



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

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

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## DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Déardaoin, 17 Iúil 2025*

*Thursday, 17 July 2025*

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter ‘Chap’ Cleere) i gceannas ar 8.47 a.m.

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

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### Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

#### Public Expenditure Policy

1. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation for an update on general budgetary expenditure measures. [39486/25]

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** Is dócha gurb é seo an uair dheireanach a bheimid ag suí roimh an samhradh. An cheist is mó atá i mbéal an phobail faoi láthair ná céard go díreach a bheidh ag tarlú leis an gcáinainéis. I ask the Minister for an update on general budgetary expenditure measures. There had been an expectation that the summer economic statement was due to be released this week, but it now looks like it will be next week.

**Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform (Deputy Jack Chambers):** I thank Deputy Farrell. Some €106.4 billion in gross voted funding is being provided in 2025 to deliver on Government priorities and commitments. This significant level of investment reflects the priorities of budget 2025 and this Government’s commitment to deliver continued improvements in our infrastructure and enhance our existing public services to build a stronger future. End of June expenditure figures were published earlier this month in the Fiscal Monitor. Total gross voted expenditure for the first half of the year amounted to €50.9 billion. While spending is slightly higher than expected for the first half of the year with an overspend of €0.3 billion or 0.7% compared to profiles, the overall position is broadly in line with the amount profiled by Departments to be spent by the end of June. The majority of Vote groups remain in line with profile at an overall level.

Compared with this time last year, spending is €3.8 billion or 8.2% higher than the end of June 2024 position. This level of spending demonstrates sustained high level of investment in the delivery of public services and infrastructure. Year-on-year capital spending levels have in-

creased substantially, with capital spending of €5.8 billion, up 22.5% or €1.1 billion. There are substantial increases in key capital spending Departments such as the Department of housing, where spending is up 36% year on year, health, which is up €0.2 billion, or 92%, and transport, which is up 20% over June 2024. Current spending of €45.1 billion has increased by €2.8 billion or 6.5% year on year. This reflects spending on budget priorities in areas such as increased social protection weekly rates, teaching posts and health sector investment. Investment in 2025 builds on the additional funding provided over recent years, which is delivering record levels of capital investment and public services to a growing and changing population. It is continuing the delivery of vital infrastructure needed to support our future economic and social progress.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** I thank the Minister for that initial overview. It will not surprise him that I raise this, but one of the big things is the capital spend on infrastructure. Storm Éowyn put into sharp focus the creaking infrastructure we have across the west of Ireland, in particular. That is obviously an area I would like to see huge progress in. I am aware the Minister knows the west of Ireland quite well. I know he cannot give me specific figures on what exactly will be spent on budget day. However, will he identify some general capital projects that will get additional funding? It is fair to say we need to see identifiable progress in the likes of the basic crucial infrastructure that needs to be invested in, in the west of Ireland.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** The overall process on the national development plan is continuing. We have approximately €20 billion to allocate across critical areas in our economy. We know with the Department of housing that continued investment in public infrastructure for housing is central to this process. We have set out the priority areas of housing, energy, transport and water infrastructure in particular. That will give Ministers across many areas additional head room to invest in infrastructure across our economy. We are continuing that process this week, so I cannot give an individual breakdown of what that will mean. It is just to say this will allow a lot of Ministers to increase the overall spend *vis-à-vis* the baseline allocations they were given in the previous national development plan process. We will be able to set out further clarity on that next week.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** I look forward to seeing how that unfolds. It is incredibly important. It is interesting that on both the budgetary oversight and finance committees we have been dealing with the issue of tariffs. One of the big things is how we can protect ourselves. What may or may not happen nobody can predict. One of the longer term things is the investment in capital infrastructure, so we can build housing and our own economic structures. It is about being targeted and putting in place the kind of infrastructure that will help support indigenous companies as well. If there is a big focus on capital infrastructure, and there is a mind to address some of those issues, we need to put all of our focus on that. I also ask that the Minister mentions the issue of procurement, which I have mentioned before, to make sure we get the best value for the local economy and for local people out of the investment we make.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I share that objective. That is why giving that additional scope to Ministers across their respective policy areas to invest in critical infrastructure is essential as part of the national development plan. We are at a point of significant economic uncertainty and this Government is clearly setting out that we want to seriously increase our overall investment in critical infrastructure, which will provide the growth, prosperity and jobs for the future. We know that housing, energy, water and transport in particular are areas requiring that additional investment. There are other areas that require the additionality to provide for critical services and social infrastructure across communities in Ireland. That is also part of the wider process in terms of the national development plan. We share those objectives, particularly when we have

the wider uncertainty. We need to provide for that growth and opportunity for the future. We will be able to set out further detail next week.

*Question No. 2 taken with Written Answers.*

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter ‘Chap’ Cleere):** Deputy Paul Murphy is not here, so it is Deputy Farrell’s lucky day. She has two in a row. You are up again.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** Go raibh maith agat. Sometimes you are waiting a few minutes in between questions.

### **Protected Disclosures**

3. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation if his Department’s submission to the EU review of the protected disclosures regime will refer to the views of whistleblowers from the Farrelly commission and Children’s Health Ireland (children’s hip surgeries) about the reprisals they faced. [39487/25]

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** The Minister might be aware that I have a particular interest in the issue of protected disclosures and protecting whistleblowers. I worked well with the previous Minister, Michael McGrath, in regard to the EU directive. I put forward my own legislation on this. There is obviously now going to be the review of that. There is the EU review of the protected disclosures regime, and I am interested in an update on that.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I thank the Deputy for this question. On 3 July 2024 the European Commission presented a report on the transposition of the EU Whistleblower Directive 2019/1937. This report stated that a review of the directive, which is referred to in Article 27(3), would be finalised no later than 2026. This review or evaluation will assess the functioning of the directive and consider the need for additional measures, including amendments, with a view to extending its scope to further EU acts or areas. Ireland will have an opportunity to input into this review and raise any concerns or emerging issues with the European Commission, through participation by officials in my Department in meetings of the Commission’s whistleblowers expert group.

I would also make the Deputy aware that a statutory review of the Protected Disclosures Act is due to commence and as part of this review a public consultation will be carried out. We would encourage different stakeholders and whistleblowers to participate in this consultation. The Protected Disclosures Act 2014 was amended in 2022 and these amendments sought to address a number of issues that were raised during the 2018 statutory review of the 2014 Act. The upcoming statutory review will provide a valuable insight into the operation of the Protected Disclosures (Amendment) Act and the views and experiences of all stakeholders and whistleblowers will be welcome as part of this.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** When the Government was transposing the EU directive on protected disclosures, I was clear at the time and I voiced significant concerns. I felt it was perhaps deliberately going to weaken the transposition. I said I felt the setting up of the protected disclosures office was a retrograde step and that it removed a protected disclosure as a political issue. Previously, an Opposition TD could deliver a protected disclosure to the relevant Minister

and then seek to know what progress had been made. Now, the Minister will simply say that has been handed to the protected disclosures office and it has nothing to do with them anymore. We have had very serious cases recently, which were well publicised and extensively dealt with in this House. Those were the whistleblowers in the Grace and CHI cases. We need to make sure we are protecting these people. People come forward because they passionately believe something has gone wrong, and the people have been wronged. We need to protect them. Far too often in this State they are just not protected.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** Everybody should be protected, particularly when they raise wrongdoing with public bodies. I think we all share that objective across the House. We have two areas of legislation between 2014 and 2022, some of which was the transposition of EU legislation and also policy direction in an Irish context. We have different points now in the context of the European review, which is happening, and the wider review that will happen in the Irish context, on which we would welcome inputs from across the House and from whistleblowers. We have brought through reforms. As a Department, we are funding the supports in terms of Transparency International Ireland, to support whistleblowers making any claims. Exchequer funding has been given this year to Transparency International Ireland as part of legal advice to be provided to those who want to make a protected disclosure. I welcome that the European Commission has an ongoing review of this, so we will listen to the wider public feedback on the particular domestic regimes that exist in different member states. That will allow any required reforms out of that to occur.

*9 o'clock*

I share the broader objectives relating to ensuring that we have a protected disclosure regime which supports and protects whistleblowers. That is my policy interest in this area.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** One thing I absolutely encourage and urge the Minister to do is listen to the voices of whistleblowers. That is essential. We have had an issue for far too long whereby whistleblowers highlight wrongdoing and feel that they are persecuted after doing so. Unfortunately, from listening to the real-life experiences of whistleblowers, I do not think the position in that regard has changed. We need to do everything we can to protect these people because when it comes to revealing wrongdoing in the State, more often than not, the relevant information actually comes from whistleblowers. I will not name any of them because there are far too many to mention, but the thing that is common to all of them is that how their efforts to reveal wrongdoing were treated. They say people circled the wagons, tried to protect the reputation of the organisations involved and frustrate the whistleblowers' efforts, and, if needs be, questioned their motives, character and so on.

We had incredible witnesses before the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach in the previous Dáil who told us about their lived experiences as whistleblowers. I hope very much that their words will be reflected in the Department's engagement with the EU as part of this review.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** Obviously, the European Commission presented a report in July of last year. The review will be launched this year and finalised next year. That wider evaluation will be essential in order to monitor the transposition of the directive into law in Ireland and in other member states. It will provide an opportunity for a wider input regarding the reforms that may be required as part of the broader EU transposition. From a domestic perspective, we will have a statutory review of the operation of the Protected Disclosures Act. This is due



to happen in parallel with the EU review over the coming years. In the context of domestic, international and European legislation, it is important that we have the review. We must also look at the ongoing supports that are available to whistleblowers. That will be essential in the period ahead.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter ‘Chap’ Cleere):** As Deputy Heneghan is not here to take Question No. 4, we will move to Deputy Kerrane.

## **Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions**

### **Flood Relief Schemes**

5. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation to provide an update on a permanent solution for flooding in Lough Funshinagh in County Roscommon; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38435/25]

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** This question relates to the permanent solution to the flooding that has affected Lough Funshinagh in County Roscommon for years. As the Minister of State is aware - he was there to make sure it happened - there is a temporary solution in place.

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran):** Lough Funshinagh is a designated special area of conservation turlough and has experienced increasingly severe flooding in recent years. Roscommon County Council has implemented temporary flood defences, including road raising and water level management. The council is being supported by an expert working group comprising representatives from the Office of Public Works, OPW, the National Parks and Wildlife Service and Geological Survey Ireland. The group has concluded that the lough is not draining as it used to and that this, in part, is the cause of flooding and is also a risk to the ecological status of this area of conservation. To address this, the council has developed a three-pronged approach, including the provision of individual property protection for those properties at flood risk, which includes TrapBags installed at selected locations around the lough. The OPW has approved funding of €529,000 for the provision of these measures.

Due to the significant flooding that occurred in the spring of 2024, the development of an interim flood relief scheme became the primary focus in advance of the permanent scheme. The €5.2 million interim scheme includes a temporary pipeline and pumping station for over-ground pumping of water from the lough to a discharge point on the Cross river. Planning permission for this scheme was received from An Bórd Pleanála in January of this year, with the pumps activated in March. As of 12 May, the pumps were deactivated in accordance with the parameters outlined in the planning application until water levels in the lough begin to rise again.

Roscommon County Council has been stopped on two occasions, by means of judicial reviews, from completing emergency permanent works to reduce water levels back to normal. The council, with funding from the OPW, is currently progressing the Lough Funshinagh climate adaptation project. The studies and assessments that have been completed for the interim flood scheme are applicable to the permanent scheme. Roscommon County Council-----

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**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter ‘Chap’ Cleere):** I thank the Minister of State. I am just conscious of time.

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** I will come back in.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I acknowledge the Minister of State’s role and that of his predecessor in getting us to the point where the pumps started in March and the very positive impact that has had. As the Minister of State will know, residents living in and around Lough Funshinagh suffered incredibly as a result of the flooding in 2015, 2016 and more recently. They have been surrounded by water for years now. Some families have had to abandon their homes. Those who have remained in the area around Lough Funshinagh deserve incredible credit for what they have done. As a community, they are extremely resilient. They have battled to get to this point where the interim solution has been in put place. However, they want and need to see progress with regard to the permanent solution. That needs to be the priority now. We need to see both running in parallel. I appreciate that the Minister of State did not have the chance to provide it already, but I would like an update on the permanent solution for the residents and the community at Lough Funshinagh.

