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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—*Neamhcheartaithe*

(OFFICIAL REPORT—*Unrevised*)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 10 Iúil 2025

Thursday, 10 July 2025

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell) i gceannas ar 8.40 a.m.

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

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Foreign Conflicts

1. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade his views on the situation in Sudan, and on the Government's position on same. [38023/25]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I wish to highlight that there is a defence committee meeting this morning, so I will take the Priority Questions and then I will have to depart to attend that.

On my first question, the Tánaiste and I had a brief exchange last week in the committee regarding an area of huge human suffering and human rights infringements. Many people are facing hunger and displacement in Sudan, an area that probably does not get the attention it ought to. I invite the Tánaiste's comment with regard to the Government's position on that situation.

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Harris): I thank Deputy Ó Laoghaire for again raising this issue which, as he said, he rightly raised at the Oireachtas committee in recent weeks.

The Government remains deeply concerned by the conflict and the real humanitarian crisis in Sudan. Since April 2023, the situation has continued to deteriorate and the consequences are now clearly devastating. It is estimated that over 14 million people have fled their homes and almost 25 million people are in acute food insecurity, with some facing famine. The two main parties to the conflict, the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces, are fighting on multiple fronts. Both are now responsible for large-scale attacks on civilians described by the United Nations as amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity. Recent attacks on Port Sudan and the UN convoy in North Darfur marked a significant escalation in hostilities. The RSF has now gained control of large parts of north Sudan along the Egyptian and Libyan borders. External actors are also providing military support to the parties and peace negotia-

tions have, for all intents and purposes, effectively halted.

Ireland has supported very strong EU messaging on Sudan and we have initiated discussions on sanctions in 2023, which led to the establishment of the EU sanctions regime. Ireland initiated EU Council conclusions on Sudan in 2024, which condemned both the indiscriminate and direct targeting of civilians, called on parties to oblige by their obligations under international law and called for an immediate ceasefire and sustainable resolution of the conflict through dialogue.

We continue to respond to the crisis in close co-ordination with our EU and international partners. At the April Foreign Affairs Council, Ireland raised the urgent need for increased and flexible humanitarian funding and for sustained pressure in support of a cessation of hostilities and a return to negotiations. We have provided €14 million in humanitarian assistance for Sudan and neighbouring countries in 2024. So far this year, we have already provided €7.7 million to the Sudan humanitarian fund and direct funding to NGOs operating in Sudan. We will continue to engage through all diplomatic channels to keep Sudan on the international agenda and to support mediation efforts aimed at ending the conflict in the near future.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Sudan is a very significant country in the region with a large population of about 50 million. It is in that context that the scale of what is being faced is to be recognised. Different reports suggest that the number of people displaced is between 9 and 12 million, with some 24.6 million facing acute hunger. That is almost half the population. There are significant ramifications for the surrounding countries. I know many refugees have fled Sudan for Egypt, among other countries, and the conflict seems to be escalating. I welcome the commitment to aid. I might ask if the recent cutbacks in USAID have had any impact on projects in Sudan and support for them. I welcome the positions taken by the Government internationally. Has any discussion taken place on an arms embargo with regard to the conflict?

Deputy Simon Harris: The first thing to say is that we will at least match the level of humanitarian aid to Sudan this year that we provided last year. We have already provided €7.7 million this year. We provided €14 million last year and we will at least match the €14 million this year. That is an additional commitment from the Government to do more with regard to help for the most appalling humanitarian situation.

We have also, through my own Department, provided financial support to Irish journalists to travel to Chad and report on the desperate situation in the refugee camps. A view we would all share is that there has not been visibility with regard to this humanitarian crisis in the same way as there rightly has been with regard to others. It is important that we continue to keep visibility on this situation too. The Taoiseach will continue to raise this at the European Council. I will continue to raise it at the Foreign Affairs Council and the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, at the GAC.

On USAID, I do not have a specific note with regard to Sudan but there is no doubt in my mind that the USAID cuts are going to have desperate effects everywhere. I do not believe Sudan will be spared the impact.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: That point of awareness is very important here and at European level. We had discussions post-European Council recently. At a European level it does not seem to me that this is getting the attention it ought to either. I might ask that at future European discussions, Ireland makes sure this will appear on the agenda. I appreciate that lots

of conflicts are being discussed there, including within Europe, but is important that it reaches that level.

I note, and the Tánaiste mentioned it, that a significant part of this conflict seems to be sustained by external actors both through funding and supplying arms. A particular piece in the *New York Times* recently referred to the support being received by the Rapid Support Forces. Can the Tánaiste comment on that and whether the Irish Government has raised its concerns with the governments potentially providing such support?

Deputy Simon Harris: I am not certain whether we have raised them directly, or not with those individual countries, but we have certainly raised them through the European Union. I would point out that we now have an EU special representative for the area, Dr. Annette Weber, who is doing very excellent work. We raised Sudan at the most recent meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council. The Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, will represent Ireland at the next meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council where we will seek to raise this again. We are part of a core group of like-minded EU member states. The most recent meeting of that like-minded EU member state group took place on 23 June to discuss how the EU can take a more collective approach to Sudan, so perhaps this is something we can return to after the next series of engagements we have.

The reality is that there are many countries and entities, including the European Union, ready to play a part in mediation and in trying to find a way forward but at the moment, being quite frank, interest in that seems to have halted. We have to look at what we can do to maximise the pressure to get both parties back to a negotiating table.

Revised Estimates for Public Services 2025: Message from Select Committee

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): The Select Committee on Enterprise, Tourism and Employment has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimate for public services for the service of the year ending 31 December 2025: Vote 32 - Enterprise, Tourism and Employment.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh (Atógáil) - Priority Questions (Resumed)

Middle East

2. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade whether his Department has had engagement with, or diplomatic representations from, US counterparts around the exclusion of services from the Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill 2018; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38290/25]

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: My question is on whether the Tánaiste's Department has had engagement with or diplomatic representations from US counterparts around the exclusion of services from the Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill 2018. Last week, the Taoiseach said in comments to the media that the aim of the OTB must be to pressure Israel to end the war in Gaza and not "disadvantage Ireland unduly". He made special reference to

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some US states that have anti-boycott legislation. Has the US been pressuring the Government on this? Are we only happy to fulfil our obligations so long as it costs us nothing? That is the context in which I ask this.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Gibney for the question. As she will be aware, the Government carried out an extensive analysis and review of the occupied territories Bill 2018, as it was then, late last year. The Government's analysis, shared with the Oireachtas at the time, was that substantive amendments would be required to most, if not all, of the provisions of that Bill in order to bring it in line with our Constitution and to try to ensure it could withstand an EU challenge, should that arise, and be compatible with EU law.

On 24 June, the Government approved the general scheme of the Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory (prohibition of importation of goods) Bill 2025. The general scheme has now been referred to the Oireachtas Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade for pre-legislative scrutiny, which I think began last week. The Bill, if enacted, will deliver on a commitment in the programme for Government to progress legislation in this area following the ICJ advisory opinion.

With regard to services, the heads of Bill, or the general scheme, do not prohibit trade in services with natural or legal persons located in Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory. As I have said, I remain open-minded on that. Legal clarity is now needed - and I know the committee has been teasing through this - on whether it is possible to include services. I have asked the Attorney General to advise on this.

Engagement with third-country counterparts is a central part of my work and that of my officials in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Such engagement routinely includes exchanges on issues relevant to the bilateral relationship between Ireland and the country concerned. The new Israeli settlements Bill has not been the subject of my recent political engagements with US interlocutors.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: The question was about the last Bill.

Deputy Simon Harris: I have not had engagement with anybody recently on the new Bill but given the significant level of public interest in it, several international partners, including the United States and a number of European and like-minded countries, have expressed an interest in the Bill and the Government's approach more generally. My officials have engaged with them on the matter, including briefing them on the Government's position.

9 o'clock

I will get a chance to come back in a moment but it is a known statement of fact that the previous US ambassador, for example, wrote to me, as Taoiseach at the time, expressing a view in relation to the Bill. Ireland takes every opportunity internationally to outline our position including engaging with interlocutors. However, that will have no effect or impact on decisions we make in proceeding with legislation that we feel strongly on.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I am not totally clear. The Tánaiste mentioned interactions with the ambassador but perhaps he could clarify exactly the extent of the diplomatic interactions he had with the US. I am specifically asking about the previous Bill, not this one.

Deputy Simon Harris: Sure, absolutely.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: My concern relates to whether we are saying that the wishes of the House and the Irish people on this matter are subservient to legislation passed in, say, Alabama or New Jersey and whether we are unwilling to fulfill our obligations under international law because state-level law in another country means it might cost us something. When it comes to international trade and sanctioning of Ireland on this, we are properly protected from rebuke by EU-level reciprocity of sanctions. I must say clearly here in this Chamber that when it comes to fulfilling our obligations under the UN Charter and the genocide convention, there is no caveat that says it does not apply if it will cost you. Some of the worst violations of international law are very lucrative. We do not engage with them because they are illegal and because they are wrong, and that again is the context in which I ask these questions.

Deputy Simon Harris: I very much appreciate the context. Let me be very clear: the Government intends to progress with this legislation. I also have an open mind about services. Both of those situations remain factually true and very clear in my mind, and clear in the view of the Government. However, as an Oireachtas we want to pass legislation fully informed, with our eyes wide open. That is why it is really important, and it is not for me to interfere, that the Oireachtas committee is going to hear from people with different perspectives and different views. That is an important thing to do. Of course my Department has a responsibility for representing Ireland externally. Of course we are going to continue to engage, explain our position and also be aware of the compatibility of our law and how it is viewed in other people's countries. That is an appropriate thing to do. We are very clear that this is not a Bill that boycotts Israel. It is a Bill that prohibits trade with illegally occupied territories in line with the International Court of Justice, ICJ, advisory opinion, and it is very appropriate and important that our embassy network make that point. Our embassy team in the United States would of course interlock with its counterparts there. That is appropriate and it should continue to do that.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I am glad the Tánaiste clarified that. That is exactly the case. The occupied territories Bill is not designed to stop the genocide in Gaza. It would simply put pressure on Israel but its actual function, as drafted in 2018, long before the current genocide erupted 18 months ago, is to cease trade with illegal settlements on stolen land. We all know that. Whether the US or a US state likes it or not should not inhibit us in prohibiting the trade of stolen goods and services.

I understand the Tánaiste taking into account how to support business in the wider context of tariffs. However, I am asking the Government to be clear that it is not a justification for not complying with international law and banning trade with the settlements. I have to say that again and again, on various topics but on this area in particular, that what is put forward is that we have to consider Irish jobs and the economy, but we have to prioritise the moral obligation that we have to cease the genocide. For me, that means that we set in place a Bill right now to stop trade with Israel that includes services. I am terrified of the domino effect that we are going to set off if we do not include services. Because Ireland is the first country that is doing it, it will mean that every country that follows also introduces weak legislation.

Deputy Simon Harris: First, I appreciate the Deputy's acknowledgement that Ireland is the first country that is doing it. That, in and of itself, is interesting, in that there is not another country in the European Union that has published any draft legislation on that. Now, weeks on from when we published our legislation, with goods or services, they have not produced any legislation. That is interesting in and of itself. However, the Government has an obligation to our citizens to tease through the consequences of all legislation. That does not mean the Government or the Oireachtas changes its mind, but we are meant to vote on matters with our eyes

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wide open. We are meant to be aware of how our legislation will be viewed and the legality of it. That is an important part of the work of my Department in engaging with interlocutors abroad. It does not change our position. We have a vastly different view from the United States of America and particularly the current Administration in relation to the ICJ and the genocide in Gaza. All of that is true. We are progressing with this legislation.

However, the question was clearly asking me whether my Department had had engagement with or diplomatic representation with US counterparts around the exclusion of services. The answer is “No”, not specifically around the exclusion of services. As for whether it had engagement on the previous Bill, if I can call it that, the 2018 Bill, it did, and it will have engagement with the current Bill. That is the case not just with the United States but also with many European countries in the hope that it might inspire them to legislate too.

International Relations

3. Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if Ireland will be represented at the emergency ministerial conference in defence of international law and the rights of the Palestinian people on 15 and 16 July 2025 in Bogotá. [38024/25]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: An emergency meeting next week in Bogotá has been called by the Republic of Colombia and the Republic of South Africa. It will be attended by a variety of countries concerned at the current situation and the breaches of human rights. They include Spain, Portugal, Uruguay and many others. It has been called in response to the escalating violations of international law in the occupied Palestinian territory. Will the Irish Government be represented?

Deputy Simon Harris: The very short answer is that we will. Both I and my officials interact with a wide variety of international partners on the Middle East. This remains a major priority for the Government and, I know, for the people of Ireland, who are rightly repulsed by what they see happening, particularly in Gaza but also in the West Bank. Ireland’s engagement is guided by our long-standing and principled position, notably respect for international law, respect for the equal right to self-determination, peace, security and dignity for Palestinians and Israelis alike, and unwavering support for the two-state solution. While Ireland is not a member of the group referred to by the Deputy, as he knows, the Government is committed to working with all partners around the world in service of these objectives.

Ireland will be represented at an official level from our embassy at the meeting in Bogotá next week, on 15 and 16 July. At the EU level, the situation in Israel and Palestine remains a standing item on the Foreign Affairs Council each month. The next meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council will also take place on 15 July, where this will be discussed again. Ireland has been centrally involved in the work of the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution, which was founded at UN high-level week last year and has met several times since then. Across all of our bilateral and multilateral engagement, Ireland has consistently underlined the need for all parties to comply with international law, including international humanitarian law. Ireland is a steadfast supporter of the International Criminal Court - I want to say that because this is a court coming under incredible attack - as well as being a supporter of the principles and values enshrined in the Rome Statute.

My overarching priority, and the overarching priority of the Government, is to contribute to a co-ordinated and consolidated effort by the international community as a whole to support a return to a ceasefire, a hostage release agreement and a surge of humanitarian access into Gaza. This all makes it possible to safeguard the two-state solution and to work towards the return of the Palestinian Authority to Gaza in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2735 and to uphold the equal right to self-determination, peace, security and dignity for Israelis and Palestinians alike.

I look forward to the Government being represented at official level in Bogotá next week.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I welcome that. I thank the Department and the Tánaiste for ensuring that is the case. It is important. The approach required is to ensure Ireland is using its voice collaboratively with countries internationally and individually. The Tánaiste has articulated that in the past. There are far more actions domestically that we could take undoubtedly, and we have had many discussions on that, but the international component is vital. The Tánaiste made the point in relation to the occupied territories legislation. Many countries attending that event would be sympathetic to potentially advancing legislation of this kind that might expand the potential impact of that type of legislative approach.

One of the biggest issues at the moment, although far from the only one, is the killing of people who are waiting for humanitarian aid. It is appalling. That accounts for about 80% of the people who have been killed in recent weeks. I regret to say that some cover was given to the Israeli Government by Kaja Kallas a number of months ago by her attitude towards UNRWA, which was reprehensible.

Deputy Simon Harris: There are a couple of things there. First, the Deputy is right; quite a few like-minded countries may well consider looking at what we have done here and introducing their own domestic legislation. What I was trying to say in response to the last question is that we are in contact with quite a number of European countries that are inquiring as to our legislation, and I hope others will join us in publishing their own domestic legislation. We would all rather act at an EU level, although we know that has not made the progress we collectively would want it to make. In the meantime, member states can consider what domestic remedies are available to them through their own legislation. It is a narrow path, but we believe the ICJ advisory opinion provides a path as well.

The big priority right now has to be a ceasefire. The Deputy is right in saying the humanitarian aid is beyond urgent and the release of the hostages is beyond urgent too. I believe some progress is being made in the ceasefire talks. I met the Qatari Prime Minister on this last week. However, those talks need to deliver a resolution. In relation to the European position, Kaja Kallas and the likes, of course the European Union has significantly increased its contribution to UNRWA at a time when other parts of the world have walked away.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I would nonetheless make the point that the rhetoric employed by her and her office at that early juncture gave political cover to the Israeli Government and the US to undermine the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine, UNRWA, and put in place their own position.

I welcome the fact we will be attending the emergency meeting because it is important to work with other countries. I will ask the Tánaiste to respond to two final points. I know the granting of visas is strictly a competency of the Department of justice but they are processed

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through the Department of foreign affairs. It is disappointing that the visas for the representatives of the Lajee Cultural Center and GAA Palestine have not been processed. Some of this is about political will and involves contacting the organisation, working through whatever issues exist and ensuring they are worked through quickly. That must happen in the context of the appeal because these are vitally important initiatives. I urge the Tánaiste to work through that with the Department of justice.

I ask the Tánaiste to respond to the extraordinary announcement last night by the US Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, in respect of sanctions on the UN special rapporteur, Francesca Albanese. That kind of direct attack on a UN special rapporteur is appalling.

Deputy Simon Harris: I agree with the Deputy on the last point. Any attacks or sanctions on UN representatives are attacks not just on them but on multilateralism. Ireland remains a steadfast supporter of the work of the United Nations and the special rapporteur. It is a deeply concerning development.

On the issue of visas, the Deputy is right that it is a competency of my colleague, the Minister for justice. I am, however, *ad idem* with him on this, as is the Government. Every system must have rules. The awarding of visas must be done in accordance with strict criteria, including issues around ensuring child protection documentation and the likes, for very good reasons. I do not overly want to comment on individual applications other than to say that appeals processes are available to anyone. I am sure many will consider that.

Middle East

4. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade on his recent engagements with other states regarding the genocide in Gaza; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38251/25]

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: What interaction has the Tánaiste had with other states, particularly in the EU, about Gaza? His colleagues in the EU Parliament will today apparently endorse Ursula von der Leyen despite her complete approval of the genocide that is taking place. She made comments about Israel's right to defend itself at a time when the Tánaiste has recognised that a genocide is taking place. Ireland will row in and support Ursula von der Leyen in the Parliament today on a vote of confidence.

I also want to ask about the visas.

Deputy Simon Harris: Today's censure motion in the European Parliament is a stunt by the far right and people that the President of the European Commission has referred to as "Putin's puppets". They are seeking to divide Europe at this time. I am disappointed to see the far left lining up with the far right on this issue. The censure motion, by the way, has nothing whatsoever to do with Gaza. As the Deputy knows, it relates to a different issue around a ruling relating to text messages. The impact of the censure motion would be that Maroš Šefčovič, the EU Trade Commissioner, to whom I hope to talk later today, would be out of a job. Our very excellent Commissioner from Ireland, Michael McGrath from Cork, would be out of a job. The entire European Commission would be out on its ear. To even fathom for a moment that it is an intelligent thing to do at a time of huge global instability is pathetic politics. That is my strong and clear view in that regard.

On the Middle East, I absolutely believe what is happening to the people of Gaza is a genocide, as do the Taoiseach and the Irish Government. We have been clear in that regard. Of course, the Middle East, as a region, is experiencing major instability with multiple crises and conflicts, many of which are interrelated. The situation in Gaza is appalling and deteriorating. Those words do not capture the situation. That was an understatement. The same is true of the situation in the West Bank. These remain a central focus of my engagement and that of the Minister of State, Deputy Thomas Byrne, with the EU and other international counterparts.

Ireland has consistently condemned the ongoing activities of Israel in Gaza. The current volume and pace of aid delivered into Gaza under Israel's so-called partial lifting of the blockade remains extraordinarily insufficient to meet the needs of Gaza's entire population. As Deputy Ó Laoghaire reminded us, we have seen people killed while queuing for aid. I share the concerns of the United Nations and other credible international actors that the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation is not operating in accordance with any humanitarian principles or law.

I welcome the fact that ceasefire talks are under way. I had the opportunity to speak to the Qatari Prime Minister and foreign minister in Dublin last week. I commend the role of mediators and their efforts to secure progress. Ireland has repeatedly, both bilaterally and at a multilateral level, called on Israel to comply with international law, stressing the universal applicability of international law.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Given all the Tánaiste has said about recognising there is a genocide and our State's recognition of the Palestinian state, how can we refuse visas to children who are coming here to escape the bombardment in Gaza? Moataz Sarsour GAA Club has been refused visas. From talking and writing with the people involved, I know they have complied on multiple occasions with all the requests of the Department of justice. They have said they found it completely unprofessional and bureaucratic and thought barriers were being put in their way.

We have failed to give medical evacuation to Palestinian children-----

Deputy Simon Harris: No, we have not.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: -----who were promised care. The Government has stalled the treatment of 18 children from Palestine. The Tánaiste can clarify the situation, but it seems as if it has been stalled because those children may be bringing siblings with them. There seems to be an appalling attitude to getting people over here. I have, for example, tried to get the wife of a citizen and constituent over here. That man is a doctor. I have been told to go through the normal process. Is there no extra help for people coming from Gaza, given what is happening there?

Deputy Simon Harris: There are a couple of things there. These are all important issues. On the medical evacuation of children from Gaza, we are fully committed. Genuinely and truthfully, there is an absolute commitment. We have committed to four groups of children. Two have come already and two more are due. The original ask, for the want of a better phrase, was one child accompanied by one parent or guardian. In practice, that does not always work. Going from memory, we have seen 12 children coming in but a total of 45 people in the round. We have gone beyond, if you like, one plus one for good humanitarian reasons. The Ministers for Health and justice have indicated that they just want absolute clarity. It will not cause a delay. I have been assured of that, and have spoken to my Department in this regard. Officials

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have been in touch with our people in the region. I have spoken to the Ministers for Health and justice. The Taoiseach and I discussed the issue on Monday night. We are fully committed to the medical evacuation programme.

On the issue of visas, we absolutely do grant visit visas but each visa application must be decided on its own merits. When children are being brought here, we must comply with child protection laws. There is ongoing engagement in that regard and the appeal process is open to anybody.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It seems mealy-mouthed in the extreme to call it a genocide when, as one of the richest countries in the world, with a massive budget surplus and health service, a basic thing we could do is to treat some of these children who have suffered the most appalling treatment. They are now being checked repeatedly to ensure that only one person is coming with them. This is terrible.

Why is this GAA club facing these barriers? The Tánaiste cited child protection. The GAA itself has comprehensive child protection rules. We opened up for American Football and all sorts of other things in recent times. These children are coming to participate in a well-known institution in this country. They are coming to visit Croke Park and play matches but their visas are being stalled. From speaking on, and listening to, the radio, we know they would have complied with all of the requests.

Deputy Simon Harris: They have not.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Why should doctors who are trying to escape from Gaza have to go through the normal process? Can we not give some extra help?

Deputy Simon Harris: Those are two distinct issues. For medical evacuations, we are not saying it is one plus one. There has not been a one plus one scenario. Twelve children have arrived. In a one plus one scenario, that would mean the arrival of 24 people. More than 40 people have arrived so far through that programme.

I do not want to be too argumentative on a sensitive issue but there must be rules and checks. The reality is that if there are children from far-flung parts of the world travelling to this country with adults, some of whom are not their parents, there need to be legitimate checks in respect of child protection. I do not think any immigration system in the world would grant visas without satisfying itself in respect of visa applications for minors. There are issues around birth certificates and consent letters. These are important things. We cannot just tear up the rule book when it comes to migration. There do have to be rules in place. Of course we will work with people but the rules apply in relation to visas. Ireland is not just tearing up its migration system or its rules in this regard.

Trade Agreements

5. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade his position regarding potential increased tariffs with regard to the US; and the preparations being made for same. [38025/25]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Another week has brought another dramatic statement from President Trump. It is hard to interpret what will happen with his announcement of po-

tential 200% tariffs on pharmaceuticals. We can all guess and gauge how accurate it is. People who work in pharmaceutical companies, life sciences and all these sectors are concerned. The direction of travel is in a particular direction. It is vital that we are alive to it and respond to it. What is the Government's response in preparation for the potential impact of tariffs and retaliatory measures?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy Ó very much for raising this because he is right that the EU-US negotiations are now at a critical juncture. Our position, I think across party lines, has been clear as a country. Tariffs threaten the hugely successful EU-US and Ireland-US economic relationship. They are bad for businesses, consumers and workers, and they are bad on both sides of the Atlantic.

Since April, many Irish exports to the US have been subject to an additional 10% tariff - that is in place today - and the imposition of these tariffs has had a negative impact on all types of businesses from multinational companies to small and medium enterprises and microenterprises. The extension of the deadline for the end of the US pause on higher tariffs from this Wednesday, 9 July until Friday, 1 August allows for further time for negotiations to continue, which is welcome. It would be much better to have an agreement, or at least a framework agreement, but it is welcome. It gives an indication that even President Trump realises he needs a deal with the European Union too. He cannot just ignore €4.5 billion worth of trade across the Atlantic Ocean in both directions each and every day. The European Commission is working towards reaching an agreement as soon as possible in advance of that deadline. We should not wait until 1 August. I hope to have conversations with the EU trade Commissioner in the coming hours. The EU's and Ireland's objective has always been to find a fair, balanced, mutually beneficial negotiated solution. The intention has been to limit the impact of the existing 10% baseline tariff but also to avoid additional tariffs being introduced. We want to reach an agreement in principle that provides certainty and then allows for more work to be done on zero for zero in as many sectors as possible. As the Deputy knows, we are doing a lot of this work through the Government Trade Forum, which is attended by senior Ministers and business representatives. Last Wednesday, I chaired the sixth meeting of the forum, which focused on protecting Irish jobs and our economy.

I will talk about pharma specifically because the Deputy asked about it. This is an area where there is uncertainty at the moment. The European position is very clear. The relationship is interdependent. We have global supply chains and patients. We need to work together with the EU and the US. A huge focus of our attention, both as a country and a European Union, will be on the pharma sector. I will come back with further detail on that.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: That is very important. A related but not identical by any means sector is life sciences and orthopaedics. This is another sector in which Ireland has a very significant footprint and which, unlike pharmaceuticals, is already affected by the 10% in that area. I would ask whether that has had an impact as of yet.

I will briefly flag two sectors which, because they involve items that are on the shelf, do not have the same lead-in and are probably particularly vulnerable in the short run, that is, agrifood and, in particular, dairy products, and drink, including whiskey. They are very vulnerable sectors as well to any potential impacts. In terms of the reciprocal tariffs, some progress has been made on the dairy side but perhaps less so on the whiskey side. Preparation on this needs to step up. The examination of potential supports for individual businesses is needed, whether it is export facilitation or whatever. Where is that at?

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The Tánaiste: We will shortly bring our action plan on market diversification to Cabinet. That is a joint initiative between my Department and the Department of enterprise. Of course, as part of that, we will have to look at how we can help Irish companies looking to export to new markets too. The priority at the moment is to try to minimise the impact of tariffs, however. We have published our economic impact assessment through the Department of Finance. In my letter to Maroš Šefčovič on reciprocal tariffs, I specifically referenced agrifood, aviation, med tech and pharma as key areas of concern from an Irish perspective. On pharma specifically, the US section 232 national security investigation into the import of pharmaceuticals, semi-conductors and commercial aircraft and jet engines is ongoing. I spoke to the US trade representative, ambassador Jamieson Greer, and made the point that we should seek to work together on pharma, and we can do something mutually beneficial. US pharma companies need access to a market of 460 million people in the EU. He did say to me on that call that the US was open to creative solutions, so those dialogues continue.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I will raise two more issues, the first of which I have raised in briefings with the Tánaiste's officials and, in fairness, they are well aware of the importance of it. From an Irish point of view, the potential for distortions between North and South is a very particular risk that we face. It is not in anyone's interest. We could have a seesaw-type effect that might favour one side of the Border at another stage but, ultimately, it would create a distortion because that could flip. Many products travel across the Border multiple times before they hit the shop shelves.

The other issue is one on which to proceed with caution and with our eyes wide open because of the fraught history relating to it. When these functions were still with the Department of enterprise, the Minister of State at the time, Deputy Calleary, responded to a question on export credit insurance and whether there was a need for a State-backed scheme. Ireland is unusual in not having this for historical reasons. At the time, the position was that the private market was covering enough. The situation has changed a bit in the past three or four years. What is the Government's position on such insurance?

The Tánaiste: I have not received any advice on changing that position but on foot of this, let me give it some consideration and come back to the Deputy.

On the North-South elements, co-operation is excellent. I interact with the Deputy's party colleague and one of my counterparts, Economy Minister, Dr. Caoimhe Archibald, on a regular basis, and the deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland. We discussed the issue of trade and tariffs at the North-South Ministerial Council in County Armagh recently and also in our bilateral meetings at the British-Irish Council, also held in the North the week before that. There is, therefore, ongoing engagement at both official and political level, as there should be.

On the issue of briefings, I reiterate that my Department remains available and will continue to provide briefings to all interested Oireachtas Members and, of course, to the Deputy, Opposition parties and, indeed, the Chairman of the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, as appropriate, because we are in a time of huge uncertainty and we need to continue to provide the latest information across the House as it becomes available.

Dáil Éireann
Foreign Policy

6. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade for a report on his engagement with other EU member states with regard to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38587/25]

Deputy John Lahart: I want to ask the Tánaiste about the special tribunal for the crime of aggression against Ukraine, which we hope will be able to investigate and prosecute senior government and military leaders responsible for the crime of aggression up to and including heads of state. He might update the House in that regard.

The Tánaiste: I will begin this reply regarding Ukraine and Russia by saying that the latest information I received from our embassy in Kyiv is that it has been a particularly difficult 48-hour period. Ukraine came under large-scale drone and missile attacks again last night. According to President Zelenskyy, 18 missiles and 400 drones were deployed by Russia over a period of ten hours, targeting at least six oblasts as well as Kyiv city. In Kyiv, very loud explosions were heard for an extended period during the night and damage has been reported in at least five districts of Kyiv, including the district in which the Irish Embassy is located. At least two people are reported to have been killed in the city, and 16 injured. I am pleased that all our embassy staff are safe but, of course, very tired after a very difficult night. Residential buildings, cars, warehouses, offices and non-residential premises were set on fire. I believe the papal nuncio has now reported light damage to the Holy See chancery, most likely caused by a drone explosion nearby. I want to share that information with the House because Putin talks about peace and all of this sort of stuff, and this is what goes on in reality. We have two presidents - one who is willing to accept a ceasefire without condition to try to get into substantive peace talks, and one who keeps on avoiding that reality. Last night was really a night of horror for many people in Kyiv. I want to thank our ambassador, Jonathan Conlon, and his team. The Minister of State, Deputy Thomas Byrne, and I engage on this on a very regular basis. I am pleased they are all safe and grateful for their service but horrified at what is happening.

Our support for Ukraine is steadfast. It remains a key focus of our engagement with EU counterparts bilaterally and, of course, in Brussels. This war, and the threat posed by Russia, is not only an existential issue for Ukraine but we see it as a major challenge to the security of Europe. It is right, therefore, that support for Ukraine remains a top priority for the European Union.

Russian aggression features prominently on the monthly agenda of the Foreign Affairs Council where ministers are regularly joined by the Ukrainian foreign minister to hear directly about the situation on the ground and about Ukraine's most pressing needs. This is an important forum for discussion with my EU counterparts on how we enhance support for Ukraine so that it can defend against and deter future Russian aggression.

Deputy John Lahart: What is interesting from listening to the debates here in the past week is the criticism of the Government about its stance on the Iranian regime from some of the far left voices in the House and a complete ignorance about who supplies an awful lot of these drones to Russia to continuously attack a part of Europe. I understand the special tribunal I referred to in the question is the first international judicial body since the Second World War with jurisdiction to investigate and prosecute individuals regardless of their position suspected of committing the crime of aggression. The establishment of the tribunal marks the culmination of years of legal work by Ukraine, its partner countries, the Council of Europe and the European

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Union to ensure justice for the victims of Russian aggression.

Can the Minister elaborate on the European input into that and the development of that special tribunal?

Deputy Simon Harris: We have been extremely supportive of this at European level and remain so. I believe my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, represented us at a meeting on this recently -----

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Today.

Deputy Simon Harris: I am sorry; he is representing us in Rome today and showing the Government's support. On 23 June, the Foreign Affairs Council discussed co-ordinating a strong and united European response behind Ukraine, including stepping up the EU's political and military support. Ukraine's foreign minister highlighted recent very worrying developments in Ukraine. It is absolutely clear Russia is engaging in the crimes of aggression. It is not engaging in peace talks in any good faith. It maintains its maximum demands and in this context it is more important than ever that we bolster support for Ukraine across all work stands. At the meeting in Rome today, the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, and European colleagues will work constructively in assisting the work of the tribunal.

Deputy John Lahart: As Chair of the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, I met the ambassador recently. I am a little concerned that so much time in the House is spent on Gaza, which I understand, particularly as Chair of the committee, is justified, that Ukraine has slipped down the agenda and we need to keep it up. The continued acceleration of attacks by Russia poses a significant threat to the European Union. The Minister mentioned the largest attack in the past couple of days. In Ireland, because we are so remote, sometimes we do not appreciate that fully. However, a threat to the European Union threatens the values we take for granted and essentially threatens our way of life. The continuous highlighting of this Russian aggression against Ukrainians is necessary in the House. I welcome the opportunity and the Tánaiste's answers on the tribunal.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy is entirely correct. We cannot lose focus on what is happening in Ukraine. The UN is dealing with more conflicts than ever in its history. We discussed Sudan earlier. That is another major humanitarian catastrophe that barely gets spoken about in political dispatches in Ireland. Some colleagues do highlight it but it is not getting nearly enough attention. I worry about this kind of faux engagement on some sort of peace agreement by Russia, which is not being done in good faith while day in, day out it is pounding Ukraine and now we are witnessing a significant escalation.

In Ukraine many children have been forcibly abducted from their parents. Children have been stolen at the youngest possible age. We cannot lose focus on that either. They have been taken and effectively re-educated in Russia. I thank the Deputy for keeping the focus on this. Ireland will continue to stand with Ukraine.

We must also call out others that continue to support Russia. China wants to talk about how we can do more economically with the European Union while continuing to support those carrying out a war on the Continent.

Dáil Éireann
Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Departmental Meetings

7. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to outline the number of times he has met with the Palestinian ambassador to Ireland since he took office. [37514/25]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The slaughter in Gaza is one of the biggest stains on the international community. The killing of 57,700 people in Gaza is a war crime of massive proportions. It is happening in large part because it is underwritten by the West. It is underwritten by the US and many countries in the European Union. The approach of the West to the war in Ukraine and the war in Palestine could not be more different. Ireland's approach could also not be more different. Is the refusal of visas for the 33 Palestinian children from the GAA Palestine project not an example of this?

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy was critical of the decision not to grant the visas.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I am critical of that.

Deputy Simon Harris: Every individual visa application has to be considered on its merit. This country will continue to apply rules in relation to migration and the issuing of visas. The Department of justice will continue to robustly apply rules, particularly when it involves minors and minors travelling without their parents and accompanied by other adults. I will not get into the individual application beyond saying an appeals process is in place. The documentation we require as a State is something we take very seriously.

On 28 May, we marked one year since Ireland announced that it would recognise the State of Palestine. Ireland, together with Spain and Norway, took that decision as an expression of our view that Palestine holds, and should be able to vindicate, the full rights of a state. That made the Palestinian representative a full ambassador in due course. It was a very important moment and the first time we have had an ambassador from Palestine in Ireland. In my capacity as the then Taoiseach, I was delighted to welcome for the first time a Palestinian ambassador to the Taoiseach's office on 6 June 2024.

Since the announcement of Ireland's decision to recognise Palestine, an exchange of diplomatic notes confirming the establishment of full diplomatic relations was completed on 29 September 2024 and that enabled the Palestinian ambassador to present her credentials as Palestine's first ambassador to Ireland in December.

Ireland's representative office to the Palestinian Authority maintains close and regular contact with the Palestinian authorities, and senior officials in my Department are also in regular contact with the ambassador and other officials at the embassy of the State of Palestine.

Much of my engagement with the Palestinian authority is at political level with my direct counterparts. I have met and spoken to the President of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, and the Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Mustafa. I keep in contact with them and other interlocutors of the Palestinian Authority.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I agree there should be rules and checks. Nobody has said that

more in this Chamber than me probably in recent years. However, I have also said it needs to be compassionate. That is something the Tánaiste has said too and that there should be a strict system and compassionate response. There are dozens of children unaccompanied coming to this country annually at the moment anyway. That is the state of the situation. Look at the two approaches between Ukraine and Palestine. There are 112,189 people from Ukraine here. They do not need a visa. They are considered, for their temporary situation, to be nearly European citizens in what they can do. I understand that. On the other side, we have 33 Palestinian children from the GAA Palestine project. It is very obvious there is a two-tier approach that is materially different. Those two groups have had a completely different material difference in relation to this. Will the Tánaiste formally ask the Minister for justice to intervene on this and see if visas can be provided for these children?

Deputy Simon Harris: Many visas have been granted to Palestinian nationals, mostly to family members of Irish citizens and residents. We do try to adopt a compassionate approach. I take the Deputy's point and his credibility on this in the sense of wanting a rules-based migration system. I do not doubt his bona fides on that. I also do not doubt, nor does the Minister for justice or the Government, the good faith of those in organising these events. I do not doubt it at all for a moment. However, many factors must be considered before a visa can be granted. Unfortunately, not all people will be able to demonstrate that they satisfy the conditions to be granted a visa to come to Ireland. A visa is a very important legal document in our migration system. There was a request for 47 people to travel to Ireland from Palestine and 33 of these were children who were not travelling in the company of their parents. These applications were given very careful consideration. A visa officer has to be satisfied that children are travelling in the company of their parents or an appropriate guardian. Additional documents, such as birth certificates or consent letters, are regularly requested to establish the relationship. An appeals process is under way.

Deputy Peadar Kirby: While the Tánaiste has been stronger than many of his European counterparts in standing up for the people of Palestine, and I grant that is the case, the European Union is still very cold in how it is dealing with Gaza. Ursula von der Leyen strode the world's stage stating that she would underwrite the IDF's actions at the start of this process. I believe she distorted the foreign policy of this country and other European countries when she made those statements. She has been defended by members of the Tánaiste's party. It is interesting that Mairead McGuinness defended Ursula von der Leyen amid the backlash on Gaza. She said Ursula von der Leyen should be "judged by her record in the round" and is extremely strong in terms of humanitarian aid and she does not doubt her credentials at all of this topic. Does the Minister agree with the former EU Commissioner?

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy has randomly picked former EU Commissioner. She must have caught his attention in terms of a potential upcoming electoral contest. I agree with the former Commissioner on many issues and I agree with her that the European Union, through the President of the Commission, has provided a significant level of leadership that other parts of the world have not provided. At a time when other parts of the world walked away from UNWRA, the European Commission, European Union and many member states significantly increased their contribution. We have significantly increased funding at EU level to the Palestinian Authority to help it reform. We are working very closely with Arab nations. Foreign policy is set by member states, through the high representative. The European Commission has taken many positive steps from a humanitarian aid point of view. A lack of European unity on Gaza and a way forward is extraordinarily regrettable. People will look back on this period of

history and believe Europe could have done more.

EU Meetings

8. **Deputy Ryan O'Meara** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he will report on his meeting with the EU budget Commissioner on 25 June 2025; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37909/25]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Thomas Byrne): On 25 June, I met the EU Commissioner for Budget, Anti-Fraud and Public Administration, Piotr Serafin, in Brussels. The meeting was an important opportunity to set out Ireland's preliminary views on the post-2027 multi-annual financial framework, MFF, in advance of the proposal of the Commission being published next Wednesday. During this meeting, I called on the Commissioner to ensure a robustly funded and separate, strong and ring-fenced Common Agricultural Policy, CAP. As a thriving sector of our economy, I stressed the importance of CAP in sustaining jobs and rural communities and strengthening food security across Europe.

In addition, the Commissioner and I discussed the competitiveness fund. I called for a strong focus on digital, connectivity and infrastructure, which are key enablers to improving productivity, innovation and competitiveness. I also reaffirmed the importance of ensuring a separate and ring-fenced horizon programme, which provides for excellent research, transnational collaboration and innovation.

In the context of security and defence, which will play a significant role in the next MFF, I advocated that the Commission take into account the specificities of island and peripheral regions with large maritime areas and subsea infrastructure to protect. I also emphasised the importance of maintaining development and humanitarian assistance in a sustained and long-term manner.

On financing, I highlighted Ireland's role as a net contributor and long-term beneficiary, and our view that the EU budget must be fit for the future, take into account horizontal principles and values and respond to Europe's priorities effectively. Overall, the meeting was an first important step for Ireland in setting our ambitions and will be the first of many engagements I will have with the Commissioner in advance of Ireland's EU Presidency next year, during which the MFF negotiations will be at a critical juncture.

Deputy John Lahart: I was interested to hear what the Minister of State said, following the conversation we had in the Chamber yesterday. I mentioned the Gates Foundation. He re-emphasised Ireland's commitment to overseas development. That is good news in a world where the cuts in US aid have been described by aid agencies as irreplaceable and having a significant impact. The security piece is important.

I want the European budget to adapt and develop in such a way that it is able to meet unforeseen circumstances. I understand 90% of the budget is fixed and 10% is discretionary or can be used to respond to particular situations. Was cohesion policy discussed? What were the budget Commissioner's views on that? To what extent does the Minister of State think that increased security expenditure might impact on this?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: It is important to briefly set out the process. The Commission will

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publish the proposal next Wednesday. Ultimately, it is a matter for the leaders to agree this, in conjunction with the European Parliament. Over the next year and A half, starting on 18 July, governments will discuss the Commission's proposal and, in effect, negotiate it. Next Wednesday's proposal should be seen as the first outing. We will have a ministerial meeting two days later and that is the very start of the process. During our Presidency, Ireland will play a key role in those negotiations.

In terms of our external policies, the Minister has outlined the support the EU has given to, for example, Palestine and UNRWA. From Ireland's point of view, we want to make sure that the MFF maintains the EU's leadership in providing development and humanitarian assistance. That was a point I made, whether for war-torn situations or for the likes of Gavi. Regarding defence, we see a continued role for the MFF to build on investments under way to enhance our collective defence, in particular infrastructure, research and development and co-ordinated action.

Deputy John Lahart: I thank the Minister of State. Our political grouping at EU level, Renew Europe, has some positive ideas. It proposed reinforced provisions to promote democratic resilience, including something that is close to the heart of this Government, which is funding support for independent media, investigative journalism and fact checking. I understand the Estonians are way ahead of the rest of Europe in dealing with disinformation. We need to pile some significant money into that.

Much of this overlaps with the portfolio of our European Commissioner, Michael McGrath. It is also being proposed by our group that the MFF must position the EU as the world's leading provider of development and climate aid. The Minister of State mentioned that. Is this something he will support? Might it be a factor in our Presidency next year?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: During the Presidency Ireland will, in effect, be in charge of the negotiations. We will have to act as an honest broker. It is important that between now and then we get our spoke out, so to speak. That is why met Commissioner Serafin at a very early point and immediately after that meeting I met all of our MEPs, all of whom were invited to be briefed on our position. I am more than happy to do that with the committees on foreign affairs, EU affairs and agriculture. Individual Ministers will also do that. It is also important for Oireachtas committees is to engage with their counterparts in other parliaments. The CAP is the biggest part of the budget in terms of what we receive. It is important that we protect that.

The other issues the Deputy mentioned are important. In terms of our major priorities, we have to work with other member states and that includes the parliaments. I foresee a big role not just for MEPs but also Members of the Dáil on all sides. By and large, the priorities will be supported across the House.

On misinformation and disinformation, I recently had very good engagement with the Hybrid CoE in Finland and encourage the foreign affairs committee to engage with its representatives on best practice in this area.

Overseas Development Aid

9. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade his plans to ensure sustained annual increases in Ireland's official development assistance to

progress towards the UN target of 0.7% of gross national income; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38250/25]

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Ireland has a proud history when it comes to development aid. We are still falling short of the UN target of spending 0.7% of gross national income on overseas aid. The most recent figures show we are at just 0.57%. When domestic supports such as Ukrainian refugee assistance are excluded, the figure drops to 0.41%. How does the Government plan to progress towards the 0.7% target?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for the question. Let us be honest: overseas development aid and assistance are coming under attack in many parts of the world. I am very proud that we live in a country where, on a cross-party basis, even during the deepest financial crisis, there has been consistent support for Ireland to continue to support those less fortunate in some of the most deprived and developing parts of the world. The Government remains committed to the targets agreed at the UN to provide 0.7% of gross national income in official development assistance. That commitment was reaffirmed in 2019 in *A Better World*, Ireland's international development policy. It is also been reaffirmed in our programme for Government.

In recent years, the Government has consistently increased the allocation for the Irish Aid programme managed under Vote 27 of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. This year, it stands at €810.3 million, the highest ever in the 51-year history of the developing programme. Total overseas development assistance and aid for 2024 are currently being finalised, but preliminary figures released by the OECD place Ireland's own overseas development at over €2.2 billion, representing 0.57% of GNP. This includes eligible first-year supports for refugees in Ireland from Ukraine, as the Deputy mentioned.

Excluding these costs, the 2024 overseas development aid percentage was 0.41%, an increase from 0.38% in 2023. It is important to note that the refugee costs eligible for reporting as overseas development aid are finalised retrospectively and that no such funding has been sourced from the allocation for the Irish Aid programme. Thus it does not come from that programme. This will remain the case in 2025. Total ODA, including contributions to international development from other Departments and Ireland's share of the EU development co-operation budget was in the region of €430 million in 2024.

Obviously individual decisions on how we get there are a matter for the budget, but I am heartened by the fact the programme for Government between the two parties and Independents is clear on that 0.7% commitment.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I acknowledge there is a commitment in the programme for Government and the Tánaiste's commitment to international development aid. The difficulty, as he has outlined, is the global aid landscape has completely changed. The US has made massive cuts to USAID. Over \$60 billion has been slashed. UK development aid is down by £6 billion. That has a huge knock-on impact on the likes of the Irish NGOs. Goal, Concern and Trócaire, which is based in my home town of Maynooth, have lost vital funding and have had to freeze recruitment and suspend some operations in countries such as Syria and Sudan. Earlier we heard of the devastating impacts in Sudan and how we as a collective need to speak more openly about Sudan. These programmes run by Irish NGOs are vital in ensuring there are supports for people in the hardest-hit areas of the world.

Deputy Simon Harris: I fully agree with the Deputy. We have allocated about €7.7 mil-

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lion so far this year to Sudan. We are committing this morning to allocating at least €14 million during the total year, which would bring us in line with what we did last year, because the humanitarian situation there is horrific. The year 2025 will be the fifth consecutive year in which the Government allocation to the Irish Aid programme managed by my Department will have increased and we will publish in September the annual report on our official development assistance to provide a detailed breakdown of the distribution of that aid.

The Deputy is right the very large cuts from other donors are having a real impact. The OECD projects a fall of between 9% and 17% in global ODA in 2025 at a time when the world probably requires it more than ever. This comes on top of a 9% drop in 2024 which marked the first global decline in six years. This projected decline is driven by announced cuts by major providers. France, Germany, the UK and the US all cut their ODA last year for the first time in nearly 30 years.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: There is a little bit of light in a dark place from the commitment by the State and the Tánaiste's Department to increase the funding, especially to Sudan. That is an important message people need to hear. I acknowledge as well the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, made the comment in Sierra Leone earlier in the year that Ireland has a responsibility to show real leadership in how development spending directly impacts people living in poverty. It goes throughout Government and throughout the Tánaiste's Department. As I said, I welcome the increase in funding and the commitment to increase funding, especially to Sudan and the hardest-hit areas globally.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for highlighting this. We are monitoring very closely the impact on our work as a country and the impact on NGOs like the ones the Deputy mentioned as a result of the ODA cuts from other countries. We are continuing to assess the immediate and long-term effects with our partners. We are in regular contact with governments in developing countries, with the UN and other multilateral agencies, with our Irish development NGOs and with our international NGOs. We are going to continue this approach and we are trying to provide support to them that is predictable and flexible. We are trying to help those partners adapt as well as possible to what is a rapidly changing context. For example, we are front-loading the payment of our 2025 core funding for trusted UN agencies at their request. However, I must be honest that international aid architecture is facing a very uncertain time. We remain firm in our ODA commitments. It is clearly not feasible for us to fill the major funding gaps but we will continue to lead as we can and to be flexible in the engagement with our partners.

