deputy said, it is a reminder of the urgent need for compassion, connection and support.

This is why suicide and self-harm reduction are a priority for the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and the Government as a whole. The Minister of State recently brought a memo to the Cabinet to update the Government on our work to improve suicide prevention in Ireland in terms of access to services but also work on our new suicide reduction policy. She updated Government colleagues on the fact that suicide rates are declining in Ireland and that between 2000 and 2021, the last year for which we have official figures, the rate declined by over 25%. Preliminary figures record 302 deaths by suicide in 2023, the lowest preliminary figure in over 20 years, but, as the Deputy said, one death by suicide is one too many. We also need to be aware that there is sometimes a significant time lag in reporting on deaths by suicide. Numbers can be revised upwards, so I would not like to give a false impression of what the numbers are.

There is progress, but the Government and the Minister of State recognise we have so much more to do. Work to enhance services nationwide has taken place through Connecting for Life, our national suicide reduction strategy, and there have been sustained increases in investments in services. The Minister of State funds the National Office for Suicide Prevention, the budget of which has tripled from €5 million in 2012 to almost €15 million in 2025.

Across Ireland, a wide range of HSE-funded organisations are working to support people to overcome suicidal crises. The Minister of State recently increased funding for suicide crisis counselling through Pieta House to the national suicide bereavement liaison service, to the "text about it" service, which acts as a safety net for young people, and to the national Traveller counselling service. There are dedicated resource officers for suicide prevention in each of the health regions promoting and co-ordinating suicide prevention initiatives in their local areas. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, is working with the Department of Health and the HSE to expand alternative care pathways and therapeutic environments for people presenting to emergency departments in mental health crisis because she believes emergency departments are not an appropriate environment for people in a mental health crisis. She is working to prioritise securing additional funding to continue their expansion.

These alternatives are helping to shift supports for those in crisis into their communities. This is primarily through the roll out of a network of crisis resolution teams. I will expand on that in a moment.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I want to reiterate my thanks to the Minister of State for taking this tonight. I really do appreciate it and I ask that she pass on my thanks to the Minister of State for such a considered reply. I do not doubt for a second the sincerity with which the Ministers of State are approaching this at all. I hope she can hear that I am not here to critique Government policy on this issue whatever but rather to take the opportunity to highlight it specifically when it comes to men and young men in Ireland.

I completely accept the point with regard to emergency care and it often being an unsuitable place. I just want to make the point that it is if-and-when they present because it is often the case that men do not present for help. I hope the new reduction policy that will come before us really acknowledges meaningfully the stigma and the taboo that survives in Irish society when it comes to us speaking openly about our mental health and showing the opposite of toughness

and about being willing and ready to embrace the idea of being supported and vulnerable.

In the 30 seconds I have left, while we have already acknowledged the fantastic work of the HSE, I want to acknowledge the many services in our society that might not intend to do such good. I think of the likes of the men's sheds network, youth services and youth clubs which provide recreation and a safe space to talk and listen in a very informal way but which do unquantifiable good for our society when it comes to men's mental health specifically.

I thank the Minister of State again for her time and for the opportunity to raise this again tonight.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I really appreciate the Deputy's considered and genuine comments on this. I mentioned the network of crisis resolution teams. These are teams of mental health professionals who work out of hours to meet people in mental health crisis and provide rapid assessment and intensive intervention in the community in calm environments known as solace cafés.

Connecting for Life, our national suicide reduction strategy, came to an end at the end of 2024. Work on Ireland's new suicide reduction policy is being swiftly progressed by the Department and an extensive public consultation was recently completed.

I have heard what the Deputy said. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, has said that making sure our policies are informed by lived and living experience is really important. The consultation I spoke about had a huge response, almost 1,900, to an online survey and hundreds of people went online and had in-person consultations to share their stories. I hear very clearly what the Deputy says when he speaks of the risks especially for young men.

In that context, it is not quite the same but related, the Minister of State will also visit Exchange House, the Irish National Traveller Service, tomorrow morning to listen to the experiences of young Travellers in relation to mental health and suicide. Earlier I mentioned that I visited Tipperary ETB yesterday. When I was leaving, I was given three books. All three were written by Travellers in one way or another. One in particular was about the experience of young Traveller men and suicide. It was a book of poetry and I read it on my way back. It was one of the most powerful things I have read in a long time because it talked about the raw pain and the shocking impact of suicide in all communities but in this case especially in the Traveller community. She was especially referring to young men.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 10.55 p.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 2 Iúil 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.55 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 2 July 2025.