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** I acknowledge and appreciate all the work that has been done, particularly by the people and those in the farming community who live around Lough Funshinagh. It was great to go down there to switch on the pumps. It is great now to see the work on the interim solution coming to fruition, particularly as I was involved with the work on it when I was in government previously.

The long-term solution is on target for planning by the end of the year. As the Deputy knows, we had a consultation day in County Roscommon, which was very well attended. It is very important to get people to attend such events because we can iron out the issues and problems that may be foreseen. As stated, we are on target. This is a good-news story for the people of Lough Funshinagh. I have visited the householders there on a number of occasions. Even when I was not in government and out of politics, I still called at Christmas to see people. I have seen the devastation, etc., at first hand and have tried for years to find a solution. We now have a solution. The Deputy is right; we need the permanent solution. We are on target to deliver that, so it is good work all around by everybody.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I, too, acknowledge the work. It is good to hear that we are on target for planning towards the end of the year. This will be absolutely essential. I am conscious of that as we come into the autumn and winter months. We all know about the winters the families and community around Lough Funshinagh have faced, particularly last winter. It was devastating. There will be a lot of work to be done after the permanent solution is put in place and sorted in terms of people’s homes and the damage that has been done. Farmers with lands around the lake have suffered incredibly as well. This has been a real loss and has had a real impact on people, their livelihoods and their families. People have passed away in the meantime. I am thinking of one gentleman who never got the chance to live to see the current solution being put in place. Therefore, we need to ensure that the supports for the families who live in the area are there, whether it is in respect of damage, farmers, land or whatever. We need to see those financial supports for people who have lost a great deal. I am thinking in particular of those who lost their homes as a result of flooding.

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** I appreciate everything the Deputy said. She is on the ground and knows exactly what she is talking about. She knows more than those of us who are in gov-



ernment. The pressure came from the Taoiseach to the Tánaiste right down to every Minister who had a role in this.

As I said, delivering the scheme is important. I do not know if the Deputy had time to go and visit, but the day we turned on the pumps, it was great to see the local farming community and particularly the people who had suffered most - the families whose houses were affected - and see the excitement on their faces knowing that Government had listened and delivered on what they wanted. However, the final piece is the permanent solution. As I said to the Deputy, the meetings we have had to date show that we are very much on track to deliver that. I live only a stone's throw across the water. It was a very proud day for me because I have so many friends and relations who live down there. Seeing the smiles on people's faces is what we are about. I went into government to ensure delivery of major projects such as this and to give people peace of mind.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere):** Deputy Lahart is not here to take Question No. 6. Question No. 7 is in the names of Deputies O'Connor and McCarthy. I will let Deputy McCarthy go ahead whenever he is ready.

### **Flood Relief Schemes**

**7. Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the status of flood schemes for Rathcormac, Middleton, Castlemartyr, Mogeely and Killeagh and any others in Cork East that his Department is considering; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40173/25]

**9. Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation if his Department will consider a new retrospective scheme for residents of Middleton who wish to purchase higher barriers to protect their premises from any flooding that may occur in the future, considering that parts of Middleton town were under four feet and more of water during Storm Babet; if his Department is aware of any delays installing the current individual property protection, IPP, scheme in Middleton; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40172/25]

**Deputy Noel McCarthy:** Will the Minister provide an update on flood protection measures currently being undertaken at Rathcormac, Mogeely, Killeagh, Castlemartyr and Middleton in east Cork?

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 7 and 9 together.

The launch in 2018 of the flood risk management plans trebled, to some 100, the number of flood relief schemes at design and construction. There remain some 50 schemes, referred to as tranche II, yet to commence work on their design, due to constraints of professional engineering services and skills in Ireland. However, the Government is committed to funding these projects through the €1.3 billion available under the national development plan for flood relief measures.

Cork County Council is leading the delivery of six flood relief schemes, including Middleton, with nine tranche II schemes, including Castlemartyr, Youghal and Rathcormac. The OPW is funding nine staff in Cork County Council to support its delivery of this programme of schemes, and other schemes across the county, including in Mogeely and Killeagh.

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The OPW is piloting a new delivery model in counties Donegal and Kilkenny to inform delivery of future tranche II schemes nationally.

The Midleton flood relief scheme, to protect up to 750 properties, is currently estimated to be submitted to An Coimisiún Pleanála in early 2026 and for substantial completion in 2031. A planning application for advance works at Tir Cluain, to protect 111 of these properties, is scheduled for submission as a Part 8 application later this year with construction planned to commence in late summer-early autumn 2026. Cork County Council has begun to engage with landowners on environmental surveys and assessments required to inform the environmental impact assessment report. The council has completed a number of interim flood defence works in Midleton since Storm Babet in October 2023. Cork County Council progressed interim flood mitigation measures for Rathcormac, Castlemartyr and Killeagh and is liaising with the Office of Public Works on interim measures for Mogeely.

In October 2024, the OPW approved €5.8 million in funding for Cork County Council to make individual property protection available free of charge to home and business owners in Midleton and across east Cork who were impacted by Storm Babet in October 2023. This included retrospective payment to property owners who had purchased suitable individual property protection, IPP, measures between 18 October 2023 to 7 October 2024.

Following a review of all applications there were 725 valid applications. Cork County Council is, since April 2025, delivering flood barriers to properties where no civil works is required. The council is fully aware of the urgent nature of this unprecedented project and is constrained by the response from the market for supply of flood barriers and civil works contractors. Cork County Council and the OPW are keeping the delivery of IPP under review.

Cork County Council has advised that the standard height of barrier being delivered under this scheme is 680 mm which is the accepted industry standard height for flood barriers. This is in line with best practice guidance from the United Kingdom to avoid potential structural damage to properties. No review of the scheme's criteria is being considered.

A quarterly update to elected representatives, members of the business community and the wider community by Cork County Council on the Midleton flood relief scheme and individual property protection scheme is taking place today, 17 July 2025.

**Deputy Noel McCarthy:** I thank the Minister of State. At this time of year, we tend to see less rain, however, this does not stop those in Cork East whose property was damaged by flood water from worrying. I acknowledge considerable flood prevention works have been undertaken across Cork East but concerns will always remain until full flood protection measures are introduced. Lack of insurance cover further increases these fears. I thank the Minister of State for visiting Midleton in April and for his commitment to calling to other areas, such as Rathcormack, Killeagh, Mogeely and Castlemartyr, when his diary allows. When might the Minister of State be in a position to meet the residents of these villages to discuss their concerns in person? I asked this question in February and the Minister of State gave a commitment he would call to Rathcormack but I note he is awaiting funding and I appreciate this. If we could have a date for that visit, I would really appreciate that.

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** I thank the Deputy. The Taoiseach and I visited Midleton and met the people there. I always say in the House that from start to finish, a scheme takes 11 years. It is very hard for people to accept this, particularly when their houses and businesses

have been flooded. I understand well the areas in Midleton and the pressures on them. With regard to the other areas in question, I am making changes to the minor works scheme and looking at other areas where we can provide funding to the local authority to help to try speed it up under tranche II.

We announced the scheme back in 2018 and I will give the Deputy a picture of where we are at today. We have more than 100 schemes at various stages in the planning and construction, which was an enormous move in terms of the Government protecting the people at risk of flooding. In recent months, we have gone from five schemes to 13 with machines on the ground and two more to come at the end of the year. We are about to make changes to minor works scheme where local authorities will be able to come to my Department and speed up the delivery of some of these schemes in tranche II. I hope to be able to deliver for those people in question with the minor works scheme.

On the Deputy's question on calling to the areas, I would say we are looking at approximately two to three weeks. I am probably the only Minister in the House who is under heavy demand. I am everywhere and anywhere but I like to visit people and to see the problems first hand. I am familiar with some of the areas the Deputy spoke about but we will meet the people on the ground to give assurances that Government is there to help and it will do whatever it can, and I know my Department is doing that. My colleague, the Minister, Deputy Chambers, has been very supportive in the recent talks relating to providing funding. Government is very much to the fore in respect of flooding right across the country.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere):** The Minister of State is like Shaws. He is almost nationwide but do not forget Kilkenny as well.

**Deputy Noel McCarthy:** I must also acknowledge that. I thank the Minister of the State and the Minister, Deputy Chambers, for their support.

With reference to Rathcormack, Mogeely, Killeagh and Castlemartyr, they have been in tranche II the catchment flood risk assessment and management, CFRAM, programme for a long period. I welcome the Minister of State's response in that regard. For these villages, flooding is a regular occurrence and residents are afraid tranche II of the CFRAM is not progressing fast enough, which the Minister of State said himself. However, I acknowledge that currently much work is going on the ground to ease their concerns. Residents in some areas, such as Mogeely, are particularly at risk given their houses are timber-framed and cannot withstand further flooding. With this in mind, I appeal to the Minister of State for tranche II to be prioritised and for these villages be moved up to alleviate the fears of people living in these areas at risk of flooding. I sincerely thank the Minister of State for his positive response and I look forward to his visit in the next two to three weeks. It will be good news for the villages concerned.

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** I thank Deputy McCarthy. I know the pressures he is under as an elected representative, as is everyone in this House. I was in this role before and I know the run of the Department but there are still constraints that do not allow us to deliver the schemes as fast as humanly possible.

In regard to Lough Funshinagh, when we went into try to do the work there, we had not dotted our i's or crossed our t's and we ended up with judicial reviews which held back the project for a number of years. We are now in a good place and working together.

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This is not about politics. People have water up to their knees in their houses and are scared for their lives. We should not use this as a place to beat Government up. Rather, we should work together in the House to deliver for these people because we know too well the suffering they are going through at this time.

*Question No. 8 taken with Written Answers.*

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter ‘Chap’ Cleere):** We will move back to Question No. 4.

### **Planning Issues**

4. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation if he will outline the specific reforms under consideration following his Department’s review of barriers to infrastructure delivery; if these reforms will include changes to procurement processes, planning timelines, or inter-agency coordination; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40188/25]

**Deputy Barry Heneghan:** Inniu, tá mé ag iarraidh labhairt leis an Aire faoi digital reform. Will the Minister outline the specific reforms under consideration following the Department’s review of the barriers for infrastructure delivery, and will these reforms include changes to procurement processes, planning timelines or interagency co-ordination?

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** In April of this year, I announced Government had agreed a series of actions to accelerate the delivery of strategic infrastructure in Ireland. This work, led by my Department, will first identify and assess the barriers impeding the delivery of critical infrastructure across many sectors, including electricity, energy, transport and water. We will then publish an action plan which will target high-impact reform measures to address the barriers identified and speed up the development of this critical State infrastructure.

This work is being done because the availability of infrastructure in these sectors is particularly impeding our ability to provide for the needs of a growing population in housing and to improve the competitiveness of the economy. At the moment, my Department is finalising the systematic, evidence-based review of the most impactful barriers to the timely development of infrastructure. This review is informed by research undertaken by officials in my Department, contributions provided by the accelerating infrastructure task force, evidence from direct engagement with key stakeholders, which remains ongoing, and the more than 170 contributions received via public consultation between 6 June and 4 July. This is in addition to input sought at the national economic dialogue on 16 June and a consultation event in Athlone on 18 June. I expect to receive an interim report from my officials on the most significant barriers to infrastructure development by the end of July. As I noted, this assessment of barriers is a critical input to the overall objective of this work programme, which is the development of an action plan to accelerate infrastructure provision. I expect to bring an ambitious action plan to Government in autumn, to publish it and move on to the work of implementing the agreed reforms.

In advance of this, I can share some of the key themes on barriers to infrastructure that have been expressed by stakeholders through the direct engagement and the public consultation. They are satisfied that infrastructure, once delivered, is of a high quality but the universal view is that the development of infrastructure in Ireland takes far too long. Stakeholders attribute the

lengthy development cycles-----

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter ‘Chap’ Cleere):** I thank the Minister.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I can continue later.

**Deputy Barry Heneghan:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. Is deas é sin a chloisteáil. I am delighted to see that, this week, the Government announced the private wires policy. This was something we discussed during the formation of the Government and I am delighted to see the Minister is supporting it, too. I appreciate the response from him and I look forward to him finishing his contribution, but I heard Deputy McCarthy talk about flood defence. I hope the Minister of State will not forget north Dublin’s flood defences as well.