Middle East

10. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade whether he and his Department formally submitted an additional complaint to the International Criminal Court regarding the murder of thousands of Palestinian civilians by the Israel Defense Forces while queuing for food; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37868/25]

Deputy Brian Stanley: My question is on the International Criminal Court. Has Ireland sought to include the slaughter of starving Palestinians queuing for aid in South Africa's case, which we have joined? I welcomed our joining that case.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for the question. The International Criminal

Court is under attack. We are seeing this very regularly in many parts of the globe. Last week I met the President of the ICC in Dublin and we discussed ways in which Ireland can continue to defend the court from sanctions. The president thanked Ireland for its support to date, but having discussed it with her, frankly I was shocked at the impact sanctions, threats and a threatening environment is having on its work. I intend to raise this with European counterparts. Europe really needs to give consideration to how we can much better support the ICC.

I strongly condemn the continuing Israeli action in Gaza. International humanitarian law makes it very clear civilians must not be targeted in an armed conflict and that the provision of humanitarian relief must be facilitated and protected. I call for a full and independent investigation into the horrific events that have been outlined in these reports.

The International Criminal Court has the jurisdiction to investigate and prosecute any international crimes committed on Palestinian territory, including by Israeli citizens. I checked in advance of taking this question that no further referral is needed for the ICC to be seized of the matter. It already has that jurisdiction to investigate and prosecute. The ICC prosecutor has already confirmed he is conducting an investigation into the escalation of violence in Palestine, including the events of 7 October 2023. To date the ICC has issued three arrest warrants in relation to the situation in Palestine. Two of these warrants are for the Israeli Prime Minister and the former defence minister. The third warrant was for the Hamas commander, who has since been confirmed dead. Ireland supports the investigations of the ICC into all situations before the court, including Palestine. It is vital we allow the court to carry out its important work in an independent and impartial manner. During my meeting with the president of the ICC we discussed ways in which Ireland can continue to defend the court from US sanctions and she thanked Ireland for its support. We will continue to work with like-minded states to support and protect the court.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I thank the Tánaiste for his reply. I gather from it the International Criminal Court has already included this. I ask that the Tánaiste and his diplomatic staff do everything possible to try to ensure that case is pressed. The horror show in Gaza continues. There is bombing of tents with innocent civilians in them as well as of hospitals and schools. The four Gaza Humanitarian Foundation centres have been turned into shooting galleries where people are herded in and shot for fun. If firing tank shells into crowds of starving people is not a war crime, then God almighty in heaven, what is? That is along with water being turned off and everything else.

All this is being done in the name of improving Israeli security. If anybody thinks breeding the resentment that is going to flow from this in the years to come is going to increase Israeli security they are delusional. I ask the Tánaiste to keep pushing that case.

Deputy Simon Harris: We certainly will. The Deputy is correct. We are seeing people queuing for aid for themselves and their children in a situation of near starvation and being shot at and killed. This is beyond horrific.

Ireland will continue to support the ICC. I need to stress to the House how volatile and dangerous the situation is in terms of the sustainability of the ICC. We have to support the ICC. We have to support international courts. Europe has always had and still has unanimity on that support, or almost unanimity, on the work of the ICC. Financial sanctions are being used to try to get to a point where the ability of the ICC to operate is undermined. That would be despicable and needs to be condemned. From our point of view and the work of the ICC investigations on

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Palestine, we have made additional voluntary contributions. In 2024 we made a further contribution of €1 million to the ICC prosecutor's trust fund for advanced technology and specialised capacity, another €1 million for the trust fund for victims, €500,000 for the special fund for security and €250,000 for the special fund for witness relocation.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I thank the Tánaiste. I welcome that support for the International Criminal Court. It is important. The international order is under attack, without a doubt. The Tánaiste's reply has caused me more concern due to the feedback he got last week. It is important Ireland and other countries continue to support the International Criminal Court and not allow the United Nations to be undermined, and indeed for the whole organisation to be reformed and improved. The Government has stood out. We need to continue doing that. I ask it to go further, of course. There is going to have to be negotiations and the release of hostages, both Palestinian prisoner hostages and Israeli hostages.

10 o'clock

The sooner that happens, and we move to negotiations for a two-state solution, the better.

Will the Tánaiste continue to try to build what I would call a coalition of the willing? Ireland has managed to get some other European countries on board. I ask that he continue that work and, hopefully, other countries in Europe will come on board. We must keep applying as much pressure as possible on Israel to stop the slaughter and the horror show that are Gaza and the West Bank.

Deputy Simon Harris: We certainly will do that. The beauty of Irish foreign policy is its consistency. We are always in favour of human rights, international law, peace and dialogue, regardless of the parties involved. I often hear Ireland's position being misrepresented, with questions about whether we are pro this country or anti that country. We are pro international law, multilateralism, human rights and humanitarian law. It is easy to speak up and speak out for one's country when its foreign policy is grounded on those principles and is so consistent.

We will continue to work to build alliances at a European level and also work with Arab states. We all hope and pray we arrive at a point where the killing stops, the genocide stops and we can have a discussion about the future of Gaza and how to begin to build a two-state solution. I acknowledge that intense ceasefire talks are under way. We really hope they yield progress in the coming days.

Diplomatic Representation

11. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he will request the Irish Embassy in Washington DC to engage with the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations to ensure its members are not subjected to disinformation in regard to proposed Government legislation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38165/25]

Deputy John Lahart: What does the Tánaiste consider the best response to the comments by the chair of the United States foreign relations committee that the occupied territories Bill is blatantly antisemitic?

Deputy Simon Harris: I deplore antisemitism, as does everybody in this House. We should

speak with one voice in condemning antisemitism in all its forms. It needs to be called out and we all need to do more, as countries, as the European Union and as a global community, to stamp out antisemitism. That is beyond doubt.

Separate and distinct from what I just said, we will continue, as a country, to speak up for our values as a people in terms of human rights, the work of the ICJ and our feeling of obligation to be in compliance with ICJ advisory opinions. That is where this legislation has come from. It came from the fact that an international court of justice looked at the situation in the illegally occupied territories and has called on countries like Ireland - in my view, it has compelled countries - to act. We would not be true to our values, nor, I believe, to our obligations and the work of the ICJ, if we did not act.

In respect of the United States, we will not respond to bombast but we will continue to respectfully engage. I look forward to engaging with the new US ambassador on a whole range of topics. I will have a substantive meeting with him next week. I will continue to engage with my counterpart, Secretary of State Rubio, and with the commerce secretary and the trade representative. The Taoiseach will continue to engage with the President on all issues to do with our bilateral relationship.

Senior level engagement with the United States is a top priority for me. It is also identified as a priority in the programme for Government, which includes a commitment to “strengthen our political, cultural, economic and trade relationship with the US at all levels, recognising the unique significance of the transatlantic relationship between us”. Our embassy in Washington DC, the staff of which I thank for their great work, is continually engaged with a number of committees across Congress, particularly the Senate and House committees that deal with foreign relations. This provides an opportunity to ensure Ireland’s foreign policy, including on the Middle East, is well known and, I hope, understood in key Congressional committees.

It is easy to talk when there is agreement on everything. It is harder, but more important, to continue to engage when there are points of difference. We do that in a manner that is respectful of the deep relationship between Ireland and the US.

Deputy John Lahart: I welcome and echo the Tánaiste’s remarks. The small Jewish community in my constituency of Dublin South-West feels particularly vulnerable at times of protest.

Outside our relationship with the UK and the European Union, we have a unique relationship with the United States. This issue provides an opportunity, not to review it but to move forward with a different kind of dynamic. Some people on the left are the first to protest when members of the Houses of Congress who may hold strong views with which we disagree visit this House. These visits are opportunities to engage and to outline the rationale behind Ireland’s stance on particular issues, as opposed to having a blanket protest against their presence in the House. In that engagement with people who hold particular views, it is important that we express to the Americans that it is not the Irish Government that has been accused of genocide, crimes against humanity and weaponising of hunger. Those views must be made known as strongly as possible to our American counterparts.

Deputy Simon Harris: Absolutely, and that is the difference between the Government and the Opposition. The Taoiseach and I were in the United States, where he had a meeting with President Trump, engaging on behalf of this country, speaking up for our values, putting for-

ward our views and valuing our relationship. The leader of the Opposition took the weekend off. That is the difference. It is easy to turn up when everybody is getting on great. It is more important to turn up when there are legitimate points of disagreement and to articulate our views in that respectful manner. We have a very deep, cultural, economic and person-to-person relationship with the United States of America. That is a good thing. We also have our own policies and that is okay too. We are a democratic, sovereign country and we engage in that respectful manner.

Separately to the formal engagement that happens at the Congressional committees I referenced, our ambassador to the United States, Geraldine Byrne Nason, who is doing an excellent job, regularly meets with members of Congress from both parties. Our consuls general across the US mirror that federal level engagement with state-level Congressional leaders. The ambassador and the team at the embassy regularly engage with the US Administration at a senior level. The embassy is fully aware of the need to ensure timely and accurate information on Ireland's policy priorities in respect of both our foreign and economic policy.

There will be lots of visits from Congressional delegations, as the Deputy rightly noted. Regardless of our political perspectives, we should all take those opportunities to engage.

Deputy John Lahart: I echo the Tánaiste's comments regarding our diplomats.

The week of St. Patrick's Day is a particularly important week for Ireland. Is it time to look at mobilising more politicians, outside of just Ministers and Ministers of State, to engage at state House level in the United States, open up a new conversation with American legislators and mobilise our considerable diaspora? There was a time when we had very significant figures on Capitol Hill but that has diminished a little bit. The Cathaoirleach of the Seanad has done a lot of work on creating new connections and networks in the US. Other countries have trade envoys and political envoys who convey particular messages. There are some messages diplomacy cannot deliver but which face-to-face political connections can. I seriously encourage the Tánaiste to look at the possibility, over the lifetime of the Government, of having some politicians act as envoys on behalf of the Government in particular areas and with a particular focus on the US.

Deputy Simon Harris: I remember the challenges to do with envoys previously. I agree with the Deputy's broader point on the need to empower as many people as possible to engage. I will reflect on his point. The first way we should do that is by continuing to facilitate and host Congressional delegations, known as CODELs, whereby people from both sides of the aisle, Republicans and Democrats, travel to Ireland together. One of the most recent delegations, which visited in April, included three members of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. They met with a number of Oireachtas Members and Government representatives. We plan to proactively engage with further CODELs due to visit Ireland in the coming months, which will include a number of important interlocutors.

The Deputy is right that we have built up great relationships over the years with senior Irish-American figures. We need to look to the next generation of people who may have an affinity with our country. I acknowledge the work done by the Cathaoirleach of the Seanad. The US is a federation and engaging on a state-by-state basis is very important.

Question No. 12 taken with Written Answers.

Dáil Éireann
Consular Services

13. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade whether he is aware of the case of a person (details supplied) who is married to an Irish citizen and has been detained arbitrarily in the UAE for the past 17 years; the steps his Department is taking to provide consular assistance and seek his release from arbitrary detention; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38291/25]

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Is the Tánaiste's Department aware of the case of Ryan Cornelius, who is married to an Irish citizen and has been detained arbitrarily in the UAE for the past 17 years? What steps is it taking to provide consular assistance to Mrs. Cornelius and to seek Ryan's release from arbitrary detention?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for raising this question and giving me an opportunity to provide some further information about the matter, as I am sure she will provide the same to me. I am aware of this case and have been apprised of the details. I spoke with officials in my Department on the matter as recently as yesterday and have asked them to meet with Mr. Cornelius's wife, family members and representatives to discuss his ongoing detention and explore possible avenues for our engagement. As the Deputy is aware, the person in question is a citizen of the United Kingdom. In these circumstances – and this is as a matter of law rather than my opinion of the world - it is the UK authorities and their embassy in the United Arab Emirates that hold the consular responsibility in this case. Furthermore, from the perspective of the United Arab Emirates authorities, they are bound to deal only with the authorities of the United Kingdom. That is a reality we are facing. It is my understanding that the British authorities have been and are active on behalf of Mr. Cornelius throughout his detention. I am happy to have a perspective on that too.

Officials in my Department, including at the Embassy of Ireland in Abu Dhabi, are in contact with the UK authorities on this matter. I must emphasise that my officials will be guided by the primary consular protection authority in our actions. Our interest in the case was discussed with a senior UAE minister during her recent visit to Ireland and we will continue to keep this under review. I will not overly comment on individual cases other than to say we will do anything we can that is helpful. Helpful is the important word in this regard. We wish to be helpful. My officials meeting with Mr. Cornelius's wife, family and representatives will be an important step in exploring that.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I welcome that the Department will meet with Heather, her legal team and her brother-in-law, who is assisting her. When I wrote to the Minister about this matter on 13 May, I received a reply similar to what the Minister has just outlined, that is, that the responsibility for this case lies with the British consulate. Heather is an Irish citizen, as we have established. She is a victim of this injustice and is raising her children alone as a result. She has been separated from her husband, who has been arbitrarily detained for 17 years. She now faces the reality that, at the age of 71, she may experience him dying in prison. We have to help her, as a citizen of this country. Although the technical consular responsibility lies with the UK, we can help her. I do not agree that the UK has supported Heather and her family. They have been very frustrated with their experience. While the family has asserted, as the Minister said, that the Irish Embassy in Abu Dhabi has been helpful, the weight of the Department of foreign affairs needs to be put behind this issue.

Deputy Simon Harris: I am conscious that I am talking to a family through the prism of

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the Dáil. I wish to be respectful of that reality. I thank Deputy Gibney for writing to me on this matter. My officials will meet with Heather, the family and Mr. Cornelius's representatives because we want to be helpful. While this might sound like a frustrating thing to say, and I can understand why, this case requires exploration as to what is helpful. I do not wish to do anything, accidentally or otherwise, that would be unhelpful. The UAE has a clear view that it engages with one consular authority. Obviously, law is also clear in that regard. What I can say is that Ireland raised this matter with the UAE minister who visited Ireland recently. Our interest in the case was discussed in some detail with that senior minister during her recent visit to Ireland. The Irish embassy in the UAE continues to engage with the UAE authorities and we are also raising it with the British authorities. I am happy to have a direct word with Deputy Gibney in this regard. I am also happy to ensure the meeting takes place as quickly as possible.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Speed is of the essence because they have reached their wits' end with support from the UK. That is why Heather has turned to Ireland, essentially, for help. At the 93rd session of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention in 2022, it found Ryan Cornelius to be arbitrarily detained. There were massive procedural issues with the original conviction in 2008. There are a huge number of issues to deal with. Meanwhile, Heather remains separated from her husband, raising her children alone. The legal team around her has provided incredible support. While it has kept this case at the top of its agenda and kept the pressure on the UK Government, it has received little response. I am delighted to hear the Tánaiste's Department will meet with Heather to provide her with the support that we can as a country.

Deputy Simon Harris: We will absolutely do that. I am happy to keep in direct contact with the Deputy on this issue. I cannot imagine how difficult, traumatic and upsetting a time this must be for Heather, her children and the wider Cornelius family. As I said, I do not wish to accidentally endeavour to intervene in a way that is unhelpful. That would be the worst thing to happen. We are very eager to engage with Heather to, in the first instance, discuss her perspective and experience, including her dealings with the UK authorities and the assistance they are legally bound to provide to Mr. Cornelius, which I am told they are providing, and also to explore that to see what assistance may be appropriate or helpful from Irish authorities. I will make sure that happens as quickly as possible.

Question No. 14 taken with Written Answers.

Passport Services

15. **Deputy John Paul O'Shea** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he will consider opening a passport printing office in Cork to assist with printing passports in a timely manner; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38241/25]

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: Will the Tánaiste consider opening a passport printing office in Cork to assist with printing passports in a timely manner? I ask him to make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank my colleague, Deputy O'Shea, for raising this question. I am pleased to say the passport service is delivering passports to our citizens within advertised turnaround times and, in many cases, well before their due date. More than 580,000 passports have been issued this year to date.

The public offices in Dublin and Cork operate an urgent appointment service for renewal applications. The Dublin office offers one-day and four-day turnaround services, while the Cork office offers a four-day turnaround service. Our records show that, between the two locations, just 1.6% of all passport applicants avail of this service. So much is done online now. That is a key point. During 2024, there were an average of 240 appointments available in Cork each year. Throughout that year, however, only 26% of appointments available in Cork were taken up. We have significant spare appointment capacity, which is a good thing. It means the system is working well.

Currently, the passport service operates three passport book printing machines, with two in the main production facility at the Balbriggan campus and the third in the Dublin Passport Office, which is near Leinster House, on Mount Street. The printing and dispatching of passports are a highly automated process in what is an industrial production system. The passport service estimates the initial capital cost of purchasing and installing a new printer and mailing machine to be approximately €5.3 million. In addition to this are costs associated with capital investment and the requirement for expert engineers on site. The running and maintenance costs alone are estimated to be a further €600,000. For these reasons, I need to give further consideration to this because the service is working reasonably well. While I will consider this matter, I am not in a position to commit to it now.

I am pleased to say that we are increasing our presence in Cork. We are increasing the number of people working in the Cork office, with a new premises at Navigation Square in Cork city identified by the Department and the OPW to house the Cork Passport Office. It will have capacity for 140 staff compared with the 115 staff who are currently assigned. We are moving to a bigger office to increase our staffing levels in Cork. That will happen and I am grateful the new premises has now been identified at Navigation Square in Cork city.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: As the Tánaiste said, there are two publicly accessible passport offices, one on the South Mall in Cork and one on Mount Street in Dublin, in addition to a passport printing facility in Balbriggan. Of these three buildings, only two print the passports, with one printing facility in Dublin city centre and two printing presses in Balbriggan. There is no such facility in Cork. Given that the number of annual first-time passport applications has more than doubled, and renewal applications have nearly doubled in the period from 2020 to 2024, an additional passport printing service is definitely needed. I note the Tánaiste's comments about the public offices and the passport services in Cork and Dublin operating an urgent appointment service for renewal applications. The Dublin office offers one-day and four-day turnaround services, while the Cork office only offers a four-day service. If the Cork office was able to provide a one-day turnaround service, as well as a printing service, that would be welcome.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: No one in this Chamber is going to give out about increased capacity for our passport services. In every constituency office at this point, there is no shortage of calls from people trying to make it on holiday who are absolutely afraid they will not get their passport in time. Obviously, we need to make sure people check their dates and do whatever is needed. We have spoken about this previously.

There is an issue when it comes to streamlining, however. We know the issues that keep occurring around forms and the areas where mistakes are routinely made. They are made by a significant number of people. We need to look at the means by which that happens. At times, when a mistake happens, the clock is almost put back to zero. That is an issue. While people can sign up to be reminded when their passport goes out of action, I spoke to the Tánaiste previ-

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ously about finding a way to make that streamlined in order that there is an automatic email in the same way as there is when it comes to motor tax and whatever else.

Deputy Simon Harris: Let me take those suggestions on board. The passport reform programme is continuing. While we made significant progress on passport delivery, turnaround times and the integrity of the passport, that process continues. I am happy to continue to engage on that.

On Deputy O'Shea's point, what I am saying for the people of Cork is that we are committed to Cork, to our Passport Office and to the new passport office. We will have the new passport office operational by autumn 2026 at 1 Navigation Square in Cork city. In addition to this, we will have the new building, the public office and the space and capacity for more staff. Our commitment to Cork and our presence and footprint in Cork are beyond doubt will be expanded.

My Department is not convinced of the business case for the printing machine but we will continue to keep this under review. I am happy to continue to engage. Perhaps next time I am in Cork, we might visit the passport service together and consider that further.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I thank the Tánaiste. I compliment the passport staff. The many passport service staff I have dealt with in my role as a TD for the Cork North-West constituency have been very helpful at all times. It is great to see that a new passport office is opening in Cork in the autumn and that there will be additional staff in that office. I know this matter has been brought up locally in my county, Cork, by local representative Councillor Rory Cocking in the Middleton local electoral area, and also by my colleague here in the Oireachtas Senator Eileen Lynch. It is a matter of importance to everybody in Cork to see if we can get a service operating that would be of benefit for all the people of Cork. The challenge is that if an urgent appointment is required, the people of Cork and of Munster have to travel to Dublin for a one-day service appointment to get that urgent passport. That is where the critical issue is.

Deputy Simon Harris: I hear the Deputy. We are continuing to do everything we can to reduce the number of people who ever need to travel for an in-person appointment. I am really encouraged to see that that is less than 2% of people. It is quite incredible. We have spare capacity for the appointments in Cork today. Only about 26% of the slots in Cork are being used. I join with the Deputy in saying that is not by accident but is a testament to the incredible work of the people in the passport service. It is not that long ago that, after the Covid backlog, trying to get a passport was a real challenge for many of our citizens. We often quite rightly criticise some of the reform programmes, which can be quite challenging. The passport reform programme has gone very well. I was in the Balbriggan office and met Deputy O'Reilly there not that long ago. A great team of people is doing really good work there. I thank them for that.

Middle East

16. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade for an update on his position in relation to the EU-Israel association agreement. [38030/25]

23. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade for an update on the steps he has taken, in conjunction with other EU governments, to have the Israel-EU trade arrangements suspended; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

[37865/25]

46. **Deputy Tom Brabazon** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade his assessment of the EU review of the EU-Israel association agreement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38058/25]

48. **Deputy Peter ‘Chap’ Cleere** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade for an update on his discussions with his EU counterparts on the EU-Israel association agreement. [38053/25]

55. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the course of action he plans to take should the suspension of the EU-Israel association agreement continue to be blocked at EU Council level, despite clear evidence of the breach of the human rights provisions of the agreement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38292/25]

73. **Deputy Barry Ward** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the position regarding the EU-Israel association agreement; the actions our Government is taking in talks with our EU partners related to Israel’s compliance with Article 2 of this agreement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37246/25]

Deputy Barry Ward: Question No. 73 relates to the work the Tánaiste is doing relating to the EU-Israel association agreement. I respect hugely the work that we have done in the European Union, that the Tánaiste has done in the European Union and the respect for the rule of law. Given that there is ample evidence to suggest that Israel is outside the terms of that agreement and that it is not respecting the rule of law or humanitarian law, evidence of which we see time after time, as well as the advisory opinion of the ICJ, can we persuade our colleagues in the European Union to take action on the EU-Israel association agreement and actually hold Israel to account with regard to human rights clauses in that agreement?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We all know what we want to see with the EU-Israel association agreement. We know the pieces we want to see here and I see there are questions tabled about the occupied territories Bill. I would like to think we are moving closer to delivering on services. I think everybody who is in this room would also like to think that there will be follow-through by the Tánaiste’s Department and the Department of justice on delivering on the GAA Palestine visit. Many people have contacted all of us about that. The EU-Israel association agreement will at least be the first move by the European Union on rightful sanctions against Israel. On that basis, would I be right in believing that that would give the Central Bank the powers to not facilitate the sale of war bonds? Has the Government looked at a means of avoiding our situation whereby we are facilitating the sale of war bonds? I do not need a conversation on the legislation and the arguments we have about that but there has to be a means by which we would remove any possibility of complicity in the brutal ongoing genocide.

Deputy Simon Harris: I propose to take Questions Nos. 16, 23, 46, 48, 55 and 73 together.

I thank Deputies Ward and Ó Murchú. As the House is aware, as far back as 14 February 2024, the then Taoiseach and the Prime Minister of Spain wrote to the President of the European Commission, requesting an urgent review of whether Israel was compliant with its human rights obligations under the EU-Israel association agreement. It was a lonely place back then, with just Ireland and Spain seeking this review. Further, the letter requested that the Commission propose appropriate measures for the consideration of the Council should it find that Israel is in breach of its obligations. The EU-Israel association agreement provides that the relations

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between the parties would be based on respect for human rights and democratic principles, which constitute an essential element of the agreement. The agreement says that human rights clauses are an essential element. It is clear and we did not need any review to tell us that Israel is not living up to its human rights obligations. We eventually got 17 and then 19 countries to agree that we should have a review. The review has taken place and has found, *quelle surprise*, that Israel is in major breach of its human rights obligations and Article 2 of that agreement.

I do not believe this can be a consequence-free zone. The European Union cannot find a party to be in breach and then just ignore that or wish that away. At the last Foreign Affairs Council meeting, we asked Kaja Kallas, the High Representative of the European Union, to engage with the Israeli Government, because if someone is in breach, we have to ask how they intend to take themselves out of breach. We also asked her to engage with the College of Commissioners on what potential actions the European member states may now wish to take. The Taoiseach, the Government of Ireland and I would like to see the agreement suspended in the interim. That would be appropriate. It would require unanimity and I would be misleading the House to suggest that such unanimity would exist or be likely to exist. That is one reason why we are pursuing our own domestic legislation regarding the occupied Palestinian territories as an interim measure. I again reiterate my call and I hope other EU member states that share our views on this issue will follow and produce their own domestic legislation.

Deputy Barry Ward: I put on record my admiration for the fact that the Tánaiste has put together a coalition among our European colleagues. It is no small feat. Given what he has said and given the inconsistency of the strength of action that Europe has taken on Russia, and the lack of action taken regarding Israel, how can we continue to have faith in the operation of the rule of law if this is not an almost automatic thing? Where the breach has been found, how is unanimity still required when, on the face of it, there are clear breaches that render the agreement inoperable?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The Tánaiste said, "Israel is not living up to its human rights obligations." That is a massive understatement and I think he would acknowledge that himself.

Deputy Simon Harris: Yes.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: There have to be consequences for the genocidal action of the brutal Israeli regime. It must feel those consequences. The Tánaiste has the support of all the people on this island to take action against Israel to ensure that it does feel those consequences. While I am on my feet and have the floor, I implore him to do all that he can to get the kids here to play GAA. I spoke to one of the families that are expecting a child to come and stay with them. Their kids are devastated but, more importantly, the children in Gaza need to get out for a couple of days to play the sport that they love and to be somewhere peaceful and quiet for a couple of days. I urge the Tánaiste to do everything in his power to facilitate these children coming to Ireland. They just want to play Gaelic games with young Irish people. That is all they want to do.

Deputy Simon Harris: I hear Deputy O'Reilly about that. I acknowledge that people are trying to do something good, in good faith. We all share that view. There are rules in place relating to visas, particularly when it comes to minors, especially when they are not travelling with parents or guardians. An appeals process is in place. I make that point without over-commenting on individual applications.

I agree on the point about consequences and made this point at the Foreign Affairs Council. We cannot find somebody in breach of their human rights obligations in an association agreement and say that is grand, we found them in breach and there is nothing to see here. There have to be consequences. I am checking this at the moment but my understanding is that the suspension of the agreement requires unanimity. Other measures may not require unanimity and that is where Ireland's focus will be in the days ahead.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Rural Schemes

79. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht if he has considered the establishment of a community wealth-building fund within his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33194/25]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: This question is fairly straightforward and simple, as I would like to think all my questions are. Has the Minister of State given consideration to establishing a community wealth building fund within his Department? He will know it is very long-standing Sinn Féin policy to support the development of community wealth building. We were in here the other night debating a Bill on ethical procurement and a representative of the Government stated that the Government is not hostile to the idea. This question is generally in that vein.

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): I thank the Deputy for her question. Community wealth building is, indeed, a long-standing commitment of the Deputy and her party. As she knows well, the concept refers to a range of approaches to local economic development. While the Department under the Minister, Deputy Calleary, and me does not have a dedicated community wealth building fund as such, our wide range of policies and funding programmes provide support for local economic development and community-led local development in line with many of the principles of community wealth building.

The creation of an environment in which social enterprises can thrive is a key element of community wealth building. Our Department leads on the implementation of the Government's social enterprise policy and a new policy, Trading for Impact, was launched last year. In addition, the community services programme currently supports 427 community-based organisations to provide local services through a social enterprise model. The national rural development policy, Our Rural Future, has, over its lifespan, provided significant investment and supports, strengthened local economies and improved the lives of many people in rural communities across Ireland.

The LEADER programme, which supports economic development and job creation in rural areas, is a prime example of community-led local development. In addition, the rural regeneration and development fund and the building acquisition measure of the town and village renewal scheme invest in the regeneration of rural towns and villages, including measures for the acquisition of buildings for community use, which aligns with the concept of community wealth building.

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As the Deputy knows, Deputy Conor D. McGuinness, the Minister and I have visited many areas in conjunction with the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP. This initiative supports integrated approaches across communities throughout the country, enhances and leads community development, addresses disadvantage at local level and supports community-led initiatives in urban and rural areas. I thank the Deputy for the question and would be happy to explore the matter further with her.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I really welcome that. As I said, this is long-standing Sinn Féin policy but it also makes a lot of sense. I appreciate that the Minister of State outlined what has been done, but the difference between what he has said and community wealth building revolves around key performance indicators, KPIs, to use that jargon. A community wealth building fund is shown to have been successful where there are deliverables and it is measurable, meaning we can look at reductions in poverty and inequality in a given local area. The purpose of it is to take the money being spent and use it to drive not just the local economy but also the local community.

The State is a big player as regards spending power at local, national and international level. We must take that and channel it towards deliverables such as reduction in poverty, well-paying jobs for local people and additional local businesses, including those owned by co-operatives. It is not only what the Government is doing but adding an extra layer on top of that and measuring it. If we look at places such as Preston and Ayrshire, we can see genuine transformation happening at local level.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Deputy. If we look at the example and model we have here in SICAP, which is our country's primary social inclusion intervention, it supports communities. I am well aware of Cleveland and Preston. I am not aware of the Ayrshire model and would be happy to discuss that further. I have looked at Cleveland's model in particular.

To give the House an example, €48.9 million in funding was invested in SICAP this year. I remind Members of the House that the place-based leadership programme under SICAP leads to improved building capacity. To be helpful, and I make this point in a non-confrontational manner, the issue of work co-operatives does not come under our Department but a different remit. Both the Minister and I, along with our Department and under the programme for Government, are committed to improving many aspects of the lives of people through community involvement and community-led initiatives. Last week, I was in Clare, while the Minister was in different parts of the country. I met Deputy McGuinness in Waterford with different people. These are wonderful people lifting each other up and raising the standard of living and the standard of public buildings. I opened a number of buildings last week in Cork, including the eHub, which is different. It is about working locally and nationally to ensure disused buildings are used.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I do not wish to be argumentative but there is a small difference between what I am saying and what the Minister of State is saying. As much as the community wealth building model is driven by those deliverables, we are looking at measuring improvement in regard to the number of children living in poverty and increasing the percentage of the working-age population in employment, and not only in employment but in employment in decent work. It is about measuring as well as local development and investment and channeling money in a focused way. I encourage the Minister of State to look at Ayrshire and Preston in particular. Preston has been completely transformed by this and the drivers measured the impact on wages, poverty and job satisfaction, etc., for the local community. On this day last

week we were here with the Minister of State's colleague the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, and we discussed how the State can be a really important driver. This adds an additional measurement in order that it will be very focused and ensure there is delivery at local level.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: As the Deputy knows, the Department is progressing a number of initiatives and policies that provide both urban and rural regeneration through an integrated strategic way of delivering supports, programme schemes and co-ordinating measures to address social disadvantage and imbalance in our communities or, in some cases, a lack of opportunity. I gave the example of the national policy on social enterprise, the strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland. We are working to develop new policies, synergies and partnerships, such as through Our Rural Future, and there is significant investment. Some people are still not where they should be and I fully accept that, but we are working to identify and respond in a variety of ways. Our Department is very much committed to a people-first approach in any funding we spend to deliver for people at a local level.

Library Services

80. **Deputy Mark Wall** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht to provide the amount of funding allocated to local libraries, in each county, for the past four years, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38310/25]

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Deputy for his continuing support for our national library programme. When we served together in the Seanad, he was a strong advocate for library services. The Minister, Deputy Calleary, and I, as Minister of State with responsibility for libraries, are investing in our library services. They are a key priority for both of us and for the Department and that is reflected in the public library strategy. It is an ambitious, forward-looking strategy and one of its key commitments is the delivery of a libraries capital programme. To that end, it is important for Members to bear in mind that the provision of library services is a matter for local authorities primarily.

Within that capacity, under the Local Government Act, we are funding a capital programme this year over a four-year window from 2023 to 2027 that amounts to €22.6 million. Eleven state-of-the-art library projects across the country are being commenced and a further €2.6 million is being invested in 12 next generation mobile library services, including in two new libraries in the Deputy's county of Kildare, in Clane and Newbridge. In addition to this, investment of over €28 million was approved in May of this year under the rural regeneration and development fund for three projects including the provision of new library facilities. Our Department also provides funding annually of over €740,000 as a contribution to support local authorities in leasing buildings for the provision of public library services. In addition, €1.3 million was approved by our Department in November 2023 for the provision of new ICT equipment in public libraries. Over the past four years, a sum of €40 million has been allocated by the libraries unit in our Department for public libraries across three funding streams, namely, capital projects, current expenditure and the Dormant Accounts Fund. The €2.25 million allocated from the Dormant Accounts Fund has provided, for example, sensory equipment and equipment to support physically impaired library users for libraries in every county. I will provide the Deputy with information detailing the expenditure county by county in tabular form. In the county of Kildare, which Deputy Wall represents so well, a sum of €5.5 million has been allocated during that four-year window.

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Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Minister of State for his detailed reply. I welcome the fact that €40 million has been spent on libraries. We all agree in this House that every euro spent on libraries is a euro well spent. I start by commending everybody in my hometown of Athy where over the past number of years a former Dominican church was converted into a library. Anyone who has visited that location will see it shows the benefit of converting older buildings into a community library. If they are ever in the town, both the Minister and the Minister of State are welcome to visit that library because it is a model that could be replicated. The Minister of State mentioned converting buildings into libraries, etc., and that community library in Athy is a model that could be replicated in so many places.

My question relates to Newbridge library for which funding of €3 million was recently announced. That will be a county library for the county of Kildare with archive storage, etc., which is very important for any county. I ask again for continued support from the Minister of State's Department for that library in Newbridge, which will be a state-of-the-art library for the whole county of Kildare.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I look forward to visiting the library with Deputy Wall. Just to assure him, the project has received funding of €3 million under the capital programme to support what is a very ambitious and exciting plan for the county library in Newbridge, including archives and a cultural centre. The project will be superb in terms of its size and scale. It will be 2,378 sq. m. It will be four times larger than the existing library in Newbridge and will provide an opportunity to showcase the library service in the county.

As the Deputy knows, it has received stage 2 approval in the Department's four-stage capital management process. I look forward to working with Kildare County Council, the Deputy and other Members of the House in ensuring the libraries capital programme delivers for the people of Kildare. To be fair to Kildare County Council, it has been very progressive and ambitious around the library service and I commend it on the work it is doing. I look forward to working with all Members and Deputy Wall, in particular, on the project for Kildare.

Deputy Mark Wall: The latest information I have is that it is hoped the project will proceed in quarter 1 of 2026, which would be very welcome. I mentioned in this House before that Newbridge now has a population of almost 26,000 people, so it is very important we have a functioning library for that size of population. The fact the new building will be four times larger than the existing building, which has run its course but has done the people of Newbridge proud over a long period, is very welcome. I look forward to the opening of that library and the continued support of the Government. The library will have the support of every public representative in the county of Kildare, because it is so important not only to the town of Newbridge but also to the county of Kildare. We have a tradition and history there and a great history department within Kildare County Council. It has a lot of archive material that needs to be shown and displayed. The Curragh history museum is also very important to the county and we can share that history as well through the Newbridge county library. I thank the Minister of State for his reply and I look forward to that project for the people of Newbridge and of County Kildare.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Since 2020, our Department has allocated Kildare County Council €11.1 million for the public library service, be it the library service to Clane or the mobile library service. It is a testament to the vision of Kildare County Council in terms of its recognition of the importance of our library service.

This is maybe tongue in cheek, but perhaps the Tailteann Cup can be showcased in the new library as well. I wish Kildare every success over the weekend.

It is important we in the Department work with the county council to ensure our libraries capital programme is delivered. I have travelled to a number of libraries across the country. I visited Ennis last weekend and it is fantastic to see what is happening in our libraries and in particular in the My Open Library service as well. As Minister of State with responsibility for libraries, I look forward to working with all Members of the House to ensure the library service's capital programme, the book fund, the mobile library service and ICT is enhanced during the term of our office in the Department.

Voluntary Sector

81. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht if he shares the concerns of community development workers regarding resourcing of this critically important discipline. [38528/25]

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Baineann mo cheist le hoibrithe forbairt pobail agus na buarthaí atá orthu i dtaobh acmhainní. My question relates to the critical and important role of community development workers and their concerns around resourcing, both pay and conditions, and also resourcing within organisations. The Minister of State will appreciate from his engagement with community development bodies that there are serious concerns now about both pay and conditions and the ability of these organisations to recruit and retain workers in this very important discipline.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Deputy for raising this very important matter and he is right that it is a recurring theme when we speak to people who are very committed to the work they do. The Government's five-year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector, Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities, was published six years ago. It is a whole-of-government strategy, led by our Department and it has been implemented collaboratively over the last five years in partnership with the sector.

Last week, I announced the commencement of a public consultation process to prepare for the development of a successor strategy, which I expect will reaffirm the Government's commitment to supporting the community development sector.

I am very much aware of the important role community workers play in the delivery of programmes that are funded through our Department, many of which are based in very disadvantaged areas and provide vital services to communities. I thank the staff and workers for the work they do. They make the lives of all of us better and enhance our local communities every day and week they go out and do their work.

In line with the current strategy, our Department has supported initiatives to strengthen the profession of community development worker. In 2022, funding was provided to establish a two-year bursary fund to support people employed in community organisations to pursue professional community work qualifications. In addition, further funding was approved for the establishment of a one-year pre-professional bursary. Both funds are administered by the all-Ireland endorsement body. The funding will have the effect of expanding the professionally qualified workforce in the community workspace, strengthening the capacity of the workers

and their respective organisations to respond to the complex challenges the communities they work in are experiencing.

I look forward to continuing to engage, as does the Minister, Deputy Calleary, with the community development sector in the consultation process for the new strategy and to hearing their views on this important issue.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Cuirim fáilte roimh an gcomhairliúchán sin. It is good that consultation, with a view to arriving at a new strategy, is taking place. However, this comes down to a question of resources and to the level of Government funding. There is a huge amount of training and accreditation going on and the bursaries are very welcome. However, it is about creating a situation and environment where community development workers - people who put time, effort and thought into becoming professionals - enter into that discipline. They are passionate about the communities, understand that process is as important as the task at hand and get the holistic nature of community development work in the result being more than the sum of its part. These people by economic necessity cannot enter that sector or stay in it because the salaries and job security are not there. This really comes down to resourcing, certainty about resourcing and additional money. As we move towards the budgetary process, I ask that this be front and centre of the Minister of State's engagement with the Departments of public expenditure and finance.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I am committed to continuing to provide supports to the community and voluntary sector. I am not absolving us from any role here but our Department does not set terms and conditions of pay. We are very much of the view that it is about supporting the community and voluntary sector. My priority is to create an environment where the sector can thrive, that is enabling and empowering, and that is building capacity and strengthening the sector. I am very much aware of the needs and concerns expressed and the reality some people find themselves in regarding the retention and recruitment of staff.

It is about ensuring we can build resilience, skill-development and capacity among the community and voluntary groups. It is about having a comprehensive training needs assessment specific to the needs of our small community and voluntary organisations, in particular. It is also about ensuring we can put in place multi-annual funding through SICAP, CSP, SSNO and LEADER to help us to create an atmosphere and an opportunity to retain high quality staff. We have high quality staff in the sector and we must acknowledge that and do all we can to ensure that knowledge base is not lost. I would be happy to hear any suggestions the Deputy has and I would be happy to work with him on them.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. I think we all acknowledge the skill and the resilience of those working in the sector. Indeed, it is their resilience that got them through and kept them in their jobs when austerity was tearing the very heart out of the sector. Many of our communities are grateful they stayed the course. However, as I said, it is becoming more and more difficult for community organisations to recruit and retrain staff into these. What we need is an extension of the community development programme. We need more money going into these community groups so that community workers can be out on the ground doing the jobs they need to. The model is that Government does not set pay and conditions. However, the Government has to be very conscious of those pay and conditions and the impact lower pay and conditions has on the sector and its ability to do work that benefits society and the State in the long run. That means Government has to step up now and fund and support improvements in terms, pay and conditions for workers in the sector.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: To be fair, we are aware of and are very cognisant of the challenges in the sector. I reiterate that it would be inappropriate for our Department to be involved in the setting of pay and conditions, while recognising the importance of the sector and the brilliant work being done. What we are committed to doing and what we will do is to look into an estimated time to boost the budget for the Department but also recognising that the conditions of employment, the whole issue of training and upskilling is part of what we do in looking to improve the outcomes for people in terms of staff and qualifications. As I said earlier, our Department has been heavily investing in professional bursaries and professional upskilling of the workforce through strengthening capacity of the workers and the different organisations. It is about ensuring the Department takes note of what the Deputy is saying and recognises the importance of the staff and the workers. I will further engage with the sector again on the matter, as he knows.

Question No. 82 taken with Written Answers.

Forbairt na Gaeilge

83. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** den an Aire Forbartha Tuaithe agus Pobail, agus Gaeltachta cén dul chun cinn atá déanta maidir le haitheantas a bhronnadh ar bhailte a chuir isteach ar Líonraí Gaeltachta, cathain is féidir leis na gceantair sin a bheith ag súil go mbronnfar an stádas sin orthu; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [37816/25]

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Cén dul chun cinn atá déanta maidir le haitheantas a bhronnadh ar bhailte a chur isteach ar stádas mar líonra Gaeltachta? Cathain gur féidir leis na ceantair sin a bheith ag súil go mbronnfar an stádas sin orthu?

Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht(Deputy Dara Calleary): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta. Tabharfar aitheantas faoi Acht na Gaeltachta, 2012 do líonraí Gaeilge ach pleananna teanga a bheith aontaithe leis na pobail sna líonraí éagsúla i gcomhréir leis na critéir pleanála teanga fhorordaithe. Tá Foras na Gaeilge freagrach faoi Acht na Gaeltachta as tacaíocht a thabhairt d'eagraíochtaí maidir le hullmhú agus cur i bhfeidhm pleananna teanga sna líonraí Gaeilge. Tá trí líonra Gaeilge ceadaithe go dáta faoin bpróiseas faoi Acht na Gaeltachta. Is iad sin: Inis, Baile Locha Riach agus Cluain Dolcáin. Anuas air sin, ta dhá ceann sa Tuaisceart - Carn Tóchair agus iarthar Bhéal Feirste - ceadaithe faoi phróiseas neamhreachtuil atá á riar ag Foras na Gaeilge.

In 2020, rinne Foras na Gaeilge athbhreithniú ar scéim pobal Gaeilge de chuid na heagraíochta agus, mar chomharba uirthi sin, fógraíodh an scéim forbartha líonraí Gaeilge. I measc aidhmeanna na scéime seo, tá béim faoi leith ag deontaithe reatha na scéime oibriú i dtreo aitheantas mar líonra Gaeilge a bhaint amach. Tríd an scéim, tá grúpaí á gcumasú le teacht chun tosaigh agus a chur isteach ar an chéad bhabhta eile den phróiseas iarratas reachtuil. Trí Fhoras na Gaeilge, agus le beannacht mo Roinne, tabharfar cuireadh d'eagraíochtaí bheith ceaptha mar cheanneagraíochtaí líonraí Gaeilge in am trátha.

Toisc scéim forbartha líonraí Gaeilge a bheith ceangailte go dlúth le cuspóirí Acht na Gaeltachta, 2012, cheadaigh Bord Fhoras na Gaeilge síneadh ama le deontaithe reatha de chuid scéim forbartha líonraí Gaeilge go deireadh 2026. Déanfaidh mé cinneadh mar Aire ar cathain a chuirfear tús leis an gcéad timthriall eile d'ullmhú pleananna teanga i leith líonraí Gaeilge, ag tabhairt staid reatha an phróisis pleanála teanga, aiseolas ón bhForas agus na hacmhainní airgid

a bheidh ar fáil do mo Roinn sna blianta amach romhainn san áireamh.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Mar atá ráite aige cheana féin, tá trí cinn de na líonraí seo in Éireann faoi láthair: Inis, Baile Locha Riach agus Cluain Dolcáin. Ó thuaidh, tá Carn Tóchair agus iarthar Bhéal Feirste chomh maith. Ó thaobh Cill Dara go háirithe, tá Cill Dara le Gaeilge ann. Is eagraíocht é seo atá ag déanamh iarracht líonra Gaeilge a bhunadh i gCill Dara. Tá an oiread sin Gaeilge á labhairt i gCill Dara. Breathnaím ar Mhaigh Nuad, mo bhaile féin, mar shampla. Tá dhá Ghaelscoil i Maigh Nuad agus tá Gaelcholáiste ann. Tá Ollscoil Mhá Nuad ann, ar ndóigh, agus Coláiste Phádraig Má Nuad chomh maith. Tá Gaeilge Nuada ag déanamh an-obair ansin, chomh maith le Gaeilge an Bhradáin i Léim an Bhradáin. Ní hamháin go bhfuil mé ag breathnú ar Cill Dara le Gaeilge agus Nás na Ríogh agus Sult na Sollán ach tá mé ag breathnú ar Mhaigh Nuad chomh maith ó thaobh líonra Gaeilge sa toadhchá. Ceist amháin atá agam ag teacht as sin ná cathain a mbeidh an chéad bhabhta maoinithe eile ar fáil do na heagraíochtaí sin?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta agus tréasláim go mór leis an obair atá ar siúl i gCill Dara faoi láthair agus le blianta anuas. Tá mé buíoch d'athair agus don ghrúpa atá ag obair leo, as an obair sin. Mar is eol dó, bunaíodh Cill Dara le Gaeilge i 2014 agus tá mo Roinn ag cur maoiniú ar fáil ó 2021 chun oifigeach fheidhmiúchán a fhostú agus chun na costais a bhaineann le plean oibre an duine sin a chlúdach. I measc na ndualgas atá ar an oifigeach sin, tá comhoibriú le gnólaigh i gContae Chill Dara chun iad a spreagadh le breis a úsáid ina ngnólaigh. Tá fostaí lánaimseartha eile ag an eagraíocht freisin atá á mhaoiniú ag Foras na Gaeilge. Ó mo Roinn, i 2025, tá níos mó ná €90,000 ceadaithe do Chill Dara le Gaeilge. Mar sin, táimid dáiríre faoin obair atá ar siúl i gCill Dara agus seasann an Roinn go mór leis an obair sin. Níl aon dáta don chéad bhabhta eile maoinithe. Braitheann sé sin ar chúrsaí cáinainéise. Ós rud é go bhfuil obair iontach ar siúl, áfach, táimid sásta seasamh leis sin agus airgead a chaitheamh ar an obair sin i gCill Dara.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Buíochas leis as an aitheantas sin chomh maith. Tá sé seo an-tábhachtach do na pobail Ghaeilge seo, go háirithe lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht. Ní airgead amháin atá ann. Tuigim go bhfuil airgead i gceist sa chás seo ó thaobh líonra Gaeilge a bhunú ach is rud fíorthábhachtach é an t-aitheantas mar líonra Gaeilge do phobal na Gaeilge lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht. Tá sé tábhachtach go háirithe i gCill Dara ach timpeall na tíre chomh maith in áiteanna cosúil le Maigh Eo agus Baile Átha Cliath. Tá sé feicthe againn cé chomh maith is atá an líonra ag dul i gCluain Dolcáin mar shampla, agus i mbailte eile. Tá na Gaeil Óga i mBaile Átha Cliath chomh maith agus tá a lán eagraíocht eile ar fud fad na tíre. An iarratas dheireanach atá agam ar an Aire ná go n-iarrfadh sé ar an Aire Airgeadais an t-airgead a chur ar leataobh don cháinainéis do na líonraí Gaeilge seo - go háirithe i gCill Dara, mar shampla. Go raibh míle maith ag an Aire as an méid oibre atá á dhéanamh aige go dtí seo.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tá an t-uafás oibre ar siúl i ngach cuid den tír. Tá 36 grúpa bainteach leis an nGaeilge i ngach cuid den oileán ag an bpointe seo, ní hamháin i gCill Dara. Tá naoi grúpa ann in áit a bhfuil líonra Gaeilge ann. Táimid ag obair le gach ceann de na grúpaí sin faoi chúrsaí airgeadais agus faoi chomhoibriú freisin. Tuigeann an tAire caiteachas phoiblí cé chomh tábhachtach is atá an scéim seo agus cé chomh tábhachtach atá an obair atá ar siúl. Beimid ag plé na hoibre thábhachtach seo i gcomhthéacs an chéad cáinainéise eile agus sa phlean forbartha náisiúnta atá ag teacht. Tá an t-ádh linn go bhfuil Aire sa Roinn caiteachas phoiblí a thuigeann cé chomh tábhachtach is atá ár dteanga agus cé chomh tábhachtach is atá sé í a spreagadh. I gcomhthéacs an chéad cheithre bhliain eile, tá muinín agam go mbeimid in ann dul ar aghaidh leis na grúpaí sin.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

85. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht the total amount of funding allocated to the social inclusion and community activation programme in Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38272/25]

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Deputy. Our Department's social inclusion and community activation programme is our country's primary social inclusion programme. SICAP is a national programme delivered locally in both rural and urban areas by local development companies. It supports those in the greatest need to address high and persistent levels of deprivation through targeted, locally-led initiatives and approaches. The programme encourages partnerships between people, community organisations, and public sector agencies to address diverse community needs. The current SICAP programme commenced in 2024 and will run until 2028. I thank the Deputy for the work he does in his own area, particularly in Blackpool. He will be aware that there are currently seven local development companies delivering the SICAP programme across the eight contract areas in Cork city, Cork county and the west Cork Islands.