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** I will have to go back to the Minister with all these requests.

**Deputy Barry Heneghan:** The Minister of State visited the site and the residents are really thankful. While I am following up, the consequences of the poor co-ordination of infrastructure in Clongriffin and Belmayne in my constituency are being felt every day by residents. It is an extremely densely populated area, but there are no community facilities, including no library, no primary healthcare and an undersupply of school places. A submission has been made by Dublin City Council and I hope it will be looked at by the Minister. I was recently at a meeting with the LDA and the residents groups, and the communication had nothing about how the deficit would be addressed. I really hope the Minister will bring in these reforms and we will see visible change in north Dublin.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** Private wires are an essential part of developing the wider need on energy and digital infrastructure. What I was about to say was that some of the lengthy development cycles and regulatory complexity and fragmentation across regulatory bodies is extremely problematic. Too much uncertainty and delay is driven by legal, planning and consenting processes. There is also the issue of capacity concerns in the public and private sectors, as well as the lack of realistic and specific State project pipelines. Additionally, there is some insufficient public acceptance of critical infrastructure to grow our economy.

On the direct point made by the Deputy concerning north Dublin, social infrastructure is obviously part of our wider capital allocation that we advance. It is then a matter for each Department to prioritise the social infrastructure in respect of different communities. We have significant programmes across the State, whether in sports capital, the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht or, indeed, other parts of the Government that provide for significant social infrastructure across the State. Part of the national development plan will be to continue this over the period.

**Deputy Barry Heneghan:** I thank the Minister for his response. I urge his Department to take a more active role in identifying and responding to the key areas and needs left in Clongriffin, Belmayne and all of north Dublin in my constituency. This community has 15,000 people, with more moving in each year. The area does not even have a supermarket; people have to leave. The area has one of the highest rates of car ownership in Ireland. A recent study has shown that. This is because people do not have the ability to do otherwise. Infrastructure is something they really need.

I note the recent announcement by Dublin City Council in relation to the L-shaped land development in Belmayne. Clongriffin also needs infrastructure. In the meeting I was at last



week, LDA officials were very informative, but they need support from the Minister's Department, so I ask him for it. We need joined-up planning that includes not just bricks and mortar, but the services and amenities that turn housing into real, sustainable communities. They deserve no less.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** If we look at the national planning framework and all the different existing policies, it is about complementing housing delivery with community infrastructure and social infrastructure. We have had significantly increased supports for the development of social infrastructure across the State. If we look back to the last Government, we had one of the biggest interventions around developing community and sports infrastructure, for example, which is being seen right across north Dublin and in many other parts of the country. Similarly, there is the work the then Minister, former Deputy Humphreys, did at the time concerning the wider social infrastructure across the State. There was a massive uplift in support.

Regarding the issue the Deputy referred to in Clongriffin, I have not seen a specific allocation in that regard, except to say we are committed to social infrastructure in our wider national development plan and this will continue over the next five years to give headroom to Departments and Ministers to complement housing delivery and economic infrastructure with the need to build sustainable communities. This is why transport infrastructure is extremely important in parallel as well.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere):** I call Deputy O'Connor very briefly. I know his Questions Nos. 7 and 9 were taken by Deputy McCarthy. Would the Deputy like to come in very briefly? I know he was at a select committee meeting.

**Deputy James O'Connor:** I thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach. I am sorry. I apologise because I am chairing a select committee this morning, too.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere):** I ask the Deputy to be very brief. We have dealt with these questions, but I will give the Deputy an opportunity.

**Deputy James O'Connor:** Go raibh maith agat. I just wish to reiterate the point regarding the need to expedite the flood schemes for Mogeely and Castlemartyr in terms of tranche 2 schemes and for Rathcormac as well, and the importance of this being done. Deputy McCarthy and I are in the House this morning as local Government TDs. The communities impacted post Storm Babet need to see this critical flood infrastructure being put in place. They have been left in limbo for far too long. I have been repeatedly raising this matter over the last number of years. I know the Minister and the Minister of State have very kindly come to the constituency to see the damage caused by Storm Babet and the follow-ups being done by the OPW, the Department of public expenditure and the local authority. When it comes to tranche 2 schemes, though, we have been waiting far too long for answers from the Government about where they are and getting them done. I would appreciate if this could be prioritised by the Department of public expenditure and the OPW.

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** I gave a detailed response earlier, but I fully appreciate and understand clearly where the Deputy is coming from. As I said to Deputy McCarthy, this is an area I am looking at. Ministers and Ministers of State have visited the area, including me. I know how important tranche 2 is, but I also know how important tranche 1 is. There are the bigger schemes we are delivering across the country, but, regarding tranche 2, some of the smaller schemes are being caught up and left behind. This is frustrating for the Deputy as an elected



representative but also for the people of the areas he mentioned. I committed to visiting those areas inside the next two to three weeks. I am working on providing more funding to the local authorities through the minor works scheme, but I think we may be able to make steps forward in terms of the tranche 2 scheme. I fully appreciate and understand the pressure the Deputy is under as well.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter ‘Chap’ Cleere):** I am going to move back briefly to Question No. 6 from Deputy Lahart. After this, just to be fair to everybody, I am not going to go back anymore if someone is not here. Just to be fair to Deputy Lahart, I will let him in now.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Flexibility is always welcome in a Chair.

### **Office of Public Works**

**6. Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation when work will be undertaken to renew the exterior protective finish of Rathfarnham Castle; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39992/25]

**Deputy John Lahart:** I will not take the full time. This question is just in relation to Rathfarnham Castle and to ask the Minister for an update on it. It is a cosmetic-related question on the upgrading of the exterior of the building and the progress on this work.

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** I thank the Deputy. Rathfarnham Castle was built in 1583 and throughout its long and rich history has been owned by Archbishop Adam Loftus, the founder of Trinity College, Speaker Conolly, and the Jesuit Order. The castle is one of Ireland’s oldest Elizabethan houses. For most of the 20th century, the castle was owned and occupied by the Jesuits. The castle was declared a national monument and purchased by the State in 1987. The OPW is responsible for the care and management of Rathfarnham Castle while the lands are managed by South Dublin County Council. Since 1987, the OPW has undertaken an extensive programme of conservation and restoration to secure the historic fabric of the building and has also undertaken works to improve access to the building with the installation of a lift and ramps.

As the Deputy has noted, the exterior of the castle is showing signs of wear and tear. The exterior of Rathfarnham Castle is finished with a substance called lime harling, which was last renewed in 2010. This would normally be expected to last many decades, so detailed assessments have taken place to understand the cause of the wear and tear. To address the issue in the short-term, a sample of the north facade was cleaned in June 2024 to assess whether cleaning the facade was feasible and would be of benefit to the building. Cleaning and repair works are being progressed after a completed sample proved effective. This is a preventative measure to maximise the lifespan of the existing wet dash and lime finish. This will improve the current appearance of the castle.

In the longer term, however, a full refinish of the exterior is required, along with repair works to prevent this wear and tear. This is a large works project that will necessitate full scaffolding being erected around the building. However, there is a short seasonal window, along with weather conditions, in which the lime harling finish can be applied and these works are not expected to take place until 2027. Funds have been allocated to undertake this project, with a

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senior architect assigned to oversee the design and completion.

**Deputy John Lahart:** I thank the Minister of State. Deputy Moran was not in position when I got the last reply, which was this time last year. It repeated exactly what he has said, namely, a weather window would be required to carry out the works and the works would be carried out in 2025, which is this year. The reason I have asked the question is that the weather window has well and truly been with us for the past four or five months. Now, the Minister of State is saying the works will be carried out in 2027. What has changed?

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** To be honest, I cannot say. However, I visited the castle a number of weeks ago and saw at first hand exactly the damage caused.

I will take back with me that the Deputy got a response that it would be done in 2025 and revert to him in writing. I will pursue it because I fell in love with the castle when I went there. It is a fabulous facility.

**Deputy John Lahart:** I appreciate that. I would like an explanation as to why I was told last year it would be done in 2025 with the exact same reason in relation to the seasonality of the work.

It is imperative. The local authority took a decision recently in relation to the land that it controlled, which is in the curtilage of the castle. That was positive news about the development of the outbuildings and the creation of local infrastructure in terms of social and cultural facilities. The renewal of the facade of the castle - that cosmetic piece - is vital.

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** In defence of why it did not happen in 2025, and as I said in my report, it is due to weather. The type of material we use to do with the castle is all down to weather. If we do not get the weather, we cannot do it.

**Deputy John Lahart:** We had the weather.

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** I am not trying to cover for why it was not done but I know it is seasonal.

**Deputy John Lahart:** That is okay.

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** I have this right around the country where people, such as the Deputy, raise the question, but in defence of my Department, I have to say we have a very small window in which to do it. I will come back to the Deputy in writing to give it more flesh.

*Question No. 10 taken with Written Answers.*

## **Water Services**

11. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the progress being made on plans for additional funding to Uisce Éireann to progress large-scale infrastructure projects following the review of the national development plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40118/25]

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** We all know the issues that are impacted by Uisce Éireann. It says that delivering infrastructure can take more money. In my own constituency, even in the

Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, report, we have question marks in relation to everything from Cabinhill to Greenmount and Tallanstown. We need to see movement on all of this.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** In line with the commitment in the programme for Government, my Department has prioritised an early review of the national development plan, which will be published in July. The aim of the review is to improve our infrastructure, particularly water, energy and transport. Prioritisation of these sectors is necessary to deliver hundreds of thousands of additional homes and to boost our competitiveness.

The review document to be published in July will feature annual capital allocations to Departments over the five years to 2030 and overall capital expenditure ceilings for the ten years to 2035. This will be followed by sectoral publications later this year detailing the particular programmes that will be funded from the NDP. While particular allocations are yet to be agreed, investment in water infrastructure is a key priority for the review.

As part of the process, Departments have also been asked to consider whether their planned programmes meet the criteria for designated environmental projects to receive funding from the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund. Some €3.15 billion is available from the fund for 2026 to 2030 and is part of the total NDP funding available. In addition, a climate assessment is also being carried out on projects receiving funding as part of the NDP and this will be published alongside the review document in July.

Regarding sustainable management of water services specifically, I would remind the Deputy that, since 1 January 2014, Uisce Éireann has had responsibility for all aspects of water services planning, delivery and operation at national, regional and local levels, according to the 2013 Act. Uisce Éireann co-ordinates that with the Minister for housing. However, we recognise the funding issue, which has existed and has been publicly articulated this year in particular. Water infrastructure will be a central part of the national development plan, which we will set out next week.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I suppose we need to see that review as soon as possible. Has the Minister any information in relation to what he reckons that timeline will be for the sectoral allocations?

Some of what I am talking about, particularly in the case of Dundalk, falls into the bracket of projects that have been timelined. The three projects I mentioned - Cabinhill, Tallanstown and Greenmount - have had planning, plans and dates, yet their timelines have unfortunately all been put back. In the recent EPA report, we are told there are question marks in relation to the robustness and resilience of the water supply, but also its quality. There are other issues I have raised even in the past while. We had issues in Ardee and Smarmore over the weekend and a particular issue that keeps happening in relation to Hackballscross and the water supply being picked out. In my supplementary question, I will deal with wastewater and whatever else.

There is a wider issue here. When we talk about housing, we know that planning permissions and so on are impacted by a clean water supply and our ability to deal with wastewater, and none of it is up to scratch at present.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** Water and wastewater infrastructure is critical to deliver the homes that we need and to deal with the broader infrastructure deficit that exists relating to water infrastructure more generally. What we are doing as part of that is prioritising it.

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The Exchequer funding of what is now Uisce Éireann significantly increased in recent years but we recognise that, to meet the level of ambition we have in housing supply in the economy, but also to address some of the deficits in regions, there needs to be a much greater level of funding given to Uisce Éireann. We are finalising that presently. What will happen in the aftermath of that is Uisce Éireann will be able to update its respective plans and delivery timelines relating to different projects. The metric will be delivery when funding has been provided over the next number of years so that Uisce Éireann is really enabled, from a funding perspective, to drive the delivery of this infrastructure. The engagement that we all will be having will be on delivery, when we have met the funding need that is required.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I hope the interaction that we have is in relation to delivery. Some of the projects I spoke about earlier have been timelined. It is a matter of ensuring that those timelines are at least met. They are timelines that have been set further back than we would have anticipated or wanted. There are particular issues.

I welcome the Minister's statement that there is need for a greater level of funding. We are not in the place we would like to be as regards infrastructure. Looking to the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, the wastewater system where I live is not up to scratch and could lead to flooding. Never mind getting catchment flood risk assessment and management, CFRAM. We have a huge amount of people who are impacted even when we have heavy rains. If we do not have capacity delivered at the south end of Dundalk, we could be looking at flooding no matter what we do as regard the CRFAM works.

As has been brought up with the Minister, Deputy Browne, by members of Deputy Chambers' own party, there is a particular issue in the sense that many planning permissions now are looking to put in interim water treatment schemes on the basis that Uisce Éireann does not have the capacity to deal with wastewater. I am talking about the likes of Haggardstown. It is obviously causing issues in relation to a number of residents and constituents.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere):** I thank the Deputy.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** It is a matter of delivering in all this. We are not where we need to be and we need to get there.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere):** I have two supplementary questions, 30 seconds each. I will let Deputy Farrell in first and then come to Deputy Colm Burke.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** When we are talking about investment within Uisce Éireann and we know investment is desperately needed in terms of delivery of housing and so on across the State, we also need to look at the investment we are making in water infrastructure on the offshore islands. On Inis Oirr, for example, there are night-time restrictions every summer. We need to have a plan and we need to invest in the offshore islands when it comes to water. We have previously had, as the Minister will remember, issues with water on Inisbofin as well. We need to have a plan. I accept that these types of plan will not be----

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere):** Thirty seconds.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** Apologies. I did not realise.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** The Minister spoke of funding for Irish Water. More than 500 treat-

ment plants throughout the country were built between 2002 and 2008. Many of the developers who built them have gone into liquidation or receivership. In one case in Whitechurch in Cork, raw sewage is flying out of the treatment plant into the stream. I have taken samples from it. I have been writing to Cork County Council, Uisce Éireann at the EPA for seven months. I was out there ten days ago and took samples from the stream that are totally contaminated. There are 500 of these plants around the country and we have no timeframe for when Uisce Éireann will take them over.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I echo what others have said here. In Ennis and Clarecastle in County Clare, even though the sewage treatment system is modern and new, it is already close to capacity. If we want to reach these housing targets, the first thing that needs to be done is to upgrade all of that network underground. The public will not see it and we might not get great praise or thanks for it, but it is crucial and is the key enabler. I call on Uisce Éireann to look at the situation in Ennis and Clarecastle. It is unforgivable that a few years after that system was designed and built, it is already near capacity.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I thank Deputy Farrell for raising the issue of offshore islands, Deputy Burke for raising the issue of wastewater treatment plants during the noughties and Deputy Crowe for raising the issue of underlying infrastructure. My first role as part of this is to ensure that commercial State bodies, like Uisce Éireann, are appropriately funded over the medium term. That is something we will address as part of the national development plan to be outlined next week. The second part of my responsibilities is to ensure that when a project is being progressed and has been decided upon, the life cycle of the project can happen much quicker than at present and we can deliver a project from concept to delivery in a much quicker way within our economy because the timelines at present are too slow.

Regarding specific operational issues Uisce Éireann has with the offshore islands, the wastewater treatment plants and the underlying infrastructure that all the Deputies referenced, the Minister for housing and Uisce Éireann will be able to respond on those specific details. However, there will be a significant uplift in funding for water infrastructure in the State when we outline the national development plan.

### **Capital Expenditure Programme**

12. **Deputy Edward Timmins** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation if there is long-term financial planning for capital infrastructure projects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40182/25]

**Deputy Edward Timmins:** I have met people working for State bodies involved in asset procurement for long-term infrastructure projects. One of the points they constantly raise is the lack of long-term financial planning and commitments on projects that take a long time to deliver, for example, ten years. They say that more certainty is needed and this would help improve the efficiency of delivering the projects and gain the commitment of suppliers to the projects. Can we move away from the short-term approach and put more emphasis on long-term financing and certainty?

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** The national development plan is the State's medium- to long-term plan for public capital investment. The current national development plan to 2030 provided for public capital investment of €165 billion over the period 2021 to 2030. Government



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is currently prioritising an early review of this plan, to be published this month, which will set out five-year departmental capital ceilings and additionality to 2030 and overall capital expenditure ceilings for the ten-year period to 2035.

The objective of the review is to improve our infrastructure, particularly housing, energy, water and transport. Improvements to these sectors are necessary to deliver on the core ambition for the review to fund the supporting infrastructure to enable the delivery of thousands of additional homes and to boost our competitiveness.

This reflects a planned and strategic approach to public capital investment over the next ten years. Planning and prioritisation of the funding will be guided by: the critical priorities for infrastructure investment highlighted in the programme for Government; the capacity of sectors to deliver projects and programmes within the period of the review, while being cognisant of trade-offs within and between sectors such as construction sector labour supply; the cost of proposals in the context of competing priorities and existing levels of capital funding; and the alignment of particular projects with the core focus on housing and competitiveness.

The revised national development plan will also form part of our broader structural plan and associated medium-term expenditure framework. The plan is being worked on by my Department and the Department of Finance and will reflect the strategic choices that will need to be made over the next five years in the context of tax and expenditure to ensure a balanced and sustainable fiscal outlook.

The medium-term expenditure framework being prepared by my Department will support the delivery of key social and economic priorities of Government for the period to 2030. Financial planning for capital projects also takes place at the individual project level. My Department, through the infrastructure guidelines, provides the framework through which Departments can plan.

**Deputy Edward Timmins:** I want to emphasise how spending on infrastructure is an investment, in that it gives a return. For example, I recently attended the opening of the new wastewater treatment plant in Arklow, County Wicklow, which cost €140 million and came in on budget. Much of that €140 million comes back to the State immediately through taxes. This plant has a capacity of 24,000 population equivalent with an expansion possibility to 36,000. This can cater for over 10,000 new houses. When these houses are built, the State will recoup much more than the €140 million investment. VAT on new houses, development levies, and the taxes and spending involved in construction will flow back to the State, before even valuing the environmental benefits.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** The Deputy is right. That was an excellent project delivered by Uisce Éireann. His original question connects back to the previous question that was asked. We understand the challenge Uisce Éireann has had each year in knowing its funding position the following year and the effect that has on contractors and their delivery pipelines. We are cognisant of that in the work we are doing as part of the national development plan. In the critical strategic sectors of infrastructure, we will give a longer view for contractors to give the confidence to build a pipeline and expand particular sectors within the economy. Part of what we are doing through the national development plan is to give greater certainty on the project pipeline for the likes of Uisce Éireann and others so they can plan for projects that will come on stream in the medium term. That has been an important part of the feedback we received through the consultation we had on infrastructure.



**Deputy Edward Timmins:** Regarding delivery, a new infrastructure division group has recently been established. For the current national development plan, a delivery board was set up in 2018. The national development plan envisages five or four - it is not clear - additional outside experts being added. It only meets every two to three months, which seems way too seldom. I wonder how successful it has been. Another body was set up in 2012, the Irish Government Economic Evaluation Service, IGEES, which has taken on 150 analysts. By the way, this is all in the current national development plan. EY's report, entitled "Supporting Excellence", has many recommendations to help infrastructure delivery. All these groups appear worthy but I wonder if they have worked.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, for all the work done on flood relief programmes. The problem I have with them is the time it takes from start to finish. One, the Glanmire flood relief project, is being done in my constituency at the moment. It is nearing completion and was very well managed by the OPW. I am concerned about the one in Blackpool, which started in 2013 and, 12 years later, the most recent part has been signed off by the OPW but not by the Department. We have been waiting for more than 12 years. It is really important for that side of Cork city because very little development can take place until it is completed.

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** The Deputy has raised this in the committee and here in the House. As I said to him, a judicial review held up that whole scheme. We got consent and were ready to go, and then came the judicial review. Once it comes through the planning process, we will be on the ground. As I explained to the Deputy, I am working extremely hard to try to do this. He can play a part by going to talk to the people who bring these objections to see if we have done everything required so that, when it comes out, we are not faced with another objection and it is delayed again. It is unfair to say the OPW and my Department have not worked tirelessly to try to deliver this scheme. I know the pressure the Deputy is facing over the length of time it has taken. Once there is a judicial review, it holds up the entire planning process. He knows how long this has been going on and so do I. Let us see what happens in the next few weeks and then we can get working.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere):** We will go to Question No.-----

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I might just come in also. The Minister of State, Deputy Moran, just dealt with one part. Part of the work we are doing is to try to accelerate and improve the project life cycle. Be they full schemes or road projects, they are taking far too long. The Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service, IGEES, is deployed across Government Departments, assessing and evaluating some of the policies that have been advanced by Government. It provides external assessment to inform policy decisions we take as part of the budget process. It plays an important role and is deployed across Government, led by my Department. The NDP delivery board has been changed through the accelerated infrastructure task force, which I have established. It has a different remit in the context of reform of infrastructure delivery in the economy and oversight of those reforms and broader infrastructure delivery from the projects and the plan we will set out next week.

*Question No. 13 taken with Written Answers.*

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## Flood Risk Management

14. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation if he will provide an overview of OPW drainage, flood protection and coastal erosion defence works that are planned to be undertaken in County Clare in 2025; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39855/25]

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I thank the Minister of State for taking this question. I would like to know what plans the OPW has for drainage, flood protection and coastal erosion defences in County Clare this year.

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** The OPW and Clare County Council have an extensive programme of flood risk management works across Clare during 2025. Clare County Council is currently leading the delivery of flood relief schemes in County Clare in the townlands of Springfield, Kilkee and Shannon, Bunratty and Kilrush. These schemes are funded by the OPW from the Government's €1.3 billion investment in flood measures under the national development plan to 2030. Construction of the €5.2 million Springfield flood relief scheme to protect 21 properties is nearing completion. The completion of this scheme is being informed by the groundwater report.

The €8.5 million Kilkee flood relief scheme to protect 134 properties was submitted for planning during 2024 and detailed design for the construction of the scheme is being progressed. Work to finalise the design of the Shannon flood relief scheme to protect 1,400 properties is continuing and the scheme option is scheduled to be submitted for planning approval in quarter 2 2026. The OPW is working with Clare County Council on potential flow path in Bunratty, which may increase the knowledge of the flood risk in this area to inform the feasibility study of the scheme. Clare County Council is finalising tender documents for technical consultancy services for the Kilrush flood relief scheme and plans to issue these later this year.

Since 2009, the OPW has approved funding under the minor flood mitigation works and coastal protection scheme of €3.8 million to County Clare for some 42 projects. Clare County Council proposes to carry out coastal minor works as part of the 2025 programme at Aughinish Island, north Clare, Marine Parade, Kilkee and Ballynacally, Newmarket-on-Fergus. The works include underpinning and strengthening of the existing sea walls and reinforcement of existing earthen embankments. Clare County Council has also appointed consultants to carry out a condition survey and performance upgrade options review of the tidal barrage at Clarecastle. Non-coastal works at Gullet Cross and Mountcashel are also due to be carried out in 2025.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I thank the Minister of State. There is a lot of positive stuff happening in the county. I will bring the Minister of State back a bit to the Arterial Drainage Act 1945. Neither of us was around at that time but some guru decided that different watercourses would be divvied up between the Board of Works, now the OPW, and local authorities. The River Inagh in north Clare comes under the jurisdiction of Clare County Council. Its budget for managing that watercourse and river is minuscule. It does not have the diggers or the heavy machinery, such as the long reach diggers the Minister of State and I are very familiar with, that can clear out all the silt. It has none of that.

The OPW gets approximately 90% of the budget with 10% going to local authorities, yet the latter are expected to manage rivers like the River Inagh with few resources. I ask the Minister of State to consider recategorising that river. Surely in this day and age, with climate change

and everything that has caused, the 1945 legislation needs to be revised.