11 o'clock

While SICAP is a multi-annual funding programme, it is subject to the annual budgetary Estimates process. The total SICAP funding allocations for last year and this year for the seven companies in Cork came to €8,183,430. The Department has also provided additional funding through SICAP since 2022 to local development companies to support Ukrainian beneficiaries of temporary protection and international protection applicants. A total of €1.91 million has been allocated to the local development companies in Cork for these supports this year and last year. There has been a positive trend of year-on-year increases in SICAP funding in recent years. The Minister and I are committed to ensuring this continues in line with commitments in the programme for Government.

Deputy Colm Burke: The issue in relation to funding is about people living in disadvantaged communities, supporting people with disabilities and people with a criminal record who, as a result, have difficulty finding employment. I am concerned that there is a lack of structure for people discharged from our prisons in accommodation and in trying to get them back into the system. Will more work be done in that area? It needs to be done first when they are physically in prison, with co-ordination of their plan for when they get out. According to the records, on the north side of Cork city in particular, there are people whose only home in real terms is prison. While it is a small number of people, it is important. We need to do more in that area. Are there proposals to deal with that issue?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Deputy who is right to raise this matter. He has raised it previously. I have asked the Department to examine this issue. The *Irish Examiner* recently had an interesting profile of the north side of Cork city. It is an issue I am concerned about. We need to have a serious conversation about it. The Glen Resource Centre has a good programme for the families of those in prison. It has held a summer camp in the past few weeks. I am happy to sit down and discuss this with the Deputy because it is an important matter. Despite all the funding, outreach, activities and programmes, there is an issue we are missing somewhere. I commend the Cork City Partnership on its work, particularly in the Mayfield area. I will work with all involved to ensure we look at supports, in particular for those who have left prison to avoid that revolving door. A lot of work is being done. There are success stories but the Deputy is right to highlight the people being missed by the great programmes.

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Deputy Colm Burke: It is interesting the Minister of State mentioned the Glen Resource Centre. I have been involved going back to 1996 when there was nothing at all there. We got funding from Europe to start the centre. There are now 80 organisations using the centre. It is a fantastic development with fantastic staff. All of the organisations there are working hard, providing a good service for the community. Coming back to the issue, as we come into the winter months, people will offend because they have nowhere to go. The whole idea is they will end up in prison for the winter months. There is a problem in our prisons with inadequate accommodation. We should seriously look at how to help these people when they are in prison. We need to get community groups working with them at an early stage when they come back out. I ask for that issue be worked on over the next 12 to 18 months.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Deputy for the work he has done. I taught in St. Aidan's Community College; I am familiar with the area. I recognise the issue he has highlighted, despite the great work by a variety of community organisations and mentoring. There is an empowerment piece, training, retraining and engagement between agencies. There are a number of people who re-offend once they leave prison. We have an obligation, duty and responsibility to work with everybody to ensure those people and their families are given that opportunity. If the Deputy has suggestions, I am open to working with everybody to ensure we accomplish the aim he articulated so that we do not miss people. We as a Department and a Government are about tackling many issues in terms of disadvantage and the people in our criminal justice system. There are success stories. People have left prison and made new beginnings. The Glen Resource Centre is an example. I commend the Deputy again on his work on that. It shows that by working with families and children of the men and women involved, we can make it better.

Foras na Gaeilge

84. **Deputy Tom Brabazon** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht the engagement his Department has had with Foras na Gaeilge to ensure the group has long-term funding into the future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38163/25]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Tá Foras na Gaeilge ag freastal ar phobal na Gaelainne ar fud an oileáin ar fad. Tá an-bhuairt ar na heagrais éagsúla a bhfuil an foras ag freastal orthu nach bhfuil an maoiniú oiriúnach ar fáil dóibh. Cén teagmháil a bhí ag an Aire leis an bhforas go dtí seo chun a chinntiú go mbeadh an maoiniú oiriúnach acu?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Is í mo Roinn féin, thar ceann Rialtas na hÉireann, agus an Roinn Pobal ó Thuaidh thar ceann Fheidhmeannas Thuaisceart Éireann a chómhaoiniú an Foras Teanga Thuaidh-Theas, ina gcumasctar Foras na Gaeilge agus Gníomhaireacht na hUltaise. Cuireann Rialtas na hÉireann 75% den bhuiséad Fhoras na Gaeilge ar fáil go bliantúil agus tagann an 25% eile ó Fheidhmeannas Thuaisceart Éireann de réir an chaiteachais a comhaontaíodh nuair a bunaíodh an Foras Teanga Thuaidh-Theas.

Déanann Comhairle Aireachta Thuaidh-Theas buiséad na n-institiúidí Thuaidh-Theas, lena n-áirítear an Foras Teanga, a fhaomhadh. Bhí mé i mo chathaoirleach ar chruinniú earnáil an fhoras teanga i mí Aibreáin, inar comhaontaíodh pleananna gnó agus buiséid 2025 d'Fhoras na Gaeilge agus do Gníomhaireacht na hUltaise. Bhuaileamar freisin le cathaoirligh agus príomhfheidhmeannaigh gach gníomhaireachta ag an gcruinniú sin, tar éis dom bualadh le Foras na Gaeilge níos luaithe i mbliana ar mhaithe le plé a dhéanamh ar na dúshláin mhaoinithe os comhair na heagraíochta.

Áirítear sa mhaoiniú comhaontaithe do 2025 íocaíochtaí aonuaire de luach €630,000 ó Rialtas na hÉireann go Foras na Gaeilge maidir le costas pinsin stairiúla, rud a chuirfear ar chumas Fhoras na Gaeilge na ciorruithe a d'fhógair sé níos luaithe i mbliana a chur ar ceal. Cé gur chuir Rialtas na hÉireann méadú maoinithe ar fáil d'Fhoras na Gaeilge ina bhuiséad do 2025, ní mór cómhaoiniú a bheith ar fáil ón Roinn Pobal ó Thuaidh de réir chóimheas an chomhaontú maoinithe sular féidir borradh ar bith a chur faoi bhuiséad na ngníomhaireachtaí. Ina leith sin, tá athbhreithniú á dhéanamh faoi láthair ag an dá Roinn a thugann urraíocht le socruithe ó thaobh maoinithe a chur ar fáil don Fhoras Teanga. Mar sin féin, ní mór don dá Roinn a thugann urraíocht agus na Ranna airgeadais sna dlínsí teacht ar chomhaontú faoi rudaí áirithe agus a bheith soiléir an féidir é a chur faoi bhráid an CATT.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Is maith é go bhfuil an teagmháil á brú ar aghaidh ag an Aire. Tá buairt ar phobal na Gaelainne agus ar na heagrais éagsúla. Teastaíonn uathu a chinntiú go mbeidh maoiniú oiriúnach ar fáil do na heagrais ar fud an oileáin ar fad. Tuigim go bhfuil an Rialtas ó Dheas sásta a chuid mhaoiniú a chur ar fáil ach gurb amhlaidh go bhfuil an brú ag teacht ón bhFeidhmeannas ó Thuaidh agus nach bhfuil an DUP agus Sinn Féin ag cur a sciar den airgead ar fáil. Is é sin an áit a bhfuil an deacracht. An féidir brú a chur ar an bhFeidhmeannas ó Thuaidh, ar an DUP agus ar Shinn Féin a dhualgais a chomhlíonadh agus tacaíocht a thabhairt don fhoras agus do na heagrais Ghaeilge ar fud an oileáin ar fad?

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Ní ghlacaim leis an léamh atá ag an Teachta Ó Muineacháin ar an gceist seo. Baineann an ghéarchéim seo le hAire amháin ón DUP san Fheidhmeannas ó Thuaidh atá ag cur srian ar mhaoiniú. Tá gach iarracht á déanamh ag na páirtithe eile san Fheidhmeannas. Mar a thuigeann an Teachta, ní gnáthRialtas é. Ní oibríonn sé sa tslí chéanna a n-oibríonn an comhrialtas sa dlínse seo. Caithfimid dul i ngleic leis an bhfadhb seo. Tá sé níos measa ar an bhforas mar gheall ar na ciorruithe a tharla thar na blianta, go háirithe le linn na géarchéime eacnamaíche nach mór deich mbliana ó shin. Tá sé seo ag cur isteach ar líonraí, ar bhailte seirbhíse Gaelainne agus ar scéimeanna Gaelainne fud fad an oileáin seo. Caithfidh an Rialtas dul i ngleic leis agus níos mó maoinithe a chur ar fáil sa tslí chéanna ina gcuirtear ar fáil é do na forais chultúrtha eile atá maoinithe ag an Stát, an Chomhairle Ealaíon mar shampla an-láidir.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Gabhaim buíochas leis an mbeirt Teachta as sin. Tá sé an-tábhachtach dúinn teacht ar réiteach ach ní bheidh sé éasca. Nílím ag cur an mhilleáin ar aon duine go pearsanta. Tá na hoifigigh i mo Roinn ag obair go crua agus go dícheallach le hoifigigh na Roinne sa Tuaisceart. Tá siad fós ag déanamh na hoibre sin. Tá an obair sin ag leanúint ar aghaidh. Tá m'oiifigigh ag rá go bhfuil siad ag leanúint ar aghaidh. Táimid ag pleanáil le haghaidh an fhorais don chéad dá bhliain eile. Nílím ag plé cúrsaí airgeadais amháin ach cúrsaí cothroime freisin. Nílím féin in ann na ratios a athrú. Caithfimid a lán obair a dhéanamh air sin. Taobh amuigh den phróiseas sin, tá ardú mór tugtha d'Fhoras na Gaeilge ó thaobh cúrsaí airgeadais. In 2023, bhí €1.8 milliún ann. In 2025, tá €3.6 milliún ann. Tá an t-airgead sin ag teacht ó Rialtas na hÉireann go dtí an foras le haghaidh na n-eagraíochtaí. Beidh mé ag obair chun airgead breise a fháil sa chéad cháinaisnéis eile toisc go bhfuil sé tábhachtach go gcuidíonn muid agus go seasann muid leis na heagraíochtaí Gaeilge atá ag déanamh sáriarracht i ngach cuid den oileán.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Ar an gcéad dul síos, caithfimid díriú isteach ar riachtanais phobail na Gaelainne ar fud an oileáin ar fad. Más rud é nach bhfuil an Feidhmeannas ó Thuaidh ag freastal ar phobal na Gaelainne agus ag cur maoiniú cuí ar fáil - chonaiceamar anuraidh an tslí ina bhfuil sé ábalta maoiniú a chur ar fáil - an féidir an

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córas a athrú gan teacht salach ar Chomhaontú Aoine an Chéasta? An bhfuil slí eile chun é sin a láimhseáil más rud é nach bhfuil an Feidhmeannas ó Thuaidh in ann freastal ar phobal na Gaelainne? Tá sé fíorthábhachtach gan teacht salach ar Chomhaontú Aoine an Chéasta ach teastaíonn uainn a chinntiú gur féidir freastal ar phobal na Gaelainne ar fud an oileáin ar fad.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Bíonn slite eile ann i gcónaí. Táim ag coimeád súil ghéar ar an bhfadhb seo agus tá mo chuid oifigeach ag obair go dian leis na hoifigigh sa Tuaisceart. Comhoibríonn na hoifigigh sin an-mhaith le chéile. Beimid ag coimeád súile air sin. Caithfidh airgead breise a fháil. Táim chun é sin a phlé leis an Aire caiteachais phoiblí, go háirithe i gcomhthéacs an chéad cháinainéis eile. Ag an bpointe seo, i lár mhí Iúil, tá na cainteanna fós ar siúl. Leis na cainteanna seo, táimid ag réiteach don chéad dá bhliain eile le haghaidh Fhoras na Gaeilge. Tuigim an bhuaire atá ar na heagraíochtaí éagsúla. Bhíomar go léir ar an ócáid leis an gconradh an tseachtain seo caite. Tuigimid go léir na deiseanna atá ann don teanga má tá airgead breise le fáil.

Community Development Projects

86. **Deputy Erin McGreehan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht for an update on the community centres investment fund; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38070/25]

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I ask the Minister for an update on the community centres investment fund, and to make a statement on the matter. When will the next round be announced? It is a hugely important and successful scheme so I would like to hear an update.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy for her question. Community centres are the cornerstone of community life in towns and villages around the country. The Government recognises the very important role these centres play in bringing people together and facilitating community services and events.

Since its establishment in 2022, the community centres investment fund, CCIF, has provided some €110 million for the enhancement and refurbishment of existing community centres and the construction of new centres in locations that were not adequately served. Over €45 million was approved for some 861 community centres nationwide under CCIF 2022. To date, over €43 million of this has been paid to these communities, with 760 of those projects now complete. Last year, funding of €30 million was approved for the construction of 12 new community centres covering nine counties. These projects are now beginning to move forward.

The most recent fund focused again on the refurbishment of existing community facilities. In March of this year, I was delighted to announce over €26 million for 369 community centres under category 2, which provides funding of up to €100,000. This was in addition to 405 projects approved in November with a value of €7.8 million under category 1, which provides funding of up to €25,000. This brings the total amount approved under the 2024 iteration of the fund to over €33 million for in excess of 770 projects nationwide.

I am totally committed, as is the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, to delivering further iterations of the fund in the coming years in line with the commitment in the programme for Government. Since the programme for Government was agreed, we have seen first hand the value of these community centres in responding to Storm Éowyn, and the value of the people

who volunteer to provide these community centres. We will be looking at future rounds of the CCIF to ensure community centres are at the forefront of any future climate responses.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I thank the Minister for the very positive response. I want to highlight communities like my own community of Mullaghbuoy. Mullaghbuoy Community Centre was built by the community, including my parents and loads of other parents and my neighbours. They went around collecting £1 a week to make sure we had a community facility. It caters for everything from the cake sales to the céilís to making sure we have events for people in our communities. These centres have supported communities all around County Louth from St. Nicholas' GFC and St. Mel's Hall in Drogheda right up to Omeath District Development, which the Minister visited with us a couple of years ago. As he well knows, these had no ability to get funding for community centres. We have now seen huge positive investment, and community centres that were run down and had no money for refurbishment have come to life. We are seeing that investment in people in our communities. I really look forward to having the next iteration to support more community investment, and more communities in County Louth getting more access to the grants.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I want to take this opportunity, when we are discussing community centres, to make a request. This was a question I had in and it was moved to another Department but I am going to try and wedge it in here anyway. It concerns community childcare. When we are talking about community centres, we need to be looking at harnessing those buildings. We had a discussion on Storm Éowyn and the way in which it exposed some of the fragile infrastructure. Now that there is a lens on it and people are looking at that vital infrastructure, the Minister might consider and have community childcare and crèches as part of community centre redevelopment where it is happening. They are located, as Deputy McGreehan has pointed out, at the centre of our communities. They are the beating heart of our communities and are, very often, a very handy place for parents to get to and from. I ask that the Minister would keep community childcare to the forefront when he is discussing and considering community centres and investment.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I agree with the Deputy. Where we can colocate community facilities, it is much better for everybody. It is a more cohesive community. I know the Minister, Deputy Foley, who has responsibility under the building blocks scheme, has also expressed an interest in working with the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer and myself on this.

To come back to Deputy McGreehan, as I said, over €80 million has been approved for the refurbishment and enhancement of existing community centres since 2022. Last year, we funded over €30 million for 12 new community centres. My priority, at the moment, is to get those 12 projects up and running to get that money drawn down. We have over 770 projects completed and they are already delivering very real benefits, not just during storms. I am sure there are many community centres hosting summer camps as we speak, giving great relief to parents and guardians at this time of year. That is being done by volunteers in many cases. It shows the value of it all-year-round. In relation to Mullaghbuoy, as the Deputy mentioned, €24,000 was approved in 2022 to improve the kitchen facilities and €19,000 in 2024 for energy security upgrades. Much of the focus has been on upgrading community centres that were built at a certain time when energy costs were not a priority. They now are. We are now assisting community centres to reduce their energy costs.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: In relation to bringing childcare and that community and children focus, we have a fantastic facility in Cooley Kickhams which was also a recipient of the

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grant. We have a preschool there. My children went to it. It works well. It is the heart of the community and it is where our children should be and where they fit best. I absolutely support that.

Library Services

87. **Deputy Mark Wall** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht if he will report on the progress of implementing the national public library strategy; the amount of funding allocated to the strategy; the current expenditure on the implementation of strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38316/25]

Deputy Mark Wall: We have spoken about libraries before but I want to get an update on the public library strategy and maybe discuss one or two issues around that.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The public library strategy was published in July 2023. It contains 66 actions which will enable our public libraries to become multipurpose social and educational spaces for all members of the community to enjoy. As I said in response to a previous last question, our libraries are now transformed into places of community activity. They are no longer just for reading and studying; there are men's sheds, women's sheds and different varieties of activities going on there. The libraries development committee, comprising representation from members of the Local Government Management Agency, the County and City Management Association, city and county librarians and my Department, is responsible for monitoring the implementation of actions in the strategy.

Significant progress has been made to date on the implementation of the strategy. Examples of actions under way are a national skills for life programme of resources and activities which will see 684 events take place throughout the country this year, and the fact that age-friendly recognition has been achieved in every library. The My Open Library service continues to expand and is now available in 55 branches. A national public libraries open day took place this year and almost 1,350 new members were registered. Our Department continues to work with all the local authorities, the LGMA and all other partners and stakeholders to deliver on the ongoing actions.

I am delighted to support the strategy with continued investment. Since the launch of the strategy two years ago, our Department has approved expenditure of €28.3 million for libraries, including capital funding. A total of €8.3 million has been spent to date. In this context I would like to acknowledge the financial contributions made by local authorities from their own resources. I would also like to note the financial contributions made by various other stakeholders in the delivery of the strategy. The Minister, Deputy Calleary, and I are committed to developing the national library strategy.

Deputy Mark Wall: I did not come in on Deputy McGreehan's question because I wanted to leave it until this one. I totally believe it is important to have multipurpose facilities. I want to raise an issue that has come up in respect of a couple of locations. We have derelict buildings, old former schools in rural areas. A number of people have come together to form book clubs and heritage and historical societies in those buildings. The query I have relates to that multipurpose function whereby a library or a history club can be developed and make use of that community building. Will the Minister support that? Can we see funding for it? It is a very good use of buildings. We have spoken previously about the major libraries in major towns and

the amount of very welcome investment going in there. However, rural communities want to take over buildings, some of which are derelict, and form book clubs or heritage and historical societies. It is a great use of the building and a great fit for the library service as well to link in with those community buildings.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I was contacted recently by a student living in Balbriggan. He told me that he is there every morning 20 minutes before the library opens because there is a massive queue of people. That is a ringing endorsement of the work done by the people working in Balbriggan library and indeed all our libraries - I understand we in north County Dublin are not unique in that respect. Will the Minister give consideration to conducting a small survey, with reference to the previous point made, about utilising any existing capacity that might be within a town to expand that space? It is a really positive and good thing that people are actively trying to get into the library but it is unfortunate that sometimes they are turned away. We are in the middle of a housing crisis and many people live in very overcrowded accommodation. The library has never been more important in our towns, cities and villages. Will the Minister consider doing that survey to see where there might be a need for additional resources or additional capacity?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: There is huge merit in those suggestions. I am certainly very open to that. Athy library was mentioned as an example. Birr library is another example. In other parts of the country refurbished buildings are, through a variety of means, being used. Our libraries are now community spaces. They are being used by a variety of people. Our traditional library has changed, thankfully, from a place where you cannot talk, just read, to one where there is an open door for communities. Our Department recognises the importance of public libraries in our communities. It is about community and about people. I recognise the significance of the capital investment. To answer Deputy O'Reilly, I am open to any suggestions because I am a big advocate for libraries. As a member of the local authority, long before I was elected here, I was involved in the Cork city library committee. As the Deputy said, the library is a place for people. It was the only place where people could get educated. They could get books. I remember going to the mobile library as a child and wondering when we would get a library in Bishopstown. I will happily sit down and talk to the Deputies about that. If we can improve the offering for people in communities, why not do it?

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Minister of State for the positive reply. I want to mention two issues he brought up, namely, the age-friendly aspect and sensory rooms. They are important as part of our libraries. I welcome the fact that the Government has recognised that. I urge the Government to continue to invest in sensory rooms in particular. I know from visiting my local library and other libraries the importance of inclusivity. Having a sensory room means libraries are inclusive. Everyone can be part of the community.

The issue of turning rural buildings into mobile libraries facilitating book clubs and history clubs is something the Government should look at. I look forward to working with the Minister and the Minister of State on that because there are so many issues. Multipurpose buildings in communities are bringing a bit of life back into rural Ireland again. It is a positive reply and I look forward to advancing that.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: In regard to the sensory room issue, I was in Ennis library last week, where there is a sensory space. There was a mum with two kids in the sensory space and their joy and contemplative ease was phenomenal. I commend the staff in Ennis library on that space. It was breathtaking to see the way in which they were able to take a piece of the library

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floor area and use it for people with autism or other disabilities to go in and be at ease and at peace. I was struck by that. It is about the age-friendly recognition and that community piece. It is about ensuring that, as part of the strategy, we deliver on the 66 actions. It is also about ensuring that our libraries are the focal point for people and for communities. We are blessed with the staff in our libraries. They are wonderful people. I was struck by the local archive and local history sections in a number of libraries I visited in Waterford and Dungarvan. In my own city of Cork we have a wonderful public library and I hope we can transform the central library on Grand Parade in time. We are very fortunate with our library service. It is a jewel in the crown.

Question No. 88 taken with Written Answers.

Scéimeanna Tacaíochta

89. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** den an Aire Forbartha Tuaithe agus Pobail, agus Gaeltachta cén dul chun cinn atá déanta chun scéim na mbóithre áise a chur ar fáil arís; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [38150/25]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Nuair a bhí scéim na mbóithre áise ag feidhmiú cheana féin, bhí sí an-chabhrach do phobal na Gaeltachta. Déanadh athchóiriú ar bhóithre ar fud na nGaeltachtaí. Cén dul chun cinn atá déanta anois chun an scéim sin a oscailt agus a chur ar fáil do phobal na Gaeltachta arís?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tuigim go mór cé chomh tábhachtach is a bhí scéim na mbóithre áise le haghaidh mhuintir na Gaeltachta. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as ucht a cheiste fúithi. Mar a bhí luaite sa fhreagra i mí an Mhárta 2025, tá scéim na mbóithre áise curtha ar fionraí le roinnt blianta anuas. Faoin scéim sin, chuirte airgead ar fáil do na húdaráis áitiúla ar mhaithe le hobair dheisiúcháin a dhéanamh ar bhóithre cáilithe faoi leith sa Ghaeltacht. Idir an dá linn, bhí agus tá maoiniú ar fáil faoin scéim feabhsaithe áitiúil, nó LIS, de chuid mo Roinne chun cabhrú le húdaráis áitiúla obair fheabhsúcháin a dhéanamh ar bhóthair neamhphoiblí agus ar bhóithre nach ndéantar cothabháil poiblí orthu sa ghnáthbhealach. Tuigtear dom go gcaithfidh an bóthar i gceist a bheith ag dul chuig árais chónaithe, talamh feirme nó suíomheanna taitneamhacha ar nós locha, aibhneacha nó trána. Tá breis eolais le fáil ar shuíomh na Roinne.

Tá geallta sa chlár Rialtais nua go dtabharfar scéim na mbóithre áise ar ais. Níl aon mheicníocht chuige sin oibrithe amach go fóill, áfach. Beidh athbhunú na scéime ag brath, dar ndóigh, ar airgead a bheith curtha ar fáil chuige sin do na blianta amach romhainn trí phróiseas na Meastachán. Tuigfidh an Teachta nach bhfuil an idirbheartaíocht maidir le Meastachán 2026 tosaithe go fóill. Beidh plé ar bun idir na páirtithe leasmhara agus mo Roinn maidir leis an gcur chuige is fearr chun an scéim seo a athbhunú. Tuigim cé chomh tábhachtach do mhuintir na Gaeltachta is atá an scéim sin. Is é an rud is tábhachtaí, áfach, ná go gcabhrófar le bóithre áitiúla sna Gaeltachtaí.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Bhí an scéim an-úsáideach i gcomhair phobal na Gaeltachta mar rinneadh athchóiriú ar an chéad píosa den bhóthar ar a raibh siad ag tiomáint ar maidin agus an píosa deireanach sa tráthnóna ar a raibh siad ag taisteal agus iad ag filleadh abhaile. Tá sí dírithe ar bhóithre a bhí fágtha ar leataobh go minic ag an gcomhairle contae de bharr go raibh siad ag díriú ar bhóithre níos gnóthaí.

Tuigim nach mbeidh an scéim tosaithe thar oíche agus go mbeidh roinnt oibre sa chúlra i

gceist. Cad iad na céimeanna atá tógtha go dtí seo chun an scéim sin a athoscailt? An bhfuil plé, mar shampla, le hÚdarás na Gaeltachta, le Roinn na Gaeltachta nó le comhairlí contae ar conas a dhéanfaí láimhseáil ar an scéim? Cad iad na céimeanna atá bainte amach go dtí seo cheana féin?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tá obair bhunúsach déanta ag m'oifigh sa Roinn. Tá muid ag scrúdú na meicníochta a bheidh muid in ann úsáid chun cuidiú leis na bóithre sin, go háirithe dóibh siúd a bhfuil cónaí orthu ar na bóithre sin nó a úsáideann iad le haghaidh obair feirmeoireachta. Mar a dúirt mé, tá an scéim feabhsaithe áitiúil ann agus tá mé ag cur béim ar an scéim sin chun airgead breise a fháil a thabharfaidh cuidiú breise do na húdaráis áitiúla ina bhfuil ceantar Gaeltachta. Tá muid fós beartaithe ar scéim na mbóithre áise a thabhairt ar ais mar tuigim cé chomh tábhachtach is atá sí ó scéal an Teachta. Tá sé ag cur brú orm. Tá Teachta Pat the Cope Gallagher ag crú brú orm freisin. Tuigim, agus tuigeann an tAire Stáit, an Teachta Buttimer, cé chomh tábhachtach is atá scéim na bóithre áise agus an scéim feabhsaithe áitiúil. Tá muid ag scrúdú na meicníochta is tapa agus éifeachtaí chun cuidiú le daoine agus na bóithre sin a fheabhsú.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Cloisim an méid atá á rá ag an Aire mar gheall ar an scéim feabhsaithe áitiúil, nó LIS, atá ann faoi láthair. Is scéim an-úsáideach í agus cabhraíonn sí le feabhsú bóithre ar fud na tíre. Tá sé fíorthábhachtach, pé dul chun cinn a dhéantar, go mbeidh scéim na mbóithre áise ag feidhmiú go chomhthreomhar leis an LIS agus go mbeidh deis breise ag pobal na Gaeltachta feabhas a chur ar na bóithre, seachas blas Gaeltachta a chur ar an LIS do phobal na Gaeltachta amháin agus go gcaillfidh siad amach ar an scéim eile. Tá sé fíorthábhachtach go mbeidh an dá rogha ar fáil do phobal na Gaeltachta agus gurb amhlaidh go mbeidh buntáiste do dhaoine a bhfuil cónaí orthu sa Ghaeltacht. Mar sin, teastaíonn uaim a chinntiú nach mbeidh scéim na mbóithre áise ag teacht in áit an LIS agus go mbeidh sí ag rith go comhthreomhar léi ionas go mbeidh an dá rogha ar fáil do phobal na Gaeltachta nuair a bheidh an scéim nua ann.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Nuair a thiocfaidh Roinn na Gaeltachta go dtí an Roinn caiteachais phoiblí, is é sin an rud a bheidh muid ag déanamh. Is mian linn go mbeidh deiseanna breise ar fáil do mhuintir na Gaeltachta agus muintir na n-oileán. Tá sé tábhachtach go mbeidh na deiseanna breise sin ar fáil do mhuintir na Gaeltachta amháin agus go mbeidh siad in ann iad a úsáid. Is é an rud is tábhachtaí ná go n-oibríonn muid amach scéim chun tacú agus cuidiú le muintir na Gaeltachta le haghaidh na mbóithre áitiúla a úsáideann siad, mar a dúirt an Teachta, ag tús agus deireadh an lae. Is é an rud is tábhachtaí ná go mbeidh scéim againn le cuidiú leis na daoine sin go díreach agus go tapa, agus go mbeidh an t-airgead ann le haghaidh an bhealaigh sin. Tá mé ag obair ar bhealach tapa chun airgead breise a chur i dtreo mhuintir na Gaeltachta.

Stádas na Gaeilge san Eoraip

90. **Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht for an update on his Department's work to promote Irish as an official language of the European Union. [38068/25]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Tá an cheist seo bainteach leis an gcéim shuntasach a bhain muid amach cheana féin ag fáil stádais oifigiúil don Ghaeilge san Aontas Eorpach. Chomh maith leis an nGaeilge a bheith ag feidhmiú laistigh den chóras, an bhféadfadh an tAire a léiriú cén dul chun cinn atá á dhéanamh chun an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn san Aontas Eorpach?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tacaíonn mo Roinn le raon tionscnamh chun an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn mar theanga oibre agus oifigiúil de chuid an Aontais Eorpaigh agus chun a chinntiú go mbeidh soláthar leanúnach de dhaoine leis na cáilíochtaí agus scileanna cuí ar fáil do na seirbhísí teanga lena dtacaítear le húsáid na teanga in institiúidí éagsúla an Aontais Eorpaigh.

Airítear leis seo scéim intéirneachta a reáchtáil i gcomhpháirt leis an gCoimisiún Eorpach, Parlaimint na hEorpa, An Comhairle Eorpach, Coiste na Réigiún, Cúirt Iniúchóirí na hEorpa agus Oifig na bhFoilseachán. Sa scéim seo, tugtar an deis do dhaoine aonair triail a bhaint as saol oibre ar an Mór-Roinn, oiliúint a fháil, feabhas a chur ar a gcuid scileanna chun tabhairt faoi phróiseas earcaíochta iomaíochta agus páirt a ghlacadh sa phobal bríomhar Éireannach agus Gaeilge sa Bhruiséil agus i Lucsamburg. Glactar suas le 12 intéirneach ar feadh tréimhse naoi mí, a thosaíonn gach Deireadh Fómhair. Oibríonn na hintéirneigh seo in aonad Gaeilge mar aistritheoirí, profléitheoirí nó cúntóirí sna hinstitiúidí Eorpacha ábhartha.

Ní annamh go n-ofráiltear conradh lánaimseartha do chuid de na hintéirneigh mar thoradh ar an oiliúint faoin scéim seo. Is ionann an maoiniú bliantúil don scéim intéirneachta seo agus €305,000. Chomh maith leis sin, oibríonn mo Roinn le páirtithe leasmhara chun eolas a scaipeadh faoi deiseanna fostaíochta laistigh d’institiúidí an Aontais Eorpaigh dóibh siúd atá líofa sa Ghaeilge. I gcomhairle leis an gCoimisiún Eorpach, reáchtáiltear seimineár agus ceardlann phraiticiúil gach bliain ina gcuirtear béim ar na deiseanna seo atá dírithe go príomha ar mhic léinn tríú-leibhéal agus céimithe. Tá an chéad seimineár eile le tarlú an Eanáir seo chugainn i mBaile Átha Cliath.

Cuireann mo Roinn maoiniú ar fáil i gcomhair comhdhálacha bliantúla, arna eagrú ag Óstaí na Rí, ina gcuirtear deiseanna fostaíochta san Aontas Eorpach chun cinn do dhlítheangeolaithe, ateangairí agus gairmeacha gaolmhara. Tá an chéad chomhdháil eile le tarlú i mí an Mhárta 2026.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: De réir an embassy, táthar den tuairim go bhfuil thart ar 15,000 Éireannach sa Bhruiséil faoi láthair. Is Gaeilgeoirí iad an-chuid acu. Mar shampla, chonaiceamar an clár teilifíse “La Vie sa Bhruiséil” ina léiríodh an pobal beo bríomhar atá inti. Mar sin, lasmuigh den chóras oifigiúil, is léir go bhfuil pobal Gaeilgeoirí ann. An bhfuil iarrachtaí á ndéanamh chun tacú le pobal na Gaeilge lasmuigh den chóras oifigiúil chun go mbeidh, mar shampla, Gaeilge le cloisteáil sa Bhruiséil nó aon áit eile sa tslí céanna is atá an Pholainnis nó aon teanga eile le cloisteáil?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Aontaím go mór leis an Teachta go bhfuil sár-iarracht ar bun, go háirithe le haghaidh na nGaeilgeoirí sa Bhruiséil. Is iontach a fheiceáil, in gach cathair san Eoraip, agus níos faide i gcéin, go bhfuil muintir na Gaeilge beo agus ag úsáid Gaeilge. Go háirithe sa Bhruiséil, tá dream iontach inti atá ag baint a lán úsáide as an nGaeilge. Eagraíonn siad Seachtain na Gaeilge gach Márta sa Bhruiséil agus oibríonn siad leis an bParlaimint agus leis an gCoimisiún. Bhí mé i láthair an tseachtain sin cuid mhaith blianta ó shin nuair a bhí mé i m’Aire Stáit sa Roinn frontair ag an am. Níl aon sonraí agam faoin saghas cuidithe. Gheobhaidh mé na sonraí don Teachta. Má táimid in ann oibriú agus cuidiú le haon duine a bhfuil spéis aige nó aici i gcúrsa Gaeilge, go háirithe chun a scileanna Gaeilge a úsáid san Aontas Eorpach, cuideoidimid leo. Agus Uachtaránacht na hÉireann ar an Aontas Eorpach ag teacht an bhliain seo chugainn, táimid ag cur béime go mbainfimid úsáid as an nGaeilge i gcomhthéacs na hUachtaránachta.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Céim shuntasach a bhí ann chun an t-aitheantas don Ghaeilinn

a bhaint amach. Sa bhliain 2005, bhí an chéim ba mhó ann. Thug sé ardú meanman. Bhí foireann mhór ateangairí agus go leor eile ag teastáil chun a chinntiú go bhféadfaí é a chur i bhfeidhm sa chóras sa Bhruiséil. An bhfuil go leor daoine ar fáil? An bhfuil an fhoireann ann? Is dócha go bhfuil an Rialtas in iomaíocht le hateangairí sa tír seo chomh maith. An bhfuil céimeanna á dtógáil chun a chinntiú go mbeidh daoine breise, ateangairí agus aon duine eile atá bainteach leis an gcóras féin ina measc, ar fáil sa Bhruiséil agus sa tír seo?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Is é sin an rud is tábhachtaí faoin gceist seo. Tá dúshlán ann chun iarrthóirí a fháil a bhfuil na scileanna acu chun obair ar chaighdeán teanga an Aontais Eorpaigh. Tá an caighdeán sin tábhachtach. Tá oifigigh i mo Roinn i gcónaí ag obair leis na hinstitiúidí tríú leibhéal ionas go mbeidh na daoine agus na graduates leis na scileanna ann chun na scileanna sin a úsáid. Tá níos mó ná €1 milliún á chaitheamh ar an advanced Irish-language skills initiative ionas go mbeidh daoine réitithe le poist a fháil san Aontas Eorpach, agus go mbeidh na caighdeáin teanga a éilíonn an AE acu agus iad ag fágáil na n-institiúidí tríú leibhéal ina bhfuil an Ghaeilge á múineadh. Is traenáil speisialta í, go háirithe i gcúrsaí dlí agus aistriúcháin mar tá an caighdeán dlí agus aistriúcháin an-ard san AE. Is é sin an fáth go bhfuil an Rialtas ag déanamh na hinfheistíochta sin ionas go mbeidh na scileanna ann chun an Ghaeilge a úsáid.

Enterprise Support Services

91. **Deputy Edward Timmins** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht the strategies he has to develop long-term employment in rural Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38307/25]

Deputy Edward Timmins: Many people in Ireland commute to work and spend a long time in traffic. Many of these people's jobs are not conducive to working from home. This is a cost in terms of finance, time and family life. Rural employment must be supported. I welcome the successful roll-out of the national broadband plan, which is ahead of schedule and under budget. What strategies do the Minister and his Department have to deliver long-term employment in rural Ireland?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank Deputy Timmins for his question. Our Rural Future is the whole-of-government policy for sustainable rural development in Ireland. More than 170 measures are outlined to support sustainable economic and social development and environmental and cultural well-being across all our rural areas. The delivery of these measures is clearly based on a cross-governmental approach, with a range of Departments contributing to their own areas of responsibility.

Supporting employment and careers in rural areas by creating an environment that supports entrepreneurship and enterprise growth in rural areas is a key objective of that policy. In the main, enterprise policy and related commitments contained in Our Rural Future are the responsibility of my colleague, the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, Deputy Burke, working together with the relevant agencies under his remit. Significant progress continues to be made in this regard. For example, 64% of the new jobs created by Enterprise Ireland client companies last year were located outside the Dublin region, while 59% of Industrial Development Authority, IDA, investment was in the regional locations.

The role of the regional enterprise plans and local enterprise offices, LEOs, are crucial here also. In 2024, more than 7,000 new jobs were created by LEO supported companies, with 81%

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of these new jobs in businesses based outside of Dublin. Such interventions at local level, along with those at Údarás na Gaeltachta for muintir na Gaeltachta, are key to ensuring continued economic growth. I look forward to the development of the new round of regional enterprise plans next year.

Within my Department, the LEADER programme also focuses on supporting local economic development, helping to diversify the rural economy and create employment opportunities. Similarly, the delivery of the network of more than 380 connected hubs, supporting remote jobs in rural areas, and significant enhancements to our digital infrastructure, as the Deputy mentioned in his opening remarks, are helping to support rural enterprises and employment.

The programme for Government includes a commitment to publish and implement a new Our Rural Future policy, which will take effect from 2026. Public and stakeholder consultations are already well under way in respect of the new policy. They will continue throughout the summer. I hope to bring a final draft to the committee before the end of this calendar year.

Deputy Edward Timmins: Employment brings life to rural Ireland and helps support our unique culture, including things like the GAA and many other traditions that are part of our culture and such a positive part of our society. In particular, can the Minister look at ways of supporting the economic development sections of our county councils? Some have significant resources but many, including my County Wicklow, have limited resources. We also need to be careful regarding the tourism sector and Airbnbs. Airbnbs bring tourists to parts of Ireland and parts of rural Wicklow that are not on the tourist map. In a recent poll carried out across the country, an average of 93% of Airbnb hosts cannot or will not release their property to long-term letting.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I cannot speak specifically to the Airbnb question. As I said, however, my Department has invested significantly in remote work and remote working facilities. We will be publishing a new national hub strategy, which will include measures to underpin ongoing sustainable development. As we discussed here previously, hubs in 2025 are different from what they were in 2020, and we need to make sure we keep up to date with them.

In terms of the local authority issue, local authorities and the enterprise units are centrally involved in the regional enterprise plans. I know from my former Ministry that there are regional enterprise plans that work extremely well because of proactive local authority involvement. I encourage every local authority to be proactive. I encourage every chief executive to ensure they have a well-resourced economic development unit and in particular that they have a well-resourced LEO. The local enterprise offices right across the country, which are based out of our local authorities, are superb at promoting rural enterprise, working with LEADER and other operations. A good LEO is invaluable to any local authority.

Deputy Edward Timmins: Much of small-town Ireland has a shortage of housing yet no house building. House building would provide valuable employment. Currently, it is not viable to build houses as the cost to build exceeds the selling price. This is never mentioned in discussions on housing. However, it means that much of Ireland has no house building and yet there is a demand. We must look at strategies to allow house building in these areas through increased affordable housing, and reduce the cost of building a house, such as through the development levy waiver and other measures.

I also want to mention pubs, coffee shops and small businesses in rural Ireland. These small

businesses provide valuable employment and bring life to our rural communities. We need to reduce their cost base as many are not financially viable and will continue to close, resulting in a loss to the community.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Absolutely, I agree. The cost base of every business is of concern to the Government. With regard to the small rural regionally based builders, we made it very clear that they need to be given support from the banking system to allow them to make the kinds of developments in rural areas the Deputy has spoken about and that we all want to see.

The Minister, Deputy Browne, will be writing to every local authority in the coming weeks to ask them to reopen their development plans to designate more land specifically for housing. That, in turn, will create opportunities for smaller builders. There is a skills challenge, and the Ministers, Deputies Lawless and Browne, are working to address that skills challenge in terms of apprenticeships to ensure we have the skills to support those regionally based builders to build those houses we need.

We are working closely with the hospitality sector but, as I said, the development of things such as 300-odd hubs keep people working in local villages and towns who otherwise would not be able to do so and who can use those facilities for lunch, coffee, etc.

That is an invaluable provision.

Community Development Projects

92. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht for an update on Ballyvolane community centre. [38279/25]

Deputy Thomas Gould: Ballyvolane is a fabulous community. For decades it has been promised a community centre and for decades Government promises have failed to deliver. Will the Minister outline supports and when the community centre will finally be delivered for Ballyvolane?

Deputy Dara Calleary: The community centre investment fund, CCIF, is my Department's primary funding vehicle for new and existing community centres. It was first introduced in 2022 in recognition of the need for a dedicated funding stream to support investment in the hundreds of community facilities that are at the heart of both rural and urban communities.

In Cork, my Department has provided more than €8.9 million for the enhancement and refurbishment of 158 existing community centres in both the city and county. In early 2024, funding of €30 million was approved under CCIF for the construction of 12 new facilities covering nine counties. I can confirm that a project in Cork was successful under this fund, with Rylane community centre being awarded over €1.5 million for the construction of a new facility.

As regards Ballyvolane specifically, I understand that there has not been an application under any iteration of the community centre investment fund for a community centre there. I am committed to delivering further iterations of the fund in line with the commitment in the programme for Government. We are currently negotiating that in the context of the national development plan. This will provide an opportunity for any proposed project in Ballyvolane.

I am happy to work with all the Deputies and Senators from the area around this project, and

to explore it further with the Deputy now.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I thank the Minister for his response but, unfortunately, once again there is nothing there for Ballyvolane. He made the point there has been no application. I have been hearing about a community centre in Ballyvolane for decades. I have attended meetings. How was a community centre not given funding or prioritised in all that time? Over 2,000 houses are planned for the Ballyvolane area on top of the hundreds of houses that are there already. How is it possible to build thousands of houses and not put in the infrastructure and resources at the time? Ballyvolane has been identified as an area for potential future population growth and the possibility of a new district centre under the Cork city development plan. Here we are talking about expanding Ballyvolane, building more houses and getting more people to live there and there is nothing for the children or the community. It has to be delivered.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I do not disagree with the Deputy. That is why we have invested in the community centre investment fund and why we have put money aside for new centres, new builds, in communities such as Ballyvolane. Twelve of those have been funded and Rylane in Cork is one, and that is why I hope to have another scheme next year for new builds. I am more than happy to work with the Deputies here and the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, on Ballyvolane but the application has to come in. I would put it back on the city council in this case to work with the Oireachtas Members and the local community, most importantly, to get that application together. I am more than happy to work with the Deputy and to keep him updated on the funding that may or may not be available for a scheme for either new builds or refurbishment. As I said, I have approved €30 million already for new centres. We want to build new centres. We had a discussion earlier on the value of community centres and the Deputy's colleague Deputy O'Reilly highlighted the need for co-location of services such as childcare. That is what we want to do.

Deputy Thomas Gould: A new development is going up in Lahardane with hundreds of homes. There is to be a site there for a specific building for a community centre. You could not swing a cat in it, no disrespect. What we want is a proper community centre delivered for the people of Ballyvolane, for the existing residents and the new residents who will come there. We want to see services provided in the community. I was recently at a meeting with other TDs and councillors from the ward where it was outlined that a scoping exercise was going on. I am asking that when a plan is delivered by Cork City Council and the Ballyvolane community, the Minister and the Government give a commitment that the money will finally be there to deliver it. During the local election campaign, councillors and candidates from Government parties were out talking about the need for the community centre. Were these more false promises made at election time which are not then delivered? If an application is made by Cork City Council and the community, will the Minister commit to fund a new community centre in Ballyvolane?

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I commend both the Minister and the Minister of State, who have committed to meeting me regularly. I have met the Minister of State in particular about this. As has been highlighted, the application is not in but I am very grateful for the €30,000 that was secured by me and colleagues for the scoping exercises to find the right site for Ballyvolane. I am acutely aware of the recent visit by the Minister of State, who committed to getting the project over the line and agreed it is overdue. He is dedicated to Cork, in fairness to him. I am working very hard with Leeds football club and other groups such as the men's shed to secure the ideal location. As my honourable colleague has said, Ballyvolane will be doughnuttled in the next couple of years. We accept that, but it is about finding the perfect location. Over ten years ago,

the perfect location, to which money was allocated, was rejected by the community, which I think was a mistake. I thank the Minister for making the moneys available for Ballyvolane and I look forward to working with him and the Minister of State on securing them going forward.