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** I could not agree more. As the Deputy said, there is a lot of good and positive stuff happening in County Clare. The Department is working closely with the local authority on the local drainage scheme and it is supported by the Government, which is very important. I am looking closely at the issue the Deputy spoke about. I am looking at vegetation clearing, getting into the rivers and working with the local authorities. I hope to have good news on that in the near future. I have been working closely with local authorities and elected representatives up and down the country all of which face the same problem. They tell me that when the rivers are never cleaned and this is not done when flooding occurs. However, it means working with the local authorities and we also have to comply with environmental rules. I am working on that and will hopefully have good news in the near future for the local authorities.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** Before the Minister of State was appointed, his name was synonymous with communities fighting back against flooding. He has done stellar work in and out of politics on that. For many people in these areas, insurance is still impossible to get. The term “risk equalisation” is used when applying for health insurance. It means that all people of all ages pay a little bit of a premium so that risk is balanced across older and younger people. The same principle is now being applied by the insurance industry to homes. Between 12,000 and 13,000 homes in the south Clare area cannot get flood insurance cover. Not a week goes by in my office that we do not have to write letters of comfort, which is ludicrous. What does a letter of comfort from a TD really mean? We need to have this fully nailed down by the OPW and the Government so that if there are flood defences or an area has not flooded, the principle of risk equalisation is applied and families are given insurance cover.

A lot of property sales are falling through because once the conveyancing is done, banks will not lend capital if they see that the applicant cannot get flood insurance cover. The Government needs to take that practice to task.

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** I could not agree more with the Deputy on insurance. My job is to protect communities up and down the country. My officials and I hope to meet the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, on this. The Government is very much focused on this issue and we understand it. I get it, the same as the Deputy gets it. I get requests to write letters of comfort as well and I wonder what it is all about. My Department has spoken with the Minister of State’s Department. We are working closely on this to see if we can deliver something.

### **Public Sector Pensions**

15. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation if he will provide an update on his scoping exercise for the overpayment of civil servants and Ministers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39499/25]

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** My question relates to the scoping exercise the Minister and his Department are undertaking on the overpayment of pensions to civil servants and Ministers. What is the status of that, what has been identified to date and what can he tell us about it?

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** As the Deputy said, she is referring to delay in addressing taxes

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due on retirement and anomalies in deductions of various pension contributions. A review in relation to Ministers who may have been impacted regarding contributions and additional superannuation contributions, ASCs, has been completed. Those identified are being contacted and engagement is ongoing. I understand from the National Shared Services Office, NSSO, that many recoupment plans are now in place. A review of retirees liable for chargeable excess tax and withholding tax is nearing completion and the NSSO has been in contact with individuals impacted. That work is progressing.

My Department and the NSSO have put new measures and controls in place to ensure these matters do not reoccur. Additionally, I have asked the chair of the NSSO advisory board to commission forthwith an external audit for the board and my Department of the systems and processes in the NSSO for fulfilling its role and responsibilities. The terms of reference have been finalised in consultation with me and my Department. The clear evidence of errors which has recently come to light emphasises the need to validate and provide reassurance regarding whether the NSSO is carrying out its functions in full compliance with public policy and statutory requirements. My Department is actively engaging with the chair to get this external audit up and running as a matter of urgency.

Work is ongoing with the Office of Government Procurement on a supplementary request for tender, which is expected to issue to the relevant framework members this week, ending 18 July 2025. The procurement process will involve clarification questions to be received within 21 days, with 30 days for tenders to be submitted. Work will commence following the relevant evaluation and contract negotiation process. I expect this external audit to be expedited with all due speed and to be completed as soon as practically possible. The external audit will be submitted to the chair of the board and my Department. Following that audit, I will brief the Government on the findings as soon as they are available.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** People are quite worried about this. We are seeing reports that one civil servant was apparently overpaid by €280,000. The 19 former and existing senior civil servants received overpayments worth €1.4 million. I hope measures are being put in place to make sure this does not happen again. The fact that it happened in the first place is shocking. When I raised it with the Minister at a committee he said he had no concerns about recouping the money. However, when his Department was in front of the Committee of Public Accounts last week it did not seem to be certain of the timeline. It is my understanding that it was pointed out that some of these people will have 20 years to repay the money, which is a very long time. I am concerned that we will not be able to recoup all this money. This has been a major blunder.

*10 o'clock*

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** Recruitment plans around chargeable excess tax and pension contributions are two separate issues. I agree that what happened is unacceptable. That is why we need a full external audit and that will happen.

If someone who has worked in the public service is liable for chargeable excess tax, they have 20 years on a normal basis to spread that liability once they retire. For example, if someone is retired for two years, they have the remaining 18 years to pay that liability of chargeable excess tax if it has not been paid or they have not agreed a plan to pay it over those 18 years. That is within the existing rules. The issue is when that liability is not paid or is not agreed to be spread over a particular period. The work the NSSO is doing with individuals affected is to ensure they pay the liability at the point of retirement or have a plan in place to pay it over the

remaining period in accordance with the rules and procedures that exist for the public service.

On pensions contributions, the NSSO is working with anyone who is liable to ensure such contributions are made in terms of recruitment plans. Separately, it is examining the wider group impacted. There might be old payments, particularly for those in a work-sharing pattern. It is assessing that at the moment.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** It is deeply concerning for most people that this is where it is. When does the Minister expect to have an outcome? Has he been able to identify exactly how this occurred? I do not mean any one person should be blamed for something like this but there must have been some system failures as well. Has the Minister got to the bottom of that? Does he expect that to come out of the report? When does he expect the report to be in the public domain?

The Minister will be acutely aware, as he prepares for the budget, that many people are struggling with the cost of living. When you do your weekly shop, the difference every week on the same bundle of goods is amazing. There is a huge impact. When people see this kind of thing, it frustrates them. Let us be frank about that. It is important this never happens again and that we have clear outcomes from the review.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** The external audit will be important in assessing the wider systems processes and compliance with public policy and with the statutory position the NSSO exists within. That work will commence and be completed as soon as practically possible. The tender process is ongoing with this audit for the NSSO.

As part of budgetary preparations, we are being clear we want to make permanent, sustained and sustainable changes in the context of budget 2026 to improve public services and living standards and make a difference, particularly targeting supports at families that need them. That is the wider context for budget 2026, with broader economic uncertainty facing the country. That work is ongoing with the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, in preparation for the summer economic statement. There will be engagement with all Ministers on what is possible in advance of the budget.

### **Public Procurement Contracts**

16. **Deputy Séamus McGrath** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the safeguards that are now in place to ensure large-scale public infrastructure contracts are completed on time and within budget; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40074/25]

**Deputy Séamus McGrath:** I thank the Minister for taking this question. What safeguards are in place to ensure our large infrastructural projects come in on time and on budget? As we are about to embark on an ambitious national development plan review involving significant capital funding, it is timely that we set out the safeguards in place to reassure the public that we are managing the situation as effectively as possible.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I thank the Deputy. My Department has implemented several safeguards and strategic frameworks to ensure that large-scale public infrastructure contracts are completed on time and within budget. The infrastructure guidelines published in 2023 set



the key requirements for project governance over a project's life cycle. The guidelines cover the evaluation of projects and their proper planning and management once approval in principle is obtained.

The guidelines have replaced the public spending code and, significantly, have reduced the number of approval stages and streamlined the requirements for major projects, while retaining the international best practice governance and oversight arrangements already in place. These arrangements sharpen the focus on risk and cost management and reduce the compliance burden on low-risk projects, which brings Ireland into line with leading international approaches to major project delivery. The introduction of the external assurance process and the establishment of the major projects advisory group has improved the governance and oversight arrangements for major infrastructure projects.

Standard procurement and contract templates are published under the capital works management framework, CWMF, and apply to projects that are majority Exchequer-funded. There are several cost control review points set out within key stages of a project's design evolution which utilise standard reporting templates. It is a general principle that projects to which the CWMF applies are put out to tender on the basis of a comprehensively defined set of project requirements so that tenderers can provide a lump sum price for the completion of the project. However, major infrastructure projects, due to their scale, duration and risk profile, often require bespoke contractual strategies not catered for under the CWMF. Typically, these projects use standard forms of contracts which are used internationally in order to attract as wide a field as possible to tender.

These contracts bear many similarities with the standard form of public works contract, with clearly defined circumstances where the price and date for completion may be adjusted. They typically employ comprehensive change management procedures which are adhered to by both parties. They differ from the CWMF contracts in the pricing structure and the inclusion of incentives to deliver the project on time and within budget.

**Deputy Séamus McGrath:** I recognise significant work has been done in this area. We are about to embark on the national development plan. The current plan involves €165 billion and there will be additionality on that, which is very welcome. We will be spending significant money on water infrastructure, energy, transport, health, housing and more. It is important we rebuild public trust in our management of large-scale capital projects. Unfortunately, we have seen too many examples - the national children's hospital, the Dublin Port tunnel, the national broadband plan and so on - of significant overruns. The Irish Fiscal Advisory Council has commented on this.

I welcome the work of the Minister and his Department. It is critical we have robust processes in place to ensure proper cost analysis and forecasting, rigorous risk assessment and a sound legal basis for contracts, so we reduce the risk of budget overruns and projects not coming in on time and so we can rebuild public trust, which is badly needed.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I agree. Much work has been done in recent years to embed international best practice into contract management. The wider point has to be acknowledged that if things become too risk averse and no decision is made, then we do not have any delivery and have a long list of hypothetical projects that are not delivered over time. We need a balanced discussion on delivery, in addition to that on risk and cost which is sometimes the broader discussion in this House, the media and elsewhere. The metric has to be delivery and ensur-



ing appropriate safeguards are in place in respect of guidelines and frameworks. Some of the feedback received as part of the infrastructure task force is on balancing risk. The real metric for the future of our economy will be delivery of critical infrastructure. If it sits on lists and circles around processes for decades, we cannot embed any investment. Balancing the need for safeguards against the need for delivery will be critical to delivering this Government's infrastructure ambition.

**Deputy Séamus McGrath:** I accept the Minister's point on balancing the process. We cannot become too risk averse. I fully understand that. Delivery of large-scale infrastructural projects is critical but we have seen examples of large-scale projects that were 100% over budget. It is critical we do not repeat that. I sit on the Committee of Public Accounts and listened to the national children's hospital development board speak of the number of claims lodged, the lengthy dispute process involved and the uncertainty as to when many of these claims will be concluded. That is just one example. It is critical we strike the right balance and have a robust system in place to ensure projects can be delivered in a reasonable timeframe and with proper risk assessment. I understand the challenge with large-scale projects. They go on over a long period. We face international uncertainty and have faced inflationary conditions in recent years. I thank the Minister and Department for the work they have done. We have the opportunity to rebuild public trust and ensure we can deliver. The Arklow wastewater treatment plant is an example of a large project being delivered on time and within budget, so we can do it.

**Deputy Cathal Crowe:** I echo the points made by Deputy Séamus McGrath. The EU procurement rules are rather outdated. A lot of the regulation that is stifling what this country is able to do is not domestic but comes from an EU treaty. The time has come for us to be able to procure beyond the EU 27 bloc for very large projects, such as hospitals, large road projects, rail, etc. It has repeatedly happened that projects we pitch a certain amount of money for have cost twice as much by the time they have gone through all the gateways. We need to procure beyond the European Union. I hope the Minister will be able to raise that at the Council of Ministers in due course.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere):** Deputy Connolly has been waiting patiently. I will allow him one minute to ask a supplementary question.

**Deputy John Connolly:** I very much welcome the Minister's response. I have a similar question, Question No. 32, on the commitment in the programme for Government to review the infrastructural guidelines. One of the most frustrating aspects of being a public representative is the time it takes between the concept of a project to its delivery. I was a member of a local authority from 2004 to 2009, and my recollection is that public projects moved a lot quicker during that period than they do now. I welcome the Minister's response on the need to balance the necessity for prudence with the ambition to make sure we deliver projects. I understand the need for prudence and I am not promoting financial recklessness, but I agree with Deputy Crowe. I have found that as the financial appraisal takes place, the costs rise. One wonders about the objective at the outset in undertaking them. As promised in the programme for Government, the guidelines need to be reviewed to try to make sure delivery is made easier.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I thank the Deputies for their questions. To speak to Deputy Crowe's point, there has been a significant consultation on Ireland's procurement strategy and we will have a new national procurement strategy in the coming months. The Minister of State, Deputy Emer Higgins, is leading out on that work. Changes are taking place in the EU and we expect them to conclude during Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union in

2026. I agree with Deputy John Connolly that we need more balance in the broader discussion around infrastructure delivery and the metric has to be that it can advance and be accelerated while having the appropriate safeguards in place. That is the work we are doing on the project life cycle. From concept to delivery, how can we cut time out of the particular points which are creating excessive delays and impacting on communities that have an infrastructure deficit? That question is central to the work we are doing as part of the review of the national development plan and the accelerating infrastructure task force, as is how we better balance risk to promote delivery.

*Question No. 17 taken with Written Answers.*

### **Coastal Protection**

18. **Deputy Michael Cahill** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation if he will provide funding to tackle coastal erosion and flooding in Rossbeigh, Waterville, Kenmare, Tralee, Listowel, Glenbeigh, Dooks, Cromane Lower, Killorglin and Glosha; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39792/25]

**Deputy Michael Cahill:** I raise the issue of coastal erosion and flooding, which are huge problems in my neck of the woods. I live by a beach called Rossbeigh in Glenbeigh, County Kerry. It is on Castlemaine Harbour. That area in particular is very problematic with global warming and high tides. When the high tides coincide with storms there are particular issues. Homes are flooded and we require funding as soon as possible.

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** The Government has committed to investing a sum of €81 million for the design and implementation of flood relief schemes for County Kerry. Tralee, Kenmare, Abbeydorney and Banna are all in the first tranche of schemes to be progressed, with Dingle, Killarney, Ballylongford, Listowel, Castleisland-Tullig in the second tranche.

Engineering and environmental consultants were appointed in quarter 3 2021 to deliver a flood relief scheme for Tralee. Emerging options are scheduled to be identified in quarter 4 2025 and will be made available to the public for consultation. It is expected that this scheme will be submitted for planning in quarter 4 2026.

Engineering and environmental consultants were appointed in quarter 2 2022 to deliver a flood relief scheme for Kenmare. Assessing the flood risk in Kenmare is complex and it is expected the design option will be made available to the public for consultation in mid-2026. Works on the Finnihy river were completed in early 2024 to mitigate the flood risk.

While the Listowel scheme is not in the first tranche of projects to be progressed, the OPW, through Kerry County Council, is investing €2 million for advance measures. Following a flood event in Listowel in November 2024, Kerry County Council engaged consultants to provide a report on the flood event. The findings were presented to Kerry Municipal District on 30 April 2025 and are now available to the public. Kerry County Council has discussed the findings of this report with the OPW. The council recently requested the consultant to assess the delivery programme for the recommended short-term measures, including rising the embankments at Killacrim. Once complete, this assessment, which may require hydraulic modelling, will inform a meeting with the OPW in the coming weeks to discuss implementation and funding mechanisms for any viable measures. Any requirement for environmental assessments

for these works will inform the timeline for their delivery.

**Deputy Michael Cahill:** I thank the Minister of State for that response. The towns of Kenmare, Tralee, Listowel, Castleisland and lower Killorglin all need protection works at the earliest possible date. I have been inside homes where there has been 3 ft of saltwater. Rainwater is one problem, but saltwater is a different story completely. I plead with the Minister of State to come down, see for himself and provide the necessary funding. Historically, coastal erosion and flooding were at the bottom of the priority list when it came to funding. It is about time they were addressed.

Other areas in Kerry also need coastal protection works, for example, Waterville and my local beach in Rossbeigh. Cromane is a particular problem. People there are living in fear any time a high tide and a storm coincide. They cannot sleep in their beds. This is happening too often. We are seeing more and more issues all the time. I would be delighted to welcome the Minister of State to Kerry and show him these particular areas. I have no doubt he will deliver for the people.

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** As I said, €81 million in investment has been given to Kerry County Council. The Deputy talked about coastal protection. Since 2009, €4.2 million has been given to the minor flood mitigation and coastal protection scheme. This also includes €2.9 million for coastal erosion work. My Department is very much working with the local authority, particularly in Kerry. We know too well the issues people are facing right around the country, not just down in Kerry. I will visit Kerry in the not-too-distant future to look at the situation and talk to people. When I was last in government I worked very closely with the local authority in Kerry and we delivered a number of projects. I look forward to looking at those and also the areas Deputy Cahill raised today. The Minister outlined major infrastructure problem areas and the backlog in delivering major schemes. I am looking at this in my Department to see if we can streamline how we deliver schemes in terms of the planning process. As I said earlier, 11 years to deliver a scheme is too long. There are constraints that we need to comply with and deliver on. I will work closely with the Deputy.

**Deputy Michael Cahill:** I thank the Minister of State for confirming he is coming down to Kerry. I look forward to welcoming him. There are so many areas. It is a huge problem that involves expensive work. Rock armour is very expensive, as are other lines of defence. For many of the people affected, the Minister of State is General Custer making his last stand. We are pleading with him to deliver for our county and people and to give them some sort of comfort. I am getting calls all the time. Any time a storm is forecast it is particularly worrying for young families. Their homes have been ruined before. I have seen this first hand. It is not a pleasant experience. As the Minister of State knows, it creates other problems in the context of insurance, etc. It is hugely important that we get funding. There is other areas too, including Callanafersy, Castlemaine, Keel and Inch. The area around Castlemaine Harbour is a particular issue for us. The pilot study is long completed and it went on long enough. The Covid pandemic threw it back. I am looking forward to the Minister of State coming to Kerry.

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** I know too well the problems people face. There is nothing as bad as getting up in the morning or going to bed at night when there is rain or wind. I know too well the suffering, worry and stress this causes whole families and the people around them. The Government is very much committed to delivering schemes. As I said, in the last few years we delivered between €68 million and €74 million. By the end of this year, a total of €93 million will be delivered through schemes. That shows that in the few months of this Government,

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with the help of the Minister, Deputy Chambers, and the finances we have, we are delivering for the people.

There are backups and delays we have to work through to see, as I said at the outset, whether we can streamline the planning process to try to deliver faster for the people. I know too well what the Deputy explained today. I have seen it first hand in my town of Athlone. Now that the flood defences are almost complete in Athlone, I see the pressure that is off the people and what it does for businesses. It gives people quality of life. I look forward to meeting the Deputy in Kerry.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** By the time the Minister of State has finished that tour of Kerry and gets to Kilkenny, he will be exhausted.

**Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran:** I will ask my line manager if he will organise a helicopter because I have had so many requests today that I will be flying.

### **National Development Plan**

19. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation if he will ensure that the new national development plan sets an enhanced level of ambition for collaborative cross-Border public investment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39837/25]

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** The different cross-Border programmes have been important since they were first initiated by then Taoiseach, Albert Reynolds, in the mid-1990s. There were the PEACE I and PEACE II programmes and INTERREG programmes. As the Minister, Deputy Chambers, will be aware, the PEACEPLUS programme is very important for all the Border counties, north and south of the Border. I am particularly anxious that we build on the great potential of the PEACEPLUS programme and I hope the Minister will be able to implement even more collaboration and co-operation on an all-Ireland basis in future programmes.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** The programme for Government reaffirmed its commitment to the shared island fund and committed to increasing the resources available to the fund by a further €1 billion up to 2035. The shared island initiative is co-ordinated by a dedicated unit within the Department of the Taoiseach, with a focus on fostering co-operation and collaboration across the island of Ireland, aiming to build a more connected, sustainable and prosperous future. The initiative involves working with the Northern Ireland Executive and the British Government and is supported by significant investment from the fund.

Funding from the shared island fund is allocated by the Government to Departments and agencies to support the delivery of projects that implement programme for Government priorities on our shared island. These projects are developed and taken forward in co-operation with counterparts in Northern Ireland and focus on practical cross-Border collaboration in a range of areas, including key infrastructure projects, climate action, tourism, culture and research. In some cases, Departments operate programmes that offer grant and funding opportunities that are open to applications as part of the shared island initiative.

In addition to the shared island fund, as the Deputy said, the PEACEPLUS programme has a total value of €1.1 billion to fund projects across Northern Ireland and the Border counties of

Ireland until 2029. PEACEPLUS is co-funded by the Irish Government, the European Commission, the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive. PEACEPLUS is funding regional development projects across a diverse range of investment areas, including skills, education, transport, and socioeconomic regeneration. Investments include €165 million to support replacing the train fleet for the Enterprise service and €32 million for a cross-Border water quality improvement programme.

In my discussions at the European Council of Ministers, this plays an absolutely essential role for many Border counties and is central to our broader discussions in the context of EU funding to complement the work of the shared island fund.

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** I thank the Minister sincerely for his reply and the particular interest he always has in cross-Border projects. It is heartening that the shared island initiative has been warmly welcomed by people of all political traditions. Different projects I have been involved in, if they have been cross-Border projects, have been funded by the shared island fund, such as the UNESCO Cuilcagh Lakelands Geopark.

I had the opportunity recently to meet the Minister, Deputy Calleary, and Ms Gina McIntyre, the CEO responsible for the PEACEPLUS programme. The programme is being rolled out successfully and there are great plans to expand it. The funding allocated by the Irish Government, the British Government and the European Union is being put to good use for communities right along the Border. They are communities that need investment as they have suffered particular disadvantage. The programme is also building on the potential of advancing different projects on a cross-Border basis that would not be initiated on either side of the Border if the cross-Border dimension did not exist. I welcome the Minister's commitment to enhancing and even intensifying these projects on an all-Ireland, cross-Border basis.

**Deputy Jack Chambers:** I share the Deputy's ambition and focus on this critical investment to help to build peaceful and thriving communities. The fund helps to deliver economic regeneration and transformation across our island and empowers and invests in young people, embedding partnership and collaboration. The PEACEPLUS programme and the shared island fund have driven progress across many areas and we are seeing the manifestation of that capital investment in the deliver of infrastructure in some instances and also in important community projects. I met Ms McIntyre in some of my North-South engagement and I can see the critical impact the PEACEPLUS programme is having on many communities across our island. We want that work to continue and be complemented by the position we are taking with the European Union on the PEACEPLUS programme and the ten year trajectory we have set out from a capital perspective under the shared island fund to embed this funding stream for the future.

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** I warmly welcome the Minister's comments and his confirmation of his Department's co-operation with the Special EU Programme Body. In all my dealings with it over the years, Ms McIntyre and her colleagues have ensured that the best value is given to the taxpayer for the major investment that has occurred and that particularly disadvantaged communities benefit from that investment.



## Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

### Special Educational Needs

78. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Education and Youth the number of children identified by the NCSE by the February deadline who have yet to be offered a school place for September 2025; the total number of children now with a recommendation for a special class or special school place who have not been offered a school place for September; to outline her efforts to ensure that all children with additional educational needs will have a physical school place and the necessary SET, SNA and other resources and supports in place for September; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [40610/25]

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** Will the Minister tell the House the number of children who were identified by the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, by the February deadline and are yet to be offered a school place for September 2025? What is the total number of children now with a recommendation for a special class or special school place who have not been offered a school place for September? Will the Minister outline her efforts to ensure all children with additional educational needs will have a physical school place and the necessary special education teacher, SET, special needs assistant, SNA, and other resources and supports in place for September and will she make a statement on the matter?

**Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The NCSE is the national agency with responsibility for the provision of special education places. This year, the NCSE has sanctioned 407 new special classes for the coming school year, bringing to 3,742 the number of special classes in our schools. There are new classes in every county in Ireland and, with the number of special classes doubling in the last five years, this now means that there are more classes than ever ensuring greater numbers of children can access places, most importantly, in their local schools. Combined with 300 new special school places, this brings to 2,700 the number of new school places for children with special educational needs.

The additional capacity, together with the movement of children across existing classes, means that my Department and NCSE have created more capacity than required for the children known to the NCSE by the deadline of February 2025. The NCSE has advised me that outside Dublin all children known to it by the February deadline, who require a special class placement at primary and post-primary level have received a place. The NCSE is working intensively with the parents of a small number of children in the Dublin area who are seeking a special class or special school placement, and with the schools concerned to finalise the arrangements for the 2025-2026 school year.

In addition, the NCSE is working closely with parents who came forward after the February deadline to support them into available class placements. It will always be the case, no matter what deadline is put in place, that there will be children who do not meet it. We are therefore working actively to make sure those children have a place identified for them.