Deputy Dara Calleary: It is clear that Deputy O’Flynn has done a lot of work. The Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, tells me he taught in the area so he knows it very well. I cannot give Deputy Gould a guarantee. Local authorities have to prepare plans but judging by the scoping work, site identification work and community meetings, it sounds as though they are doing the necessary preparatory work. It sounds like an area that needs it. With the Minister of State’s experience in the area, the Deputies will be pushing an open door. Nevertheless, that does not take away from the need for Cork City Council, working with the Deputies as Oireachtas representatives and with the local community, to have an adequately prepared application outlining the benefits that would be brought from it. This is very competitive - unfortunately, there are a lot of Ballyvolanes - but I hear Deputies Gould, O’Flynn, O’Sullivan and Burke and the Minister of State, who are all very loud in their support for this.

Departmental Schemes

93. **Deputy Michael Murphy** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht whether he intends to provide additional funding in 2025 for the local improvement scheme, LIS; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [36845/25]

95. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht if he will provide an additional allocation to Monaghan County Council for the local improvement scheme in 2025. [38304/25]

105. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht the measures being taken to address the long wait time for applicants under the local improvement scheme in Cork North-West; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38149/25]

Deputy Michael Murphy: As I am sure the Minister will agree, the local improvement scheme, LIS, and the community involvement scheme are two critical supports at local level that are vital to the fabric and function of rural Ireland. Are there plans to provide any additional funding before the end of this year?

Deputy Matt Carthy: I agree that the local improvement scheme budget needs to be increased. I point the Minister to County Monaghan in particular, which is virtually at the bottom of the list of the 25 counties that receive LIS applications. Only one receives less than County Monaghan despite our probably having more private lanes than many others. Will the Minister increase the budget allocation to Monaghan County Council?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I propose to take Questions Nos. 93, 95 and 105 together.

The three letters most feared by my officials are LIS. We are actively reviewing the LIS, looking to make it more effective and to deliver more consistently. It is a key support to rural communities in improving non-public rural roads and laneways that are not typically maintained by local authorities. We reintroduced the scheme in my Department since 2017 following years of no funding, and since then we have provided almost €170 million to local

authorities across the State.

In April 2024, €40 million in funding was announced for LIS across eligible local authorities to cover the period 2024 to 2025. Under the 2024-25 allocation, Tipperary received €2.52 million, Monaghan received €938,000, while Cork County Council received €2.78 million.

12 o'clock

Earlier this year, my officials began the 2025 LIS works approval process. Priority lists were approved for eligible local authorities. Sanction has been given to all local authorities to begin the 2025 LIS roads programme. To date, local authorities have indicated that 378 non-public roads and laneways will be repaired in 2025. Each year, my Department seeks to ensure the approval process is completed early in the year so that repair works can be carried out as efficiently as possible. However, I am very aware that there are delays and lists around the country. I am actively seeking extra funding in the context of the national development plan review. I am aware of the need for the scheme to be supported. Since 2017, Monaghan has been allocated almost €6 million, with 153 roads completed.

Deputy Michael Murphy: Across south Tipperary, the condition of local and minor roads has reached breaking point. We are not talking about potholes or surface cracks; we are talking about roads that are effectively impassible and where families struggle to reach schools, farmers cannot move machinery safely and emergency services think twice before making a journey. As the Minister knows, both schemes provide essential upgrade to non-council roads. I again appeal to the Minister that if he has money up his sleeve there is no better value for money than the two schemes to which I have referred.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Minister, shake out your sleeves.

Deputy Matt Carthy: In 2024, Monaghan County Council received 273 new applications for LIS funding, yet the funding provided to Monaghan County Council for the scheme would allow for the resurfacing of eight roads in 2024 and nine roads this year. Even with the funding the Minister has indicated, and dealing solely with the applications received in 2024, it would take nearly 30 years to clear all of the roads. We need to bear in mind that the people who live on these lines have to contribute to the cost of resurfacing their own roads on top of their road tax and ever increasing fuel costs. In the interest of fairness, I implore the Minister to ensure that the scheme is allocated additional funding.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: As we are out of time, I ask the Minister to give a brief reply.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I agree with the Deputies. In the interests of fairness, we have provided €170 million for a scheme that was not funded prior to 2017. We are working with local authorities. Neither Monaghan nor Tipperary are offenders in this regard, but quite a number of local authorities have a cost per road that is way above the national average. Believe it or not, there are also local authorities which have underspends in the LIS scheme. We are working with local authorities to address that issue and to get extra resources and to ensure that when those resources are provided they are spent well.

Deputy Michael Murphy: While I welcome the increases in recent years, let us be honest. They are not nearly sufficient to address the scale and demand for the schemes. We need to double existing funding for the LIS and CIS schemes so that counties like Tipperary, in particular south Tipperary, gets its fair and equitable share.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Since 2021, 4,800 roads have been dealt with under LIS. I agree that we could do with extra funding. We are actively pursuing that and ensuring that people have proper access to their homes and farms.

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

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Minute's Silence to Mark Anniversary of Srebrenica Massacre

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: This month marks the 30th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide. Today we commemorate and honour the victims of the genocide, the 8,000 men and boys killed and all of those impacted by the atrocity. Before we proceed to the minute's silence, I ask Members to welcome to the Gallery members of the Bosnia-Herzegovina Association of Ireland who have joined us here today. You are all very welcome.

Members rose.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am sure the Leas-Cheann Comhairle will not mind if I take this opportunity to wish Katie Taylor, our undisputed world champion, all the very best as she steps into the ring in Madison Square Garden tonight. We are right there in heart and spirit with her. Go n-éirí léi.

Tá sé 20 mí anois tar éis don Rialtas maoiniú éigeandála a gheallúint don chéad uair chun cúram riachtanach a chur ar fáil do leanaí le riachtanais speisialta, ach go fóill níl an t-airgead ar fáil. Tá sé seo scannalach. I have received confirmation that vital funding through the children's disability grant first announced by the Government 20 months ago has still not been released. It is even worse than that. I have a letter stating that despite funding for organisations having been publicly announced by the Minister, organisations have been asked to reapply for short-listing with no guarantee that funding will be provided for projects or be granted.

The grant was announced in 2023 as an emergency fund to fill a gaping hole left by the HSE which was not able to provide vital therapies for children. That was 20 months ago. Parents and children with special needs thought the Government had finally heard their cries for help, but the months went on and nothing happened. No funding was released. Just two days before the local elections in June 2024, then Ministers, Senator Anne Rabbitte and Deputy Charlie McConalogue, held a press event in Donegal re-announcing the funding. Local lad Jack Donaghy, who has cerebral palsy, and his mother, Denise McGahern, were included in the photo op. They were understandably delighted the funding was finally being provided for Jack and many others.

Fast forward nine months to March 2025, there was still no sign of the money being released. Denise went public to express the disgust and anger she felt at her son being as an election prop for a Government photo op. In March, the Tánaiste apologised for the situation going on for so long and said it would not defend something that was indefensible. In regard to the funding, he said that he was going to make sure it is released and provided.

Five days after the exchange between me and the Tánaiste in the Dáil, the Government again announced that funding would be released, yet despite his promises here we are. Three months on no funding has been released or provided. Therapies are still not available. The 54 organisations which thought they successfully applied for the grant have not received a single red cent. Not only that, it gets worse. Some of the organisations concerned understood they would get millions of euro over a three-year period. Funding was announced by the Minister. However, organisations have been told they have to reapply for short-listing and the funding is no longer multi-annual but instead needs to be spent by the end of the year. Organisations only have until the end of the year to spend money that they have not been given.

I have a letter from one of the organisations, which publicly announced what it would receive and has now been told to reapply, stating that there is no guarantee of funding, there is less money than the organisation thought and it all has to be spent this year. The Tánaiste told me in March that he would resolve the issue and make sure the money would flow. The Government has announced this funding on three separate occasions, and each time its promise has disappeared without a trace. There is no follow-through, delivery or funding.

This is about kids with special needs. It is about kids like Jack, who has cerebral palsy. It is about kids who are in braces, kids who are trying to speak, kids who are PEG-fed and kids who want to walk who are suffering as a result of this. These children and their parents are left crying out for help they have been promised and promised again. It is cruel what the Tánaiste's Government is doing to them. There is no other word for it.

I am going to ask the Tánaiste a couple of questions. When is the money going to be released? When will the funding be put in place so the therapies can be delivered to these children who desperately require them? Can he explain to me why, when two Ministers from the previous Government's Cabinet went to Donegal and announced specific multi-annual money for these projects, the HSE is now telling them there is no guarantee they will even get funding and that there is no multi-annual funding available any more? What is a Government promise worth any more, especially to these children and their families? These are the questions they are asking me today.

The Tánaiste: First, I join the Leas-Cheann Comhairle in remarking on the fact tomorrow marks the 30th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This was one of the most horrific atrocities ever to take place on the European Continent and an atrocity that resulted in the massacre of more than 8,000 men and boys. It is our duty as a country, a Parliament and an international community to remember the brutality and devastation that occurred. I know we all join the community today.

Deputy Doherty mentioned Katie Taylor from Bray. I join him in wishing her all the best.

I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. He was right when he raised it in March. I did take action, as did the Government. I think the Deputy raised it on a Thursday during Leaders' Questions and on the Monday, from my memory, we had a meeting of the Cabinet committee on disability and agreed to sanction a fund of €8 million - again from memory - into what was called the children's disability services grant fund. That decision was taken by the Government on foot of the engagement the Deputy and I had here. I have been asking about this pretty regularly because these are important projects and, indeed, I had an opportunity to speak to the head of the HSE, Bernard Gloster, about it only this week as part our ongoing regular engagement.

In relation specifically to the Donegal group, I understood they are in very regular contact. I think there has even been contact this week between them and the HSE. I am also told they have been assured their costs will be funded. From a Government point of view, we have allocated the €8 million. I take the point about the delay and I apologised for it, but we have now sanctioned the funding. I can fully understand that there might be final compliance checks or governance checks. I do not say this rudely to the groups, but it is the first time some of them have ever received public funding or the likes. I take the point that the HSE has to do that, but we want to see the money flow. Because of the importance of the issue, while I accept there are more projects than those in Donegal, I will ask that we have a meeting of Donegal Oireachtas Members. I will ask for that to be arranged with the relevant Minister or the HSE next week to try to bring a finality to this situation. Our commitment on this was solemn. It was an €8 million fund.

More broadly, because I am conscious that people are watching this, therapy services for children is an area in which there needs to be huge progress and we are endeavouring to reform that system. That is why we have taken decisions only in recent weeks to establish a new national education therapy service led by my colleague the Minister, Deputy McEntee. We should be in a position to start recruiting for those posts in the coming weeks, I hope, starting with special schools and then rolling the project out more broadly after that to special classes and then mainstream schools. That is an important step and we have seen when it comes to assessments of need this year that there has, thankfully, been a very large increase in the number of children now getting them, although there is much more work to do on that.

On foot of Deputy Doherty raising this, and I can only imagine the genuine frustration of Denise and Jack and other Denises and Jacks, we will arrange for that meeting next week and I will keep in close contact with the Deputy. From the Government's point of view, I am clear, because I was in the room, that we have sanctioned the €8 million. We did that in March. I will ask for a specific meeting to take place with the Deputy and other Donegal Oireachtas Members next week.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Tánaiste will forgive me for saying that is not good enough, because we have been here. He promised he would make sure it was being provided - not just sanctioned and released but provided. None of these groups have got it. The Tánaiste is absolutely right that they have been in contact this week. I have the letter here. Does he know what it says? The groups need to reapply for short-listing. The Tánaiste's Ministers turned up to Donegal and announced the project. One project got €3 million over a three-year period. It was well deserved for the massive work they are doing. The letter says the funding is not multi-annual and has to be spent in 2025. That commitment is gone. The letter also said funding for the grant scheme is less than originally expected. That is why people have to apply.

It is not just the groups in Donegal. I am a Donegal Deputy and there are four groups in Donegal but there are 54 groups across the State. There are children whose names I do not know who are equally entitled as Jack. It is disgraceful. This is 20 months on and this is emergency funding. Why? Because the HSE is not able to provide the therapies and supports for these families and their kids. I do not know what we have to do to get this money released, but when a government stands up, right or wrong, and promises disability services are getting X amount of money, then it needs to deliver on it. This letter tears up that commitment. The Tánaiste needs to do more than respond to me three months ago and then nothing happens. The communication is worse. Parents are seething at what is happening. It is just not good enough. I am asking the Tánaiste for a commitment he gave here in the Dáil. He said every eligible

project, 54 of them, should get the €8 million funding. I am asking him to ensure every single project, including the four announced in Donegal and the levels of funding announced for them, will get the funding they need because these are therapies and support the children and their families so desperately need, 20 months after this was first announced.

The Tánaiste: I am very clear, not just from my perspective but from that of the entire Government, that on 25 March of this year, the Department of Children, Disability and Equality secured sanction for the €8 million grant fund. There is a budget of €3.2 billion for disability services, as the Deputy knows, and €8 million of a grant fund was sanctioned for the Department of Children, Disability and Equality on 25 March. From the Government's point of view, once it was sanctioned, we expected it to be drawn down and spent. In light of what Deputy Doherty has brought to my attention, I will of course follow this up again. I had conversations on it this week, coincidentally, where I was told there were some final compliance and governance issue with some projects. Again, I do not say that as a slur but just before the final governance issues in terms of the drawdown of public money. That is what I was told was the situation this week.

It would be useful, if we take the Donegal projects as an example, to convene a meeting next week of Oireachtas Members with the relevant HSE and departmental officials. I undertake to get that in place. I will also talk to the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, and the Minister, Deputy Foley, about this matter today. From the Government's perspective, the funding has been allocated and now needs to be spent quickly for the benefit of these children.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: Yesterday, Uisce Éireann announced that areas in 12 counties, from Donegal to Wexford, are officially suffering a water drought. This is at a time when we have seen tragic flash floods in Texas, wildfires outside Marseilles and an extended heatwave in many countries across Europe that is about to hit Ireland. Before I came in here, I got an alert on my phone from Met Éireann that it has issued a hot weather warning. Do not get me wrong, the bit of sun is great, but we need to recognise that this is not normal for Ireland and that our current drought is a result of a drier-than-normal autumn, winter and spring. This is climate change in action. Paradoxically, we have just had a wetter-than-normal June but, because of our creaking water infrastructure, almost 40% of our treated water is lost. There are more leaks in our pipes than are coming out of Cabinet meetings. The state of our water infrastructure is holding up the development of much-needed housing, and new housing is plugging into crumbling old pipes and putting unsustainable pressure on the whole system. We are facing water restrictions ultimately. Just ask the residents of Dargle Wood, Knocklyon, in my constituency of Dublin South-West about our water infrastructure. They have faced over 12 water outages this year alone.

The broader picture is our climate preparedness and climate action, or the lack thereof. Ever since the programme for Government was published, the Labour Party has had serious concerns about this Government's commitment to addressing the climate crisis. Last week, in the climate committee, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, basically waved the white flag in saying the best we can hope for now is that we might get about halfway to meeting our 2030 emissions reduction targets. People want to take climate action, but we know from a recent survey carried out by the climate Department that people's overriding feeling when it comes to this Government and climate action is frustration. People feel hamstrung by this Government's inaction and delay in providing even the most basic measures to allow them to engage in climate action. People want to retrofit their homes, but the system of grants restricts this to well-off households with significant savings. We in the Labour Party want to see a street-by-street retrofitting scheme backed by green loans. People want to switch to public transport but the services are not there

or are already at capacity. We need more rail services and, in the short term, projects like Bus-Connects need to be prioritised. How in God's name has it taken eight years and counting to get a few new bus lanes put in? In the absence of public transport, people feel they cannot make the switch from petrol or diesel to EVs because our charging infrastructure is so lacking. Farmers are getting mixed messages and, meanwhile, there are insufficient compensation schemes to enable the necessary changes to our agricultural policy and ensure a just transition.

Earlier this week, the European Commission published its latest environmental implementation review of Ireland, identifying a €3.3 billion investment gap. Will the Government commit to providing the investment required to fill that gap in order to avoid climate disaster, improve our infrastructure, which will help us on climate, and support people to make the climate-positive changes they want to make in their lives?

The Tánaiste: It is welcome to have a question on climate as I am not sure we, as a Dáil, are having the level of focus and discussion needed on this issue. The climate emergency has not gone away; far from it. We need to look at how we can accelerate the pace of change that needs to take place. We need a conversation about how we bring people with us, on which the Deputy had some good ideas. I, too, know people who would like to retrofit their home or switch to an electric vehicle but cost is still a barrier. We, as a Government, must reflect on that.

The short answer to the Deputy's question is "Yes". He will begin to see real and meaningful intent when we publish our national development plan, which I hope will be at the end of this month. It will show a commitment in areas like investing in water infrastructure, supporting Irish Water, accelerating the delivery of renewable energy and investing more in transport, including public transport. The Cabinet committee on climate action, environment and energy met this week and had a good and detailed discussion on climate policy. The latest data from the Environmental Protection Agency, which made a presentation to the committee, shows that Ireland's emissions continue to fall for the third year in a row and are at their lowest level in three decades.

I say that not because we are where we need to be but because we do not want to inject a sense of fatalism into the debate, which the Deputy is not doing. We are able to make more progress as a country. Emissions decreased by 2% in 20024 and by 10.6% between 2021 and 2024. Ireland now has the lowest level of greenhouse gas emissions in 35 years. This is more significant when we consider that this period saw 1.5 million more people living in the country and over a million more homes. We are achieving reductions at a time when our economy is, thankfully, continuing to grow strongly.

However, the Deputy is entirely correct that we have a long way to go to get to our 2030 climate targets. Certainly, there is no white flag being raised by the Government. The next phase has to be about acceleration. It has to be about how we can do more and do it more quickly. That is why the Government has announced our intention to establish a new climate investment clearing house to try to accelerate progress on our energy transition. That is the big dial change. If we can get to that energy transition, we can stop using dirty fuels and start being able to produce clean renewable energy.

There are a number of commitments in the programme for Government on climate. They include strengthening governance structures around the climate action plan, achieving energy independence by harnessing renewable energy resources, ramping up home retrofits, improving grants, on which we have given a commitment, enabling communities to secure grid access for

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local renewable projects and supporting the just transition commission to ensure no community is left behind. One of the big decisions the previous Government made was the establishment of the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund. We are putting billions of euro aside to be able to invest in that transition.

I have read the Commission's report on our implementation of EU environmental law. My honest evaluation is that it is a mixed bag. It points to some areas of progress over the past year, including in biodiversity, our clean air strategy, the publication of successive climate action plans and the binding legislation.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I am glad to hear about the Government's focus on accelerating what we are doing. However, the fact remains that we are not meeting our climate targets. While there was a 6% reduction in emissions in 2023, there was only a 2% reduction in 2024. The EPA is saying we are going backwards. This is because we are seeing significantly slower progress than needed on many fronts, like onshore wind, offshore wind, electric vehicles, district heating and the use of biomethane, not to mention the impact of the new LNG fossil fuel terminals the Government is promoting and the data centres that are not required to use renewable energy.

We are told all the time that money is no object to our taking action on climate. Will the Government please pull out all the stops with the new national development plan? Will it invest in the infrastructure we need to mitigate the climate crisis, including our water pipe network, which is so bad it is not able to ensure people have water right after a month of abnormally heavy rain? I ask the Government, please, to invest in our future and to support legislation to establish a future generations commissioner, who will challenge the short-termism we have seen from too many Governments and embed future thinking across government.

Will the revised national development plan will be framed to ensure we meet our climate targets? Will the Tánaiste commit to addressing the environmental investment gap?

The Tánaiste: We are committed to providing the investment that is required. I am being very honest in saying I am not convinced currently of the need for more legislation in this area. There is a lot of legislation in place. It is an implementation issue now in terms of how quickly we can accelerate delivery.

Most sectors of our economy are seeing a decrease in emissions, including agriculture and transport. Our electricity is now cleaner than ever before. Last year marked the first year in which no peat was used for power generation, which was a symbolic end to a high-carbon era. It reflects the structural transformation under way in our energy network. Wind energy provided 48% of Ireland's power last February. In January, Ireland reached the important milestone of hitting 5 GW of installed onshore wind capacity. EV sales increased by 23% in April this year compared with the same month last year. Home retrofitting is scaling up. I agree with the Deputy that we need to go further but we are beginning to see the direction of travel. We must back that up with investment but also by making sure projects are delivered more quickly, particularly in the area of offshore renewable energy.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The local training initiatives, LTIs, run by Tipperary Education and Training Board, ETB, at Spafield family resource centre in Cashel, Knockanrawley centre in Tipperary town, the Cahir Development Association facility in Cahir and the Littleton community centre, have been abolished. This has an impact on the most vulnerable people in our

society. This is unconscionable and wholly unacceptable.

Tipperary Education and Training Board's funder, SOLAS, has left the board €1.5 million short of its required budget for Government-approved schemes, including expenditure on increased apprenticeship provision and the roll-out of new initiatives such as the national tertiary programme. There is also a failure to provide for the costs of the new apprenticeship centre in Carrick-on-Suir. Despite continued engagement with SOLAS, it has failed to provide the necessary and legitimate funding for the board.

LTIs have provided transformative support for countless vulnerable young people and adults. The progression of students through these programmes speaks volumes. Many of them have faced significant barriers, ranging from family disadvantage to low confidence and profound health struggles. They found a safe and nurturing environment where they could truly thrive. The abolition of the courses removes a lifeline and an irreplaceable service for individuals and families in these communities. The courses are also a lifeline for young and lone parents who are trying to break free from generational poverty and build better lives for themselves and their children. The courses offer more than education. They offer hope, routine, purpose and a pathway to employment and independence.

If these courses are taken away, we will not just lose a course; we will lose a network of connection and progress that helps to lift families out of poverty, reduce social isolation and promote inclusion and resilience in communities. The true measure of any society is how it deals with its most vulnerable individuals. I appeal to the Tánaiste to intervene directly with SOLAS to ensure these courses continue into the future, with effect from the start of the coming academic year in September.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. As a previous Minister with responsibility in this area, I know Tipperary ETB to be an excellent and well-run organisation. I am aware of some of the exciting projects in which it is involved, including at the old barracks in Clonmel and the plans for a FET college of the future. I know the ETB to be a well-run organisation and would take very seriously any feedback it has for the Government on any supports it requires. I am happy to have further engagement on this issue and to speak with the Minister, Deputy Lawless, to reflect the views raised by the Deputy and other Tipperary Deputies. My understanding is that not only has SOLAS, the national agency, not reduced its funding to Tipperary ETB, but we, through SOLAS, have increased its funding. To be clear, the Deputy has not asserted to the contrary. We have provided a budget for Tipperary ETB this year of €35.5 million through SOLAS, which is an extra €1.1 million on what it received last year. We are very much investing in further education and training opportunities in Tipperary ETB.

My understanding, going somewhat from memory, is that local training initiatives are one mechanism through which people access training. They generally operate on an annual funding cycle and are always reviewed by all ETBs at the end of the cycle. They look at a range of factors, including demand, funding, local strategic priorities and the like. They then decide whether to offer those courses again.

I understand that Tipperary ETB has not formally approved or scheduled any LTIs to operate beyond the conclusion of this year's initiatives and, therefore, no learners are formally enrolled for September. I am also aware that Tipperary ETB has advised that it is considering alternative options to support those learners who typically would have been served by LTIs. It has requested the contact details of any current or prospective LTI learners and intends to

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engage with each of them on personalised guidance and to consider the various educational options that might be available to them. I know it remains committed to that.

I believe there are over 9,600 unique learners in Tipperary who were supported last year through post leaving certificate courses, PLCs, apprenticeships, traineeships, Youthreach and adult and community education programmes.

I am happy to have further engagement with the Minister, Deputy Lawless, and SOLAS on the matter. There is a number of different pathways to achieve those training objectives. When Tipperary ETB has gone through its process, it will be interesting to see if it identifies any gaps and if it does, how the Government responds. It might be that the ETB is able to meet the education and training needs through a variety of other means. I am happy to keep in touch with the Deputy on the issue. I am satisfied at the moment that Tipperary ETB is going through a process and I look forward to the outcome of it.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I thank the Tánaiste for the reply. The local training initiative is a valuable service that has been in existence for more than 20 years. It provides a leaving certificate qualification over two academic years for students or trainees who are not suitable for mainstream education. It provides modules on subjects such as computers, communications, work experience and mathematics. The closure of the service and these courses affects 41 training places across the four sites. It also impacts six staff members who will lose their jobs. No alternative employment is being offered. They already find themselves disadvantaged because of the short-term contract nature of their employment. That means they have no redundancy entitlements and no contracts of indefinite duration.

The costs involved in this are minuscule in the overall context. We are talking here about less than €300,000 to provide a service that is absolutely essential to the most vulnerable in our society. I am advised there are no alternatives to this course. There is certainly no local alternative in these towns. Any alternatives that might be available are not available to the trainees involved. I again urge the Tánaiste to intervene directly with SOLAS to increase the funding to ensure these courses continue.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. I know the seriousness with which he views this issue. He has said it is a “central issue” and that is obviously how he feels about it. It will be interesting to see whether, through the range of courses provided by Tipperary ETB and the pathways available, it believes it can meet the needs of learners through other mechanisms or whether it will require LTIs to continue in the new year. On foot of the Deputy raising the issue, and it being raised a few times in the Dáil this week, I will ask the Minister, Deputy Lawless, to engage with SOLAS and Tipperary ETB, as I know he will be eager to do anyway. We will see how the situation progresses. We are very committed to the work of the ETB in Tipperary. I thank the staff of the ETB for the work they do. It is an organisation I have come to know reasonably well. I am pleased that we have increased in funding in 2025 compared with 2024. I expect we will continue to increase its funding and will look to provide more educational opportunities to Tipperary. I will keep in touch with the Deputy on the matter.

Deputy Ken O’Flynn: Last week in the House, I raised with the Minister, Deputy Chambers, the urgent need to extend legal aid to whistleblowers who step forward not for personal gain, but to protect the public interest. In that exchange, the Minister expressed his willingness to meet me and the whistleblowers in question. I accepted the offer in writing but have received no reply as yet from the Minister. There is plenty of time for that.

We all recall the case of Garda Maurice McCabe, a man falsely accused of the most heinous of crimes by Tusla, a State agency charged with the protection of children. The scandal shook this country to its core. It showed we treat our whistleblowers disdainfully. It showed we are not protecting but persecuting them. Today I raise a case that is equally as difficult as that of Garda Maurice McCabe. It is every bit as alarming.

In 2019, a former Tusla employee made a protected disclosure. He reported serious governance problems. It resulted in relentless retaliation and attack. In 2021, Tusla sent him a formal letter questioning his capability to work with children. This triggered an unauthorised background check in what appears to have been an orchestrated campaign to discredit him professionally, financially, personally and psychologically. Afterwards, at a hearing of the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, Tusla made a commitment to launch a full inquiry. That was four years ago and to date, there have been no findings, no inquiries, no answers, no accountability and no justice.

This case is not unknown to the public. The current chairperson of Tusla, Mr. Pat Rabbitte, commented publicly on this in the *Irish Examiner* in 2019: “It is deeply concerning that a whistleblower has been left without any financial income.” Two former Ministers for children, Katherine Zappone and Deputy Roderic O’Gorman, were also briefed. The office of the then Minister, Deputy O’Gorman, was so concerned that it offered the whistleblower free counselling after receiving a detailed account of what occurred.

The retaliations from Tusla continued and the attacks deepened. The information we have obtained shows there was a formal complaint to the Data Protection Commission that Tusla contacted the whistleblower’s private counsellor and demanded access to confidential records. That is an extraordinary breach of personal privacy by a State agency.

Ms Kate Duggan, Tusla’s current CEO, held a direct meeting with this individual. During that meeting, she was informed that Tusla had falsely accused him of being a danger to vulnerable children, an allegation made without foundation against a man whose only crime was to tell the truth. Again, there has been no inquiry and no justice.

This is not merely an administrative failing or systemic dysfunction. The State is failing whistleblowers. It is not protecting them but is destroying their lives.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising the matter, as I acknowledge he has on previous occasions, as he said. He raised it with my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Chambers, who has committed to engaging with him. I will welcome his views on the legislative basis we have in Ireland.

I am not familiar with the details and if the Deputy has details, he should furnish them to the relevant authorities. That would be useful. Ireland has comprehensive legislation to protect workers who raise concerns about wrongdoing in the workplace. We have been on quite a significant legislative journey to try to get it right. The Protected Disclosures Act was enacted in 2014. It was enhanced and amended during the previous Dáil through the Protected Disclosures (Amendment) Act 2022. A statutory review of the Protected Disclosures Act is built in. That is due to commence, I am told, in the near future. Under the law, it must be done by 2027. It must be done within five years. A public consultation will be held as part of that review. Those of us who were here in 2022 will recall that the Act has built into it a statutory review of the legislation. That will involve public consultation. We will be obligated as an Oireachtas to

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consider the legislation during the lifetime of this Dáil. We will be obligated to, quite rightly, have a public consultation as part of that. At EU level, there is a review of the EU whistleblower directive, which is Directive 2019/1937, expected next year. The amended Act we have is a transposition of the EU whistleblower directive. That will be charged with reporting to both the European Parliament and the Council on the national law transposing the directive, so it asks how every country is getting on with fulfilling their EU obligations and whether any additional measures are considered appropriate for any member state in the European Union's analysis of people's compliance with that directive. The Commission has indicated the report will be finalised no later than 2026.

I say that by way of context for some of the broader issues the Deputy raised, because protecting whistleblowers is important. People who come forward in the public interest need to know that they can do so in an environment that is safe. That is the purpose of our legislation and indeed it was the purpose of the broadening of the scope of the legislation in 2022, where we made it clear that there was a broader range of people who could report wrongdoing, beyond employees, to include volunteers, shareholders, trainees, board members and job applicants, and ensure they benefited from the protection of the law. It also imposes new requirements on employers as regards the operation of a formal whistleblowing channel. There are also now special channels for the reporting of wrongdoing relating to law enforcement, security, defence, international relations or intelligence. Our law of the land, the Act, prohibits any penalisation or threat of penalisation for a worker who has made a protected disclosure. Penalisation can include unfair dismissal, unfair treatment, coercion, intimidation or harassment. Statutory protection from penalisation is provided primarily by the Workplace Relations Commission, which can make orders for restitution and payment of up to five years' salary in compensation. Cases can be appealed to the Labour Court.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I thank the Tánaiste for his response but, with the greatest of respect, they are only words. We are talking about a man whose life has been left in a legal limbo for over half a decade and who has been defamed, isolated, ignored and ricocheted from one Department to another. Two senior Ministers, officials, and the chair and CEO of Tusla knew about this, and nothing has been done. I am asking the Tánaiste, not just as Tánaiste but as a senior officer of the State: Will he with meet me and will he meet with the whistleblower? Can we launch an investigation? Five years of this man's life have been ruined by no Minister taking responsibility and by nobody putting in place a full investigation. His life has been absolutely destroyed and there is still no action or accountability. This man was only doing his job. He was there to protect the agency and saw corporate governance and governmental issues with the agency. He made a disclosure and tried to protect the agency, and he was met with a wall of attack and silence.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. When he criticised me about my response only being words, I am not sure what more I can provide in oral response to a question. I provided clearly in those words quite a bit of detail on the laws that are in place in our land. They are laws that those of us who are honoured to serve in government worked hard to put in place in 2014, with an enhancement in 2022. In the lifetime of this Government, we will carry out the statutory review. We are going to look at that at an EU level too

. Regarding the specific case, I am conscious of not knowing the detail. I am not doubting the Deputy's bona fides. I suggest that the appropriate thing to do would be to provide the relevant information to the relevant Department or Minister, who will process that in accordance with the laws of the land and the Protected Disclosures Act. Without knowing the details of

the case or pre-judging any information that I do not yet know, the WRC and Labour Court are avenues that are available to any employee who experiences any discrimination.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: He has been there and there has been no investigation since.

The Tánaiste: I cannot pre-judge. We have a WRC and Labour Court that are independent of government. We have An Garda Síochána. We have a number of avenues and robust whistleblower legislation. I suggest in the first instance, if the Deputy believes there are more issues that need to be considered, to provide them to the relevant Department.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Carol Nolan: In June 2023, a scoping report on the sexual exploitation of children in State care by UCD academics, Dr. Mary Canning, Dr. Marie Keenan and Ms Ruth Breslin was published. The Sexual Exploitation Research and Policy, SERP, Institute report clearly outlined in horrifying detail the predatory behaviour that these young people, mainly young girls, were being subjected to on an ongoing basis, which was totally disturbing. We were told how some of the most vulnerable children in this State were going missing or running away from home or a care placement, despite the fact that some had an intellectual disability or had suffered prior sexual abuse or neglect. I raised this issue in this Chamber in November 2023 with the then Tánaiste, Deputy Micheál Martin. We had a constructive engagement and agreement on this issue.

Since then, I have tabled numerous parliamentary questions on the issue, the most recent in the past few days. I have been informed in response to one of these questions that while a final draft of the commissioned report on a systematic review to examine institutional, organisational and organised child abuse, including trafficking and exploitation of children and young people, has been received by the Department of children, it is still being assessed for final consideration and observations.

It has been two years since the SERP report was published, with some serious concerns, and 21 months since I raised it on the floor of this House. I fully understand that there is a need to generate a robust evidence base to inform the State's policy and practice responses to institutional and organised abuse and its prevention. My fear is that this issue has fallen out of the spotlight and the sense of urgency, that we so badly need, is not appropriate to the level of the emergency that these vulnerable children are facing.

The State may move slowly, but unfortunately predators do not. They are relentless in their poisonous pursuit of these children. We must be equally determined and relentless in our efforts to stop them and we need to do it urgently. We have seen from the UK's experience what happens when the State appears to deprioritise these concerns. I am not saying that is happening here to the same extent, but the Tánaiste will agree with me that we cannot even allow the perception to take hold that these vulnerable children are not on the State's priority list.

Will he do what he can to speed up the introduction of robust protections for the children identified in the SERP report and elsewhere? It is clear that the current system is failing children if they continue to be targeted by such vicious and violent predators. Unfortunately, that continues.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for highlighting this extremely important issue and for highlighting it on an ongoing basis and for her work on this. We appreciate that. It is important. I was listening to the Deputy and thinking back to some of the debates we had in the previous Dáil. We are going to have to do more to empower An Garda Síochána with the technology it needs for this. The predators, exploiters and criminals, and I can think of many worse words which I am not allowed to use in this House, are using these technologies and are ahead of some of the things that we do. I visited the Garda in the Phoenix Park in relation to this and watched how gardaí are having to sift through the most horrific images for an extraordinarily long time. There is technology that can do that more quickly. We have decided to listen to the views of some who do not have to sift through that more than the gardaí who are on the front line.

I will absolutely follow up with the Minister, Deputy Foley, in the first instance, about the SERP report and the issues the Deputy has identified, and ask her to come back to the Deputy with a timeline. I assure Deputy Nolan that this Government is fully committed, as I know everyone in this Oireachtas is, to addressing sexual exploitation in all of its forms, most particularly child sexual exploitation and child trafficking. To tackle human trafficking, including the trafficking of children, the Government has supported the expansion of the border management unit. Around 200 members of the border management unit are based at Dublin Airport alone. To encourage victims to come forward and access supports, in November 2023, probably when the Deputy was having that previous engagement, the national action plan to prevent and combat trafficking was launched. Its key actions include a new national referral mechanism, making it easier for victims to come forward; new and widespread training for all those who may come into contact with victims; and ongoing development and training through NGOs targeting front-line staff in certain industries.

Sexual exploitation of children is an extremely serious offence. We have comprehensive legislation in place to deal with it but this is about making sure that we can robustly always quickly implement that legislation. It is something we have to give absolute attention to. We are fully committed to playing an active role in negotiations on new EU laws that will require online service providers to deal with child sexual abuse material and attempts to groom children on their platforms. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, played a leading role on this in the previous Government. An Garda Síochána's online child exploitation unit is the national centre point of contact for receiving referrals in relation to child sexual exploitation or abuse material. Referrals are received from a number of sources, including the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, Europol, Interpol, the FBI and the National Crime Agency. The role of this unit also includes the investigation and co-ordination of cases relating to possession, distribution and production of child sexual abuse material and any related sexual abuse and exploitation of children. They are also proactively investigating intelligence concerning paedophiles and their use of technology, including through the targeting of those suspected of the production, distribution and possession of child abuse images. There is a huge amount to do in this area. We will keep an absolute focus on it. I will ask the Minister, Deputy Foley, and perhaps, the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, to further engage with the Deputy directly on it.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I thank the Tánaiste for his comprehensive response, and more importantly, his commitment to tackle this issue. I accept there is a need to resource An Garda Síochána with regard to technology. There is no doubt about that. Every resource needs to be used to protect these vulnerable children who are subjected to a nightmare of sexual abuse exploitation. That is my main concern. The findings of the report need to be looked at and responded to in greater detail. I had the pleasure of meeting the academics involved in compiling

this report. They have legitimate concerns. Our laws need to become a lot tougher on the issue of child exploitation. I and many others want to make sure these predators - people who exploit children - face the full hammer of the law. It should come down on them heavy and a message be sent out that that is what anyone who tries to exploit vulnerable children in State care will be facing. The message that needs to go out is that it will not be tolerated and, more importantly, that we are monitoring the situation. To the best of my knowledge, there are children being picked up from airports where they are coming in unaccompanied and they are being placed in all sorts of settings.

The Tánaiste: There is a special place in hell for anybody who commits a sexual crime against a child. While we cannot do much about places in hell, we can do things about places in prison. We can do things about making sure our legislation and resourcing are as robust as possible. As the Deputy rightly said, we need to come at this with every possible resource and avenue. I appeal to the Oireachtas to please listen to An Garda Síochána about the tools and legislative changes it needs in terms of technology. There was a rush of people into this place the last time but none of those people were involved in stopping the exploitation of children online. The gardaí are asking and the Garda Commissioner has asked this place to give them more powers in relation to facial recognition technology. The Dáil has not quite shrugged its shoulders, but it has not done much more than that. We have to act on this. The Minister is determined to act on it. The Government is determined to act on it. Technology and facial recognition technology have a role to play here in getting on top of these predators and bringing an end to some of these disgusting practices.

There is also a role at an EU level. We need the European Union to decide whose side it is on here. We have had discussions about social media, digital media and all that sort of stuff. The EU needs to put the protection of children ahead of any other interest in terms of online platforms. We will continue to engage intensively on this.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Many people have described the denial of visas for those 33 children from Palestine as “cruel”. That is a fitting word. These are children who have been learning to play GAA for the past year. They have been looking forward to this trip, this escape from Israeli occupation and oppression. The organisation said it has done everything it can. It provided more documentation than ever before. It provided it in ample time. A week before these kids were supposed to land, they have had this hammer blow. I am not interested in a tit for tat on who said what or who did what but, surely to God, this can be resolved. We are talking about 33 Palestinian children. We are talking about children living under an occupation and living under oppression. These are kids who have had a hurley in their hands for the last wee while and want to come over here. There are more than 150 families ready to welcome them into their homes and hearts. Surely to God, we can resolve this. There is still time to resolve it. I ask the Tánaiste to move the machinery of government to make sure assistance is provided and all of the things are done to make sure those kids are able to travel here and enjoy our national games.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: I do not doubt the good faith of the people in our country and in other countries who have been trying to make this trip happen. No one doubts that. No one doubts want-

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ing to support children. Of course, we are not just talking about 33 children seeking to come to Ireland. We are also talking a number of adults, almost all of whom are not the parents of any of the children.

Deputy Mark Ward: The parents are dead.

The Tánaiste: Please do not interrupt me on a sensitive issue. We have just discussed child protection. It is very important. Vetting is very important. We have strict rules on migration and who can come into our country. It has to be a rules-based system. I do not want to go too far into the application. I am sure everyone is engaging in good faith. There is certainly not an effort by the State to seek to block or be difficult here. I am engaging in good faith on this too. There are rules and processes. There is an appeals process available. I have no doubt that will be considered by some of people I have heard speaking publicly on this today. I know this is an effort by people to do good. I do not doubt that. However, we have to uphold the integrity of our migration system as well.

Deputy Duncan Smith: On the same issue, if the roles were reversed and a GAA club in Greystones, Swords or anywhere else were trying to go somewhere and the mentors who were travelling with them were falling foul of this, we would be rightly asking questions and, indeed, be outraged. We know this is not a normal case either. There have been many political representations made on this. We also have something else coming down the tracks with the Lajee Center in Bethlehem sending dancers over who may be subject to the same situation. The Tánaiste has spoken about breaking down silos. We have limited methods and ways of showing solidarity with Palestinians at the moment. This is one of them. I ask the Tánaiste to take up this issue of the GAA children, as well any other groups that are coming down the track, to ensure every possible effort is being made to allow them to visit this country.

The Tánaiste: I genuinely take the good faith in which people are raising it. They are quite right to raise it. Many people have raised it and contacted us all about it. The Minister for justice has a specific and important job to do and that is to apply the laws of our land on visas, child protection and immigration. If he did not do that, I am sure he would be criticised in the other direction. We are granting and have granted visit visas for quite a number of people from Palestine. We are always looking for ways, as a people, to support and show solidarity. We also have to operate and respect the integrity of our system. I am quite confident the rules being applied here by Ireland are exactly the sort of rules we would expect any other country to be applying as well. There is an appeals process in place. I do not want to cut across the independence of that. The Minister has outlined clearly the reasons why his Department was not in a position currently to grant the visas. I am *ad idem* with him on that.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Many of us in this Chamber use sport as a form of escapism. For those 33 kids who we are talking about from the West Bank, this is a potential escape from hell, a living hell that has rained down on them for 20 months at the hands of the Israeli genocide. It gives them a sliver of hope in their darkest hour. At the last minute, the Government has shattered their dreams and tried to extinguish that hope by denying them entry to the State for a trip that has been meticulously planned. This morning and again now I have heard the Tánaiste defend this fiasco by talking about a rules-based system. GAA Palestine, however, is adamant that their paperwork is in order. The embassy in Tel Aviv has said it did not put any barriers in place. Of course, if this was a group of Israeli kids, they would enjoy visa-free travel here because the rules-based system has different rules for different groups. The entire nation wants the Government to resolve this.

Deputy Brian Brennan: That is wrong.

Deputy Helen McEntee: It is child protection. That is not correct.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: It has until Monday to sort it out. What is the Government going to do to help these children get here and give them back that sliver of hope?

The Tánaiste: It must be exhausting speaking for the whole nation, but I also speak for people in this country, as does every Member of this House. We are not tearing up our rules-based migration system. If, God forbid, anything happened to any child from any part of this country who came in here unaccompanied by a parent, the Minister would be hauled in here and asked what he did and why he let it happen. Child protection matters. There is no short circuit; there is no quick-----

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Everything is in order.

The Tánaiste: Sorry, there is no going around the back of the scrum. Do not dare do Israel versus Palestine. This is child protection. We have a visa system. We have a rules-based system. The Deputy might want to have a different approach to migration. This Government has rules and those rules will be followed in relation to migration.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: My office has been contacted by someone who became an Irish citizen and was not able to have their non-binary status recognised on their passport, or the new name they adopted in the country they came from. Non-binary and intersex status is recognised in Denmark, Germany, Malta, Iceland, the Netherlands and even the USA, as well as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan, India and so many other countries I do not have time to list.

1 o'clock

As well as people who come here from those countries who may have this issue, it is people in Ireland who are non-binary and identify as neither male nor female are having their true selves negated by us not recognising non-binary people in the Gender Recognition Act 2015, an Act that was meant to be reviewed a long time ago.

This Saturday, trans, non-binary and intersex people will march in Trans and Intersex Pride Dublin. It is estimated that at least 1.7% of the population is born intersex and their parents have to choose one or the other - male or female - even though they may have characteristics that do not conform strictly to either male or female. When will we review the Gender Recognition Act and allow non-binary people, who are recognised in many sports - for example, the Dublin marathon recognised non-binary status - but who are not legally recognised on passports and birth certificates.

The Tánaiste: The Gender Recognition Act 2015 resides with the Department of Social Protection so I will ask the Minister for Social Protection to come back to the Deputy on that matter and with a timeline for the review she is seeking.

Deputy Peadar Kirby: Catherine Sherry was 42 years old when she died of lymphoma cancer. She lived with her husband and young children just across the Border, in Newry. The special treatment she needed was not available in the North of Ireland but was available just one hour away in Dublin. Her heartbroken husband, Fergal, said she was forced to travel to London for that treatment and that travel significantly weakened her just when she needed her strength for that treatment. It also meant she could not be with her three sons during the final

weeks of her life.

Clinicians have said that there is very little cross-Border cancer activity happening, aside from Altnagelvin hospital in Derry. Altnagelvin just treats 300 people annually. One in five cancer patients from Donegal uses Altnagelvin, the rest must go to Galway or Dublin. During the week, I raised the fact that 12% of cancer patients in the north west are not getting their treatment on time. Why is it that 27 years after the Good Friday Agreement there is still no overarching framework for cross-Border cancer care?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising that issue and my sincere sympathy goes to the family of Catherine. The Deputy is quite right to highlight this issue. The Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, has had a number of meetings with her colleague and counterpart in Northern Ireland, the Minister of Health, Mike Nesbitt. I know there is a real willingness and desire on the part of both Ministers and both health services to see how we can do more together on cross-Border health. The Deputy is right that Altnagelvin was a big and important development, so was the all-island congenital heart disease network. We do not want to just keep looking back and saying is it not great we did that. It is about what is next. I suggest if the Deputy is willing to give those details to the Minister for Health, she will come back to him directly.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: This morning I published my first Bill to establish the national AI office, oifig náisiúnta na aintleachta saorga. As part of the EU's AI Act, every member state is required to produce a regulator in the state. The idea behind this particular office is that it would act both as a regulator and an enabler for SMEs and for State entities.

I have spoken with the Minister of State, Niamh Smyth, about this. I submitted the Bill to the public Bills Office today. I ask that it is given a fair hearing. We are required under the EU AI Act to set up a regulator and there would be an independent commissioner running that, similar to the Data Protection Commissioner and Coimisiún na Meán.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue and congratulate him on publishing his first legislation so soon into the term of this Dáil. He is quite right that this is a huge area. We have seen many companies such as JP Morgan and Ford make significant comments over the last week about job displacement and the type of new jobs that will be created. There is a live debate around regulation. We discussed the issue of AI at our competitiveness summit this week. We have a dedicated Minister of State, Deputy Niamh Smyth, who is doing an excellent job in this area. I have no doubt she will give consideration to Deputy Ó Cearúil's Bill and the Government will give it due and fair consideration also.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Marino Institute of Education, MIE, based in my constituency, is a teacher training college funded by the Department of education. It produces world class educators who work in Ireland and abroad. I think the Tánaiste visited there in times past. However, MIE has two courses that do not qualify under the free fees initiative - the bachelor of science in education studies and the bachelor of science in early childhood education. This is fundamentally unfair and puts MIE at a financial disadvantage. The issue seems to relate to the fact MIE is funded by the Department of education and not the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, that is, the HEA process. As a former Minister for higher education, the Tánaiste has a bit of direct know-how here and skin in the game. Can he direct departmental officials to rectify this unfair anomaly please?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Ó Muirí and he is correct that I had the honour of visiting

Marino Institute of Education. It is a brilliant third level facility and it had made this point for some time. I want to acknowledge that. The reason some of its courses are not funded under the free fees initiative is because of its status as a private institution with charitable status under the co-trusteeship of the European Province of the Congregation of Christian Brothers and Trinity College Dublin. From memory, we brought in a new Higher Education Act which gives an ability to a private institution to decide to bring itself closer into the family, to use colloquial language, and therefore that opens up opportunities on free fees. On foot of the Deputy raising this, I will ask the Minister, Deputy Lawless, to come back to him directly. I have no doubt the Minister and officials will meet MIE. I know they are in ongoing engagement on this matter. I thank him for highlighting this.