Asking parents to engage early with the NCSE when seeking a special placement has enhanced the NCSE's capacity to plan and make timely provision in local areas. Therefore, for the 2026-2027 school year we are asking families to engage by 1 October 2025 - four months earlier than this year - to support this planning further and allow the NCSE to sanction classes



much quicker. The NCSE will be actively communicating this requirement nationally.

An additional 768 teaching and 1,600 SNA posts were provided in budget 2025 to support schools in this endeavour and all schools have been notified of their allocations for the coming school year.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** The Minister will guess what my supplementary question is going to be. It will be the same as my initial question. It will be the same question that was put to John Kearney, the head of the NCSE, at the committee's meeting on 2 July, to the Minister of State at the committee's meeting on 18 June and to the Minister at the committee's meeting on 12 June and in the Dáil on the same day during Question Time. The Minister referred to 92% of the 3,275. What is the number? I recognise that progress is being made, but what is the small number for Dublin? In addition, what was the number post February? I can identify - I will raise this in the form of a further supplementary- children who have been identified and who were given recommendations post February.

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** Since we last spoke at the committee, significant progress has been made. Every week, the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and I, meet with the NCSE to make sure that more places are being offered. Just under 3,300, as I said previously, were notified before the February deadline. The number after that, to be honest, is changing. Every week, more children are coming to the attention of the NCSE. In the context of the February deadline, the majority of the children involved are being supported in placements in mainstream schools, with extra support, special classes or special schools, as necessary. Outside Dublin, places have been identified for children. A small number of allocations are still being made in the context of the enrolment process. Within Dublin, a very small number of special classes and special school places are being worked through. The number changes every time we speak. What I can say is that there are more places than there is need. That has been identified. That includes those who are coming forward. Our intention is that by September, every child will know where they are going and will have a place. That is what is actively being worked on.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I am frustrated on my behalf, as a public representative, and on behalf of parents who are waiting to places for their children. They feel like they are being gaslit because the figures are not being spelled out. They do not know where they stand in terms of the system. It feels like a co-ordinated *omertà* in the context of the failure to release those figures.

There are a number of legal cases against the State regarding children not being provided for. Not all of those cases relate to Dublin. The idea that everyone outside Dublin has been accommodated is not a fair reflection of the situation. The Minister might comment on that aspect.

An issue relating to Owenbeg National School in Sligo has been raised with the Minister on a number of occasions. A second class at the school was suppressed on the basis of the NCSE's assessment that there was no need for it. In fact, there are three children who received recommendations post February and a fourth child who really would benefit from a place in a special class. Will that be delivered by September?

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** I utterly reject the suggestion that parents are being gaslit. There has never been as much engagement with parents through the NSCE to support them. I accept that a small number of children still do not have their places. We are working on that. We will

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work all summer to make sure they have their places allocated to them. Parents and schools are being engaged with throughout all of this. The Department and the NCSE are working with schools. I acknowledge the many schools that are providing additional places, classrooms and capacity, even as we speak. The 400 new classes have now become 407. It is absolutely the case that in some areas where schools have been sanctioned for perhaps two classrooms, it is now one or even one classroom and it is not needed. That is simply on the basis that, in the context of the overall level need, a decision was taken that it was not necessary. That is not to say that next year a school might not be approved and, obviously, the classroom would open.

It is important that we are able to plan. That is why the deadline is there. It does not mean that children outside of the deadline are going to be excluded. If we have to put a structure in place to make sure that we have a good sense of exactly what the need is, where children should be and where their local schools are, however, that is the most important thing outside of all of this. We will be working all summer. The NCSE is working over the summer to make sure that every child will have their place for September.

*Question No. 79 taken with Written Answers.*

### **School Transport**

80. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Education and Youth the number of children who applied and paid on time who were refused places on school transport in September 2024; the specific changes that will be made to the school transport system in the 2025-26 school year, in comparison with 2024-25, to ensure that all children who want to avail of the scheme are accommodated; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [40611/25]

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** Will the Minister indicate the number of children who applied and paid on time who were refused places on school transport in September 2024? Will she outline the specific changes that will be made to the school transport for the 2025-26 school year, in comparison with 2024-25, to ensure that all children who want to avail of the scheme will be accommodated?

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan):** The school transport scheme is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education and Youth. In the current school year, more than 173,000 children have been transported daily in approximately 8,200 vehicles across 10,600 routes to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country.

In relation to the number of children who applied and paid on time and were unsuccessful in obtaining a seat in the 2024-25 school year, Bus Éireann has advised that 1,343 ineligible applicants, otherwise known as concessionary applicants, and 899 new applications for families of eligible children did not obtain seats. Ineligible applicants were for a mainstream scheme where a service existed. The families of eligible children were offered a remote area grant due to no service existing. Both groups comprise a total of 2,242 children for the 2024-25 school year.

Temporary alleviation measures will continue for the 2025-26 school year at post-primary level. A phased implementation of School Transport 2030 began at the start of the 2024-25 school year. This involved a number of pilot programmes held in conjunction with the National

Transport Authority, the Department of Transport and Bus Éireann.

A total of 14 pilot programmes were conducted in the 2024-25 school year. These will provide valuable insights into the impact of increased demand on the scheme, the potential for integrating public transport with school transport and opportunities to promote more sustainable modes of transport. It is intended to continue the current pilots for the upcoming school year.

Work is also under way to identify where further pilot programmes may be conducted. Implementation of the review's recommendations will continue to be planned, subject to the availability of resources.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** The Minister of State confirmed that 2,242 children were denied places last year. Many thousands more are forced to deal with Bus Éireann and the Department scrambling at the eleventh hour. There were 40,500 calls and 21,600 webchats with Bus Éireann last year in respect of the system. The system needs to be improved. There was a review. The fact is, however, that the Minister of State is choosing to ignore his Department's long-awaited review. The answer to the question I asked is that there will be no changes this year.

The major recommendation to encourage people onto school transport related to the distance criteria. Recommendation 4.1 A) states that the phased reduction of the nearest-school-distance criteria was due to start last year - this was to be matched with investment in the fleet and drivers - and was to be completed this year. The new distance criteria were to apply this year. Will this happen? If not, why? If it does not happen, will the Minister of State accept that children will be locked out of the system?

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** School transport is hugely important for every schoolgoing child at primary and post-primary level. When the school transport scheme was introduced, it was for families who may have been without transport. Now, it is because of working families. We need to make sure they avail of it and that there are enough buses for it.

There is an ambitious programme as part of School Transport 2030 to make sure we get more and more children onto the school bus service. This year, we will again have more students on the school bus service. We understand the importance of that. We will be working on the review of School Transport 2030 on a phased basis. The pilot programmes conducted in the previous school year are being assessed. They contain very important information to plan how we go forward. It is not possible in rural areas but in many other areas we will see whether we can integrate the school transport system for the greater benefit of the students and their families.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** We waited a long time for the review. To be clear, it stated that reducing the distance criteria would enable more children to be eligible for transport, increasing uptake and thus facilitating greater access to the labour market for working parents. This is mainly women. There are obvious benefits in terms of the environment, socialisation and meeting our climate action targets. The Government's target is a 30% reduction in private car escort to education journeys by 2030. To meet these targets and deliver on the recommendations, an additional 13,500 children need to be carried on school transport every year. That was supposed to start last year. The Minister of State is not doing this, so he is failing on every measure. Why is that the case? On a related point - and this will be a cause of great frustration and I expect there to be a full scramble again come the middle weeks of August - can this process

be commenced earlier next year?

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** I take the point on starting the process earlier. I always say that from 15 August it becomes school bus ticket time. A large number of tickets are processed every day by the Department and Bus Éireann. A great deal of work is being done on this. A lot of work has been done on the entire school transport system and expanding it. I take the point that a large number of students would love to benefit from it. Our aim is to try to get more students onto the school transport system. We are working within the resources available to us, and we are trying to make sure we are giving the best possible service in terms of the resources that are available. On some routes, there are issues with getting contractors and drivers. I take the point. It is April when people first go on and they then pay by 6 June. It takes a number of weeks for this to be done, but it is something we will look at.

### Departmental Strategies

81. **Deputy Jen Cummins** asked the Minister for Education and Youth for an update on implementation of the youth work strategy, opportunities for youth. [39687/25]

**Deputy Jen Cummins:** The opportunities for youth strategy for the period 2024 to 2028 outlines 18 priority actions to be delivered by the end of 2026, including the establishment of an interdepartmental group and a review of the Youth Work Act 2021. Will the Minister provide an update on the implementation of the strategy?

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** Opportunities for Youth: National Strategy for Youth Work and Related Services is the strategic framework for the youth work sector. It was published in September 2024. The purpose of the strategy is to provide a platform for an effective, data-driven and joined-up approach to the delivery of youth work and related services. The implementation of the strategy will be reported on via the Young Ireland governance structures. The implementation of this strategy, and the co-operation of all relevant actors, will be supported via a new national youth sector reference group, as well as a group with representatives from Departments and agencies that provide funding to, or interact with, the youth sector. This is being established. Importantly, this group will provide an opportunity for young people to engage. I have asked the Department, at the earliest opportunity, to make we reach as many young people as possible, in particular those who would not necessarily engage with structures such as this.

Since the transfer of responsibility for this matter to the Department on 1 May, I have included actions in the recently published education plan to bring forward these structures and have had my first meetings with the national youth organisations. I have met the umbrella organisations and had good engagement with them. They are very keen to ensure they have an active role in the implementation of the strategy. I am also keen that they have this active role. I have set out that the Department will revert to stakeholders in the coming period on draft implementation arrangements for the strategy, including consultation and the engagement structures.

Work is progressing well on delivery of several of the actions for which the Department has lead responsibility. We are still working on the full implementation plan, but the actions have not been paused. We are not waiting to move ahead. Under Action 7, a workforce survey was developed in late 2024 and disseminated to youth workers to establish baseline data and information. This data is being analysed at present. In March this year a questionnaire issued to youth organisations to provide the Department with a more in-depth understanding of the

challenges experienced by youth organisations in workforce recruitment and retention. These are coming through clearly from the organisations.

Under Action 8, departmental officials have begun work on a review of the UBU Your Place Your Space scheme. The review will assess how the scheme operates, the extent to which the scheme is meeting its objectives, and whether the processes and procedures that underpin the scheme are fit for purpose. Ten new UBUs will be supported this year and we are working through the applications we have received.

**Deputy Jen Cummins:** Youth work is indeed fundamental to our society. I stand here as a TD who came through youth work and youth theatre. I was a youth worker for a very long time. I see in my community the importance of youth work. Responsibility for youth has come within the remit of the Department. We very much need to keep it as a priority. There is a lot in education, and I would not like youth work, in all its guises, to be forgotten.

I would love to hear more about timelines. When we plan and do new things, there is a lot of consultation. It is great the Minister recognises that there is a recruitment and retention issue regarding youth workers. A large amount of work goes into applying for funding for youth work organisations, and it takes away from the work that youth workers can do on the ground. I would love to see the funding become multi-annual. Everything comes back to the young person. I would love to hear more about timelines from the Minister.

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** I acknowledge, as she has, the fantastic work done by our youth workers. So much of it is unseen, and it contributes. We have spoken here many times about challenges in school and making sure children are in school. Youth workers in particular support bringing people back to school and making sure they are happy and they are active. My role and my intention, now that youth is under the remit of the Department of education, is that we create these links and make them even stronger. I know it is something Deputy Cummins is passionate about, not only for DEIS schools and in disadvantaged areas but for young people. My objective through the youth strategy is that as many young people as possible have access to these services. There is often an assumption it is more urban areas or more built-up areas where young people need access to services. People living in the most rural part of the country might need access to a service. In the context of the new UBU services, my focus is to try to make sure we have a geographical spread.

I will be able to give Deputy Cummins timelines on the various stages of implementation once the plan is fully formed. We are actively working to make sure, between now and the end of when the strategy is set, that everybody knows what they are doing and what their timeline is and making sure, most importantly, that they stick to it.