Deputy Máire Devine: Thirty-three children in the GAA Palestine club were due to travel. I know he is very aware of the issue as a lot of my colleagues have raised it. Seven days prior to travel, they were told they need to provide more information and it has been quite devastating and upsetting for the coaches, for the hosts, for both Deputy Ó Snodaigh and me and for the Good Counsel club in Drimnagh, which is hosting them. I have sent all the relevant information to the Tánaiste and the Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan. There is a very regrettable mix-up and we will just leave it there for now. My ask today is that the Tánaiste and the Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan, meet the GAA organisers and support them in resolving this as soon as possible. Please let them play.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this. We had an informal word on this issue last night and I know of her very sincere and good interest in this matter and I acknowledge that. Everybody acknowledges that everyone is acting in good faith here. People here in Ireland are trying to do something good for children from a war-torn area. There is no two ways about that and I acknowledge that too. On the information available to me, when applications came in for visas, and without overly getting into individual applications, they were processed in a very efficient way. Applications were being submitted at various points up to May. To be given a decision by 9 July, if anything, seems to be a faster processing time in terms of an answer than usual, probably because of the sensitivity of this. There are legitimate issues. The migration service would not be doing its job, from a child protection point of view, if it did not raise those issues. There is an appeals process open. I know that while it is a matter for the Department of justice, my diplomatic colleagues in Tel Aviv and other places provide information on the best way forward and give the best advice possible. That will continue.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: The programme for Government contains a commitment to increase Local Link services in rural areas to better connect villages, towns and cities and that this Government will work to integrate Local Link routes with health services to improve access and will provide extra funding for the improvement of the transport network. We urgently need a Local Link service along the N17 corridor from Bellaghy to Sligo town. Transport for Ireland, TFI, indicates the national primary route is serviced by Expressway services but these buses only stop in large towns. This creates a significant barrier for individuals who do not drive, including those who may have ceased driving due to age or health issues, as well as those who simply wish to travel for social activities.

The Bus Éireann route 64 service stops in Tobercurry but that is no good for the people who live in Bellaghy, Trawalua Strand, Cloonacool, Achonry, Coolaney and Mullanabreena, which are all rural towns. Additionally, the cost of the commercially operated Expressway route 64 service is significantly higher when compared with Local Link routes.

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It is worth noting the positive feedback regarding the Coolaney to Sligo via Ballaghaderreen Local Link services, and particularly the Castlerea to Sligo service. Furthermore, the shortage of student accommodation at Atlantic Technological University, ATU, adds another layer to this issue but with reliable transport, people can travel from their local villages to college.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Scanlon for raising this important issue for his constituents, particularly those who travel from Bellaghy to Sligo town and are affected by the deficit he has identified in public transport provision there. I am very proud of the work we have done together over the last number of years to expand the Local Link services. It was one of the great success stories of the last Government from a public transport point of view. On foot of the Deputy raising this today, I will ask both the Minister for Transport, Deputy O'Brien, and the NTA to consider the point he is making to see how the issue can be best addressed.

Deputy John Clendennen: As per the last census, there are some towns in my constituency of Offaly with up to 40% of households still relying on peat turf for home central heating. That is ten times the national average of 4%. These families are caught up in the crossfire between climate policy and home heating regulations. For many, moving from turf to a full retrofit is simply not financially feasible or logistically possible. As outlined in the programme for Government, and with the renewable heating obligation scheme due before Cabinet, I urge the Tánaiste to seriously consider low-carbon fuel alternatives such as hydrotreated vegetable oil, HVO, with a 20% blend for home heating, and wood pellets. These fuel options would offer a realistic lower-emissions bridge for households moving away from peat where they choose to do so, with immediate benefit and without the heavy upfront costs of deep retrofits. If we truly believe in a just transition, then we must ensure rural families have practical and affordable pathways to reduce emissions. We must ensure our targets are not just ambitious but achievable.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Clendennen for raising this issue. We have been progressing the renewable heat obligation to ensure the increased use of renewable fuel types across the fuel heating sector is possible. The Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment is now preparing the heads of Bill for submission to Government shortly. Representatives of that Department and the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland also participate in an expert group on renewable and low-carbon fuels and the drafting of a new heat policy statement is now at an advanced stage. I thank the Deputy for raising the matter and I recognise its importance in Offaly and the surrounding areas. Our programme for Government commits to targeting older homes still using oil to switch to renewable heating systems and to consider the use of sustainable biofuels to reduce emissions from existing home boilers where deep retrofits are not always possible in the short term. These commitments are framing the work now under way to develop our new heat policy statement and the roadmap to phase out fossil fuel heating systems. There is a draft statement that is informed by the findings of a new national heat study. This has undergone extensive consultation and will set out our new overarching approach to decarbonising the heat sector as well. Finally, the 2025 programme for Government also includes a commitment to examine the taxation of HVO used for commercial freight to support sustainable transport solutions, which the Department of Finance is also undertaking.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I wish to correct a comment the Tánaiste made earlier. Israeli citizens do not need a visa to enter Ireland to stay up to 90 days for tourism, visiting family or friends or attending business. In other words, there is apartheid operating in this country as well, whereby people in Palestine, which Israel considers part of Israel, need to jump through every hoop in the book to get into this country, whereas Israeli citizens do not. That is from

the Department of justice. Those are the facts. The Tánaiste has the power. He is the Tánaiste and the Minister for foreign affairs. He can deliver this. I spoke to GAA Palestine this morning. It has hundreds of volunteers and will do whatever it takes between now and the weekend to get these children the visas they require. Let us be honest here. Does the Tánaiste have the will? Does he want to let these children come here? I remember going up to the Six Counties as a young fella to play hurling and football and I remember them coming to Cork to stay in my house and with my club, St. Vincent's. I remember what it was like. However, these 33 children-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thanks Deputy.

Deputy Thomas Gould: -----are living in hell. Does the Tánaiste know that if they do not get here now, some of them will not be around for the next one because some of them will probably be slaughtered by the Israelis? I am pleading with the Tánaiste. I am begging him now-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Gould, please.

Deputy Thomas Gould: -----for the sake of the children. We he let them play?

The Tánaiste: First, the use of the word “apartheid” is very unfortunate in relation to this. What we are doing is-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: That is from the website.

The Tánaiste: What we are doing is applying the laws of our land - laws which the Deputy and his party have not proposed changing, laws in relation to child protection, which I am sure he takes seriously, and laws in relation to a visa system that has to be impartial and applied. We cannot provide visas on the basis of public petition. We have to provide them on the basis of the rules. We have to address child protection. We would all love this to happen in many ways. Who would not like to help children? Of course we would, but there is a “but” here. This has to be done correctly. There are child protection requirements around visas. Everyone is talking about 33 children.

Deputy Thomas Gould: They have done all that. You heard Máire Devine and Aengus Ó Snodaigh. They have done all the child protection. They are doing everything.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Gould, please.

The Tánaiste: Everybody is talking-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Will Deputy Gould please allow the Tánaiste to answer?

The Tánaiste: With respect to Deputies Devine and Ó Snodaigh, that has nothing to do with child protection. It is absolutely nothing to do with the point. Everyone is talking about 33 children. Why is nobody saying the next bit, which is that they are travelling from one far-flung part of the world to another with adults who are not their parents and the importance of child protection checks in relation to that? It is a perfectly appropriate thing to do. No migration service and no Minister for justice would be doing their job if they did not take that seriously.

Deputy Thomas Gould: My own club brought a team to Paris a few weeks ago with their coaches, not their parents.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Whitmore. Deputy Gould-----

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Deputy Thomas Gould: It happens in every school, every club in the country. It happens with every one of them.

The Tánaiste: It is worked through the system.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Whitmore.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy will not resolve this by shouting.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I raise a commitment and a promise that was made by the former Minister for Health to cancer groups across Wicklow last October. The former Minister promised funding for a number of cancer care groups, namely, Purple House Cancer Support, Arklow Cancer Support, Greystones Cancer Support, Wicklow Cancer Support, Rathdrum Cancer Support, Roundwood Cancer Support and West Wicklow Cancer Support. None of those groups have received that funding. I have seen correspondence from the former Minister where he said that funding would be recurrent funding, no matter the affiliation with the NCCP. The Tánaiste and I both well know the amazing work these cancer groups do in County Wicklow. Will he make sure that commitment made by his former Government colleague is kept?

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I will take this on the basis of it being a health matter. The HSE and the NCCP have recently been working with community organisations to distribute the 2025 funding of €5.5 million. The first call for the full members of the Alliance of Community Cancer Support Centres, of which Purple House is one, is now almost complete and the second call for the associate members is now under way. I think some of the groups the Deputy mentioned are within that group. The Alliance has 21 full members and 22 associate members. The associate members will now go through that process as well but the priority is, of course, for the full members.

Deputy Martin Daly: This week, the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste have rightly emphasised the Government's strong commitment to easing the cost-of-living pressures on families, including the recent move to strengthen the powers of the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission to ensure fairness in grocery pricing. Given the extraordinary external pressures of recent years with Covid, the war in Ukraine and the rising global energy costs, will the Tánaiste outline how the Government plans to build on the cost-of-living supports already delivered, particularly with regard to the cost of groceries and essential utilities, to give families greater security and reassurance in the months ahead?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Daly for this. He is so right. The Government is absolutely at one in recognising that just because inflation has fallen, it does not mean the cost of going to the supermarket has fallen as well. The cost of living still remains high. People see that in their weekly shop. They see it when they go to the checkout with their trolley. While we have been very clear that there will not be a cost of living specific measure between September, October and December, that is not to say that a budget of over €100 billion - probably around €120 billion - will not try to help people with their cost of living. Of course it will. Every budget does, in terms of looking at what we can do for older people, younger people and families. That will be the approach we will all take together. However, specifically on the issue of grocery prices, we want to ensure consumers are treated fairly, that pricing is transparent and that competition in the retail sector remains robust. Our colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Alan Dillon, has met with the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission and has asked it to conduct an updated analysis of the Irish grocery retail sector on the issue of excessive pricing. I am

told that piece of work is expected to be completed in the coming weeks.

Deputy Emer Currie: Community childcare not-for-profit operations led by the community for the community stand out in a sector dominated by private provision as an alternative, often part of a wider network of early intervention and family support services. Availability varies wildly across the country, from over 60% of services in Monaghan and Leitrim to just 6% of less in my own county of Fingal. It is 13% in Wicklow. In Dublin 15, two community childcare services in two years have taken the really difficult decision to shut their doors. It is nothing to do with demand in the area. In Ireland, over the past five calendar years, the total number of community service providers that entered the sector is 114. Over the same period, the total number of providers that left is 113. That is an increase of one. Something is obviously wrong. I ask that the community model be specifically examined in the context of the review under way to reduce the administrative burden on providers and a review of core funding to support and increase community childcare services.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Currie for her work as Fine Gael spokesperson on childcare and as part of the Government's collective effort on childcare. The programme for Government is ambitious in this area. As we have discussed before, there are around 21 commitments in relation to childcare. The next step will be the publication of a new action plan on childcare and how we intend to advance it. I broadly agree with the Deputy. We do not want a system that is overly rigid. We have to have a system that recognises parents need to be empowered in what works best for their child. The idea that one model designed in an office is the model that will work best for everyone does not work. Community childcare providers have a significant role to play. We have not seen a level of growth, which should be an indication in and of itself as we carry out this review. Yes is the answer to the Deputy's question. We will ensure the community model is specifically examined in the context of that review and we will look at issues like core funding and high levels of administration and how that could be a barrier to an expansion of a sector doing good work in many counties.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: We know the application system for driving tests can be a disaster. An issue not raised as much is motorcyclists applying for tests. There is a major waiting list and people are told to monitor the site for a cancellation. There is a new practice where third-party sites and apps, for a fee, use bots and book up the cancellations. This places normal applicants at a disadvantage. It means some people fork out more money just to be in with a chance. This may not have been raised with the Tánaiste before. If it has not, will he speak to the Minister for Transport about it? If this practice is happening, it needs to be stopped.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for bringing this to my attention. I was not aware of it but it needs to be stopped. There are enough challenges for people trying to get these tests without somebody gaming the system and exploiting people looking for a test. I will raise it in the first instance with the Minister for Transport.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I raise the Health Service Executive report from yesterday on the care of some women in Portlincula hospital. The results are shocking enough that this could be replicated in other hospitals. Equally shocking and perhaps more is that we utterly failed to learn from the Walker report in 2018 and the same mistakes have been repeated. I am particularly aware of the national maternity strategy. We clearly need a debate on the topic. For today, my question relates to the decision to move high-risk pregnancies to Galway hospital, which is under extreme pressure. It does not have the new maternity wing. If it has to be done in an emergency, clarity is required on the extra resources that will be put in to facilitate that. The

department is already under extreme pressure.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy for her question. This concern is specific to Portiuncula, which demonstrated a much higher than expected rate of requirement for Caesarean sections and cooling of the baby. This was a specific issue. All of the recommendations of the Walker report were implemented. There has been a 100% increase in the number of obstetric consultants and a 25% increase in the number of midwives at Portiuncula. The report has been implemented and increased resources were provided yet there is still a problem. We have to respond to that problem from a patient safety perspective. High-risk pregnancies are being moved to Galway. I have visited the maternity unit in Galway. I know what the Deputy means. I am seeking significant capital funding to transform Galway hospital, including the maternity unit, and to make sure the resources are available in the longer term as well.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I recently met a lady in a supermarket on a fixed income with two adult dependants. She had forgotten her phone which had her loyalty card on it. Panic set in because she did not have it. After we sorted it all out, she told me she could not buy the same groceries on her fixed income as she could a year or two ago. She was quite upset and emotional about it. The CSO today said food and drink prices are up 4.6% compared with 1.8% for everything else, on average, across the country. There is no doubt gouging is going on in supermarkets. I ask the Tánaiste to consider genuinely consider looking into supermarkets having to publish profits; he has a good track record on this. The Labour Party published legislation on that to bring about transparency. More important, can the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission be asked to look at this gouging which is obviously going on? I also ask for it to investigate the scam that is loyalty cards. They are now absolutely mandatory, not voluntary. Supermarkets should work on the basis of price, quality and service. Now, if you do not engage with giving over your personal data to supermarkets to ensure you have one of these cards, you will be ripped off even further. It is not acceptable. It is a rip-off and it needs to be investigated.

The Tánaiste: I think Deputy Carroll MacNeill and I find ourselves in large agreement with a lot of what Deputy Kelly said. I know I get myself in trouble from time to time for saying these sorts of things but the cost-of-living challenge is still very real for people. We have to acknowledge that. We have to prudently budget and carefully work our way through things and always protect our economy. We can quote all the economic statistics we want but the cost of living is still very challenging for many people I would loosely refer to as the squeezed middle. On supermarkets in particular, I welcome the measures taken by Minister of State, Deputy Dillon. He met the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission and asked it to review again the Irish grocery retail sector on the issue of excessive pricing. I am told that is expected to be completed in the coming weeks. The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission has a statutory mandate now to investigate anti-competitive behaviour to ensure consumers are not misled or exploited. I understand several major retailers have been prosecuted for misleading discount practices. These cases marked the first wave of enforcement under new pricing transparency laws. We have committed to strengthening the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission further in the programme for Government. Perhaps we could work constructively on what that law should look like.

I will specifically ask the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, for a view on loyalty cards. I share the Deputy's concerns. It is one thing if it is optional but if it becomes almost mandatory to have it or you have to pay a much higher price, that is a legitimate cause for concern.

Deputy Michael Cahill: Iveragh in south Kerry is remote to many of the people who live

elsewhere on this island. It is a main attraction for many. For many of those living there, its remoteness is neither an attraction nor an advantage when it comes to health services, be they physical or mental. A proposal to move mental health services from Caherciveen Community Hospital to Killorglin would be a detrimental move for everybody resident from Castlecove to Portmagee, Valentia to Dromid and Kells to Ballinskelligs. The service includes 100 users and their families. Any move by the Health Service Executive would make this crucial service inaccessible to many of them. Space for the ambulance station, which is mooted for the move, is a high priority for the south Kerry area but surely not at the expense of our indispensable mental health service. This would add 88 km for all users of the service, unnecessarily doubling a hazardous road journey for vulnerable people, most without their own transport. I plead with the Tánaiste to intervene.

The Tánaiste: Deputy Carroll MacNeill and I will ask the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, as the Minister of State responsible for mental health to look at the serious points Deputy Cahill made. It sounds like there is a lot of stress and concern in the local community. I know the Minister of State will be eager to constructively engage with him and the HSE on this matter. I will ask her to come back directly to the Deputy.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.29 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.09 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.29 p.m. and resumed at 2.09 p.m.

Data Protection Act 2018 (Section 60(4)) Regulations 2025: Motion

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O’Callaghan): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Data Protection Act 2018 (Section 60(4)) (Data Protection Commission) Regulations 2025;

Data Protection Act 2018 (Section 60(4)) (Information Commissioner) Regulations 2025; and

Data Protection Act 2018 (Section 60(4)) (Comptroller and Auditor General) Regulations 2025;

copies of which were laid in draft before Dáil Éireann on 2nd July, 2025.

I am seeking the House’s approval of regulations made, drafted and signed by me under section 60(4) of the Data Protection Act 2018. These regulations I have signed are in respect of three statutory bodies: the Data Protection Commission, the Office of the Information Commissioner and the Comptroller and Auditor General. In fact, the last body is a constitutional officeholder as opposed to a statutory body. The regulations before us are identical save that they refer to different public bodies, whether it be the Data Protection Commission, the Office of the Information Commissioner or the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Section 60(4) of the Data Protection Act permits the making of regulations prescribing requirements to be complied with when the rights of data subjects and obligations of data controllers, referred to in section 60 of the Act, are restricted. The regulations are being made to

address concern raised by the EU Commission that section 60(3)(c) of the Data Protection Act 2018 could be interpreted as providing a blanket exemption for the Data Protection Commission, the Office of the Information Commissioner and the Comptroller and Auditor General when restricting certain rights in the performance of their functions, on the basis that it did not expressly require consideration of necessity and proportionality on a case-by-case basis. The regulations seek to address that concern.

This Government is committed to maintaining strong data protection rights for citizens in line with the general data protection regulation, GDPR. Where potential issues are brought to our attention regarding our national transposing measures, we are happy to examine the issues and act where necessary, as we are doing in this instance. While the GDPR provides strong levels of protection for individuals, the right to data protection is not absolute and it must be balanced against other rights and interests. In this regard, the GDPR recognises that there may be limited circumstances in which an organisation could have grounds to refuse to grant an individual's request to exercise their data protection rights.

Where a Member State provides for further restrictions, the following conditions, which are strict, apply: first, the restrictions must be set out national law; second, they must respect the essence of the fundamental rights and freedoms of individuals; and third, they must be necessary and proportionate to safeguard certain objectives of societal or general public interest.

In Ireland, section 60 of the Data Protection Act gives further effect to Article 23 of the GDPR and provides for restrictions on obligations of controllers and rights of data subjects for important objectives of general public interest. The rights and obligations concerned are those provided for by Articles 12 to 22, inclusive, Article 34 and part of Article 5 of the GDPR. This includes rights of access to personal data, the right to erasure and the right to rectification.

While section 60 provides for a collection of matters including Cabinet confidentiality and parliamentary privilege, these regulations are specifically concerned with section 60(3)(c) of the Act. That provision provides that the rights and obligations under Articles 12 to 22, inclusive, Article 34 and part of Article 5 of the GDPR are restricted to the extent that the personal data concerned are kept by the Data Protection Commission, the Office of the Information Commissioner and the Comptroller and Auditor General in the performance of their functions.

The European Commission contacted my Department and expressed concern about how section 60(3)(c) of the Data Protection Act had been drafted and that it could be interpreted as providing a blanket exemption to the entities concerned by not expressly requiring an assessment of the necessity and proportionality of restricting rights and obligations on a case-by-case basis, as required by the GDPR and, in particular, by Article 23. As an EU regulation, the GDPR is directly applicable in Irish law and section 60(3)(c) must be viewed in the context of Article 23 and operated at all times in keeping with its requirements. However, we recognised that the drafting of that section could be more explicit with respect to the requirements of the GDPR. To address this, two sets of regulations were prepared. First, regulations under section 3 of the European Communities Act 1972 were made in November 2024 to amend section 60(3)(c) to clarify that the restrictions applied by the Data Protection Commission, the Office of the Information Commissioner and the Comptroller and Auditor General, as the case may be, must be necessary and proportionate to safeguard the performance of a function of the body concerned.

The updated provisions also outlined the matters each body must have regard to when deter-

mining whether a restriction would be necessary and proportionate. This includes the extent to which the exercise of a right or compliance with an obligation would prejudice the performance of a function of the body including by disclosing that a particular function was being performed where it may prejudice the performance of the function concerned, or prevent the processing of personal data for a period of time where any delay may prejudice the performance of a function. In addition, the bodies concerned must have regard to the essence of the right to data protection of a data subject and the risks to the rights and freedoms of a data subject that may result from such a restriction.

The draft regulations before the House today are procedural in nature and seek to build upon the requirements set out in the regulations made last year, and are the second and final in the collection of regulations to address the Commission's concerns. Specifically, the regulations require the Data Protection Commission, the Office of the Information Commissioner and the Comptroller and Auditor General to ensure that when restrictions are being applied under section 60(3)(c) for the performance of their functions, those restrictions are only in place for so long as is necessary and proportionate to safeguard the relevant function; and that relevant information about the restrictions is provided to the data subject, including the reason, except where disclosure would prejudice the body in the performance of its function. In addition, each of the bodies is required to prepare and implement policies and procedures that set out how they will deal with important issues such as data storage, security and access arrangements. Additionally, the bodies must periodically review the policies and procedures they have in place.

Each regulation provides that any communication between the body and a data subject must be in an easily accessible form and be in plain language. My Department engaged with the three entities during the drafting process and they have confirmed that they are satisfied with the draft regulations. I take this opportunity to thank the three bodies involved for their constructive engagement throughout the preparation of the regulations.

These draft regulations put in place procedural obligations on the Data Protection Commission, the Office of the Information Commissioner and the Comptroller and Auditor General when seeking to restrict the rights or obligations necessary to safeguard the performance of a function of the body concerned. They do not introduce any new or additional restrictions on the rights of data subjects. The purpose of these regulations is to ensure our national measures better align with the intent of Article 23 of the GDPR and that clear procedures are in place, governing the limited circumstances in which rights or obligations are restricted under section 60(3)(c).

I am seeking the House's approval for the regulations drafted in respect of the three entities. I believe the regulations are necessary because they are proportionate and required for the purpose of ensuring there is compliance with the GDPR.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an eolais sin. I acknowledge, as the Minister has outlined, that these regulations will not in any way limit the rights of citizens. They will, in fact, place greater obligations on related offices in terms of the circumstances in which they may limit the right of citizens to information. The limitations the regulations place on organs of the State to limit citizens rights are entirely reasonable. They ensure that any such limitation is time-limited to only what is necessary to safeguard the work of relevant offices and mandate that an impacted person be informed that this has occurred. Crucially, the right to appeal any such restriction is in place. This is welcome and as such will be supported by Sinn Féin.

However, it is worth examining how the need for these regulations came about and how they came to light. The need for these regulations arises because when transposing the general data protection regulation, GDPR, into domestic law, the Government included what could have amounted to a blanket exemption from crucial components of the GDPR for the Comptroller and Auditor General, the Office of the Chief Information Commissioner and the Data Protection Commission itself - bizarrely, I have to say. It is worth putting on the Dáil record what rights the Government was granting this exemption in relation to. Largely, it comprised the rights outlined in chapter 3 of the regulation, the rights of the data subject. Anyone would agree that chapter is crucial - perhaps the most crucial component of the regulation. This blanket exemption applied to ten out of the 11 articles therein, articles that related to transparency, right of access to personal information, the right to rectification and the right to erasure, which is of course better known as the right to be forgotten. It also applied to Article 34, communication of a personal data breach to the data subject, and again I am certain that anyone in this House would agree that they are among the most fundamental rights for which the regulation provided.

The need for these regulations came to light because this potential blanket exemption was identified by the European Commission. The European Commission and its President get a lot wrong, as we would contend today more so than on most days, and legitimate criticisms can be made in respect of the application of the GDPR. It can become incredibly burdensome for small businesses and voluntary groups to manage. My own experience of the GDPR is that it is often utilised by State bodies to prevent legitimate questions being asked. I am sure most Members of this House have had experience where the GDPR was cited as an excuse for State bodies or even Departments to fail to interact appropriately with elected representatives. As such, I am always open to revisiting existing policy and legislation to ensure there is a correct balance of rights and obligations. The GDPR, just as with any legislation or law, should not be sacrosanct or entombed. There have to be ways and mechanisms to change it if necessary. Of course, that boils down to the difficulties. When we accept regulations or directives at an EU level, once in place they are incredibly difficult to change. By and large, the GDPR is and has been a landmark piece of legislation. While there are many issues with it, it provides citizens with greater control regarding their own personal data, which is important. It is therefore regrettable that the Government placed not only unnecessary limitations on these rights but seemingly, in the view of the European Commission, potentially illegal limitations.

I accept, as the Minister has said, that the GDPR provides for limited circumstances in which restrictions may apply. However, the issue at hand is that the Government in effect drove an articulated lorry through those limited circumstances. That is the opposite of Sinn Féin's starting point when it comes to new legislative or policy proposals, where we prioritise and take a rights-based approach. The Government should give serious consideration to the situation anytime it seeks to limit citizens' rights, particularly their right to access information pertaining to themselves. A blanket exemption in case it is needed, even if not intended to be utilised, is poor legislative practice.

I have two questions for the Minister regarding these specific regulations, which he or the Minister of State might address in their closing remarks. This is the second set of regulations related to the issues identified by the Commission. I note they were drafted individually in the case of each relevant office on the advice of the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel to the Government in case further amendment is required in the future. Is the Minister confident that these regulations address the potentially illegal blanket exemption identified by the Commission in full or does he expect that further amendment or regulation will be necessary?

My second question is particularly important given the potential limitation the Government's legislation placed on a citizen's rights to transparency. These regulations will mandate the impacted offices to prepare and implement policies and procedures to provide for the matters relating to circumstances whereby a citizen's right may be restricted, including in relation to timeframes whereby a person's right may be restricted. In what timeframe does the Minister envisage such policies and procedures to be developed? Noting that the regulations provide that a citizen whose rights are restricted is entitled to a copy of those policies and procedures, will the Minister ensure that these are published at the earliest opportunity?

Deputy Gary Gannon: It is important to speak today on this motion concerning new regulations under section 64 of the Data Protection Act. We are told these regulations do not introduce new restrictions but simply tighten up existing rules to make them better aligned with Article 23 of the GDPR Act. That is fine - indeed, it is welcome - but we should always be careful with motions like this to ensure that public oversight is maintained and that we are not opening the door to unintended consequences.

This is not some abstract debate about data protection jargon. These regulations affect real people who are trying to access their own information or to understand the decisions made about them by powerful State bodies, namely, the Data Protection Commission, DPC, the Office of Information Commissioner, OIC, and the Comptroller and Auditor General. These are institutions we rightly trust to hold others to account, but when those very institutions restrict the public's right to information, to silence or withhold, even in exceptional cases, we should always leave room for debate. Scrutinising legislation like this has never been more important. We have seen the actions of the British Government taken in recent weeks under terrorism laws, not to target violence but to silence protest. People spray-painting planes as a symbolic act of dissent now face penalties of up to 14 years in prison and simply expressing support for that group is now a criminal offence. That is not national security but the attitude of an authoritarian regime. It should make us all pause. We are living in an age when the misuse of power is often framed as order and if we are not careful, laws once meant to protect will become tools of control.

Under Ireland's current law, specifically section 60(3)(c) of the Data Protection Act, these bodies can restrict someone's GDPR rights to safeguard their own functions, in other words to carry out their work without interference. Until recently, that section did not require them to explain why they were restricting a person's right. There was no clear legal test of necessity, no demand for proportionality, nothing to ensure this power was used sparingly and transparently. That is why the European Commission stepped in. It said, and rightly so, that the law as written looked like a blank cheque for public bodies to block people from exercising their data rights. It could have allowed for a blanket exemption with no oversight. That is not in line with Article 23 of the GDPR and certainly is not in line with the spirit of fairness and accountability.

The Government's move to amend that section and bring forward these regulations is a step in the right direction. It is absolutely progress. However, my concern is that what is written on paper and what happens in practice are often two very different things. Yes, we need regulations but they must come with teeth, built-in accountability and real safeguards for ordinary people, not just policy documents that sit quietly on a website, untested and unread. I also have concerns for those who might have more difficulties navigating the system, the young person wrongly profiled, the migrant trying to challenge the decision, the person with literacy issues and no legal support. These regulations must not become another barrier to justice, wrapped in a legal cloak.

I would like to hear the Minister address the following. Will these regulations include a clear appraisals process when someone's rights are restricted? Will the DPC, the OIC and the Comptroller and Auditor General be subject to independent oversight, not just self-review? Will the Government commit to a public audit of how these powers are used, not once but regularly? Most important, will the Minister confirm that these regulations cannot be used to shield incompetence or wrongdoing, or simply to avoid scrutiny? If transparency only applies when it is convenient, it is not transparency at all.

Data protection is not just a legal principle but a human right. These regulations should not be technical fixes to satisfy Brussels. They should be meaningful steps to protect people's rights at home and to hold powerful institutions to account. I will support the motion if it comes with guarantees not just that rights are restricted carefully but that the people affected can challenge these restrictions and their consequences when institutions get it wrong.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration(Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank Deputies Carthy and Gannon for their contributions. Deputy Carthy was correct in stating that these regulations are not seeking in any way to restrict the rights of a data subject. In fact, they are seeking to add protection to the rights of a data subject by ensuring that the three agencies that are the subject matter of the regulations act only where necessary and in a proportionate way when they are seeking to restrict access.

I welcome the fact that both Deputies are supportive of the new regulations. Deputy Carthy also wondered why it was not fully transposed when the GDPR was being enacted in the Data Protection Act. I was a member of the justice committee at that stage. It was an enormous task. I am conscious of the task the Deputy faces, as Cathaoirleach of the current justice committee, with the International Protection Bill. There was a similar task when the GDPR came before that committee for the purposes of pre-legislative scrutiny and Committee Stage. In fairness, understanding human frailty, things can be missed. I do not think it was a deliberate miss or anything like that.

To answer the Deputy's question, I am confident that the regulations address the issue of the legal blanket exemption. The regulations are proportionate and necessary. I do not believe I will be back again seeking to add further regulations in that regard.

The Deputy also asked what is the timeframe for the two statutory bodies and the one constitutional body to have these policies in place. I can tell him that at present, they all have policies in place and available. They will obviously need to be updated. I understand and hope they will be published next term or in the autumn. That is my expectation.

Deputy Gannon said we should have public oversight, and I agree entirely. That is what we are doing here today. The legislation states that I, as Minister, can make regulations but they will only be approved if the Houses of the Oireachtas approve them. That is a very good provision. I cannot just introduce the regulations, sign them in and have them become law. I need to come back to the Houses for the approval of the elected representatives of the Irish people. That is how we are having public oversight.

I agree with the Deputy that we should scrutinise legislation. We have good democratic oversight of legislation in this country. I sometimes contrast the position of an Irish Minister with the people who are in power in other countries. We are subject to committee hearings, frequently answer questions in the Dáil and Seanad and expose ourselves to the media in respect of

the legislation. We have a thorough process for checking draft legislation before it is enacted. I support that thorough process. That is the way we should do it. The last thing we want is a situation whereby laws can be made relatively easily.

The Deputy also asked questions about the process in respect of anyone who wishes to pursue these regulations or make a complaint. When it comes to any data complaint, we have the Data Protection Commission, the Information Commissioner and the courts. Anyone who is dissatisfied with the operation of the regulations for which I am seeking approval can lodge a complaint under Article 77 of the GDPR and it will be dealt with in the ordinary course. A statutory mechanism is in place to ensure that anyone who believes his or her data rights have been unfairly appraised and determined can avail of the provisions within the GDPR and the Data Protection Act to ensure they are vindicated.

Question put and agreed to.

Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence: Statements

Minister for Justice (Deputy Jim O’Callaghan): I welcome the opportunity to address the House on an issue that is of significant importance and has widespread impact throughout our society. It is the issue of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. The purpose of keeping this issue in the public domain and discussing it within the Houses of the Oireachtas is to ensure that we can identify the appropriate measures to combat it. This is an activity and criminal behaviour within our society that we must make further effort to confront and eradicate. It remains one of the most serious challenges facing our society.

It is important to point out, however, that ongoing criminal acts of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence are not unique to Ireland. I looked at the statistics in respect of the murder or manslaughter of women in Ireland and Northern Ireland. The figures in Ireland are unacceptably high. The figures in Northern Ireland are even higher. I am aware that in other countries around the world, violence against women is an issue that needs to be confronted internationally and nationally.

As I mentioned previously in the House, I had the privilege of launching the Women’s Aid report approximately ten days ago. As people will be aware, the detail contained in that report is both sobering and frightening. It shows the rise in the numbers of women contacting that agency for the purpose of seeking to get advice, assistance and help arising from their being subjected to violence and criminal assault. The figures in the Women’s Aid report published this year show that 32,000 contacts were made in 2024. That represents a 12% increase on the previous year. We can sometimes get caught up in statistics. We must recall that each of those women who phoned Women’s Aid had a personal tragedy and trauma behind the phone call. We need to remain alive to the fact that there are real issues about women in our society. For too long, they have suffered in silence. It is imperative that we make them aware that there is support for them from society at large.

It is timely that we are having this discussion. There is a greater political and public focus on the issue of domestic and gender-based violence than was previously the case. Part of the reason for that, and part of the credit for that, rests with the many victims of this violence who have been prepared to speak publicly. People who are victims and women who speak out provide a stronger voice to other women who may be suffering silently and who may feel that

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they do not have the power to come forward to make a complaint to An Garda Síochána or even just to report it to agencies such as Women's Aid. I am today reaffirming the Government's unwavering commitment to what I refer to as a "zero-tolerance approach" to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. We need to ensure, however, that the approach operates across our society. It is not just an issue to be discussed by the Minister for justice when launching a Women's Aid report. It must involve a whole-of-government response to combatting this issue.

Recently, through the statutory body Cuan, my Department put out a strategy and implementation plan for how this needs to be approached and confronted. The proposals go all across government. They apply not just to my Department but to other Departments, including the Department of education.

I recognise the excellent work done by my predecessor as Minister, Deputy McEntee. She was instrumental in the establishment of Cuan and raising this issue as the prominent political issue it deserves to be treated as. Since I took up office as Minister for justice, I have sought to keep focus on it. It is one of my priorities that we have a situation in Ireland where there is growing awareness of the unacceptability of violence against women and girls. I am conscious as well that we put a significant amount into this but, of course, money on its own is not sufficient. There are unprecedented resources, with €70 million being provided in budget 2025 to tackle domestic violence. Since 2020, funding for domestic, sexual and gender-based violence services has tripled. I recently launched the third national zero-tolerance strategy, which is an ambitious national strategy to combat violence against women.

There is also the issue of refuge spaces. I am very conscious that is correctly raised frequently in this House. However, we also need to recognise that the solution to violence against women cannot become just trying to identify an appropriate number of refuge spaces around the country. As has been said previously in this House, in many instances, we have to question why the woman who is the victim of domestic violence is the person in the couple who moves out of the home. We should recognise that there are provisions in place through barring orders to ensure that individuals who are perpetrating violence against women in the home are the ones who should leave the home. Notwithstanding that, there is always going to be a requirement for additional refuge spaces. Funding has been secured for 80 additional refuge spaces, with a commitment to provide 280 spaces by 2026. We will see for the first time in Ireland a network of safe accommodation, as required under the Istanbul Convention, which will include both refuges and safe houses.

I also want to point out that since I became Minister for justice, I have sought to advance and expedite a series of legislative proposals that are necessary and that will make it easier for victims of domestic and gender-based violence. In April, I brought proposals to Cabinet to allow for the removal of guardianship rights of a person who has been convicted of killing their intimate partner under the proposed guardianship of infants (amendment) Bill 2025. That is a piece of work Deputy Carthy is doing at present, as Chairman of the Joint Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, in completing pre-legislative scrutiny in respect of that important legislation. I commend all the individuals in the public realm, particularly Mr. French who has advanced this issue, to ensure it is recognised in certain instances. This is a child protection issue.

In May, I received approval from Cabinet to pursue proposals to limit the disclosure of counselling records in rape and sexual assault cases. That is a provision I have managed to put into the civil law and criminal law (miscellaneous provisions) Bill's general scheme. I hope to

introduce that Bill, including the provision in respect of counselling notes, in the Houses of the Oireachtas later this year.

I also received permission from the Government to put into that legislation proposals to prohibit sex for rent. That is something I also want introduced, and hopefully enacted, by the end of this year. I am also happy to inform the House that following extensive engagement with officials in my Department and my colleagues, Deputy McAuliffe and Senator O'Loughlin, and, indeed, the Attorney General's office, I will soon bring forward proposals to create a domestic violence register. I commend Mr. Jason Poole, brother of Jennifer Poole, who has been instrumental in really exhorting and encouraging politicians to proceed with this proposal, which will hopefully be known as Jenny's Law. This proposal will allow for any person who was convicted on indictment of specified offences, including murder, manslaughter or serious assault against an intimate partner or former intimate partner, to be named in a court judgment outlining the sentence imposed. That judgment will be published under a domestic violence register of judgments on the Courts Service website. The sentencing court will retain discretion as to whether such a judgment should be published, which will act as an important safeguard for the victim as the consent of the victim will also be required before such information will be published and available to the public at large. This, it is hoped, will act not only to provide information to intimate partners of those individuals who could pose a risk to their partner's safety, as was the case with the shocking and tragic death of Jennifer Poole, but it should also act as a deterrent to individuals from carrying out such crimes in the future.

We also need to reflect when we are discussing this issue upon the fact that justice in Ireland is required to be administered in public. If a person is convicted of a serious criminal offence in Ireland before the courts, that is a public conviction, and the public are entitled to know about that conviction. I am also conscious of the fact that rehabilitation is an important aspect of our justice system and under these proposals, a convicted person will have the ability to make an application to court to apply to have the judgment removed after three years. I do not see anything controversial or incompatible with the rights of the individual in this proposal. It is unquestionably the case that if people are convicted of serious criminal convictions, that can be publicised. Most nights of the week on the news and in our newspapers, we read about individuals who are convicted of serious offences. However, it appears to be the case that this is done on a very arbitrary basis, and it can be the case that individuals are convicted of serious offences, but people do not get to hear about them because of the fact that there was no journalist in court at the time. In such circumstances, the court shall have regard to any subsequent convictions of the applicant and-or any actions of rehabilitation undertaken by the applicant when considering such an application. The court shall also have regard to the position and views of the victim with regard to such an application. Under this proposal, the court will have discretion to determine whether to publish details of the judgment pursuant to a written judgment, and the court will take into account the nature and severity of the case and other relevant factors. It is my hope to bring forward these proposals to Cabinet in the autumn.

The Government is also determined to break down barriers that have historically silenced victims. Transparency, data collection and evaluation will drive continuous improvement. Again, I want to mention Cuan, the statutory agency responsible for combating domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. It plays a critical role in co-ordinating this multiagency response, ensuring joined-up survivor-centred care and regular reporting on progress and challenges.

In respect of the refuge spaces, a capital programme to deliver domestic violence refuge accommodation is happening at present, and it is a very significant and unprecedented allocation.

tion of funding. Cuan has been working in partnership with local front-line service providers, local authorities, the Department of housing and other entities, such as housing agencies, to co-ordinate local actions and support local services with delivery. By the end of last year, almost all priority areas had identified a site, and one new refuge in Wexford had opened and another had started construction.

I am pleased that I have had the privilege of visiting a number of refuge centres since becoming Minister. Earlier this week, I was in Kildare where I visited a refuge centre. I visited a refuge centre in Kilkenny the week before that, one in Limerick with the Minister of State, Deputy Collins, who is beside me, and one in Drogheda. It is important that both I and the Minister of State, as Ministers in the Department, get out and actually see what these refuge centres are like on the ground and provide encouragement to ensure that more of them are created.

There are currently 53 safe home units in place as well, which will be increased by a further 45 planned new safe home units by the end of 2026. In addition to the 141 refuge units at the start of the strategy, 52 new refuge units are planned to be delivered by the end of 2026, and there is a pathway for an additional 50 refuge units to be under construction by that point.

As we enter the final phase of the implementation of the zero-tolerance strategy, it is right to reflect on the substantial progress made since its publication. There has been significant legislative reform, including the enactment of the Family Courts Act 2024. That Act establishes a dedicated family court system, and it will ensure timelier, trauma-informed access to justice. I can stand here and confidently say that the law to combat all forms of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence has been strengthened significantly in recent years. There is also the Sex Offenders (Amendment) Act 2023, which provides for stronger supervision of sex offenders after they are released. The legislation includes measures strengthening the management and monitoring of sex offenders in the community, including amendments to the sex offenders register notification requirements and a ban on sex offenders working with children or vulnerable people.

The Criminal Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2023 increased the maximum penalty for assault causing harm from five to ten years, introduced a new stand-alone offence for non-fatal strangulation and stalking and providing for the making of civil orders restraining stalking conduct and strengthened the law around harassment and ensuring the protection of the identity of alleged victims of harassment and stalking in court proceedings.

The Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Human Trafficking) Act 2024 ensures anonymity for victims in all trials for sexual offences, extends the victim's right to separate legal representation if they are being questioned about their previous sexual history and ensures character evidence at a sentencing hearing for a person convicted of a sexual offence must be made on oath or via affidavit rather than simply through a letter being sent in via a solicitor.

This legislative reform is continuing. I have touched on the progress we are making to expand refuge accommodation but my Department is also examining proposals to develop a policy on removal orders to take offenders out of the home in high-risk domestic violence and domestic abuse cases, subject to legal considerations. There are mechanisms in place, such as barring orders and safety orders, that are available to women who find themselves in the appalling situation of being subjected to domestic abuse. I also plan to progress legislative amendments to allow for the Garda to share information with schools as a measure to support children and young people who experience domestic violence in the home. We need to progress

Operation Compass not only in this jurisdiction but also in the North. I have had an opportunity on numerous occasions to discuss with the justice minister in Northern Ireland, Naomi Long, the issues of violence against women. We can provide each other with information, data and policing support to ensure that throughout the island of Ireland there is a consistent response to the scourge of this violence.

Criminal justice is very important. Sometimes in this House we focus very much on legislative solutions to problems such as violence against women. That is understandable since our primary function is making legislation. However, there is more to resolving this issue than simply drafting laws. We have to recognise that this is a societal issue and as a result, we need to try to ensure there is prevention as well as investigation and prosecution after it occurs.

There has been a significant emphasis on education in the strategy. In 2024, the then Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, introduced a new curriculum for senior cycle on social personal and health education. This tells young people about respectful relationships should be built. It empowers them to recognise and respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships. We in this House are very aware of the level of information out there and access to depraved material that young people can get online. We need to ensure that we educate young people and try to warn them that the depictions they see of relationships online is not normal and is not acceptable. Unfortunately, a tendency has developed in certain aspects of online material to present women in a very submissive, malleable way and that they are simply there to do what men tell them. We all know that is not only an anachronistic but a deeply offensive representation of women. We need to tell and warn young people about that. That is why we have to have a greater awareness raising. That is why it is so important that this is not simply viewed as a Department of justice issue but that there is also recognition that there it goes all across the Government, particularly the Department of education. The Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy McEntee, is continuing the very good work that the Minister, Deputy Foley, started last year on this and is continuing with that.

I want to acknowledge the excellent work of the GAA. Sometimes, as I have said previously, people view this as a woman's issue or an issue we discuss in certain debates; it is not. It is a societal issue. If we want to break it down on gender lines, it is probably more of a man's issue than a women's issue since men are predominantly, if not exclusively, responsible for violence against women. The GAA has recognised its responsibility. It is establishing the game-changer campaign, which uses sports-based advocacy to engage men and boys across communities, challenging harmful norms about the role women should play. This is a three-year initiative led by Ruhama, in partnership with the GAA and the Men's Development Network that brings the zero tolerance message into clubs and communities in every part of life. There is a really powerful basis for doing that when a great sports organisation like the GAA is behind it.

We also need to recognise, as men speaking on this topic that we also have a responsibility in what we say to younger men and boys to try to ensure they recognise and appreciate that it is unacceptable to use violence within a relationship. I also want to note the Women's Aid "ally action list" reminds us that every man can teach respect, call out wrongdoing and take action online and offline. If men in our schools, workplaces, sports clubs and homes step up, we can collectively dismantle the environment that allows abuse to continue.

I also want to recognise the excellent work of An Garda Síochána. There was some concern in respect of the Women's Aid report, which found that 44% of women were dissatisfied with their initial contact with An Garda Síochána. Notwithstanding the fact that the majority were

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satisfied, that does indicate there is an issue in ensuring gardaí are suitably and adequately qualified. My own assessment and the advice I have received from within An Garda Síochána and, indeed, from people who are victims of domestic violence is that, once the victim gets engaged with the experts within the force, they have a very positive outcome.

The Minister of State, Deputy Collins wants to speak on this matter so I will conclude welcoming the fact that we are having this debate. I thank Members before they make their contributions. There is a general consensus in the House that there is a problem and how it should be responded to. I have no doubt there will be criticism about the number of refuge spaces or the counties they are in. That is a legitimate criticism. We are working on that and it is my responsibility. However, we also need to recognise that this is a much broader problem than just finding safe houses and refuges.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Niall Collins): I acknowledge the very fine work of my colleague the Minister in this area and, indeed, the work that has been done across government and beyond to implement the zero-tolerance strategy.

The fight against domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is one we all need to engage fully with. As we have heard from the Minister, affecting substantial change in this area is possible. We can, and will, drive real progress in combating these horrific crimes because we are committed, determined and taking action. It is 2025 and the major obstacle to achieving gender equality in Europe is violence against women and girls. That cannot be allowed to continue. We cannot allow that to continue. We will work with our partners, ensure access to supports for victims, hold perpetrators to account and at the same time challenge and address societal root causes which underpin these horrific crimes.

However, it is really for all of us, as individuals, to realise that we must contribute. To realise that we must, in our everyday lives, do our bit to eradicate existing social and cultural attitudes and contribute to an environment where women and girls feel safe and protected and are safe and protected. There must be zero tolerance. We all have a role to play in this.

Among those playing a starring role are workers in our front-line services and I want to acknowledge in particular the commitment and expertise of our victims' services. These play a vital role in ensuring that when women and families come forward to seek support, they are treated with the highest standard of care, compassion and respect.

The ADAPT domestic abuse service in Limerick is leading from the front in this regard. ADAPT provides care and safety to vulnerable women and children affected by domestic abuse last year, it accommodated 125 families including 158 children at its refuge facility in Limerick. These figures are stark and underscore the urgency with which we all must act to ensure zero tolerance of DSGBV.

3 o'clock

It is important to recognise the staff, paid and voluntary, who work with ADAPT and other front-line services across the country, often in difficult and highly pressurised roles, to support those facing some of the most traumatic experiences imaginable. Their knowledge, rooted in years of direct experience, also informs our national strategies and ensures our policies put the experiences of survivors first. They model empathy and understanding in this difficult space that we would all do well to try to replicate.

In conclusion, I want to echo the words of the Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan, reaffirming the Government’s unwavering commitment to that zero-tolerance approach to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. This is not only a justice issue; it is a whole of society issue. It is not something for the Government to tackle; it is for all of us to tackle.

Deputy Máire Devine: I would like to greet the survivors of domestic, intimate partner, sexual and gender-based violence in the Gallery as well as those at home. Some of you may not be able to pursue justice through our legal system for myriad reasons. We see you and we stand with you always.

Every one of us knows a victim of crime in this very broad category, including behaviour which might not previously have been recognised as coercive control, revenge porn and marital rape. Consider that every single person in Ireland knows a victim. They are our friends, neighbours, family members and colleagues. There are more legislative means we can and will employ to help them, but perhaps the most important is to undertake a complete shift in culture and mindset. We can enact as many laws as we want, and we have, but that has not shifted the dial.

Let us face facts. Until we acknowledge that Irish society actively facilitates this abuse and attitudes, and has done for centuries, nothing will change. Ireland is experiencing high volumes of reports of intimate partner violence at truly alarming rates. Our society must adapt to achieve the eradication of this violence and the demeaning attitude towards women and girls which is spreading via disgustingly misogynistic online discourse.

Instead of knowing popstars by their first names, we now know survivors and victims, the Aislings, the Sophies, the Natashas, the Nikitas and so many more. We know others by the legislation named after them, such as Jennies’s law and Valerie’s law. The Dublin Rape Crisis Centre’s recent report on public perceptions of domestic violence show that our young boys and men are developing alarming attitudes to women in a break with their older counterparts. This should set off alarm bells for all of us, and we must all be leaders and shoulder the responsibility of changing our society for the better.

One way we could do this is by exploring a ban on strangulation pornography. Recent research published by the Sexual Exploitation Research and Policy Institute director, Ruth Breslin, indicates that our young people are presenting themselves at accident and emergency departments with strokes, seizures and brain injuries due to acts seen in extreme strangulation porn. It is free, heavily promoted and easily accessible online by anybody with a connected device.

Let me be clear. There is no truly safe way to strangle somebody. Videos on how to breath play safely, which sounds innocuous, are being normalised. We need hard-hitting messages to reach our men and boys who start accessing porn by the age of 11. This is not breath play. There is nothing playful about it. There is reason to be alarmed. We have seen a fivefold increase in a single decade of strangulation sex. It has grown rapidly from niche to mainstream because pornography is normalising it as part of sex.

Such horrific depictions of extreme aggression effectively become our people’s sex education. Consensual discussion is welcome, but is undermined by porn and, tragically, easy access to violent porn is grooming our boys into being unwitting sexual perpetrators. Girls curious about sex believe strangulation is a part of intimacy to which they must submit.

I have had these conversations with girls who have been frightened and disturbed. The

definition of intimacy is skewed completely by strangulation. Strangulation is identified by An Garda Síochána as a significant factor for homicide among women, but even non-fatal strangulation carries dangerous outcomes, including acquired brain injuries, seizures, paralysis and psychological impacts. Strangulation is one of the most common causes of stroke in women under 40 years of age. We should explore a complete ban on strangulation porn in Ireland, as done elsewhere, along with drastically changing public perceptions of women and girls.

This is a rising emergency in Ireland due to depictions of harmful behaviour which are clearly adversely affecting thousands of young people across Ireland. For the sake of us all, of us we must wholly reject the disrespectful and violent discourse being spread in many on-line forms and instead rapidly adopt a culture of 100% intolerance. Let us be known globally known as a society that will not tolerate this.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Fáiltím roimh an deis labhairt sa díospóireacht seo. Prevention must be central to how these issues are tackled if we are to make their elimination a real possibility. That means tackling the underlying attitudes that allow such behaviour and crimes to flourish. It means education and speaking out. In particular, it is important for men to speak out to show that this behaviour does not represent masculinity.

As well as tackling the underlying causes of this epidemic of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, we need to ensure that those who are victims of these crimes are supported at every stage in getting to safety, getting justice and rebuilding their lives. That means ensuring gardaí and all those who work in the courts are properly trained to deal with these issues. It also means tackling the delays in the courts and making the judicial process better for victims and survivors.

There are still far too few refuges. I have mentioned my constituency to the Minister on several occasions. His predecessor promised two refuges, but we are instead waiting on one. It is not good enough. We also need to be aware that the situation is made worse by the failure to tackle the housing crisis. Addressing the long-term housing needs of victims and survivors of domestic violence must be at the heart of domestic violence strategies.

Another issue I have raised with the Minister, and which requires an urgent response, is the crisis in civil legal aid for those seeking barring orders who cannot secure legal representation. At the centre of this crisis is the fact that legal aid fees payable to solicitors on the District Court family law solicitors panel for this work is deterring solicitors from taking on cases. The Minister indicated this will be considered as part of the implementation of the report of the civil legal aid report group, which is yet to be published and is due to go to public consultation. Frankly, that is not good enough.

Before concluding, I want to take this opportunity to again ask the Minister for his support for Bill I recently introduced to the House. The Victims of Sexual Violence Civil Protection Orders Bill 2025 will bring forward a new provision in law whereby a person in relation to whom an offence of a sexual nature is found to have been committed by the courts may be granted a civil protection order. That would allow victims to be assured at the time of sentence that their perpetrator will never again be able to intrude on their lives. It is a small but important piece of legislation, and would it would be very helpful if the Minister would give an indication that he is willing to support it.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I would like to acknowledge that the Minister is currently pro-

gressing legislative proposals on the guardianship rights of those who have murdered their spouse as well as the disclosure of counselling notes. It is important that we get the proposals right and it is welcome that they are progressing through the Oireachtas.

I am delighted to hear that the Minister is visiting refuges, but an area that remains of particular concern to me, because it impacts my constituency of Cavan-Monaghan, is that of refuge spaces in the constituency. Cavan and Monaghan continue to be among the nine counties which lack a domestic violence refuge. While I welcome the commitment of the Government to establishing a refuge in Cavan or Monaghan, this must be done immediately. I have heard it is looking for somewhere to progress this to and it still has not happened, so I ask the Minister to help with this. Is it his ambition to progress this and increase spaces? It would show real leadership. Will he pledge to provide adequate spaces in every county? We need a greater level of services across the board. We need legislative proposals to be progressed and enacted. The Minister will agree with this, but surely he will accept the bare minimum we owe women and children who have to flee their homes is a refuge, regardless of where they live. Is it the Minister's ambition? He will determine whether this will happen or not. Unfortunately the progress since the Government announced the target of doubling the number of spaces to 280 has been lacking. There were 12 new units in 2023 and fewer than 50 additional units are set to be delivered this year. This is all in the context of the target falling far off the number of spaces mandated by the convention on domestic violence. People in Cavan and Monaghan are entitled to a refuge, as is anyone else in this State, including those in the other seven counties that also continue to lack these services. I appeal to the Minister to recognise that. I urge him to give a commitment to our communities that he will right the wrongs of past governments and deliver adequate refuge for the women and children of counties Cavan and Monaghan.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: It was very upsetting to read in the Women's Aid annual report that the organisation has received the highest number of domestic abuse reports in its 50-year history. While I acknowledge the work of the previous Minister, Deputy McEntee, we have a lot more to do. When it comes to domestic refuge spaces this Government is still failing in its legal obligation to provide them. This is incredibly important because at a time when we have a housing crisis we have a situation where victims are becoming trapped. Their options are either to stay in an abusive situation or become homeless. This is totally unacceptable. The report also found that 44% of those who reported a domestic violence incident to gardaí said they found them unhelpful. This must change. Gardaí must be trained in how to deal with a report of domestic abuse. We need to see an urgency in perpetrators being charged and brought before the courts because it can often take many years for these matters to even reach the courts. The argument for a domestic violence register is an extremely important one when it comes to protecting women from repeat offenders and ensuring gardaí are aware of where known abusers live or if they have moved into our communities. It is welcome everyone here is on the same page but we need to see more action. We need a society where every public space, community centre, sports club, pub, shop and home is a zero tolerance space when it comes to domestic and gender-based violence.

Deputy Mark Ward: I am going to read out some statistics from last year. There were over 45,000 reports of domestic abuse to Women's Aid, over 22,000 contacts to the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre, over 49,000 domestic abuse incidents recorded by gardaí and over 65,000 domestic abuse calls recorded by gardaí. Behind every single one of these statistics is a person and they are mainly women, like the women who are here in the Gallery and the women who are watching at home. Women who have hopes, dreams and aspiration and have a right to feel

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safe. There are also women who are subjected to horrific abuse from another person, mainly a man and mainly a man who is known to the woman. The Minister mentioned that it is really incumbent on men to call out other men when it comes to situations like this. The last time I spoke in the Dáil about calling out other men I received a tirade of abuse on social media from a certain cohort of men. I tell them to have a good look at themselves and cop themselves on about why they are calling out somebody for calling them out on their behaviour.

I will mention a situation in my area that is related to refuges. We do not have enough of them and the Minister has acknowledged that. A woman I assisted in my constituency office last year had to flee her home with her children for her safety. She found the refuge and got all the support a refuge offers, but after a period she needed to leave the refuge. However, the perpetrator was still in the family home refusing to leave and exercising coercive control over his family. The council will not get involved because it just looks at statistics. It just looks at the forms that are sent in and does not see the person behind that. It sees the person is adequately housed on paper, but we know that is not the truth. Women are trapped in these situations. It was between staying in a refuge or returning to the family home, which is the home she had to flee for her own safety in the first place. As Deputy Carthy said already, the housing situation is trapping people in violent and dangerous situations. Surely a victim-centred approach can be taken when it comes to domestic violence so victims' and survivors' needs can be placed ahead of the abuser's.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: The need to tackle domestic, sexual and gender-based violence has never been more urgent. It is not merely a matter of rising numbers; it is an epidemic. Women and children across the country are facing violence in their homes, which should be their safest space. Recent research shows us one in four women in Ireland, as well as one in seven men, will experience violence over the course of their lives. Every ten minutes there is a call to the Garda relating to domestic abuse. These are not isolated incidents but deep symptoms of a problematic system that demands immediate and sustained action. We are witnessing the devastating consequences of stigma, inaction and reactive policy. We know from the most recent reports released by Women's Aid and Safe Ireland that 275 women have been violently killed in Ireland since 1996 and 20 children have died in incidents where women were violently killed. Some 63% of these women died in their homes, a place they should have felt most secure. In 87% of solved cases the victim knew her killer. Shockingly, one of the biggest risks to pregnant women in the first 12 months post-partum is violence from their partner. Most alarming of all, rates of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence have risen significantly since 2020.

We cannot allow more lives to be lost to such silent stigma or slow systems. Each woman killed violently is an outrage but behind every statistic there is a name, a woman, a mother, a daughter or a friend. Most of all, they were someone. We need an urgent, co-ordinated and well-funded intervention at every level from housing and justice to education and social protection. This violence does not respect borders. Increased numbers of women and girls are being killed in the North, which has become one of the most dangerous places for women in the EU. It is time for an all-island approach to this emergency.

Domestic violence is a leading cause of homelessness for women in Ireland yet nine counties still have no refuge. Local authorities like mine in Dublin Fingal West are in desperate need of their own refuge within the area. The rise in cases coming to me as a TD compared with when I was a councillor has been exponential. It is one of the most shocking issues I have dealt with since coming here. It is the biggest change I have seen in my caseload. Most women

who stay in refuges exit them into homeless hubs. The stark reality is women are often trapped in violent homes because they simply have nowhere else to go. We must recognise victims of domestic violence as a priority housing category. We must support victims' choice of location, especially to avoid uprooting children from their schools and support systems. We must make the housing assistance payment easier to access and more reflective of market rates. We must support faster name removals from joint tenancies. We must recognise and count the scale of the problem. Local authorities should be reporting on housing needs due to domestic violence. In Dublin Fingal West, we have a new priority welfare category for housing whereby victims of domestic violence are being prioritised, but we need a faster response on this. We must recognise domestic violence refuge accommodation in national homelessness statistics. These women are homeless and should be counted as such.

We must take financial abuse into account in assessing means-tested supports. Too often, women have no access to money because they remain classed as a dependant of their partner. We need separation of social welfare payments. Leaving abuse should not mean having to choose between safety and poverty. We must look to introduce a safety fund that would offer a cash grant, similar to the UK model, to help cover the high costs of escaping abuse and setting up a new home. The Department of Social Protection could deliver such a grant, much like it delivered the temporary rent supplement for victims of domestic violence during the pandemic.

Laws need to be strengthened and modernised, particularly in the online space where misogyny is thriving and algorithms promote toxic and harmful content that distorts reality. This is fuelling violence and abuse. It could be effectively tackled by ensuring recommender systems are turned off by the various social media websites to combat the spread of hateful material. These systems fuel and push violent and reactionary content to users. It is concerning that this proposal was notably absent from the online safety code brought forward by Coimisiún na Meán last May. I urge that there be a reconsideration in this regard.

We must be brave and introduce the necessary measures. We must enact a Jennie's law to ensure perpetrators are named and held accountable and that breaches of protection orders carry real consequences. We need to educate young men and boys about consent, respect and gender equality. We must focus on the responsibility of the perpetrator rather than the victim. Media coverage is often deeply uncomfortable and we must not become desensitised. The media have a responsibility to centre victims' voices and avoid sensationalised commentary on perpetrators. There must be a conscious effort to stop unconscious silencing of women who suffer abuse.

Domestic violence services should be funded sustainably by the State. Services having to rely on donations and the kindness of people doing fundraisers is an absolute farce. Services must be integrated into the housing and health systems. We need to strengthen links between local authorities and communities that are able to advocate for victims effectively.

We must expand and upgrade refuge spaces, not just for crisis response but to provide real long-term stability. While refuges are essential, they are not a permanent solution. Our aim should be to allow survivors to remain safely at home wherever possible and to hold perpetrators accountable, including through emergency removal powers such as those in operation in New Zealand and the UK.

We must move beyond zero tolerance. It is about not only calling out violence or misogyny when we see it but actively working to prevent it in every community.

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Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I am conscious we are discussing domestic, sexual and gender-based violence on the day we learned George Gibney will be extradited from Florida to Ireland to face 79 charges of sexual offences against children. Gibney was a high-profile Irish Olympic swimming team coach in the eighties and nineties who abused his position of power and trust. He was previously charged with, but not tried for, numerous sexual offences. Fortunately, our legal norms and laws have changed since the nineties and it is now possible to prosecute historical sexual offences.

I acknowledge the work of Mark Horgan of Second Captains in bringing this case back into the public consciousness through his investigative podcast series “Where is George Gibney?”. This is an example of the importance of well-resourced investigative journalism. The podcast prompted survivors of Gibney to come forward for the first time. It is those survivors I am thinking of in particular today. I pay tribute to them and commend them on their bravery and courage. It cannot have been easy to relive what must be such an agonising trauma by telling their story all these years later. I sincerely hope they get the justice they deserve.

We have a domestic and gender-based violence problem in this country. It is increasingly being recognised and I acknowledge the positive steps that have been taken, such as the establishment last year of Cuan. Nevertheless, the problem persists and the trends are still concerning. As has been noted, Women’s Aid services responded to a record number of contacts last year. The Garda responded to an average of 1,144 incidents of domestic abuse per week between 2022 and 2024. That amounts to more than 178,000 times a person was attacked at home, which is a place that should be one of sanctuary and safety. More often than not, the attack was carried out by the person’s partner.

We cannot separate the scourge of domestic and gender-based violence from the housing crisis. The most recent homelessness figures show that almost 4,300 women are living in emergency accommodation. How many of them are there because of an abusive partner? We know domestic violence is one of the leading causes, if not the leading one, of homelessness for women. All too often, the system is set up against those seeking safety from domestic and gender-based violence. On several occasions, I have been contacted by people in my constituency trying to escape domestic violence only to face an overly rigid, cold and bureaucratic system of housing supports that shows little sympathy or flexibility towards people in really horrendous and traumatising circumstances.

We see the same in our legal system. Sarah Grace, a solicitor and former colleague of mine, has written and spoken forcefully and courageously about her interaction with the justice system following sexual assault. She exposed the flaws in that system and how it can retraumatise victims and, indeed, be traumatic in its own right. It is a system desperately in need of reform in how it deals with cases of sexual and gender-based violence. The Minister recognises that and I hope he will treat the need for reform with the urgency it deserves.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O’Connor): Domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is a major problem in society that affects many women and children. The Government and the Minister are committed to tackling it. The Government is delivering on the commitments in the zero-tolerance strategy to achieve a society in which sexual violence and the toxic attitudes that fuel it are not accepted. Since taking office, the Minister has prioritised legislation in this area, which is really important.

The recently published Women’s Aid annual impact report for 2024 made for distressing

reading. The data is stark. Last year, Women's Aid saw a 12% increase in contacts to its services and the highest number of contacts in its history. Behind these figures are women and children seeking help. I acknowledge the work being done by Women's Aid and by gardaí around the country. While the figures demonstrate the scale of the crisis of domestic and gender-based violence, they also show a growing willingness to recognise and call out abuse.

Domestic abuse is a devastating crime that requires a strong and co-ordinated response, as reflected in the third national strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. One of the key objectives of the zero-tolerance strategy is to encourage victims of domestic violence to come forward to report crimes committed against them. A significant amount of work has already been undertaken in this area, including the nationwide roll-out of the divisional protective service units, DPSUs, which ensure vulnerable victims are dealt with by gardaí with specialist expertise. Officers are assigned to the DPSUs to receive bespoke training on engaging with vulnerable victims.

We need more safe spaces for those who come forward to seek help. In my area, we are working hard to open a new ten-unit domestic violence refuge at the Monastery Hostel site on the Old Dublin Road in Carlow town. Amber Women's Refuge is working with Carlow County Council, the Housing Agency and Cuan to make this happen, with the tender for construction currently at the evaluation stage. I will work with all the agencies involved to ensure the refuge opens as quickly as possible.

Like all TDs, I have spoken over the years with women who were in a situation where they needed help and support. It is so important for them to know there is a place for them in a women's refuge, as well as wraparound services and supports. I acknowledge that this is a priority for the Minister. My understanding is the women's refuge in Carlow will be up and running next year. It is a priority for all of us. There were nine counties around the country that needed a refuge. I ask the Minister to make the provision of all of those refuges a priority. It is important the services are in place and that we are there to help any woman or child who needs those supports or help.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank the Minister for facilitating this debate. As many speakers have said, domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is a significant issue throughout our country. At the extreme end of it, 275 females have died violently in this country since 1996. That is a huge number. An Garda Síochána has said that in 2024, it dealt with 65,000 domestic abuse calls alone. The statistics are clear and while we could spend all day rattling them off, it is obvious there is a significant issue in this regard. These are only the reported and recorded cases, however. We all know there is a significant amount of abuse and violence taking place that is not recorded or reported. That is the difficulty. For example, there are females living in domestic situations that are extremely coercive and difficult. This is a huge issue throughout the country.

To be fair to the Government, it has stepped up in many respects. It published its zero-tolerance strategy in 2022. I commend the Minister on his action plan that was published last month, which sets out additional funding and resources to critical areas that badly need it, such as organisations like Cuan. Obviously, that funding is vital.

There has to be a cultural shift in this country and that is no easy task. It has become more difficult. It was easier 20 or 30 years ago. Now, with the online world and social media, the task of creating that cultural change and that necessary respect is difficult. The biggest challenge

the Government faces is in trying to deal with the online world. We have all heard stories and witnessed examples of the online world and the influence it has in leading people to perpetuate violence, abuse and so forth.

Much of the domestic abuse and violence against women happens within the home, within the individual household. It is fair to say there are not sufficient supports and refuge options for women in that situation. As public representatives, we have all met women who said they did not feel they had anywhere to go. That is a significant issue. I know the Minister and the Government are trying to improve that situation and that it is being dealt with as an urgency. Unfortunately, however, when it comes to family-friendly places where women can go to when they leave a home, particularly when children are involved, we are not where we need to be at present. We urgently need to address that.

In the housing area, as someone who came from a local authority, I know that the one thing often asked of women who left the family home and sought housing support was why they left the family home. It is not acceptable that women are asked that question. We need to change that culture dramatically. I ask the Minister to take that up with the Department of housing and the local authorities because that type of questioning of women when they leave the family home as a result of abuse, violence or coercive behaviour should not be happening. While I commend the actions taking place, we have a lot to do in this area. Critically, for females who find themselves in a situation they need to get out of, we must have options and supports available for them, and we need to dramatically improve them.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I welcome the Minister today. It is great to have an opportunity to speak on this matter. I stand in full solidarity with every single woman, survivor and child who has been torn apart and asunder, often physically and emotionally, by domestic, sexual or gender-based violence. Every single day of the week, we are confronted by harrowing stories, brutal killings, names of women we read in the newspaper, faces we see in memorials and families who carry that burden of grief and pain that will never leave them. Their deaths shock our nation. I think of the many stories of death, killing and murder that have changed a nation and forced the system to listen to women who have been forced to normalise abuse. I am talking about those women who fear making it home safely or fear the sound of the door slamming shut behind them and that angry hand or controlling voice they have in their lives.

We all know in this House that the problem does not begin or end with the devastating murders, stories or statistics we read about. Violence against women is not rare. It is widespread and systemic and is tolerated in so many ways. It is tolerated big and small every single day in this country. To use public transport as an example, every time a woman is groped on public transport, they stay silent because they feel no one will believe them or take them seriously or they fear they will be targeted as the one who has no craic in her or has something wrong with her. Women need to be believed and have confidence in themselves to say this is wrong. We need society to say this is wrong. Every time a partner raises their fist or voice, it convinces them they have a right to dominate. Every time a child grows up and learns that abuse is just part of life, we fail as a society.

I know this is important to the Minister and to every single Member of this House. We seek not merely to condemn the acts but to absolutely uproot them from every level of society and to confront them in our culture, courts, communities and homes. Last year, An Garda Síochána received 65,000 domestic abuse calls, that is, 65,000 cries for help. Women's Aid was contacted more than 32,000 times, a record high in 52 years of service. A total of 275 women have died

violently since 1996 and nearly half of Irish women have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime.

As the Minister knows, I work closely with Women's Aid Dundalk. We are in the process of going to tender and building an incredible refuge service in Dundalk. It has done fantastic work over recent years and we are coming to a point where we will have a top-class refuge, a safe place for women. That needs to be replicated, and Women's Aid is trying to do that throughout the country. We are doubling those refuge spaces. No child or woman fleeing violence should be told there is nowhere safe for them to stay. As the Minister pointed out, we are updating a school curriculum and funding campaigns around consent because culture change has to start at home.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important debate. Cases of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence are at a crisis point. Women's Aid was founded in 1974 and it has been instrumental in responding to the needs of women over the past 50 years. Having begun as a small service, it has grown into a national organisation that directly supports thousands of women throughout the country. I have directed women to it and it gives great advice around planning how to leave an abusive relationship because that is often the most dangerous time for women. Shamefully, however, its 50th anniversary was marked by the highest recorded level of disclosures of domestic abuse in its history, with nearly 46,000 cases. These are only the cases that are officially disclosed. In 2022, 10,000 protection orders were issued against the perpetrators of domestic violence, of which 5,000 were breached, yet only 500 abusers were convicted. This is a system that does not protect women. It is not working and it degrades us all. When a woman takes the brave step to escape, she faces a new injustice, the lack of emergency accommodation and support services. Women and children in crisis are being turned away and forced to stay in dangerous situations or travel long distances to access refuges. We need more refuge places. I know the Minister has acknowledged that, and I also acknowledge the work of his predecessor, the Minister, Deputy McEntee.

We need funding for front-line services. We need a justice system that protects survivors, not one that re-traumatises them. I am glad the Minister visited Teach Tearmainn in Kildare town. Although it is a fantastic refuge, it is overstretched. While I know nine counties do not have any refuge, Kildare is a two-constituency county with nine TDs. It has a big population. We need more than one refuge. The women of Kildare deserve better. They do not want our sympathy. Rather, they want services to be resourced, a commitment and a sense of urgency.

Last week, like many others, I listened to the harrowing experience my party comrade Seánadóir Nicole Ryan suffered when she was a child. She recalled in the Seanad and again on the RTÉ "Behind the Story" podcast how her stepfather had tried to kill her mother, how her mother had bravely risked her life to protect her children from him and how Nicole did all she could to shield her brother from the wrath of domestic abuse and violence. Nicole has come out the other end and is now shaping the future of our country on domestic abuse legislation in the Seanad. Her case is an example of how this can impact on our children and why it is important that the representation we have in these two Houses is representative of our population. As Nicole said, there are no child witnesses to domestic abuse, only sufferers. While I have spoken only about women, and men suffer from domestic violence as well, I always say that if we sort it out for the women, they will make sure it is sorted out for everyone. Ní saoirse go saoirse na mban.

Deputy Gary Gannon: It appears that every single day we wake up to another horrifying

headline. Every single week, women in this country read the worst imaginable stories, imagining that it could happen to them. This week, we have once again heard the name Jennifer Poole. Jennifer was 24 when she was brutally stabbed to death in her home in Finglas. She was killed by a man with a long history of violence against women, who had already been jailed for assaulting a previous partner. Jennifer was of course neither a rare nor isolated case. Her story is part of a constant, sickening drumbeat of violence happening in homes, communities and families every single week. The perpetrators are often not strangers. They are not monsters hiding in the shadows, as we allow ourselves to believe. They are often our colleagues, neighbours and friends. We saw it again just last week. A former garda, who swore to protect, used his uniform, knowledge and power to impersonate a colleague online so that men could arrive at a woman's home to assault her. In the United States, former Irish Olympic swimming coach George Gibney now faces a staggering 79 charges of sexual abuse, decades after survivors first told their stories and were not believed.

The truth is that these men are not hiding. They are operating in plain sight because the systems around them allow it. When survivors speak up and flee violence, when they seek protection, they face a family law system that re-traumatises them. They face judges who are not equipped to spot vital signs of abuse. They face court orders that force them and their children back into contact with their abuser. They face a legal system that is not only indifferent to their safety but complicit in the continued harm.

The research published by Women's Aid this year is damning. Two thirds of women in guardianship and custody cases said the judges had failed to consider the history of domestic abuse. One described the family law system as being even worse than the abuse. A legacy of the system we have built is that it is one where women have to choose between safety and legality, where children are disbelieved, re-traumatised and forced into contact with violent parents. It is simply unacceptable. I said recently that violence against women is not new but social media is supercharging it. Big tech platforms indoctrinate boys with misogyny, funnelled through algorithmic hate. This is where violent men are now being made, in bedrooms, gaming chats and social media apps, and we are doing almost nothing to stop it.

The Government has to act. We must implement the recommendations of Women's Aid and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women recommendations for Ireland. That means fully resourcing Cuan, not as a token gesture but with stable, long-term investment. It means expanding access to legal aid so women are not priced out of justice. It means passing the Equality (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill to tackle discrimination in all its forms, reforming the family courts from the ground up with compulsory domestic abuse training for every legal and child welfare professional, and following through in full as promised with the establishment of the domestic violence disclosure scheme, with a victim-centred approach so that women have the right to find out that they are risk.

We must go further, because the State cannot preach zero tolerance for domestic abuse while gardaí on the front line are undertrained and undersupported. It is no longer acceptable for domestic abuse training to be confined to specialist units. Every single member of An Garda Síochána, regardless of their rank and role, must receive ongoing compulsory continuing professional development in recognising and responding to domestic and gender-based violence. Survivors deserve to be believed and gardaí deserve the tools to understand what that actually means. It means that we have heard the phrase "never again" too many times in this Chamber. It has to mean something and it has to start now, because for every week that passes without action, more women are put in danger, more children are traumatised and more families are left

asking why they were not protected.

Deputy Jen Cummins: In the 1990s, I worked in London at a domestic violence project to support Irish women in my job in a school completion programme. Every single year, we supported children who were growing up in families where domestic violence was an everyday occurrence. My doctoral research found that the number of young people who left school before the leaving certificate was due to violence in the home. I interviewed a number of students at a time. Now, in my constituency, people come in every single week, telling me the dire straits that they are in. For all of my working life, this issue has come up. It is not going away. In fact, it is getting worse. We need to make sure that we are doing everything that we can. It is about providing refuge spaces, but it is also about preventing refuge spaces from ever needing to be used.

Men need to be educated that it is out of order to lift their hands and treat women the way that they are doing it. That needs to be called out. Every person working with children needs to have that trauma-informed way of ensuring that they are able to explain to children of both genders why this is out of line. Every agency needs to be able to deal with it, to ask people if they are okay and how they can help. We need men to call it out for other men. This mentality that it is behind doors and all that stuff that I would love to say is old-fashioned is not, because it is still happening. It needs to be called out.

In my constituency, 70% of public order and criminal damage incidents in Ballyfermot and Cherry Orchard are linked to domestic violence. We have 1,100 child welfare cases remaining unallocated, leaving vulnerable children without help and in silence. I ask the Minister to do everything he can. We will keep talking about this until we never have to talk about it again, not because we are being silent but because it is finished.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The connections between the housing crisis, homelessness and domestic violence have been shown over and over again. The state of the housing emergency is having direct impacts on women and their children being unable to flee situations of violence. Indeed, front-line domestic violence services repeatedly raise concerns that the housing crisis is forcing victims to either stay with the perpetrator or enter homelessness services because of the lack of appropriate supports. Then, these mothers decide that bringing their children into homelessness or inappropriate emergency accommodation would further traumatised the children, so they go into hidden homelessness. They become couch surfers and try to stay with families and friends, where they can, and they are not counted. Those in domestic violence refuges are not counted in our official homelessness figures. They are hidden. They are not being considered sufficiently. When they are in hidden homelessness, they are absolutely not prioritised.

We have a housing crisis that is worsening this crisis and epidemic of domestic violence. We need to see local authorities that are trauma-informed and that understand that this needs to be a priority. When families present to them as being homeless and coming from domestic violence, they need to be believed, rather than, as I have heard, instances where they are turned away and asked if they have somewhere to stay because the local authorities have no emergency accommodation available. It is absolutely unacceptable that those who are fleeing violence are not being supported by the State to be able to leave situations of violence. The housing disaster is making Ireland less safe for those who are suffering domestic violence.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is a scourge on our society that continues to grow. I commend the focus the Minister's predecessor brought to this

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issue in her term of office as Minister for Justice and the establishment of Cuan as an agency, but we have so much work to do in the Minister's portfolio in the justice sector to continue to equip the courts and front-line services to recognise and support women who want and need to exit the incredibly difficult circumstances they are in.

It goes beyond the justice sector, however. We have to meet women where they are. It is such a delicate thread that brings people from situations of violence into safety and we have to protect it. People in hairdressers', doctors' offices and so many different situations need to be trained and equipped to meet women where they are and help to bring them to safety. We have to provide the accommodation. Until we do that, we are forcing women to stay in these situations.

Beyond that, I also want to speak to the societal issues at play here. The reality is that we live in a patriarchal society. That should not be a controversial thing to say, yet many people jar and react to it when I say those words. Because we live in a patriarchal society, we essentially facilitate everyday sexism. We also facilitate what I would say is a smaller group of people who actually practise and have misogyny in their lives. A smaller group again translate that misogyny into actual violence against women. These things are all connected. Continuing to have that gendered order in our society and having a patriarchal system allows all of this to be facilitated and to continue to be hidden. That is before we reach how this amplified in the online space. We have much to do as a State and the Minister has much to do as Minister for justice, but we also have to address the society culture that needs to change.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach as ucht an deis labhairt ar an ábhar fiorthábhachtach seo. I commend the Minister on the interest he has taken in the matter since taking office. I also commend the Minister, Deputy McEntee on the correct focus she placed on the importance of us as a society dealing with the legacy and trauma inflicted by domestic, gender-based and sexual violence.

This was brought into focus as an issue for me when I chaired a meeting of the south Dublin joint policing committee some years ago, when we saw the first set of statistics of crimes after COVID restrictions had started to lift. It became very apparent to us in the chamber, including the senior Garda officers with us, that there was a domestic violence pandemic that had been brought into very sharp focus by the fact that in many cases, women were locked in homes and other places with persons who would threaten their life and physical safety. In many cases it brought into focus the fact that the statistics on domestic, gender-based and sexual violence against women are often just the tip of the iceberg because too many of these incidents go unreported and undisclosed.

We have seen that incidence of disclosures of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is rising at the moment. We heard the references of 32,000 calls to Women's Aid and 61,000 calls to An Garda Síochána. We also know that despite the zero-tolerance strategies being put in place, these numbers are rising. Part of that may be that women now feel they can come forward and disclose these incidents of abuse, but we also know of many instances from constituency clinics and from speaking to women who have been through the trauma of physical violence in the home, that in many cases they do not feel supported when coming forward and that needs to be the focus of how we address this in the future.

In 2024, the number of instances of physical abuse rose by 22%, sexual abuse by 30% and emotional abuse by 15%. One of the darkest statistics is that five women were killed in violent

circumstances in 2024 and more than half of the women killed since 1996 were killed by a current or former intimate partner. This shows there is an epidemic we need to address. That is why laws such as Valerie's law and Jennie's law are vital in ensuring the protection of women, men and children throughout the country and need to continue to be enforced and immediately addressed. They are vital in ensuring that victims and their families are not retraumatised by a system that allows offenders to, for example, retain guardianship rights over children.

I welcome the Minister's commitment to ensuring that the compulsory disclosure of counselling notes in such cases that come before the courts is abolished to ensure we do not retraumatise survivors in the place they are supposed to seek justice, hope and support. I am encouraged by the commitment to deliver additional refuge spaces to bring us up to meet the standards that should be there under the Istanbul Convention on domestic violence. We have work to do in that space and I welcome the Minister's accelerated focus on this during his time in the role.

One of the things that brought this into focus is that it is not just a justice-led response but a whole-of-State response. One initiative I am very proud of in South Dublin County Council is that we provided domestic violence training for members of the council staff who deal with victims of domestic, gender-based and sexual violence. This training should be adopted by every public-facing State body, including judges and An Garda Síochána who have made strides in this area, but as recent surveys show, there is room to improve.

Many colleagues referred to the fact that we need a cultural check on this. Misogyny, as it permeates the online world and other spheres of life, cannot be left unchecked. We need to think about public transport, open spaces, walkways and workplaces to make sure they are safe spaces for all women. A number of years ago I was rightly called out when I said that as a dad of three boys, it was incumbent on me to raise my boys to have respect for women. Rights like this should not rely on the goodwill of men; they should be intrinsic to human beings and our laws should honour them as a matter of course. That is why this matter needs to be addressed and at the centre of the Government's focus.

Deputy Paula Butterly: Domestic violence continues to impact thousands of lives in our communities. The need for support services has never been greater. The Minister recently said that Ireland has a very big problem when it comes to domestic violence. Cases have risen dramatically. In my constituency of Louth, we have seen a 52% increase over five years and nearly 27% of an increase between 2023 and 2024. I welcome the Minister's announcement of the €3.2 million funding call to expand domestic, gender-based and sexual violence supports and indeed his firm and genuine commitment to continue with the work initiated by his predecessor, Deputy McEntee. This funding will form part of a record €67 million provided for Cuan in budget 2025. It will allow us to target access to trauma-informed care and build long-term safety and resilience for survivors. However, we also need to strengthen trust in the system. It is still shocking when I hear on the radio or read in the press about a victim who has come forward and said they feel let down or not heard by the system. It has brought some comfort to me to listen to the unity in the Chamber today as we call for improved services across the board for these offences.

Women very often feel left alone and isolated. My constituency office is no different from any other in the country and is inundated with calls about how we can help as politicians. A young woman recently came to us who has two young children and at the moment has accommodation in one of the refuges in County Louth. That is the only place she can call home with her two children, both of whom are under two years of age. This is absolutely shocking because

while she is there and from the time she can no longer stay there, the man who perpetrated violence against her is sleeping in a comfortable bed in his own home. She is potentially homeless.

As Deputy Ahern said, there is a silent homeless and the silent homeless are these women and children. I urge that we continue to invest in Cuan. I have no doubt in the coming months and maybe years, budget restraints will mean the Minister has to consider very strongly where he puts money and into which services. There cannot be budget restraints or cuts when it comes to tackling the issue of domestic violence. We need to protect our children and we need our children to be educated in order that they can speak out and we can end this brutal cycle.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I pay tribute to Women's Aid on its 50th anniversary. I wish to read out the number for anyone that needs it: 1800 341900. We obviously wish there was no need for Women's Aid but there is, and its work is getting harder and more complex.

Some of the earlier speakers mentioned the normalising of domestic abuse, and we cannot allow that to happen. We have to speak clearly and with one voice and be unequivocal in saying domestic abuse and sexual and gender-based violence is not normal and should not be treated as such. I raise a case I have raised many times and for the avoidance of any doubt, I will continue to raise until there is a resolution. I wish to speak to the Minister about a woman I will call Janet. That is not her name but he will understand why I use it when I tell her story. In 2010, she joined the Dublin City Council housing list. She was eligible then, as she is today, for social housing. In 2015, she was viciously assaulted by her partner. He was sent to prison for a very long time but is now out. She went to live in north County Dublin where she felt safe and could raise her children in peace, and she remained on the Dublin City Council housing list. She is now in the range of being offered a house she has waited 15 years. She will get an offer but she cannot move back. She has a letter from An Garda Síochána stating for her own safety she should not move back to Dublin city. She is living in precarious private rented accommodation in north County Dublin. She is being treated as if this is a normal, average, run of the mill housing case, which it is not. When I say we should not normalise domestic abuse, I mean we have to go above and beyond and recognise that individual circumstances must be taken into consideration.

4 o'clock

For that reason, I urge the Minister to consider the case and to do what he can in his office as Minister for justice to put some substance to the words we all say here, and his Government colleagues say them as well, about not normalising domestic abuse. For that reason, victims and survivors, and victims of the housing crisis as well of course, cannot be treated in isolation from their circumstances. I agree with the previous speaker about the role of men. Men must call out violence against women. Men are key players in ensuring women are safe - safe in their houses, on the streets, on public transport and in their workplaces, whether they work in a factory, an office, a hairdressers or indeed here in the Dáil or the Seanad. Men need to step up for the women they work with and alongside.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I begin by recognising the survivors of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence present in the House today and the many who will watch this debate over the course of the afternoon. I know many TDs have spoken eloquently on this issue today but we know that words must be followed by action.

I draw the attention of the House and the Minister to one particular action, the Domestic

Violence (Amendment) Bill 2024. My colleague, Senator Malcolm Noonan, along with the Social Democrats and the Labour Party, has reintroduced this Bill into Seanad Éireann. It was introduced during the previous Seanad by the former Green Party Senator, Vincent P. Martin, and it has now been reintroduced, and completed Committee Stage in the Seanad last week. We in the Green Party, the Labour Party and the Social Democrats intend to advance the Bill through that House and hopefully through this House as well. The Bill proposes simple but necessary changes to provide that breaches of court-ordered safety, protection or barring orders should no longer be treated solely as summary offences. As it stands, someone who violates one of these orders often faces a maximum of 12 months in prison. The Bill would introduce an indictable offence for serious breaches, enabling such cases to be tried on indictment and punished by up to five years' imprisonment. It is not about criminalising people unnecessarily but it is about ensuring those who deliberately and repeatedly violate court orders, who often show patterns of coercive control, face meaningful consequences. Importantly, this change will allow courts to refuse bail in serious cases, strengthening protections for survivors who are at immediate risk. We also have to recognise that children present during these types of breaches of protection and barring orders suffer deep trauma and this Bill could give them a greater degree of protection.

This is not symbolic legislation. It is survivor-informed, evidence-based and based on years of calls from NGOs working in the domestic, sexual and gender-based violence sector. I believe, as I know the two other parties involved believe, this is important legislation. It has passed Second and Committee Stages in Seanad Éireann and we hope to see it progress through Seanad Éireann and introduced in this House. I understand the Minister of State speaking to the Bill in the Seanad was broadly supportive of it. I hope, if we are able to introduce the Bill to this House, the Minister will likewise be supportive of what I think could be an important and meaningful step in offering protection to victims of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I welcome those present in the Public Gallery for this debate. The Minister mentioned at the beginning of his remarks that he would speak to representatives of the GAA about the game changer campaign. Obviously, I welcome any move by sporting organisations because they have such access to children, to girls and boys. Nobody against whom credible accusations of domestic violence have been made should be managing any sports team. This applies to soccer as well; I am not targeting the GAA. When the Minister speaks to representatives of the GAA he needs to check the GAA's safeguarding policies, that they are robust and based on best up-to-date practice because that does not seem to be the case.

I will also mention the phrase "zero tolerance". It jars with me greatly because it is such an easy thing to declare and announce that a place has zero tolerance when we know that is not the case. There is huge tolerance of violence against women in our society, in this building and in so many workplaces, and so on. The culture of violence against women is rooted in inequality, patriarchy, and economic inequality, etc.

I have very little time so I will quickly mention two issues about our legal system. We put people through the most obscene legal misogyny. The first thing I will mention is the DPP because this is an issue that needs more attention. We all know of the case Nikita Hand bravely took against Conor McGregor and won in the civil courts. Nikita should not have had to take that case. The DPP should not have a veto over cases in this way. It is not the first time. I have been approached by loads of people who have been victims of rape and whose cases were not taken. It is extremely upsetting that, having gone to the trouble of reporting and getting a medical, the DPP then says "No". In the case of Nikita, it is just incredible that the case of somebody with that level of injuries was not taken. I salute her and so many others for standing up to very

wealthy people and now facing deny, attack and reverse victim and offender, DARVO, tactics in the courts.

The Psychological Society of Ireland has come out in absolute opposition to the idea of counselling notes being used in any way. This has not received the publicity it deserves, but it has come out and said that as a society, as a professional organisation, it calls for “an immediate end to the practice of accessing therapy notes in legal cases involving rape and sexual assault...” and essentially backs my Bill. This has to be ruled out. It is something the Minister can do. We do not have juries for the Special Criminal Court because there was an emergency. There is an emergency of gender-based violence.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank the Minister for his detailed speech. Let me recognise the progress made in terms of legislation. We are on our third national strategy. We have an action plan. The Minister is promising three pieces of very important legislation in regard to the removal of guardianship rights for a person who has been convicted of killing, the issue of counselling records which has already been referred to and needs more detail and teasing out, and Jennie’s Law. I welcome all of that. I welcome the extra money for Cuan and for refuges. Once again, I will put it in perspective because we have so much legislation - I thank the Library and Research Service for its digest which outlines seven pieces of legislation from 2017 up to 2024 - one would think we should not be here talking about domestic and gender-based violence.

Let me first take away the word “domestic” because it minimises crime. Crime is crime. Let me deal with the word “epidemic”. It is not an epidemic. An epidemic refers to disease that spreads among the community. This is criminality on every level. Despite all of this legislation I have carefully watched, the numbers are depressingly, shockingly and unacceptably high. In 2024 the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre reported the highest number of disclosures in its 46-year history. Women’s Aid, which is now into its 51st year, disclosed it was contacted 32,144 times, and so on.

I will not use up the short time I have with the figures because they are truly shocking, but let me zone in on something. In 1997, the year my second child was born, we had a task force. Eithne FitzGerald was the Minister at the time. The task force set out in a very detailed way what should happen, particularly in relation to perpetrators. Fast forward 28 years from then and 51 years from when Women’s Aid was set up in 1974 and Erin Pizzey’s book *Scream Quietly or the Neighbours Will Hear* was published, which is a seminal work. Here we are 51 years later and the figures have gotten worse. The figure has already been given of 275 women murdered since 1996, the vast majority in their own homes or by somebody who knows them. We stand here again, and I do it in shame, actually. I again mention the cost of domestic violence to the economy. The Library and Research Service has zoned in on this. I will get the exact figure. It is approximately €2 billion per year to the economy alone. If I appeal to the male mind and the male model of economy, on that level alone we are losing a fortune as it costs a fortune. While I welcome the Minister’s bone fides, to think that 50-something years after Women’s Aid was established we are still clapping ourselves on the back that we are now going to build more refuges to take out the innocent people and allow the perpetrator stay, there is something seriously wrong. Part of the problem is we are describing it as domestic and as an epidemic rather than criminality.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mark Wall): I thank the Deputy. Back over to the Government side, Deputy Daly has four minutes.

Deputy Martin Daly: Today, I speak not only as a TD for Roscommon-Galway but as a GP with over three decades of experience. In that time, I have witnessed the hidden trauma of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. I recognise what Deputy Connolly has said that in some way, the term domestic has minimised what in fact is assault within the home. “Domestics” were sometimes minimised because it was simply “a domestic” and it was treated in a different way than if it was a common assault out on the street. I recognise what the Deputy said in this regard.

I have seen the fear in people’s eyes, the silent suffering, the intimidated, the coerced and the emotional and psychological scars that last long after physical injuries have healed. I have done that house call on Christmas Day with alcohol-fuelled violence, an injured wife and terrified children. These figures are deeply troubling. In Ireland, one in three women - 35% - have experienced abuse by an intimate partner. Since 1996, 275 women have lost their lives to violence, mostly in their own homes. These are not just statistics; they represent lives stolen, families devastated and communities left heartbroken. The violence is not confined to others in the headlines. It is happening in our communities. I received figures from Roscommon Safe Link, our local support service, showing a 13% rise in new clients and a 5% rise in existing clients over the last year. This increase reflects both the scale of the problem but also a growing trust in these services. People have reached out because they believe they will be met with compassion and support and I suppose that is the culture we are trying to foster here. In 2024, Roscommon Safe Link delivered 146 outreach clinics across Boyle, Castlerea and Ballaghaderreen. In rural counties, these clinics can mean the difference between someone seeking help or remaining trapped in silent terror. The service also supported 37 new children and responded to over 9,300 contacts, including more than 800 crisis calls. Behind every one of those numbers is a person in need.

Abuse affects people of all genders. There has been a rise in male clients attending as well. While these are a minority, our response must reflect that reality also. Yet, despite this vital work, County Roscommon still has no dedicated refuge. Survivors fleeing abuse are forced to leave their home county to find safety. This is unacceptable. The groundwork for a safe house and refuge has been laid with Cuan and it is essential this project moves forward without delay. I will advocate for its delivery.

However, beyond the statistics and services, we must ask the deeper question. Why does this violence persist? It continues because of the attitudes we tolerate, the behaviours we excuse and the silence we allow. If we are serious about ending domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, we must start earlier, by educating young people about respect, consent and healthy relationships. Culture must change and men must be at the heart of it. We must also recognise that abuse is changing. Digital abuse, coercive control and online harassment are growing threats. Our laws, our support services and our education system must keep pace. As a GP, I have seen how abuse often escalates during pregnancy. The Women’s Aid maternity project in Dublin shows the difference early intervention can make. These supports must be made available not just in urban centres but also in rural communities like mine. That is why I welcome the Government’s zero-tolerance strategy that calls for a whole-of-Government and whole-of-society approach to end domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. It is built on the four pillars of the Istanbul Convention, which are prevention, protection, prosecution and policy co-ordination. I welcome the Minister’s commitment to expanding the funding for Cuan beyond the €67 million committed this year. The Government zero-tolerance strategy sets direction. We must now ensure it delivers meaningful change in every community, including my

own in Roscommon-Galway.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I also join others in calling out the scourge of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence in our society. It should be called out at all junctures - in WhatsApp groups, in sports clubs, in our local pubs and here in the Dáil. I acknowledge the work of the Minister's predecessor, Deputy McEntee, in terms of the legislation, which Deputy Connolly has previously referenced, and also the structural changes and the funding that has gone with it. As has also been referenced, this is an increasing phenomenon. Local gardaí raised it specifically with us in our local policing forum when they talked about areas of crime which were expanding. Women's Aid highlighted that in its annual report when it referred to getting over 40,000 disclosures during 28,000 contacts. That would amount to an 18% increase in disclosures of domestic abuse. It is very clear that we have taken measures but we have to do more and we need to continue to do more. I also particularly welcome the attempts to try to capture what is happening. I understand the CEO is now working on a domestic violence survey to provide more accurate prevalence data to follow on from previous sexual violence studies, which have dated over time. I believe Cuan is involved in that too.

I wish to focus on an area the Minister and I have worked on for some time and that is the issue of Jennie's law. Jennie's brother Jason has been a tireless advocate for his sister and for their family who had direct impact with a most extreme outcome, the death of their sister. I thank the Minister for the work he has done along with Senator O'Loughlin and Jason to try to progress a Bill which would provide a register to put in place information that future victims may be able to avail of. In a modern world with lots of rights and balancing of those rights, it can be difficult to put in place such a register but I know the Minister is determined to do that along with his other Government colleagues.

Jennie was a wonderful young woman. She was from Finglas, beloved by her local GAA club Erin's Isle. She was a home care worker. She had two children who are now looked after by the Poole family. Sometimes, in all of the discussion around Jennie's law, Jennie's own memory is forgotten but the Poole family are determined not to allow that happen. Even the very description of the new legislation coming through and that it would be known as Jennie's law is very important to the family. What is more important to them is that the law will have a direct impact on those people who may be impacted in the future. When Jason first came to meet myself and some of my colleagues, the Minister will remember Jason also spoke about other areas where we could improve the response to domestic violence and the outcomes of families who are impacted by it.

Some of those measures have been taken, for example around the custody of children where a partner may be indicted in the crime of murder against their parent. However, there remains others, perhaps more societal steps, which we have to take too. I refer to the calling out of what might be called micro-aggressions. If you are old-fashioned you would just call it unacceptable behaviour. Often among young men, those types of unacceptable comments can develop but young men want to be empowered to call that stuff out too. I call out organisations like the GAA in particular, which is doing a huge amount of work to empower young men. This is not about targeting or stigmatising young men. It is about empowering them to call out what they know to be behaviour that is unacceptable. It is a spectrum of offences we are talking about here and I am not conflating them in any way. It is about calling out unacceptable behaviour against women at a young age with trusted organisations on the ground and funding those organisations to support them to do it. We need to work with youth centres, which are right across our communities doing that work. This is a much bigger societal issue. Those conversations

need to happen alongside the very necessary legislative and structural changes the Department is making. I thank the Minister for his support.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is an epidemic but there is a point in saying, as Deputy Catherine Connolly did, it is unacceptable criminality that has to be called out in every way it can. There is a requirement on all of us to do it. The nicest way I can put it is unfortunate pieces online - we know the characters I am talking about - cannot be given the sort of space they have at the moment to poison young men's minds in particular. None of this is acceptable, particularly in this State, when there were 45,765 disclosures of domestic abuse to Women's Aid helplines in 2024. The Dublin Rape Crisis helpline had 22,700 contacts in 2024. The Garda recorded 49,230 domestic abuse incidents in 2024. That is up from 35,668 in 2020. The Garda recorded 65,225 domestic abuse calls in 2024, up from 44,782 in 2020. It is utterly unacceptable. We hope some of those figures are because people feel freer to come forward but there are still issues. We know the logjams for those seeking protection orders of all kinds, even down to the set-up in Garda stations, which are not necessarily suitable for somebody making a disclosure. I welcome the specialist teams like that in Castlebellingham and others throughout the State. They are absolutely necessary. Wrap-arounds supports need to put in place around people, women in particular, who find themselves in really desperate circumstances. We all know the horror stories of the violence and we have also seen the absolute tragedies where women have lost their lives. We need to ensure we give the protections and mitigate as much as possible to ensure we do not allow this to happen.

There is a huge issue regarding data. It is critical we have all the data possible so we know where we are at and can be provided. In my constituency, like many others, I welcome the huge work done by Women's Aid in Dundalk, the Rape Crisis Centre North East, Dundalk counselling service, the Garda and local authorities but the tools needed are not necessarily available. Tusla officials were before the children's committee. It will not be a major shock that they said, "Wider societal issues such as global movement, poverty, homelessness, domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, drugs, criminality and exploitation, and social media continue to significantly impact the demand for our services." It is impacting families across the board. The tools and services must be provided but they are not available. That is before talking about homelessness and how it has a huge impact.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Ireland is becoming a more violent place. The rates of domestic violence, sexual violence and rape are all increasing. The society we have created over the past number of decades has led to Ireland becoming more violent for women. Day in, day out, lives are being destroyed. In 2011, 1,958 sexual offences were recorded. In 2021, this figure had increased by 75%, to 3,433. In 2011, 447 rapes were recorded. In 2021, that figure doubled to 983. I submitted a parliamentary question to the former Minister for Justice in relation to domestic violence. The Garda Síochána provided results from the PULSE database on reports of domestic abuse in this State. In 2014, there were 14,264 cases where domestic abuse was considered a motive. In 2023, it was 46,439. The figure for domestic abuse in just the first quarter of 2024 was nearly the same as that for the whole year of 2014. Domestic abuse call-outs to the Garda have quadrupled in the space of four years. The number of women who have been raped in Ireland is almost treble the rate in the EU. In 2022, the average number of women reporting rape in Ireland stood at 34 per 100,000 women. That is significantly higher than the 12 per 100,000 across six EU countries with comparable statistics. These are shocking figures. I do not believe the State even recognises what is happening at the moment regarding domestic violence and domestic assaults against women. The perpetrators of these crimes are

getting younger and younger. Children at Risk in Ireland, CARI, a specialist and professional therapy service for children, found that child-on-child abuse has increased by 44% in the past two years. Marina Porter, the manager of the Donegal Sexual Abuse and Rape Crisis Centre, said, “What we have observed is that the level of physical violence accompanying sexual violence has seriously escalated over the last couple of months ... We have also seen that [there are] multiple perpetrators in one crime ... and this is highly concerning.” The culture of this country is radically changing. That has to be recognised. Between 1996 and today, 275 women have died violently in this country, 180 have been killed in their own homes and 20 children have died during the incidents where these women died violently. Each one of these deaths is a catastrophe and an absolute disaster.

I have no doubt the Minister is personally appalled by all of these aspects. I respect that the Minister is dedicated to trying to resolve some of these issues that are happening in the country at the moment. The Minister spoke about challenging the norms leading to sexual violence. Another Fianna Fáil TD spoke about zero tolerance. I have no doubt the norms leading to this violence are not being challenged. I have no doubt there is not a zero tolerance approach by this Government. The criminal justice system is not being used to shut down the perpetrators of these crimes. Today, eight- and nine-year-olds are accessing explicit hardcore materials that would have been illegal for viewing by adults just a generation ago. Research at the school of psychology in the University of Galway has shown that almost 60% of teenage boys in this State had consumed hardcore pornography before the age of 13. Pornography has become so easily accessible that many parents find it virtually impossible to exercise control over what their children consume. I spoke to a parent recently who told me that over Christmas their ten-year-old was on their iPad, which they checked. There were two searches. The first search was about Santa Claus and the second was a violent display of oral sex. This is the situation for young children in this country. It is happening at a younger age. It is altering the perceptions of sex and the understanding of healthy relationships. It is leading to physical and mental health problems and addiction. There is no doubt the repeated consumption of violent scenes is changing the nature of young boys and young men in relation to relationships. There is an ocean of evidence now pointing in that direction. Even the children’s ombudsman in England has written extensively about how this is a significant cause of sexual violence. We have seen high-profile cases in this country such as the case of Ana Kriegel. It was a heartbreaking, shocking case where the perpetrators - young boys - had accessed horrific violence on their phones. There were thousands of images of murder and sexual violence. That should have been enough for the Government to be kick-started into action but it was not.

I introduced a Bill that would ban the provision of hardcore violent pornography to young children. I have raised it with the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the previous Minister for Justice. All of them have responded in measured tones but all of them have shrugged their shoulders and nothing has happened. Not only is there not zero tolerance of this; there is an absolute tolerance of this in respect of the Government’s approach to what is happening. The Government has enough cop on to ban the advertisement of junk food to kids because it knows it leads to behavioural change but it does not have enough cop on to ban the provision of hardcore, violent pornography to those same young boys.

We talk about zero tolerance and I think of Clodagh Hawe, who was a teacher in Oristown National School in County Meath. In 2016, Alan Hawe murdered Clodagh and her three sons Liam, Niall and Ryan. Eight years later, they are still only at the start of a site selection process for building a refuge in Cavan. If a woman wants to get out of a violent domestic situation

in that county, she has very little option to do that. There are nine counties across the country at the moment with no refuge: Carlow, Cavan, Leitrim, Laois, Longford, Monaghan, Offaly, Roscommon and Sligo. I do not see where the zero tolerance exists if there are nine counties where there is not an opportunity for a woman to be able to get out of a violent situation. At the moment, we are aiming for 280 refuge beds by 2026 but the Istanbul Convention says there are supposed to be 450 refuge beds. We are not even near the target as we should have been a few years ago.

With regard to zero tolerance, we have seen the fall in the *per capita* number of gardaí in this country. There are 58 Garda stations around the country where there is not a registered garda. The criminal justice system is breaking down because there are currently no spaces to put prisoners. I found out that 1,000 prisoners were released last year within 24 hours of being put behind bars. This is not zero tolerance. We had the longest Covid lockdowns in Europe where many women were imprisoned with their abusers. We have a housing crisis that entraps women in the situations they are in. Many women have a choice: do they leave the violent situation or do they put their children into a homeless situation? We saw the push to get rid of cash out of society in recent years. Cash gives women a really an important opportunity to have the financial wherewithal to get out of domestic violence. Aontú campaigned vigorously against this. We see young girls in State care who are going missing from unregulated and unvetted special emergency accommodation, who are then being preyed upon by gangs for sexual exploitation. That is not zero tolerance. I have been raising those cases for years and it is still happening.

I recognise there have been developments. I welcome Cuan and the fact that there are many people working in the sector who are doing really good work. I recognise that the Minister has a different approach to this and I wish him luck in it, but it is not zero tolerance with regard to what is happening in this country.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is a crisis shaped by the modern world, one where smartphones, online pornography and harmful attitudes towards women and girls are fuelling abuse. We cannot and must not ignore how technology has become a weapon in the hands of abusers, nor how degrading content is warping minds, including young minds. Revenge porn, coercive control via messaging apps and the harassment of women and girls online are rampant.

Meanwhile, the widespread availability of extreme pornography is distorting young people's understanding of sex, consent and relationships. Too many boys are learning from violent, misogynistic material, while too many girls face pressure to conform to degrading expectations. This is not just about individual acts of violence; it is about a culture that permits and even encourages to them. When boys are exposed to endless streams of abusive content they risk growing into men who view women as objects. When victims are stalked, shamed or threatened through their own devices, they are left with no safe space. When the justice system fails to keep pace with digital abuse, perpetrators act with impunity.

Government must take stronger action. We need strict enforcement of online abuse laws, including immediate takedowns of intimate images shared without consent and tougher penalties for cyberharassment. We need age verification for pornography to stop children accessing harmful material that normalises violence against women. As Deputy Devine said, we need a ban on strangulation porn and aggressive measures against social media companies. We need an education system, formal and informal, that informs and empowers people and counters harmful stereotypes, teaching young people about healthy relationships, respect and the dan-

gers of degrading content.

We must also confront the attitudes that allow this violence to thrive. Too often, boys are taught to dominate while girls are taught to endure. This must end. We need good men and we need them to step up. We need more than words from Government; we need resources, enforcement and a fundamental shift in how we address this crisis. Ireland must be a leader in fighting abuse online and offline. The time to act is now.

Deputy Gillian Toole: I am going to share with the Minister a Meath East constituent's lived experience of domestic violence. I have her permission and I have anonymised everything. She is a 42-year-old and has been 19 years in an engaged relationship with three children. She was mortgage-approved and she had a wedding booked. During that time, she achieved two third level degrees. Her final assault was in 2020, when she was slammed through a shower door and she fled with her children to a refuge. She had been recorded and controlled for ten years. She was summoned to court by her abuser days after the final assault. Gardaí and Tusla were called in as she was a safety risk, with no mention of the assaults. The refuge, the local authority and legal aid were advised incorrectly of the circumstances and she was ordered to hand over the children without seeing a judge. She acquired a safety order. She persisted with multiple visits to the Garda station, and one garda listened. Reports were ordered but her concerns were passed off by Tusla as parenting issues. A recommendation for parenting courses and children's support therapies ensued.

There was a criminal case against her partner with video evidence but as it was a first offence, there was a slap on the wrist. Unfortunately, no appeal was lodged within the ten-day period. There were repeated breaches of the safety order but they were repeatedly dismissed. The children have been terrified. All agencies were notified but there was no response. There have been threats by the court to the mother because the children refused to attend access visits.

Garda liaison for the children did begin to read between the lines of concern and a coercive control complaint began. First off, her file was pronounced missing. Since then, she has been refused access to her files. Members of the free legal aid team have not complied with the needs of the client, in her opinion, and have been afraid to push back against the system as it is their employer. A second report was thrown out. A new one, the third one, was implemented for overnight access despite the wishes of the children and the mother. In December 2023, the mother was issued with a warrant to attend court but it was the last day of school for the children and she advised the court she had no childcare. She was brought in and threatened with six weeks in Mountjoy if the children were not handed over to their father. Custody arrangements were changed because the mother refused to force the children to go to the father. The mother was stopped from seeing the children because access time was owed to their father.

A complaint was made against the judge but the Judicial Council cannot act. She has had a refusal to release files, and the woman has been forced to represent herself in court. Another report has been ordered in the Circuit Court. This week marks year five of her court experience and she wishes to give this feedback thus far: women leaving domestic and gender-based violence or abusive control face a bigger challenge once they leave. They are dealing with a lack of structure and cross-communication between organisations. They have a lack of money or maintenance to get back on track. Hotline numbers tend to pass them from pillar to post, forcing children back to the very environment that they have escaped from. Blocked from access to her own files, she has been called "dysregulated" for pushing back. She asks when are people going to wake up to the flaws in the system. She said that, having watched and lived the

experience for five years, she is an expert. Had she spent the time in college, she would have a degree in law now. She cites the following system failings: the Garda not having the power or resources to prosecute in a timely manner to protect the vulnerable from the court system; the costs of legal support and supportive therapies; and no supports in respect of starting over after abuse. In particular, she says, if people can form a sentence coherently and stand up for themselves, they are on their own. The children are unheard and the Tusla reports go to the abuser, risking child safety. We must do better. I trust that the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, will do better, that he has empathy and that he wants to help victims.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I dtús báire, gabhaim buíochas leis na Teachtaí Dála as páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht. I thank all the Members for their interesting and informed contributions to the debate. I also want to welcome to the Public Gallery any people who are victims of the criminal activity that we have been discussing here today and the people who are supportive of them. I also want to put on the record my acknowledgement of the work done by David French in respect of the Guardianship of Infants (Amendment) Bill.

It is going to be difficult to respond in detail to all colleagues, but I am going to try to give some response to them. Deputy Devine referred to strangulation sex and strangulation pornography. I would be very concerned if people's sexual behaviour has been moulded by weird pornography that is proliferating. I thank the Deputy for bringing it to my attention. I am not sure whether legislation and criminalisation are the response to that. It certainly is the case, however, that girls and women need to be informed about the fact that things that are being suggested to them that boys and men are extracting from online activity are not normal. We need to get that message out there.

Deputy Carthy referred to the refuge spaces in his constituency and the civil legal aid scheme that needed to be supported in order to ensure that women could have the expertise to facilitate them in getting barring orders. As I said before, it is my intention to improve the civil legal aid scheme and I hope to be able to publish the reports I have received in respect of it recently. I will also look again at the Deputy's victims of sexual violence Bill.

Deputy Bennett similarly referred to the absence of refuge centres in Cavan and Monaghan. This issue has been repeatedly raised with me by my colleagues, Niamh Smyth and Brendan Smith. I am aware of it. However, as has been recognised by other Deputies, including Deputy Mitchell, it cannot just become - I am not suggesting colleagues are indicating this - a county issue about needing a refuge centre in each county, as in, some counties have them and I want one in my county. We need general refuge spaces throughout the country. We need to ensure they are well dispersed.

I note what Deputy Mitchell said in respect of the domestic violence register and the training of gardaí. I want to clarify and assure Members that gardaí are trained when in Templemore in respect of domestic violence. It is a complex area that they need to be trained on, but they are being trained.

Deputy Ward referred to the fact that when he was here previously, he said men should call out other men. He is correct in that. They should not worry about the response on social media. Social media exerts far too much influence on young people and we should not respond to it, as it is not representative.

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Deputy Robert O'Donoghue spoke about the removal of names from joint tenancies. That is an issue where a male partner has been convicted of assault or violence against a female partner. As any Member of this House who has been a member of a local authority will know, it is extremely difficult to get somebody's name removed from the tenancy if that person is a tenant of a local authority. There are consequences if we are going to say that persons convicted of criminal offences lose their rights to a tenancy. We need to be careful and cautious of that. Although it sounds correct in terms of trying to get an abuser out of the house as opposed to the woman looking for a refuge space, we have to be careful about removing tenancy rights from persons who are convicted of offences.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern referred to George Gibney. I am not going to talk too much about that, as there are charges pending here in response to an extradition request that has been raised in America. I note he will be returned here to face those charges.

I listened very carefully to the Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor, who emphasised the need for units in County Carlow. I will pursue that further.

Deputy Séamus McGrath was correct when he said a significant amount of abuse was not recorded. As policymakers, we all need to try to encourage women to know that there is support for them if they come forward and if they report what is criminal behaviour.

Deputy McGreehan talked about how she stood in solidarity with victims. She also noted that women sometimes were groped on public transport. That is a criminal offence. It should be reported. I am pleased to say that, recently, a man was convicted of a grievous sexual assault on a woman while she was travelling on the Luas.

Deputy Cronin spoke about how in society were not protecting women. I believe that the changes in the law and the greater emphasis we are placing on domestic violence is having a good impact in terms of protecting women. It is obviously a constant battle but we are in a stronger position now than we were ten or 20 years ago in terms of society's response to it and how it is so unacceptable. I heard Deputy Cronin speak about Senator Ryan's account of domestic violence. I want to emphasise something that Senator Ryan said and that I believe the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, Deputy Cummins, mentioned also. Domestic violence in a house can have a devastating impact on a young child growing up. It makes the child frightened to see his or her parents engaged in violence in the house and it perpetuates that in the child's psychology in the future so that it becomes normalised.

Deputy Gannon spoke about the three cases of Jennifer Poole, the former garda who was convicted and George Gibney. Let us remember that Jennifer Poole's killer is serving a life sentence in prison, the garda was convicted of the offence and George Gibney is in the process of being extradited. The family law system is a system that results in dissatisfaction partly because the court system is based on an adversarial system where there is a winner and a loser. In family law disputes, that generally does not succeed that well. We need to start looking for more mediated solutions to family law disputes as opposed to the adversarial response of one side wins and the other side loses.

I noted what the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach said in terms of children who were living in a house where there was domestic violence and how men needed to be educated that violence was unacceptable. That responsibility rests on all of us, particularly the male Members of this House.

I noted what Deputy Hearne said about homelessness and the housing issue having an impact on women who were in accommodation. It is hard for me to dispute that because it is certainly the case that, if somebody goes into a refuge and cannot go back to the home, the only option available is to try to get a safe home. Local authorities are providing safe homes, albeit on a temporary basis. As our population increases, it is becoming a significant problem.

I listened to Deputy Gibney, who said we lived in a patriarchal society. That was certainly historically the case in Ireland. I do not think it is the case now. Female Members of the House may disagree with me but certainly the society we live in now is a much more equal society from women's point of view than it was historically.

I listened to Deputy Moynihan when he talked about how things had changed since Covid-19. He is right. Covid-19 had a significant impact on many aspects of not just Irish life, but life internationally. One of them was that people being locked up in houses together had the impact of increasing the level of domestic violence.

I heard what Deputy Butterly had to say in respect of Louth and the investment in Cuan. That will continue.

I listened to Deputy O'Reilly's account of Janet. My only advice to Janet would be that if she has been offered accommodation within the Dublin City Council area, she should not refuse it simply because a person who was convicted of abusing her lives in Dublin city. Perhaps she was going to be placed close to him, which would be different.

I listened to Deputy O'Gorman and will certainly take into account the Domestic Violence (Amendment) Bill. It seems to be a straightforward piece of legislation that will no longer treat the breach of a court order as just a summary offence but also as an indictable offence. I would have thought, however, that most of those offences would be prosecuted on indictment.

Deputy Coppinger talked about the issue of counselling notes. It is the case, notwithstanding her views, that the advice I have received is that to prohibit access to counselling notes for an accused in a trial across the board would be unconstitutional.

I also listened to Deputy Catherine Connolly and what she said about the legislation. Deputy Daly, having been a GP in Roscommon for three decades, has good insight. I have worked closely with Deputy McAuliffe on the case of Mr. Jason Poole. Deputy Ó Murchú talked about online characters. I would say to him that they are not representative.

I do not recognise the complete negativity on violence from Deputy Tóibín. Ireland is generally a non-violent society.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is more violent.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I have gone on too long.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins): 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 Catherine Ardagh - To discuss the need for all

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special schools to accept children at different levels on the autism spectrum. Deputy Robert O'Donoghue - To discuss the need to improve the design of the entrance to the Rush side of the Rush and Lusk train station. Deputy Shane Moynihan - To discuss online disinformation and the need to promote and resource media literacy initiatives. Deputy Louis O'Hara - To discuss the need for updated wind energy development guidelines.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss social welfare supports for separated parents who co-parent.

Deputy Barry Ward - To discuss the treatment of thalidomide survivors. Deputy Paul Murphy - To discuss plans to assist vaginal mesh survivors. Deputy Paul McAuliffe - To discuss wait times for audiology appointments. Deputy Peadar Tóibín - To discuss the process through which children are taken into State care.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke - To discuss the need for support with the cost of essential tablets and digital devices in secondary schools. Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss the delays with new school building for Gaelscoil Choláiste Mhuire, Dublin 1. Deputy Aidan Farrelly - To discuss temporary school accommodation for St. Farnan's Post Primary School, Prosperous. Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - To discuss funding for cancer support groups in County Wicklow. The matters raised by Deputies Peadar Tóibín, Barry Ward, Shane Moynihan, Gary Gannon and Darren O'Rourke have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Child Protection

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I wish to raise a serious issue on the floor of the House. It is a complex issue, so I hope the Minister of State will be able to give it his attention, if possible. The case involves a seven-year-old child, who I am going to call "Patrick" for the purpose of this discussion. Patrick disclosed physical and sexual abuse by his father. These allegations were brought to the attention of Tusla by the child's mother in 2018. There was an ongoing court case whereby the father was seeking overnight access to the child. In light of the allegations, the court appointed a clinical child psychologist to carry out a section 32 report.

At a subsequent sitting of the court, a social worker informed a judge in writing that the psychologist had told her over the phone that she did not believe the allegations made by Patrick. In an email, the psychologist told the child's mother and solicitor that she had not made that assertion in the phone call to the social worker and that the social worker's account of the phone call, which was relayed to the court, was false. I have seen the email. In reality, the psychologist referred the child to Tusla and contacted the Garda, such was the gravity of the disclosures and her confidence in them.

The psychologist wrote a concerning report to Tusla. It goes into graphic detail about the child's behaviour and disclosures. She wrote that in her opinion, Patrick had been abused. Tusla, however, in its report to the court entirely omitted the contents of the psychologist's report and findings. This led to further injuries to Patrick by his father. In 2021, Patrick was referred to Temple Street hospital with injuries to his testicles.

Subsequently, Patrick was interviewed by a team leader from Tusla. He made further disclosures of what happened. The team leader gave the notes of that interview to the aforementioned social worker, who provided a letter to the court. Unbeknownst to the social worker and team leader, the family had recorded the interview. There exist major discrepancies between the letter to the court and the audio file. The court was told that Patrick had admitted telling a lie. It can be seen from a freedom of information request that the falsified interview report also prevented an investigation by An Garda Síochána into the alleged child sexual abuse. Tusla decided to take the child from his mother and place him in the custody of the person who he alleged was abusing him. The child remains in this arrangement three years later.

This week, a member of An Garda Síochána walked into my constituency office and said that he, along with six other gardaí, are deeply concerned about the way this case has been handled, the way the social workers lied to the judge and the fact that the child had been taken from his mother and placed with a man against whom he has alleged abuse. The garda stated in a letter to me that he has raised these questions with management over the case, including the Commissioner and the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission, GSOC, and was reprimanded for doing so. He stated that his name was smeared with suggestions that he was doing something untoward in his relationship with the child's mother; a woman he barely knows.

I find these details shocking, especially the falsified interview with the child. The family can provide an audio recording that it is at odds with what Tusla supplied to the courts. I am extremely concerned that a psychologist appointed by the court is willing to supply an affidavit to state that her report of her interactions was altered and falsified by Tusla before being presented to the judge.

Given that there is a vulnerable boy at the centre of this case, we need a proper and independent investigation. We need to ensure this case is investigated for the sake of the child who I believe is in a shockingly dangerous situation. There is a problem at the heart of what is happening in Tusla if this is the case.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Niall Collins): I am responding on behalf of the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality. I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, and the Department of Children, Disability and Equality are committed to promoting safe and high-quality practices in areas of alternative care. The Child Care Act 1991 is the statutory framework for child welfare and protection in Ireland. The legislation places a statutory duty on Tusla to promote the welfare of children who are not receiving adequate care and protection. It sets the legislative provisions in respect of taking children into care and the responsibilities of the State in that regard, which aim to improve outcomes for looked-after children.

Bringing a child into the care of the State is a serious matter and the Act prescribes the different mechanisms by which Tusla can take a child into care. Importantly, the Act sets out clear thresholds under which an application for a care order can be brought to allow for a child to be taken into the care of the State. Where Tusla is required to make an application for a care order, this application is made to the courts, which provides an additional layer of oversight in respect of the child. The welfare and best interests of the child remain paramount throughout the process. Parents are legally represented in such matters and children may be appointed a guardian *ad litem* to represent the voice of the child in the court setting. In respect of the role of birth parents who may come into contact with Tusla in respect of a child protection matter, Tusla aims to work with parents to create safety for children so they can live at home.

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Tusla interventions aim to be decisive, time-limited and goal-orientated to maintain children within their families of origin. Tusla works to reach agreement with the parents and their extended family about a safety goal for that child and to develop a safety plan containing steps to achieve safety for the child that is revisited at intervals over a prescribed timeline to evaluate whether the safety plan is working. This is called a “safety planning intervention”. Parental assessments are carried out in every case where a child comes into care as Tusla must prove the threshold of harm was sufficient for the court to make a care order. Parents who feel aggrieved by their interactions with Tusla, including those related to the decision-making process around State care, have access to formal complaints processes. In respect of complaint management across all services, Tusla strives to resolve all complaints via prompt local resolution, in the first instance, and to proceed with an investigation if a local resolution is not possible.

In the case of Patrick, which the Deputy has raised, I am obviously not aware of the details. The Deputy, of course, is aware of the details and has referred to some of them. All I can do now is advise and encourage him to write to the Minister for justice, Deputy O’Callaghan, and the Minister for children, Deputy Foley, outlining the details and knowledge of the extent of the case he has raised. I am sure they will have the matter examined appropriately.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I have already written to the former Minister for children, Deputy O’Gorman, the Minister for justice, Deputy O’Callaghan, the Minister for children, Deputy Foley, and Tusla in respect of this case. I understand that the Minister of State does not know the background to the case and, in many ways, I am throwing at him the details of a case that is hard to get one’s head around in a short time.

5 o’clock

It is impossible for the Minister of State to be able to respond to this in detail; I do understand that.

I acknowledge there are thousands of good people working in Tusla every single day doing a phenomenal job and they are under fierce pressure. There are 100,000 children annually who are being referred to Tusla, which is quite a shocking reflection of what is actually happening in the country. Approximately 35,000 more than are sitting the leaving certificate are getting referred to Tusla on an annual basis. I understand that it does not have enough staff and I understand how difficult it is to be able to adjudicate. A person would have to have the wisdom of Solomon to be able to understand who is right and who is wrong in some of these cases. However, this is a phenomenally serious case, and it is a case I want the Minister of State to take on board with regard to his Department. Rather than sending me to Ministers who are not here and who I already have contacted, I ask him to take this on as a personal responsibility to try to find a solution.

This is a young child who is currently, it is alleged, in the charge of a person who is abusing them. For any mother to see a child first of all abused is a heart-wrenching, mind-bending shock. I just cannot imagine how a person would get their head over that situation, let alone for that child to be left in that scenario. There is clear evidence here that Tusla has not done its job and that the staff within Tusla have done significantly wrong by this child. This is not the only case that is coming to me. A large number of cases that are similar are coming to me. I do not imagine all of them are true, but I do think there is a systemic problem. I want the Minister of State to take responsibility to see that there is an investigation into this. Further, I believe there should be an independent panel of experts who become the last opportunity for a family to seek

justice in these cases.

Deputy Niall Collins: To be clear, the Deputy has told me that he has already written to the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, and the Minister, Deputy Foley, with regard to this. Arising from today, I will speak to the relevant officials within our Department, and I will ensure that the correspondence and communication the Deputy has sent to the Department via the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan's office, is acted on promptly and that he is reverted to with its view with regard to it.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I will email my transcript to the Minister of State as well.

Deputy Niall Collins: That is fine.

Thalidomide Victims Compensation

Deputy Barry Ward: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht bheith anseo déanach ar an Déardaoin chun déileáil leis an gceist seo. This is an issue I have raised on a number of occasions, that is, the attitude of the State towards the treatment of survivors of thalidomide. The Minister of State will be aware that thalidomide was a drug that was used in the early 1960s by women in relation to morning sickness but what is important is that it has a hugely adverse effect on their subsequent children.

We have fewer than 40 survivors of thalidomide in Ireland today. These are people who have lived throughout their lives with debilitating issues as a result of the fact that they survived thalidomide while their mothers were pregnant. I am conscious that this is a sensitive issue. I am also conscious that this is a sensitive time and I have been encouraged to withdraw this matter this evening for that reason. Let me say very clearly why I have not withdrawn it. First, there is a process under way, which is being led by the retired High Court judge, Mr. Justice Giligan, a man for whom I have enormous respect, and I do not want in any way to interfere with that process. It is important that continues and that it is completed in whatever way he sees fit and to the conclusion that is appropriate. The openness and transparency that must come with that should never be interfered with. That is not really why I am raising this issue. I am raising this issue because this is an important anniversary.

This week marks the passage of one year since the leaders of the three parties in the previous Government wrote to the survivors of thalidomide and set out what I respectfully suggest was not, in fact, an apology or an acknowledgement, but really a communication in respect of some supports that have been put in place for them. It is also a number of weeks since Jacqui Browne, a fearless campaigner and an individual of great stock herself, passed away aged 64. She was a thalidomide survivor. As we move through this, I understand those who say that now is not the time to discuss it and that there is a process under way; I understand that. The difficulty I have is, if not now, when? This has been going on now for more than 60 years. The survivors themselves are in their mid to late 60s and more importantly, their mothers, most of whom have passed away, are obviously much older than that or are at an advanced age. In fact, I think there are probably only five of them still living, and some of them have passed away in the last year as well. Those women who took the drug thalidomide without any foresight or knowledge as to the effect it might have on the foetus of the infant they were carrying bore throughout their lives huge guilt with regard to what happened to their children *in utero*. It is desperately unfair on those women who took the drug, again, through no fault of their own and who bore that burden

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throughout their lives. Most of them have died. The glacial pace with which the State is actually addressing this problem is shameful. The process is under way, let it take its course, but the treatment of thalidomide survivors by allowing the matter to go on for as long as it has is a very poor reflection on the State and the liability the State has. I have been very clear on this; there was a failure by the State in the 1960s for a period of over six months to clearly indicate that this drug should be withdrawn from the market. The information was there; the action was not taken. I am not here to go into the liability issue of it. There is a case in being, although that in and of itself has been dragged on to the detriment of those people who are involved in the case. Really, what I want to raise this evening is how unacceptable it is that, unfortunately, once again, this State finds itself in a position where vulnerable people who have been disadvantaged and injured by the failure to act by this State are once again being treated really badly and appallingly. The time has come to take action and acknowledge that.

Deputy Niall Collins: I thank Deputy Ward for raising this important issue. I also wish to extend the apologies of the Minister for State with responsibility for disability, Deputy Naughton, for being unable to attend today. She is currently on a delegation to Bosnia and Herzegovina on behalf of the Government to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide.

The Minister of State has also asked that her sincere sympathies and condolences are extended to the Browne family following the passing of their beloved Jacqui. Jacqui was a very valued chair of the disabled persons' organisations network, and she played a key role in contributing to many disability policies and initiatives, including the forthcoming national disability strategy.

The Government is committed to supporting people affected by thalidomide with health and personal social services. In July last year, the Government announced an enhanced package supports, which was co-designed with survivors. Enhanced healthcare, social care and independent living supports are currently available. Also, in April 2024, the national thalidomide advocacy office was established. This office was set up to liaise with thalidomide survivors and assist them to access supports towards their ongoing health and personal social service needs. The support provided is on a one-to-one basis, tailored to the specific needs of the person and in response to contact received from survivors. It includes identifying and liaising with the relevant HSE personnel and other agencies to ensure the required services are provided. Each survivor is also eligible for a medical card on an administrative basis, regardless of means, in addition to aids and appliances, equipment, housing adaptations and access to a full range of primary care, hospital and personal social services.

Deputy Barry Ward: I thank the Minister of State. I acknowledge the reason for the absence of the Minister for State, Deputy Naughton. I applaud her for acknowledging the massacre in Srebrenica.

I also understand what the Minister of State, Deputy Collins, said; I know he is reading a response on her behalf. The statement that the Government is committed to helping the survivors of thalidomide is all very well but the point I am making is it is taking too long. The process is there and the process is fine but what we have not had is a proper acknowledgement. We have not had a proper apology. We do not have cover. Talking about enhanced services for them is all very well but that is the very minimum we can do. These are people who were injured through the inaction of this State and that has never been acknowledged despite the letter that was written by my party leader, the Minister of State's party leader and the leader of the Green

Party a year ago. That is not actually an acknowledgement of the fault of the State. It is not an apology. It is an apology for what they are going through, which states that the Government regrets the position they are in. I understand the restrictions that are there. I have been critical before of the manner in which the State has met the legal case against them. That is one thing but there is a basic justice to this that has never been met. There is no apology, acknowledgment, full suite of treatment and no compensation. Those are all absent. If we are talking about the issue at the heart of this, which is the treatment of those people who through no fault of their own and through no fault of their parents find themselves massively disadvantaged, injured, disabled as a result of that drug and the inaction of this State, the very least we can do is those four things I pointed out: apologise; acknowledge; cover their medical needs; and compensate them for the injury caused to them. We would do it in any other situation but for some reason the State has dragged its heels. The fundamental crux of this is the treatment of those survivors of thalidomide is fundamentally wrong and shameful and is a stain on the recent history of this State that we cannot get over that and acknowledge the justice of the issue that has to be dealt with.

Deputy Niall Collins: As previously referenced, in July 2024 an enhanced package for health and social care supports for thalidomide survivors was announced. That included prioritised and simplified access to local health and social care professionals, access to therapies, both clinical and holistic, independent living supports to include housing adaptations, car adaptations and home supports, annual health assessments and a free travel pass. As the Deputy will be aware, there is a thalidomide resolution process under way facilitated by Judge Paul Gilligan. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on that process at this time.

Separately, the German Grünenthal Foundation has confirmed that since 2013 it has accepted applications from individuals for compensation for thalidomide-related injury. It is open to any Irish person to apply to the foundation for assessment of their disability as being attributable to thalidomide. Additionally any Irish person who establishes that their injury is attributable to thalidomide will continue to be offered appropriate supports by the Government commensurate with those currently provided to Irish thalidomide survivors. Support for this assessment process is available for anybody who wishes to be assessed.

The Deputy also raised a proper acknowledgement and apology and the process taking too long and the lack of compensation. I will convey the sentiments he raised here with both the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste.

Media Sector

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I wish to raise what I think everyone recognises as a growing threat to society, namely online disinformation and, more importantly, the urgent needs around how we promote and resource media literacy initiatives to counter it.

We are all aware of the alarming rise in the weaponisation of false information online. It is no longer just a nuisance. It is being used to distort truth, polarise communities and threaten our public safety. We have seen it play out in real time, most recently in light of the Dublin riots that devastated part of the city. Many of these events were fuelled by online ecosystems suggesting and spreading falsehoods.

A 2023 study by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue revealed that between 2020 and 2023,

over 13 million disinformation posts were detected across 1,600 accounts in Ireland alone. Shockingly just ten of those accounts were responsible for 14% of that content. The drivers of that content were typically far-right groups and individuals pushing narratives on Covid-19 denial, anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric, misogyny and electoral distrust and distrust in democratic institutions. Another study from DCU found that there are examples of social media platforms rapidly amplifying this harmful content. Male-identified accounts created as part of this experiment were fed misogynistic and white-supremacist material within just 23 minutes of use. Once they were exposed, the algorithms in the cases of some platforms continued to recommend similar content.

It is not just a concern shared by policymakers: it is one also shared by the public. The Digital News Report Ireland 2024 found that 64% or almost two in three people worry about distinguishing real content from fake online content. This is higher than the European average of 50%. During the Covid-19 pandemic and the restrictions, almost half of Irish citizens encountered misleading information about the virus in just one week.

Ireland did rank fifth in the media literacy index in 2022 but we have seen a 5% drop in the basic information and data literacy skills since 2023. This is a dangerous decline, especially for people who rely on messaging apps and social media platforms for their news. Research shows they are significantly more likely to believe in conspiracy theories. This is brought to life by the recent report by the Electoral Commission on the permeation of conspiracy theories. Some 35% of people surveyed for that report believe a small, secret group controls world politics but this number is a lot higher for those who rely on online media where 58% of those people believe in this theory compared with 23% of people who use traditional media.

The Government has taken steps. The introduction of the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act 2022 establishing Coimisiún na Meán as our new online safety regulator is a welcome step in that it brings into force parts of the EU Digital Services Act. The launch of the national counter disinformation strategy in 2025, built on five core principles, has also been extremely important in doing that. Coimisiún na Meán has started leading with the implementation of binding safety rules for social media platforms targeting harmful content and requiring platforms to enforce age checks, parental controls and media literacy tools. However, I fear we have arrived at a point where legislation alone and nor is enforcement of community guidelines alone. It is about empowering the public, young and old, with the skills to critically evaluate the information they consume. Media literacy is no longer optional. It is now a democratic necessity. We need to embed media literacy into our education systems making it a mandatory part of both primary and secondary curriculums. We need to fund lifelong digital skills programmes and prioritise vulnerable groups often excluded from digital education. A resilient society like this is an informed one. We must also continue to support and fund verified fact-checked journalism, which is often the first casualty of disinformation and the last line of defence against it. This is all pivotal to defending our democracy.

Deputy Niall Collins: As we know, the problem of disinformation is not a new one. What is new is how easily mistruths can be produced, how sophisticated and convincing they are, and how it can be amplified and circulated at astonishing speed.

According to the Digital News Report 2025 published just last month, 68% of people said that they are concerned about what is real and what is fake online. This is clear evidence of how important it is to counter disinformation.

The Future of Media Commission recognised this in its 2022 report and recommended that Ireland develop a national counter disinformation strategy to co-ordinate national efforts in the fight against disinformation, with the intention of limiting the creation and spreading of false, misleading and harmful material.

Disinformation is a serious challenge that requires whole-of-society response, the importance of which was recognised during the development of the national counter disinformation strategy. An independently chaired multistakeholder working group was established in February 2023 to develop the strategy and it was published on 17 April this year.

At national level, Ireland is already using a range of approaches to counter disinformation. The strategy aims to connect key stakeholders across multiple sectors, facilitating enhanced co-operation and collaboration in our efforts to counter disinformation. The strategy highlights education in particular as having an important role in giving people the skills to recognise false material and help to prevent its dissemination. Media and digital literacy initiatives should be seen alongside the promotion of public interest information in this regard. Crucially, the provision of media literacy education for everyone in our society will help to ensure that we are collectively resilient to the threats posed by this kind of manipulation to our democracy.

One such example is the Be Media Smart campaign led by Media Literacy Ireland, which encourages people to stop, think and check that the information they are consuming is reliable. The Sound and Vision 4 scheme is a notable source of funding for media literacy initiatives across television and radio. A total of €7 million has been awarded under the scheme so far this year for television and radio projects, with media literacy initiatives featuring amongst the funded projects. These range from documentaries about misinformation to local programming Irish-language programmes that set out to boost media literacy skills. Some notable examples include Beat 102-103 Digital Media and You; Virgin Media Television's "Borders & Lies"; TG4's "Am Abú"; and Newstalk's "Ctrl Shift Save - Life in a Digital Age". Further funding awards under the Sound and Vision 4 scheme will be announced by Coimisiún na Meán in August 2025. I look forward to seeing those projects that are to be awarded coming to fruition.

In addition, the programme for Government commits the Government to funding the strategy. The Department of Communications, Culture and Sport is developing proposals around this, including commitments in the strategy to media literacy as part of the Estimates process and subject to the availability of resources. While media literacy is a vital component in our fight to counter disinformation, it must be acknowledged that as a whole-of-government and whole-of-society challenge, there are other ways to counter disinformation. For example, enhanced regulation, which places obligations on online platforms to minimise the availability of harmful and illegal content, including disinformation, is highlighted in the strategy. Coimisiún na Meán is at the heart of Ireland's online safety framework. Comprising the Digital Services Act, the Online Safety Media Regulation Act and the terrorist content online content regulation, the online safety framework has an important part to play when it comes to countering disinformation.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I thank the Minister of State for his comprehensive reply. It is important to say at the outset that the proliferation of new technologies like artificial intelligence and the generation and communication tools associated with that are a massive opportunity in terms of connecting society and making information more plentiful, but also presents a number of challenges. I am a firm believer that innovation should always be promoted and welcomed, but should also be accompanied with safety and very clear expectations and parameters about

how to guarantee the safe use of new technologies.

All of the reports generated about employment, labour and the sort of skills we need for the future have correctly identified things like green skills, digital skills and the ability to understand AI skills. Report after report shows that employers and, more broadly, society are looking for people who have critical thinking skills, as well as the ability to solve problems on their own and to differentiate what might be real or false. It is important that we as a society and the Government not only say that these are things employers look for. In order to build well-rounded citizens and people who can actively engage in a democracy, we must ensure critical thinking skills are central to this.

I welcome the funding of the various programmes for broadcasters and media organisations from Coimisiún na Meán. I encourage the mainstreaming of that because it is something we will have to be vigilant about and keep an eye on. That is the core point. We must make sure that we continue to prioritise ongoing research and monitoring to stay ahead of this evolving threat so that we can evaluate how extensive it is and, indeed, how successful our efforts to address and to deal with it are.

Let us continue to act not just to regulate but to educate, and not just to respond but to build resilience in our democracy because the truth is worth protecting. Facts do matter because, ultimately, they underpin the conversations that sustain the open free speech of our democracy.

Deputy Niall Collins: As I set out, the national counter disinformation strategy explores the challenge of disinformation in Ireland, its harmful effects on society and its complexity as a policy issue. It is important to state that it is not the role of our Government or, indeed, any regulator to decide on individual instances of disinformation.

As mentioned, one of the fundamental aims of the strategy is to promote resilience in people to support media literacy and high-quality journalism to help people to make their own decisions about what is or is not disinformation. Having published a strategy in April, we are moving to implementation. A steering committee has been established and had its first meeting on 20 June. Actions are being progressed which support the commitments in the strategy.

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Gary Gannon: I cannot believe I am about to say this, but right now on Dominick Street, in the heart of Dublin city centre, stands a half-built school that should be opening its doors in September. A Gaelscoil that was promised, planned and funded now lies idle behind hoardings. What is worse is the silence.

This is not a new school project. The project is a result of a 23-year struggle by parents, educators and children who fought year after year for a proper building. The community built the school from scratch in 1988 and has since seen generations of children go to school to learn in their native language in conditions that no child should ever have to learn in. Let us call this what it is. It is a failure of delivery, of care and, at this point, of respect.

I heard the principal raise concerns for over a year. I watched departmental officials assure everyone, in the clearest of terms, that the new building would be open by the 2025-26 school year. That commitment was made not just to the board of management of Gaelscoil Choláiste

Mhuire, but also to 170 pupils and their families. Right now, the project has been paused. The site is silent. The cranes are still. The community has been left in the dark while a conciliation process plays out behind closed doors.

Yesterday we were told it is not known where the children are going to go to school. They will go to a building that was entirely unsuitable on Parnell Square to one that is only slightly more suitable, an interim solution on Cathal Brugha Street. That is not progress for the parents, families, children and the generations that went before them, and those who want to teach. It is an insult. We do not know if the building on Cathal Brugha Street will have any special classes. We know children will have to leave four times a day on their lunch break to walk from Cathal Brugha Street to Scoil Chaitríona for yard play in a school based in the Department of Education and Youth. I hope every official who looks out the window will see the failure of the State in respect of those children.

The original budget was €1 million and is now estimated at over €22 million. The delays have been blamed on unforeseen complications, namely protected structures, Luas lines and underground utilities, but anyone who knows the site knows those circumstances were not unforeseen. Rather, they were ignored. They were baked into the bones of the city and should have been built into the plan.

How did we go from a sod-turning ceremony in June 2023 to a stalled project in July 2025? That does not suggest urgency or oversight. This is not just about a school; this is about what happens when a community like ours, a working-class community which is resilient in a way in which very few others could even comprehend and wishes children to learn in the Irish language in an inner-city school, asks for something other communities take for granted, namely a proper school building, a safe and permanent space to learn and a place of pride. Instead, there has been a delay, a doubling of costs, empty timelines and another round of temporary accommodation.

I am sure the Minister of State has a response, but I hope it includes the answers to my questions. When will construction restart? Is there a date? What has the conciliation process uncovered? It is now important that we share those findings. Contract sensitivity does not come into play when the contract has ceased. Will the Department publish a new delivery timeline? Can the Minister of State assure us that will be adhered to? When does the new tender process start? Who is accountable for the doubling of the budget to €22 million and, I presume, counting?

This is not criticism for the sake of it. Most public representatives in Dublin Central have held back for obvious reasons, but that will no longer happen. This is about standing up for children and families who have been more patient than any of us could ask for. They have been more resilient than any of us could comprehend. Gaelscoil Choláiste Mhuire not just a line on a spreadsheet; it is a symbol of what the city can be, namely multilingual, diverse, proud of its culture and committed to its children. It deserves better than hoarding. At this point, there is absolute silence. We will continue to raise this issue every day if necessary until the parents, children and education community get the answers they deserve because they have been failed incredibly badly by the State.

Deputy Niall Collins: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter as it provides me with the opportunity to outline to the Dáil the current position regarding the major building project for Gaelscoil Choláiste Mhuire in Parnell Square. The Minister and the Department of Education

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and Youth are fully committed to delivering a new school building for Gaelscoil Choláiste Mhuire as quickly as possible. Department officials are in regular contact with the school authorities, meeting approximately every six weeks or more frequently when required.

The Minister and her Department are committed to continuing this support for the school. This project is included in the Department's construction programme and is being delivered under the national development plan as part of Project Ireland 2040. A number of issues arose on site at the outset, which is not unusual given the nature of a brownfield city centre site, but this led to a delay. While all parties actively engaged to discuss and resolve the issues and to reduce any risk to the programme, these unforeseen matters did lead to a delay.

In response to issues on the site, the Department sanctioned the appointment of a project manager on the project, who has engaged with the design team and contractor to minimise project delays on the programme and ensure clear lines of communication were in operation. The appointed project manager developed various proposals and strategies to remedy any issues impacting the programme, realigning the full project team roles and agreeing the project delivery timelines and goals.

Good progress was initially made following the project manager's intervention in the summer of 2024 to the end of the year, with significant visible progress being made on the structure. However, since Christmas the project issues have intensified. The Department has had ongoing engagement with the contractor and the design team to resolve these issues. As a result, the Department entered into a conciliation hearing to try to reach agreement on a solution to ensure the earliest possible delivery of the school while respecting its statutory obligations.

In accordance with standard practice and contractual requirements, the conciliation process is of a confidential nature. A temporary pause on works under the suspension of works provisions of the contract provided an opportunity to consider outcomes from the conciliation process. A notice of suspension of works was communicated to the contractor on 23 May 2025 in accordance with the provisions of the contract. During the suspension, the Department carefully considered the best way to deliver a school building while also respecting its statutory obligations. A notice of termination was issued under the contract on 1 July 2025 following careful consideration of the need to ensure compliance with those statutory obligations. Department officials will continue to work closely with the school principal and board of management.

As an interim measure, the Department is providing accommodation more suitable to the current needs of the school nearby on Cathal Brugha Street. I am informed the school has provided information to parents recently about these next steps for the school. Some small-scale refurbishment works at the building will provide a good interim accommodation solution for the school and include teaching and learning spaces for all the classes, education support and sensory spaces, adequate meeting and office spaces, a staff room, a communal area and access to a safe outdoor space for students. It is anticipated the school will move into the new premises after the October 2025 mid-term break. The Minister and the Department are fully committed to delivering a school building for this school as soon as possible.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I listened to the Minister of State's reply intently. I was hoping to get answers to some of the questions. The Cathal Brugha Street site the school is moving into is barely suitable, if even that, for a school community, but it is expected to move in there in September. The contract on that school Gaelscoil Choláiste Mhuire has been given is to June 2027.

The Minister of State has just told me some complications can be expected in a city-centre site. It is really important that we get the outcome of the conciliation process to understand what exactly went wrong. If these unforeseen complications are happening at a city-centre site, what exactly were they? Was it the Luas line? We understand there are going to be underground issues in the city centre but they were not factored in or considered. I was in the room when the principal raised this with Department officials and asked would it be an issue. I stood in rooms for a year while the school was assured consistently it would be in the building it deserved by 2025. We know that is not a normal school at the moment. It has had to deal with issues very few of us could even comprehend and what it deserved from the State was truth along the way.

There is no space for us to say there are contractual obligations at the same time the Department has told us it is no longer in a contract. We need full information. When is it expected the tender will go out? If the previous builder is going to take a court case, will that delay the tendering? We have a situation where there is a contract for Cathal Brugha Street until 2027. I have a community in the north inner city and surrounds which wants to be able to learn and teach its children through the medium of Irish. That should be a minimum, but what it has had to endure over 23 years is an insult from the State. All the school requires now is truth and while it is in Cathal Brugha Street for it to be flooded with resources so we can be assured these children can have a normal school environment, because they have not had it at all through the last 23 years, affecting generations of children.

Deputy Niall Collins: To recap, the project brief was for a large-scale capital project, namely the construction of a 16-classroom primary school consisting of a four-storey, 13-classroom block with ancillary rooms facing Dominick Street, a five-storey block with administration, services, library and resource rooms on the corner of Dominick Place and Dominick Street, an elevated first floor bridge block containing three classrooms facing Dominick Place and a general purpose hall with a basement for services to the rear of the site at Granby Row. The site is an area of archaeological interest and abuts a protected structure owned and occupied by Youth Work Ireland. That was the project brief, as the Deputy knows. It sounds like a very complex build.

As I said, a number of issues arose on site at the outset, which is not unusual given the nature of the brownfield site. These included several services on-site, including electrical lines and services related to the adjacent Luas line which were not apparent until excavation began. There was also an issue with the foundations of an adjoining protected building that required careful consideration. While all parties actively engaged to discuss and resolve the issues and reduce the risk to the programme, these unforeseen matters delayed it, as the Deputy knows. It is now prudent to plan on the basis the provision of the new school building will be unavoidably delayed. However, the Department is assessing all options open to it to expedite the delivery of the new school building, as I have previously outlined, and it is in regular contact with the school authorities.

I will convey the Deputy's sentiments. He has raised it, he has articulated it very well and I understand. We all deal with school issues and they are very important for the children and the entire school community. It is hugely important to them and I understand that. It is not unique; it happens all over the country. That is not diminishing the importance of this case. I will convey the Deputy's frustration and that of the community.

School Costs

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for selecting this issue. I am raising the issue of the cost many parents are faced with for digital devices like iPads, tablets and laptops when schools move to a one-to-one digital device policy. It is happening quite a lot and comes at very significant cost to families, many of which have multiple students at school. Devices can cost anything up to €800. At a time when many families were expecting to have the cost of school books taken off them the exact opposite is happening. I have a number of examples of where students entering fifth year are faced with a new policy that demands a device costing €800 for their schoolwork.

This question has been asked repeatedly, including by me, and a lot of the written responses point towards Government investment in ICT in schools generally. They point towards the role of the board of management in developing digital learning policies, whether these devices are introduced or not, how the ICT funding is used and the need for consultation before any change in policy is introduced. They also point to a circular issued in 2017 that does not deal with the issue at all and is about measures schools should adopt in relation to uniforms and other costs.

The real issue here is there are families who cannot afford this. They just cannot bear this cost. They can be part of a consultation. This is just the practicalities of it. They might not agree with the policy but they will have to go along with it or else their child will be left behind. We then have a scenario of children being left behind, excluded or isolated or families being pushed into financial hardship. The suggestion from the Government in the responses I have seen so far is that schools can use the ICT funding to develop a scheme to support families, but the funding is not there to do that. What happens in practical terms is schools look for full payment. They point people towards services like Humm or the local credit union to try to facilitate them. Without a shadow of a doubt, because of these policy changes in individual schools, and I recognise schools have autonomy to a significant degree in relation to these decisions, families are being left in a position where there is no support net at all. They are left completely exposed.

I see nothing in the responses I have received thus far that recognises that fact. I am interested to hear the Minister of State's response today. I hope he indicates there will be some action on this issue.

Deputy Niall Collins: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. The Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy McEntee, recently announced €35 million in funding to support digital learning in schools. A total of €35 million in grant funding for information and communications technology has issued to all recognised primary and post-primary schools. Through the ICT grant and the minor works grant schemes, schools are directly funded for their ICT infrastructure.

Schools have autonomy to determine which infrastructure to implement, including software and devices such as tablets, in accordance with their digital learning plans. The funding can also be used to provide loan schemes for devices, as needed. The ICT grant funding is being provided to schools to help them to continue to embed the use of digital technologies in their teaching, learning and assessment.

This is the third tranche of ICT funding under the digital strategy for schools to 2027. The funding issues as a lump sum per school, plus a *per capita* amount, with an enhanced *per capita*

rate for students enrolled in DEIS and special schools and to pupils in mainstream special class primary settings. Using this model of funding, all schools are treated fairly and transparently and are allocated an amount per student. Schools, in conjunction with parents, are responsible for decisions on the use of digital technology, including tablet devices, laptops and learning platforms, and how best to manage their integration into classroom practice, reflective of their own context and requirements.

Under the Education Act, boards of management have responsibility for the day-to-day management of schools. Decisions regarding the use and deployment of digital technology is therefore a matter for the board of management of each school in the context of their digital learning planning. Schools are advised to consult with members of the school community, including parents, when planning for the introduction of digital technologies. This includes devices with cost and other implications being fully considered by the board of management before a decision is made.

The Oide technology in education division within the Department of Education and Youth provides a support service for teachers specialising in digital technology in teaching and learning. It offers advice and supports to schools on digital learning. Advice sheets are available on digital technology in education, including on the adoption of laptops and tablets in schools.

The digital strategy for schools to 2027, and its associated implementation plan, is underpinned by funding of €200 million over the course of the strategy, as committed to under the national development plan. The funding allocation model is provided for in the NDP and commits to funding issuing over the period of the plan, to be applied by the Department for the digital strategy duration, which is to 2027 for the current strategy. Including the most recent grant, a total of €135 million of the €200 million committed to in the NDP for the strategy has issued to schools through the ICT grant. While the NDP commitment did not guarantee a specific amount in each year, it is anticipated that issuing €35 million in 2025 will enable the balance of €65 million to issue to schools over the remaining years of the current strategy to 2027.

This funding demonstrates the Government's ongoing commitment to supporting and enabling schools to ensure the continued embedding of digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The Minister of State's response is the response we have been getting to the question over the past few months. I want to put a number of things on the record, which I would appreciate the Minister of State conveying to the Ministers for Education and Youth and Social Protection.

We have a funding crisis in education. We cannot take from ICT funding that is desperately needed to keep the lights on and deliver ICT in schools to provide a loan scheme for students. The money is not there.

We have a cost-of-living crisis. Families very much welcome hot school meals and the elimination of school book charges. However, doing that on the one hand while, on the other, asking parents to come up with €800 for a device is driving people into financial hardship.

I take on board that individual schools can make their own decisions on funding but there must be a recognition by the Department that there is a move towards digital learning, whether in terms of augmentative and alternative communication, AAC, devices for people with disabilities, digital learning plans being developed by schools or the additional assessment com-

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ponents in the new senior cycle redevelopment. Schools are moving in a particular direction, which is digital. That move is causing real financial hardship for a number of people. The system, between the Departments of Education and Youth and Social Protection, must recognise that. We need a fund to support parents. That is what Sinn Féin is calling for. We want a recognition of this and dedicated support to ensure people are not forced under water because of this additional cost. I ask the Minister of State to take that point on board and to convey it to the two Ministers.

Deputy Niall Collins: The Government recognises that back-to-school costs each September can place real financial pressure on families. The Department of Education and Youth is keenly aware of the challenges faced by educators and parents in regard to these costs. To help address this, schools are expected to follow guidance from the Department, which includes using school uniform items that are generic and affordable and regularly consulting with parents on ways to reduce costs. Schools should also provide a full list of required items with guidance on best-value options.

A number of measures are in place to support educators and parents as part of the Department's ongoing commitment to reduce financial pressure on families and ensure every student is supported to succeed. A circular letter issued to schools in 2017 with measures to be adopted to reduce the cost of school uniforms and other costs, including of ICT devices. The circular also instructed schools to consult with parents and their school community on ensuring costs are reasonable and how to avoid cost acting as a barrier. The circular specified that, wherever possible, generic rather than branded items should be specified, for example, uniforms, clothing, tablet devices and sports equipment. It provided that schools should also consult with parents regarding their views and suggestions on cost reduction initiatives. Schools should provide parents with a list of all required items and their likely cost at best-value stores. Where an exclusive supplier arrangement applies, it should be reviewed regularly and tendered in accordance with the procurement requirements.

To further assist schools, the Office of Government Procurement, HEAnet and the Department of Education and Youth have established a framework of providers of digital services, including tablets, PCs and laptops, with appropriate specifications, agreed pricing and levels of service, as well as providing framework management. Schools are encouraged to avail of these frameworks, which will enable them to comply with procurement requirements and achieve agreed transparent pricing.

Aircraft Noise (Dublin Airport) Regulation (Transfer of Functions) Bill 2024: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Duncan Smith: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am delighted to have the opportunity to move this Bill on Second Stage. To be clear, this Bill will not solve the many issues impacting negatively the daily lives of residents in north County Dublin and east County Meath, including aircraft noise, night-time flights and the passenger cap. Members of the Government who were in opposition when this Bill was introduced supported it at the time. It would transfer the functions for regulating aircraft noise from the aircraft noise competent authority, ANCA, under the auspices of Fingal County Council, to the Environmental Protection Agency, recognising, as should be the case, the physical and mental health impacts aircraft noise has on individuals. This Bill is about transferring the function

for regulating aircraft noise from Fingal County Council to the EPA. It is in response to the Aircraft Noise (Dublin Airport) Regulation Act 2019, which the Labour Party opposed at the time. This is a long-standing position of the Labour Party. We believe the function of aircraft noise monitoring should be within the EPA. That is our preferred option. This position goes back to Councillor Peter Coyle from the Howth-Malahide ward almost 20 years and it has been supported by our party and others ever since, including the current Fingal representation of Councillors Brian McDonagh, James Humphreys, Brendan Ryan and Corina Johnston, as well as Deputy Robert O'Donoghue.

Since the aircraft noise competent authority, ANCA, was set up under the auspices of Fingal County Council, I must make it clear that there are absolutely no issues when it comes to the probity or professionalism of any of the officials. This Bill is not being brought because of any concern about probity or professionalism. Rather, it relates to the fact that, structurally, we still believe, as we always have, that setting up aircraft noise monitoring under the auspices of a local authority is an unsound option. It is not the preferred option to tackle the issue of aircraft noise, which, as we know from a 2018 WHO report, has an impact not only on the mental and emotional well-being of people but on their physical health too. I and other Deputies in the Chamber today have attended a number of presentations by the forum group in Fingal and Meath whose members have given strong testimony regarding the impact on their health, backing up the World Health Organization's assessment.

Aircraft noise can increase cardiovascular disease. People are 20% more likely to experience cardiovascular disease in areas of high aircraft noise. There are also issues of noise pollution and particulate matter in air pollution, which are caused by aircraft. While we are always told by the aviation industry that aircraft will be running on biofuels in a few years' time and that they will make no noise and be practically gliders, that is absolute nonsense. We have been hearing that for years. The fact of the matter is that, now, we have poor air pollution and particulate matter landing and resting on the homes of people in south Swords and all over north County Dublin. It is having a real impact on people's health.

An agency such as the EPA is best placed to provide that monitoring service. The reason for this is that Fingal County Council is ultimately a unit of local government that represents the interests of the residents living in the vicinity of the airport. One of the principal functions of local government, as set out in section 63 of the Local Government Act 2001, is to provide a forum for the democratic representation of the local community and to provide civic leadership for that community. It may be argued that by vesting the functions of aircraft noise with the chief executive of the county council rather than with the elected members, the Act has achieved a functional separation, which is an EU legal term. Functional separation has been achieved in the electricity and gas sectors, for example, when certain functions assigned to an undertaking are spun off into an independently operated entity, even though common ownership is preserved. True functional separation, however, requires a proper separation of functions. It is not achieved if notionally separated entities have mixed or overlapping functions. In this case, the chief executive of Fingal County Council has been given a noise regulation function under the 2019 Act which he or she must perform without direction from the elected members of the council. At the same time, however, he or she remains chief executive of a body whose principal statutory function is to provide a forum for the democratic representation of the local community and to provide that civic leadership for that community. In summary, the function of acting as a competent authority is vested in an individual whose principal existing statutory function is to advise and assist elected representatives of such local authority, while the coun-

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cil's own statutory remit is to provide a forum for the democratic representation of the local community around the airport. In those circumstances, it can be called into question whether true functional separation can be achieved without the competent authority and the local residents via their elected members on the council, of which the competent authority continues to serve as chief executive. While that might sound convoluted, it points to the fact that we believe, and have always believed, that this has not been a sound structure for the monitoring of aircraft noise.

I listened to Michael O'Leary on Newstalk today telling my constituents to "suck it up" when it comes to aircraft noise. Why does Mr. O'Leary, with his vast wealth, not buy a property right under one of the unexpected and uninsulated flight paths and put his money where his mouth is? We saw how he approached the previous Minister for Transport with a view that insulting and bullying would cow him into certain actions, with a focus then on the passenger cap and disregarding any and all resident concerns, without due understanding, - deliberately, I believe - to what has taken place in Fingal regarding public consultation, planned take-off and landing routes and noise insulation schemes. At the end of the day, the people living here are airport people. They work in the airport and want it to thrive. They want the airport to operate in an honest, open and transparent manner and for it to engage with residents in such a way.

I hope that the Minister for Transport, Deputy O'Brien, who shares my constituency, will not give in to such transparent tactics from Mr. O'Leary and others in the aviation industry when they try to force their all planes, any planes, all day, any night approach to Dublin Airport. There is a lot of strong local opinion and experience on this issue. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, will have received many of the same emails that I and my colleagues in the Chamber have received. The setting-up of ANCA and its functioning over the past five years have never persuaded local residents that it is the right setup for the monitoring aircraft noise.

I reiterate that this Bill is not designed to solve the many problems. Rather, it is just to put right a structural mistake made by the former Minister, Mr. Shane Ross, when he put the responsibility for aircraft noise under Fingal County Council. I hope the Government will support this pro-health, pro-community Bill and that we can move towards having a more modern, sophisticated and health-based approach to aircraft and aviation noise.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Niall Collins): I thank the Deputy for the opportunity to speak to the House about the important issue of aircraft noise and the aviation sector more generally. I am confident we can all agree, even though it is so often stated, that, as an island nation, aviation plays a crucial role in our economy and society. I welcome the opportunity to discuss the Government's position on Second Stage of this Private Member's Bill, the Aircraft Noise (Dublin Airport) Regulation (Transfer of Functions) Bill 2024. The Bill proposes to repeal section 3 of the Aircraft Noise (Dublin Airport) Regulation Act 2019, which designates Fingal County Council as the competent authority for the purposes of the EU aircraft noise regulation and to transfer the functions of the competent authority for the purposes of that regulation from Fingal County Council to the Environmental Protection Agency, and to provide for connected matters. After careful consideration, the Government's position is to oppose this Bill for a number of reasons, which I will outline shortly.

First, however, the Government recognises the intentions of the Deputy in preparing this Bill, which is to ensure proper and timely regulation of aircraft noise. I also wish to assure the Deputy that Government Members share a number of his concerns about the impact of air-

craft noise for those living in and around Dublin Airport. My colleague, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has been engaging extensively with a range of stakeholders on the matter in recent months, including residents, airlines, the airport and regulators. Indeed, when the 2019 Act was being drafted, Fianna Fáil colleagues engaged significantly in the development of the text and proposed a number of amendments to the then draft legislation to strengthen the independent functioning of the noise regulator.

However, while brief in its content, the Bill is potentially far reaching in effect. As I will now outline, there are a number of reasons the Government cannot support it. First, the Bill, as drafted, lacks pre-legislative scrutiny and detail on the proposed transfer of function. When the 2019 Act was being drafted, the process was subject to an extensive consultation and scrutiny with key stakeholders.

6 o'clock

I am sure the House will agree that there is a reason it is generally the case that complex and far-reaching legislation such as the 2019 Act is developed within the confines of Government and follows strict processes, including lengthy consultation, legal advice from the Attorney General, scrutiny by Oireachtas committees and extensive engagement with stakeholders. This draft Bill has not been subject to such a robust process of scrutiny or public consultation and as such it does not include the necessary detail on a number of key issues, most notably how the transfer of functions between Fingal and the EPA would be achieved in practical terms. It is unrealistic to transfer the functions of the competent authority to the EPA in circumstances where it is not clear if the organisational capability and structure of the EPA has been considered and whether the requisite planning and noise expertise is in place. As drafted, the Bill appears to assume that systems and personnel exist to give effect to its provisions. However, this is simply not the case.

At the time of drafting of the 2019 Act, a number of agencies were considered for the role of competent authority with responsibility for noise regulation, including the EPA. When evaluating the various options available, a number of factors were considered, not least the availability of potential agencies to provide an independent aircraft noise regulation process in accordance with EU Regulation No. 598/2014, which deals with the establishment of rules and procedures regarding the introduction of noise-related operating restrictions at Union airports. This regulation implements the International Civil Aviation Organization's balanced approach to aircraft noise management, which takes into consideration a range of measures such as operational restrictions, noise mitigation techniques and land use planning before implementing any noise-related operating restrictions. Therefore, a key consideration when selecting the competent authority was that it required organisational experience in assessing planning applications. In short, it was concluded that the EPA did not have the requisite experience in assessing planning applications to fulfil this role. I am informed that this remains the case.

In 2006, the EPA was designated as a national authority under section 5(1) of the European Communities (Environmental Noise) Regulations 2018. This role requires the EPA to exercise general supervision over the functions and actions of noise-mapping bodies and action planning authorities, including Fingal, with regard to the Dublin Airport noise map and action plan. It further requires the EPA to provide guidance to such bodies where necessary. Any consideration of the EPA for the role of competent authority would require an assessment of whether it could be considered independent in its capacity as a competent authority under EU Regulation No. 598/2014 given its existing role.

Regarding the independence of the competent authority, as outlined earlier, the designation of Fingal as the competent authority was subject to extensive debate in the Dáil and Seanad and during the pre-legislative scrutiny of the 2019 Act. I am informed that the Department of Transport sought legal advice on the matter at the time to ensure the selection of Fingal met the independence criterion of EU Regulation No. 598/2014. As the Deputy is aware, the 2019 Act explicitly states that the competent authority shall be independent and not subject to the direction of any other persons, including the elected council. While within Fingal, the aircraft noise competent authority, commonly known as ANCA, operates as a distinct and independent entity, a further significant factor for consideration is the fact that the regulation of noise at Dublin Airport is invariably tied to the development of the airport and the planning process. In this respect, Fingal was adjudged to have the necessary experience to assess planning applications and have both the organisational capability and structure to take on this regulatory role.

My fourth and final point is that the 2019 Act provides for a review of the performance of ANCA within seven years of enactment with regard to its functions under the legislation. The first such regular periodic review is due to be commenced by September 2026. I firmly believe that if we are to achieve coherent, lasting improvements in regulation, we must ensure that our legislative efforts are co-ordinated and consistent. I believe that pre-empting this formal review process at this juncture, no matter how well intentioned, would both undermine the intent behind the original legislation and existing regulation of noise at Dublin Airport.

Dublin Airport is a critical driver for economic growth and supports many jobs both directly and indirectly. It is important to the Government to balance these economic benefits of aviation with the objectives of the national aviation policy and the legitimate rights of local residents, which is why it is essential that we have a robust, practical regulatory framework for aircraft noise. In this context, I am pleased to say that my colleague, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and this Government are committed to reviewing and updating the national aviation policy in line with the commitment in the programme for Government. As the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has previously indicated, he will engage with colleagues across the House as work on that review progresses in the latter part of the year. For the numerous reasons I have outlined, the Government considers that this Private Members' Bill should be declined a Second Reading.

Deputy Pa Daly: Cuirim fáilte roimh an deis labhairt ar an mBille um Thorann Aerárthaí (Aerfort Bhaile Átha Cliath) a Rialáil (Feidhmeanna a Aistriú), 2024. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta Duncan Smith. I thank him for the effort that he has put into this Bill. It addresses an important issue, namely how we manage the impact of a growing airport on the surrounding environment and local communities. This Bill recognises that the current framework guiding the regulation of aircraft noise is not fit for purpose and a change in approach is needed.

The current framework is guided by the Aircraft Noise (Dublin Airport) Regulation Act 2019. Importantly, this Act designated Fingal County Council as the aircraft noise competent authority. Sinn Féin pointed out the Act's shortcomings at the time, all of which have come to bear. This has led us to the situation that we are in today. At the time, we raised serious questions about the capacity of Fingal County Council to act independently, which was supposedly a key condition of its designation as ANCA, especially if sufficient resourcing and staffing was not put in place. We also raised the importance of health and safety issues and of following international best practice but, unsurprisingly, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael chose to ignore our constructive engagement and rejected our amendments at the time, which was disappointing and frustrating. It is even more so today, especially since many of the concerns that we raised then remain concerns today. I am sure my fellow Deputies, Graves and O'Reilly, will tell the

Minister of State about the ongoing issues that their constituents face in the area.

As Sinn Féin transport spokesperson, I recognise the importance of a robust regulatory framework in order to shore up support for sustainable expansion and to rebuff claims of illegitimacy. As a small, open island economy, Dublin Airport is strategically important. It is central to our economy and essential to its growth. It is essential that the growth is managed properly and that the needs of local residents are not just treated as collateral damage, as we heard earlier on. We must strike the correct balance. Sinn Féin has always supported the development of Dublin Airport. What we do differently to Government is that we advocate for both strategic and responsible development. These goals are not unique. If done correctly, they can go hand in hand. We want to ensure that Dublin Airport can operate a good neighbour policy. Effective regulation is central to this and a properly resourced, independent regulator has always been our priority.

We also believe that the State's regional airports should be treated as a clear strategic priority, especially in the delivery of balanced regional growth. As it stands, more than 84% of all flights in the State are processed through Dublin Airport. Many of these arrivals, upwards of 40%, go on to travel to different parts of the island where other regional airports are closer. I want to speak for a moment about those regional airports, which are more than just transport hubs. They are lifelines for communities, engines of economic growth and gateways to the world. From Donegal to Knock, and in my constituency, Kerry, these airports connect rural Ireland to global opportunities and ensure that no corner of our country is left behind. For example, Kerry Airport was founded in 1968 with a modest grass runway. Over the decades, it has expanded significantly, with major upgrades in the 1980s and 1990s, including a new terminal and extended runway to accommodate larger aircraft. It is now a vital link for residents, tourists and businesses alike. It is trending higher in 2025 than in 2024. I pay tribute to John Mulhern and his team at Kerry Airport. There are four new French routes, including to the Dordogne. There is a new arrivals area. The departures area has been expanded in an impressive way. The airport has good cash reserves. There is a massive private aircraft facility and a business there also. Whether it is facilitating tourism to our landscapes, supporting local enterprises with efficient logistics or enabling families to stay connected across borders, Kerry Airport is a pillar of regional development. While more research needs to be done, there is a strong case for development of our regional aviation infrastructure.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank the Deputy for bringing this legislation forward. I am disappointed the Government is opposing it because there is significant merit in facilitating the passage of this legislation to the next Stage so we can have that discussion. The Minister of State cited the fact there has been done no pre-legislative scrutiny done on this legislation. Can he point me to any legislation picked out in lottery that we discuss here virtually every Thursday afternoon that has been through pre-legislative scrutiny? Is it effectively a waste of everybody's time to put legislation into the lottery if Ministers are simply going to ramble in and say there cannot be any discussion on it because it has not been through pre-legislative scrutiny? That is not how the lottery system works. The facility does not exist for the pre-legislative scrutiny to be done. There are plenty of Bills that will find themselves here on a Thursday evening that are worthy of merit, of which this is one, for which pre-legislative scrutiny has not been conducted but which would benefit from a Committee Stage debate and the chance to have a proper discussion. It is regrettable the Government is dismissing it in that way.

I acknowledge the role of Dublin Airport not just as a major employer in my constituency, but also as a driver for economic activity and development for north County Dublin, and in-

deed, all along the east coast and beyond. I am possibly the only representative from the area in the Chamber this evening who was there when we first debated the Aircraft Noise (Dublin Airport) Regulation Act 2019. My colleagues and I put forward amendments that would have ensured the Commission for Aviation Regulation would be the noise regulator. While we may not agree with every single word in the legislation we are discussing, we agree wholeheartedly that it was not the right decision to make Fingal County Council the noise regulator. The council's staff are not the best people; they are not best placed to regulate. In fact, they said that themselves at the time.

During the debate, correspondence emerged that had been sent to the Minister in which the director of planning at Fingal County Council said there was communication from the Minister's Department in November after the decision to appoint the council as the authority. She said: "[We have] an extensive remit in both shaping and determining the strategic direction of Dublin Airport through its land-use, planning and associated functions." She said the council was also responsible for determining applications for planning purposes. She stated: "In light of the existing complex and varied role that Fingal County Council plays as outlined above, it is considered that the council may not be best placed to act as the competent authority." She said the council does not have requisite competencies available in areas of aviation, operations, noise and economic feasibility assessments. She went on to suggest that other bodies would be better for the job. That is the director of planning and services at Fingal County Council at the time saying it was not sufficiently equipped and capability of doing the job, yet it was absolutely railroaded through here. There was an utter farce on the night of the vote. I listened to one Fianna Fáil Deputy, who is now the Minister for Transport, come in and speak against the motion. He banged the table. He was giving out. He was so angry and upset. When it came to the vote, for whatever reason the button was not pushed. The rest of his party voted to ensure the Bill went through even though the Opposition put forward constructive, well thought-out amendments that would have ensured that the airport live up to what it say it wants to be. It says it wants to be good neighbours. That is what my constituents want. They want the airport to be good neighbours. We recognise the importance of the airport, but we also recognise the importance of the people who live in the environs of the airport. It is no less than they are entitled to and deserve that they would have a noise regulator that they can have faith in.

In the Minister of State's contribution, he mentioned that the Minister for Transport is having "extensive engagements". That is brilliant. It is unfortunate that my constituents have not been made aware of it, but now he has alerted us to the fact there are extensive engagements happening, I am sure that they will make sure they make contact the Minister so that they might be part of those extensive engagements because if the Minister is having extensive engagements, then he absolutely has to be talking to the people who are living in the environs. Let us remember that these are the people who will be impacted by the regulation, whether it is light touch or otherwise. It is the people living around the airport who are going to be impacted by that and therefore is welcome that there will be extensive engagements. The Minister of State can bring my message back to his colleague the Minister for Transport that he will not find my constituents wanting when it comes to putting forward proposals, attending meetings, exchanging information or giving presentations to him because, as the Minister of State said, "extensive engagements" are what he is all about. That is to be welcomed. My constituents and Deputies Graves, Smith and O'Rourke's constituents will be more than equal to the task of providing the Minister with every single tiny little piece of information that he could require. These are people who are immersed in the issue of Dublin Airport and noise regulation. They have extensive knowledge. They are well placed to inform the Minister. I am sure they will be only

too delighted to be part of the extensive communications and engagements that are going on.

Even at this stage, will the Minister of State reconsider the decision to oppose this legislation and to facilitate its passage to the next Stage? We would then have a chance to robustly scrutinise it. We may not agree in Sinn Féin with every single word in the legislation, but we certainly can agree and agree with Fingal County Council, which said it at the time, that it is not best agent to carry out this regulation. There are “better bodies”, which is the expression that was used in the communication to the Minister. It would be worthwhile to have that engagement and tease this issue out, but that would require the Government facilitating the passage of this legislation to the next Stage. I hope the Government will reconsider the decision and allow this Bill to progress so we can have those important discussions.

Deputy Ann Graves: I acknowledge Deputy Smith for bringing forward this legislation. For a resident and somebody who is representing people in the affected area, it is a matter of dire importance that some regulation is put in place. Sinn Féin has always had concerns on the potential conflict of interest with ANCA as the noise regulator. This is not least because of ANCA’s and Fingal County Council’s financial dependencies on the DAA. ANCA is based within Fingal County Council. The Minister of State should do a quick Google of the executive staff within Fingal County Council. There he will see the director of ANCA listed among the other members of staff in Fingal County Council. There are questions on conflicts, which diminish ANCA’s capacity to act independently. This link between Fingal County Council and ANCA, whose role is to monitor and regulate where necessary for the management of aircraft noise in the communities around Dublin Airport, remains a real concern for local residents and groups representing those affected by aircraft noise, in particular, St. Margaret’s and The Ward group and Fingal Organised Residents United Movement, FORUM. They represent more than 30,000 people across Fingal and Meath. This is not an issue that just affects Swords, the airport and its surrounds. I represent the people of Fingal East and each of the areas - Swords, Malahide, Donabate, Portmarnock and Portrane - are affected by aircraft noise. It is not just the areas in close proximity to the airport.

Sinn Féin submitted amendments to the 2019 Bill, proposing taking a balanced approach: incorporating the International Civil Aviation Organization’s agreed hierarchy of measures designed to reduce the impact of noise, and the WHO’s night noise guidelines for Europe. Sinn Féin’s amendments also proposed the Commission for Aviation Regulation should be the regulator and that the average noise exposure would be reduced to below 40 decibels at night and that an assessment of the impact on the well-being and health of local residents be undertaken. These amendments were defeated by the Government, which included the current Minister for Transport, Deputy O’Brien, who is a TD who represents the people of the area, so Sinn Féin voted against the Bill.

Changes to planning conditions require planning applications and an approval process. The conditions were set to manage noise, traffic and environmental impact. The conditions also included delivering on the infrastructure deficits, including the road network, which have not been addressed. For anybody living in the area, trying to get in and out of Swords is impossible. We were supposed to invest heavily in the roads around the airport and that has not happened. The DAA acknowledged the airport will exceed 32 million passenger numbers both in 2024 and 2025. In fact, the DAA has breached many of its planning conditions from the outset.

Of major concern is the deviation from the agreed flight paths and the proposed changes to night-time flight times. These will have a major impact and repercussions on the health and

well-being of residents living in the areas affected. Deputy Smith spoke about cardiovascular disease, sleep deprivation and broken sleep patterns. That is a regular occurrence for people who live there. If the number of flights at night-time people's health will deteriorate. Looking at best practice, many airports in Europe and internationally are now reducing their night-time flights because they acknowledge their impact on the mental and physical health of those living in areas where aircraft noise is an issue.

ANCA, in its role as a regulator of aircraft noise, ruled in January 2024 that the applications in relation to passenger caps require an assessment of the need for noise-related action. As a former councillor in Fingal County Council, I consistently questioned the breaches of the planning conditions by the DAA, particularly in regard to the deviation from flight paths and the impact this has had on residents. No one wants to stand in the way of progress. I recognise the DAA is a major employer in the Fingal area. I have in the past and will continue to champion strategic but also responsible development but the DAA is not a good neighbour. We need to strive for balanced development along with addressing the impacts on local residents.

It is interesting the Minister of State noted the Minister for Transport has been communicating with people. We have had multiple public meetings throughout the area. Each of them has been a sell-out with full houses at every single time. All of the local representatives have attended them but the Minister has never shown his face at any of them. He is not discussing or consulting or communicating with the residents. He may be talking to Kenny Jacobs, Michael O'Leary and other key players but he is certainly not talking to the residents in the areas affected.

The way to achieve a good relationship with the DAA is effective regulation and, to this end, an appropriately resourced and independent regulator is a priority for Sinn Féin.

I have and will continue to support the regionalisation of the Irish aviation industry to address regional imbalances in the sector and drive much-needed economic growth to different parts of the country. I am delighted to see there is an increase in the number of flights in and out of Cork, which is another DAA airport. There are other airports that also need to be utilised and Deputy Daly mentioned a lot of them. We have a great road network, particularly from Shannon. We can use those airports and it will reduce the number of flights into, and the dependency on, Dublin Airport, and help to rebuild our more rural areas.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill and I thank Deputy Smith for bringing it forward. The usual approach from the Government is to delay these Bills by 12 months or let them go to Committee State to die. It is a particular point when the Government opposes a Bill. I would say it was a surprise but it is entirely consistent with my experience of how Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments deal with airport-related issues, Dublin Airport-related issues and airlines, whether Ryanair or Aer Lingus. At the root of that is the issue here because there is a widespread suspicion within the communities of north Dublin and Meath East that there is not fair play in any of these discussions, negotiations or transactions. There is no confidence in ANCA. There is the potential there for a conflict of interest and there is a sense it is in the wrong place and there is too close a connection with Fingal County Council and the DAA. The point was made about the role of the chief executive and the relationship with councillors, responsibility around economic development and the relationship with the DAA. This Bill was an opportunity to rectify some of that even if it is not perfect.

I echo Deputy O'Reilly's point on the argument that there was no pre-legislative scrutiny.

We can throw the whole lot out the window on that basis. The Minister of State can run that back to the Department and hopefully it will not come back with that one the next time around.

I met with representatives of ANCA. As Deputy Smith's said, there is no question in terms of the integrity of these individuals or anything like that; it is about the structure and approach ANCA takes and the methodology it applies. It is the issue of modelling versus measuring. An awful lot of what ANCA is doing is not actually measuring noise; it is modelling noise and ANCA gets that information from the DAA and the airlines. That is another issue that is problematic. There is a huge amount to be done to restore confidence.

The Minister of State is not accepting this Bill. I ask him to review that position but I do not expect he will agree to do that. Wherever we go from here, these issues will continue unless the Government and the Minister change the approach.

Another aspect where there is no confidence is the sense that there is protection for and a separate set of rules applying to the airlines and the DAA - maybe because they are really well connected or whatever - than the rest of us, for example, in regard to planning law in this State.

I specifically want to raise the issue of the flight paths, the noise ANCA is supposed to be measuring and the fact the flight paths that are being operated were never intended or planned for. Deputy Smith and I sat on the previous Oireachtas committee and in June of last year, the DAA came before the committee and agreed to review flight paths by the end of the year. There are really concrete proposals from very well-informed people who are fully committed to Irish aviation and who are employed in Irish aviation but have that novel thing of wanting to see it done in the right way and, at the very least, compliant with planning law. They have put forward clear proposals for how we might get a best fit in terms of the flight paths. Like others, I acknowledge the really hard work of the St. Margaret's The Ward resident group, the group of residents in the Wotton and the North Runway Technical Group. The North Runway Technical Group in particular has done a lot of work regarding the flight paths. At a meeting of the previous transport committee on 19 June 2024, the DAA said it would look at that. I have repeatedly pursued that. The most recent response I have is from 8 April. Really, we are getting a fudge. Nothing is happening. I get a really long answer on DAA-headed paper but in truth nothing is happening. There were access to information requests which confirm that is the case. At the root of all of this is that point I made regarding the sense within the wider community that there is not fair play here. There is one set of rules for one group of people, largely because of their connections, power and influence. It is always that way. All we have to do is look at election launches for that type of connection. As I said, this legislation could have done something to address that. The Minister is not accepting it but the problem is not going to go away. The issues of noise, the operation of the airport and, for the residents in east Meath, Ashbourne and the Wotton, Ratoath, the issue of the flight paths being non-compliant with basic planning and environmental law are not going to wash.

Deputy Gillian Toole: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit and I thank Deputy Smith as well for affording us the opportunity to discuss this issue. I acknowledge and put on record the willingness of the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, to meet resident groups and the North Runway Technical Group as recently as 18 June this year. Those meetings - any that I have been able to sit in at - have taken the thrust of always being solution-focused. I will try not to duplicate what colleagues have said already and I will edit my comments. Regarding the Bill specifically and the possibility of the transfer of functions from Fingal County Council and the Aircraft Noise Competent Authority to the EPA, I am a bit confused. As the Minister of State stated, from

10 July 2025

the correspondence of the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, the EPA was designated in 2006 as the national authority to include Fingal County Council, liaise with it and Dublin Airport Authority for noise mapping etc., and the EPA would give guidance to those bodies. Yet, I have email correspondence to a member of the North Runway Technical Group in the form of two replies from the EPA from August and September 2024 where the EPA states categorically that it has not been assigned any functions in relation to noise from aircraft and cannot assume responsibility for a particular area unless required by statute or by decision of the Government. That is pretty much repeated then in the correspondence of 14 August 2024. I would be one to say "Yes, absolutely" if there is a review coming. In or around September 2026 is what the Minister of State said was the time. However, we know more from a presentation from residents of St. Margaret's The Ward and of Meath East, including Ashbourne, Ratoath and the Wotton areas. They had a launch in Buswell's Hotel of a health impact study by Dr. Pat McCloughan. With a healthcare background, it is something to sit there, listen and see the figures. Some €800,000 per year is the estimated health impact cost on approximately 30,000 residents who are impacted. I can appreciate the attempt to get the balance between advancing the Bill and the pending statutory review after seven years in September 2026 but I would implore, based on the health impacts and the significant cost, a revision of that.

There is also another health impact that has come to light since Tuesday and that is the bird strike to an Aer Lingus aircraft that was headed for New York. There is a bird-rich compensatory habitat that Dublin Airport Authority owns in the area of Kilsallaghan. If we take that highly significant and potential, but thankfully averted, catastrophe, and include that in the mix, the whole issue of the flight paths that are deviating from the 2007 permission that was granted would add to the urgency and the need to take all of this in the round. As I said at the outset, the North Runway Technical Group, comprising commercial and private pilots, has provided a solution that will allow the growth in capacity, safeguard the residents and lessen - if not knock out altogether - the noise impact that is currently experienced. There is a win-win for all parties. I know the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is well aware but I urge the Minister of State, summer recess or not, to please take action on all of this. That is even without taking into account the regional opportunities. I made a submission to that effect to the national planning framework review some months ago. There are solutions here and we collectively must have a sense of urgency and action on this. I can understand the statutory review, the seven-year process and the September end, but when there are solutions there to provide a win-win for all parties I ask that we at least look at an earlier opportunity here. Regarding the noise monitoring, as it currently stands there are margins for error in the existing process. Residents, if they are impacted, monitor their complaints. They log their complaints with Dublin Airport Authority and then that information is gathered together and we have Lden figures and Lnight figures. That information is passed to the Aircraft Noise Competent Authority for reports, etc. We have had episodes in the area of Ratoath and Ashbourne, and I am sure it would have been experienced by residents in Fingal as well, where it was not possible to log a complaint and there were hours, even days, on occasion where the real-time complaints could not be logged by residents. As somebody with a background in science where evidence and data are so important, putting these extra stages in place is increasing margins of error. Given its role and its authority for all other types of pollution, noise pollution going to the EPA would seem to be an obvious one for me. As I said, I am between a rock and a hard place but given the health impacts, I urge for swifter action on this.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration(Deputy Niall Collins): I thank all of the Deputies for their contributions today, the points they have

raised and Deputy Smith for bringing this important topic to the House. As set out in my earlier remarks, the Government fully recognises the importance of having an open and transparent noise regulation system. The development of Dublin Airport in a sustainable manner that considers the impact on local communities is something for which the Minister for Transport has always strongly advocated. The Minister has committed to ensuring all relevant agencies engage effectively with residents impacted by noise, flight movements and airport operations. In this regard, I am aware the Department of Transport and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, regularly engage with the Dublin Airport Authority on a number of matters including noise affecting communities around Dublin Airport. I understand the DAA has assured the Department of Transport that it continues to regularly engage with the community and stakeholders on issues related to noise at the airport via its community engagement team, which conducts visits to local homes and schools to discuss a wide range of issues ranging from flight paths to noise mitigation measures. This is in addition to the large volume of email responses and updates issued to residents and local elected representatives. These kinds of earnest and regular engagements are essential. We cannot afford to limit our economic opportunities simply due to a reticence around having tough conversations about growth, sustainability and noise regulation. Ensuring there is a robust regulatory framework for aircraft noise at Dublin Airport is not about blocking progress. It is about managing the sustainable growth of the airport while also protecting the rights of people who live within the vicinity of the airport and under flight paths. This Government firmly believes these concepts can co-exist successfully - a thriving Dublin Airport and robust noise regulation with an independent regulator. That is why I highlighted in my opening remarks the planned update of the national aviation policy. Ireland deserves an aviation policy that is future focused and a national the national aviation policy will need to take account of the changed aviation landscape since 2015. In the context of aircraft noise, I expect this will include reflecting the importance of fit-for-purpose noise regulation in line with the balanced approach concept for aircraft noise. The way to achieve this balance is by listening to all stakeholders using modern technology and applying smart policy solutions. This means implementing reasonable controls, ensuring that noise is measured and capped within agreed levels, flight path management and making sure residents are consulted with and kept informed.

For context, in the implementation of the 2019 Act, in its role as aircraft noise regulator, Aircraft Noise Competent Authority, ANCA, previously defined a noise abatement objective, NAO, policy for managing the effects of aircraft noise emissions on the surrounding communities and environment for Dublin Airport. This is effectively a plan to ensure any growth at the airport occurs in the most sustainable manner possible. On an annual basis, ANCA has a remit to review the effectiveness of noise mitigation measures in achieving the NAO for Dublin Airport. I understand a review of noise levels and their effects on local communities has been initiated by ANCA. Through this process, ANCA will evaluate whether the noise impact at Dublin Airport since the opening of the new runway is of a scale that requires new noise mitigation measures or possible operating restrictions. In relation to the performance of ANCA at the regulator, the Government is confident the current system with ANCA as the independent regulator for the management of noise at Dublin Airport is proper and effective. When the 2019 Act was being drafted, the Department of Transport carried out extensive policy and legal examination to determine how best to introduce a noise regulation regime which on the one hand fully accords with EU regulation 598/2014 and on the other aligned with our existing planning and development and environmental frameworks. The outcome of these deliberations was the conclusion that the only certain way to achieve this way by primary legislation and that Fingal County Council was the best option. Further, as I set out earlier, the first periodic review of the competent authority as provided for in the legislation is due to be commenced in September

2026. It is important we do not pre-empt the outcome of this work before it even begins.

In conclusion, I am firmly of the belief that the best approach to ensuring effective noise regulation at Dublin Airport in as comprehensive and cohesive a manner as possible is through a review as provided by the 2019 Act and, separately, the development of a new national aviation policy. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and his officials will continue to work closely with all relevant stakeholders to monitor the issue and ensure the existing regulatory framework continues to apply the balanced approach to the issue of noise management. While I thank Deputy Smith for introducing the Bill and initiating this debate, for all of the reasons outlined, the Government will oppose this Bill. Overall, it has serious concerns about the Bill and if enacted it would have the opposite of its intended impact and actually negatively impact noise regulation at Dublin Airport.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I fundamentally disagree with the assertions of the Minister of State on the provisions of this Bill. I thank Deputies O'Reilly, Graves, O'Rourke, Pa Daly and Toole for contributing to the debate. These Deputies do not just contribute to the debates when the lights and cameras are on. They have been at every committee and public meetings for years on this issue. There is no other issue that unites politicians in north County Dublin more than the issue of the airport and the various related matters. In the recent development plan - Deputy Graves might correct me if I am wrong - there was one motion that was supported by every single member of the council. It was 40 votes to zero in relation to aircraft noise. That included members of the Minister of State's party and every single party. There is no other issue like it. These are people who represent the airport, have employees as our constituents and understand the economic importance of the airport yet still also understand a balanced approach to noise and understand the problem. We put forward an approach in the EPA. Sinn Féin's preferred option would be the IAA, which was the CAR. Either would be a much better approach than Fingal County Council.

I advise the Minister of State never to come to a Thursday evening debate and say a Bill did not have pre-legislative scrutiny and therefore should not go any further. That is a nonsense. That option is not open to us, as Deputy O'Reilly said. The Bill we are trying to amend had pre-legislative scrutiny in 2018 and 2019. It did not convince Fianna Fáil. It may not have opposed it but did not support it either. Fianna Fáil submitted an amendment to call for a five-year review on the setting up of ANCA, which would have meant a review in 2023 or 2024. We would already have had the review if Fianna Fáil got its way. Fianna Fáil is all over the shop on this issue. The Labour Party and Sinn Féin do not want ANCA and nor does Deputy Toole seem to want it - Opposition, Opposition, and Opposition-ish - do not want it. Fingal County Council did not want it. It said on record it did not have the competencies. If you ask the DAA, it would not say it wants it either. Fianna Fáil did not want it and the Minister apparently did not want it. Who wants it? Why is it there? Is it because former Minister Shane Ross wanted it for some bizarre reason? I advise the Minister to through the debate and amendments from 2018 - his own party's amendments. It is outrageous this Bill is being opposed at this Stage and does not even have a chance to go to Committee Stage. The Government is scared of Committee Stage because it knows from its own history it is a flawed setup and should not be the way to monitor aircraft noise, with all the complex outcomes. It is a disgrace. The Government and the Minister of State are running away from a debate they know they cannot win and they know they are on solid ground.

We as public representatives will have to continue to fight this in this Chamber, in committees and at public meetings. I acknowledge all the public representatives here, as I did at the

start, for all the work they do in all the forms they have the opportunity to do it. They should have the opportunity to debate this Bill and amend it if they so wish on Committee Stage. Unfortunately, they are being denied that. We will probably bring other Bills and amendments forward where we can to improve the situation of aircraft noise and aviation in general.

Question put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Jen Cummins: In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 16 July 2025.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 6.49 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m. Dé Máirt, an 15 Iúil 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.49 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 15 July 2025.