**Deputy Jen Cummins:** When we know how well youth work works, we can see what happens when it is absent. In my community in Dublin South Central the Donore Avenue community centre burnt down four years ago. A number of voluntary and paid youth work services were based there. Their absence has meant more young people do not have constructive things to do, and this has led to antisocial behaviour and challenges. The thing about youth work is that it is something that is often unseen but when it is absent we know exactly what the level of need is. Given that it is July, youth workers throughout the country are doing trips. They are bringing young people everywhere and giving them great opportunities. As the Minister has said, I would love to see more young people involved. Traditionally, youth work was focused in disadvantaged areas. I would love to see every young person in Ireland who wants to access



a youth service to be able to do so. I look forward to working with the Minister and I thank her very much.

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** There is a body of work still to do on just this and identifying where are the gaps. This is separate work that is happening in the Department on mapping exactly where the services are and what types of services are being provided. This is so we can identify where the gaps are and link up better with the education portfolio and identify what resources are needed. I want to make sure current funding increases as much as possible. There is approximately €85 million between current and capital funding provided for our youth services at present. I want to see this increased, not only from the current perspective but also on the capital side. I think of youth organisations in my own county of Meath. They are doing phenomenal work but they are working in old buildings that were not made for this particular purpose and are not fit for it. It is important to support them to upgrade, modernise or identify new spaces, where possible. We must also make sure we have the workers. It is a really important objective of mine to use the workforce plan to identify not only how to attract more people into the profession, but also how to keep the really fantastic workers that are there.

### Special Educational Needs

82. **Deputy Roderic O’Gorman** asked the Minister for Education and Youth if children attending a school (details supplied) who have applied for a place in a special school and have a letter from the NCSE that they are entitled to such a place will get a place in one of the two new autism classes being established in the school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [40455/25]

**Deputy Roderic O’Gorman:** Two weeks ago, parents of children who attend St. Mochta’s National School in Clonsilla who have diagnoses and who have been approved for a place in an autism class were shocked to find out that, even though the school is opening two autism classes, none of their children was being offered a place. I have met the parents and the school leadership, as have other Deputies. A lot of work has gone on in the background on this matter. I hope the Minister of State has some good news for the school, the parents, the school leadership and particularly for six young children in Clonsilla.

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** I thank the Deputy very much for the question. The National Council for Special Education is the statutory agency with responsibility for the provision of special education places. The National Council for Special Education has sanctioned 407 new special classes for the coming year, bringing the total number of special classes in our schools to 3,742. Combined with 300 new special school places, this brings to 2,700 the number of new school places for children with special educational needs. This additional capacity, together with the movement of children across existing classes, means that the Department and the NCSE have created more capacity than required for the children known to the NCSE by the deadline of February 2025.

The NCSE has advised me that, outside of Dublin, all children known to them by the February deadline who required a special class placement at primary and post-primary level had received places. With regard to a small number of children in the Dublin area who are seeking a special class or special school placement, the NCSE is working intensively with the parents and schools concerned to finalise arrangements for the 2025-26 school year. In addition, the NCSE is working closely with parents who came forward post the February deadline to support

their children into available placements.

Notwithstanding this positive work, the Deputy will be aware of the ongoing challenges in securing sufficient special class places in the Dublin area. Legislation compelling schools to open special classes where they had capacity to do so was introduced in 2018 and has been used in the Dublin area. Since then, the legislation has been streamlined to allow for shorter timeframes in which to compel schools to open the required classes and this has been a factor in the NCSE's ability to secure agreement from schools to co-operate when asked to open special classes.

For the 2024-25 school year, the NCSE prioritised opening classes in medium or larger primary schools that had not yet opened a class. I will refer to the specific school the Deputy mentioned in my supplementary reply, if that is okay.

**Deputy Roderic O'Gorman:** The Minister of State knows how to build the tension. He has given us some general points but we are still on tenterhooks as to what is happening in this particular school. I believe the Minister of State has a little bit more to say, so I will allow him to complete his answer.

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** The NCSE is working intensively with the parents and schools concerned. The school the Deputy has referred to is one such school. The NCSE engaged with the school to secure agreement to open classes. The NCSE visited the school in September 2024 and, with the support of the school patron body, it worked to sanction two classes.

We can now confirm that the issues that were the subject of the Deputy's representation and those of others over recent weeks have been resolved for the school. It is my very clear understanding that all children, particularly those from within the school cohort, have now been placed within the school. I understand that agreement has been reached between the Department, the NCSE and the school authorities to that effect.

**Deputy Roderic O'Gorman:** I thank the Minister of State. I welcome that clarification. He spoke about intensive work having taken place around the country to support the opening of new classes. I know very intensive work took place between parents, the school leadership team, the principal, the deputy principal and the chair of the board of management over the last two weeks. I have met parents, as have other Deputies. I thank the Minister of State because I know he made an intervention as well. I want to acknowledge that.

It is important to say that, while the NCSE is working very hard to open new autism classes, it dropped the ball here. It is not acceptable that children in this school who had diagnoses and who had a letter stating they were entitled to a class would watch other children get places in newly opened classes while they did not. It has always been Government policy that children deserve an appropriate place. I know there is pressure here but has something been learned from the experience of St. Mochta's?

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** It is very important to be fair to the NCSE, the Department and ourselves. A deadline of February was put in place. Parents needed to make contact by that deadline. We worked to those figures. A number of children have come forward post the February deadline in recent weeks. We are actively engaging with those families and with schools in their communities to ensure children are accommodated in appropriate places. A decision was made a number of months ago and the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and I, having engaged with the Department and the NCSE, have moved the deadline for families, guardians and schools to

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make contact with the NCSE to identify children who will need special classes back to 1 October for next year. That will give us a better sense of the challenges that will be faced in the next school year. It is important that we have this information earlier so that we can make sure we have places available. We will be giving certainty to families prior to Christmas this year. We intend to make sure we get at this earlier.

## Irish Language

83. **Deputy Ryan O'Meara** asked the Minister for Education and Youth if she will consider introducing a three-week mandatory Gaeltacht course for every student studying Irish at leaving certificate level; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [40612/25]

**Deputy Ryan O'Meara:** I will touch on the inability of so many Irish people to converse in our national language on leaving secondary school after 14 years of education. This is obviously something a lot of people talk about but I am concerned about whether we are actually addressing it and enhancing the ability of all of us to communicate as Gaeilge. Will the Minister consider introducing a three-week mandatory Gaeltacht course for every leaving certificate student studying Gaeilge?

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** In line with the 20-year strategy for the Irish language, my Department is committed to improving the teaching and learning of Irish in primary and post-primary schools. I share the Deputy's concern. We all went through school and would like to have better Irish than we do. While there are no plans to make attendance at a Gaeltacht summer course mandatory, my Department is mindful that we need a flexible approach to giving students opportunities for immersive experiences in the Irish language outside of school. These must take into account the needs, preferences and geographical location of students. As someone who attended Gaeltacht courses numerous times when I was younger, I see the many benefits they have for our young people. I support the provision of activities through Irish outside school hours.

I intend to publish an action plan for Irish in English-medium schools and commence its implementation. This builds on the work of a new unit established within the Department in 2024 to support the teaching and learning of Irish in schools that function through English. The plan is built on the structure of our earlier Gaeltacht plan, which has really enhanced and strengthened the teaching of Irish in our Gaeltacht regions. I want to make sure that the plan for the teaching of Irish in English-medium schools is just as successful.

In consultation with relevant organisations, my Department is exploring how children's and young people's use of Irish outside of school can be facilitated through increasing awareness of the opportunities currently available, encouraging student participation in these activities and extending these opportunities, where possible. We are particularly focusing on making it fun and enjoyable and ensuring it does not feel like a challenge, as it is for many children in school.

With regard to Gaeltacht summer courses, my Department's inspectorate provides advice and monitors and reports on matters relating to teaching, learning and general quality. The Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht supports and promotes Irish language summer courses in Gaeltacht regions in a number of ways. Under scéim na bhfoghlaimoirí Gaeilge, the Irish language learners scheme, a subsidy is payable to qualifying Gaeltacht households providing accommodation for students attending Irish language courses.

*11 o'clock*

**Deputy Ryan O'Meara:** After 14 years of education, it seems like the whole purpose is to get to the leaving certificate exam and to get as many points as possible out of it. That is the sense among a lot of students when they leave school. The instant the oral is over and the paper is written, they feel they are finished with Irish and stop practising it. The love of it and the whole point of why they are studying it have not been introduced.

I am concerned about the NCCA proposal to reduce the Irish oral exam to 35% from 40%. It should be going in the opposite direction to 50%. When students leave after studying Gaeilge for so many years, they should have a confidence in speaking Irish, similar to the way students who, after five or six years studying German, French or Spanish, would be confident to attempt a conversation in those languages. Enhancing the oral exam on that side would be a very positive thing.

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** I mentioned a strategy that was currently being developed. The plan is to finalise that in the coming weeks. It builds on extensive consultation that took place at national and school stakeholder levels between January and May of this year. We met almost 200 participants at a national level and over 500 participants at school level. The consultation showed that, exactly as the Deputy pointed out, children and young people wanted to be able to speak Irish. They wanted to be able to speak it outside of school as well.

It is important that we have a multifaceted and flexible approach to giving students different opportunities for immersive experiences. The only way to learn a language is to be immersed in it and listening to it, speaking it and hearing it. That is not what happens in our schools, except for Gaeltacht schools, Gaelcholáistí and Gaelscoileanna. The action plan is looking at how we can create that for young people.

Separately, the review of the leaving certificate is happening at the moment. While the specifications for Irish have not been finalised, that work is under way. We have to look at the changes that took place at junior cycle level. We have to learn from those, identify what has worked and what has not worked, and make sure any changes to our leaving certificate senior cycle curriculum encourage, support and make Irish enjoyable for our learners. That is what I have asked the objective to be.

**Deputy Ryan O'Meara:** The Minister has lined up my final point perfectly in terms of immersive experiences. Gaeltacht courses for student teachers are free for primary teachers but are costing post-primary teachers about €2,000 when they have to do them. It has been raised with me numerous times in Mary Immaculate College in Thurles by the staff and particularly by the students there. It is an obstacle for students when they are looking at a course or considering what subjects they would like to teach at the end of their college educations. It is an extra financial barrier that they would not have to face if they chose business, maths or something else. I have asked a good few times why the post-primary teachers cannot get that free course while the primary teachers can. The answer coming back from the Department is that they have other options, namely, they could go to a Gaelcholáiste or do different things. As the Minister just said, though, the immersive experience is by far the most beneficial. We need to look at offering free fees for summer Gaeltacht courses for post-primary teachers.

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** The Deputy is right that the current requirement for the mandatory tréimhsí foghlama sa Ghaeltacht, the Gaeltacht learning periods for primary initial teacher

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education programmes, is the two-week placement. This is outlined in the Teaching Council's policy, entitled "Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education". The funding was provided for that in budget 2020. The grant rate is set at about €845 per placement and the cost is about €2.3 million. That is not something that has always been in place and the fund was not available previously but it has now been provided for.

Any provision of funding for post-primary teachers would have to be negotiated through the budget. I fully take on board the Deputy's point. If we want young people to have that immersive experience, their teachers need to get the best training possible at every level, not just at primary level. We must make sure that our post-primary teachers have that access as well. It will have to be considered in an overall budgetary context.

### **Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions**

*Question No. 84 taken with Written Answers.*

### **Special Educational Needs**

90. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Education and Youth to provide an updated list of all primary and post-primary schools that have been sanctioned for an ASD class for the 2025-26 school year. [39382/25]

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** I want to ask in particular about the schools in which these works are ongoing but yet to be completed and by which a letter of suppression has been received.

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** The NCSE is the statutory agency with responsibility for the provision of special education places. The NCSE has sanctioned 407 new special classes for the coming school year, of which 398 are autism special classes while three are autism early intervention classes. This brings to 3,742 the number of special classes in our schools. The NCSE has advised my Department that an updated list of these classes is available on the NCSE website and I am also happy to share this list with the Deputy.

Combined with 300 new special school places, this brings to 2,700 the number of new school places for children with special educational needs. This additional capacity, together with the movement of children across existing classes, means that the Department and the NCSE have created more capacity than there were children known to the NCSE by the deadline of February 2025.

The NCSE has advised me that, outside of Dublin, all children known to it by the February deadline and who required a special class placement at primary or post-primary level had received a place. For a small number of children in the Dublin area who are seeking a special class or special school placement, the NCSE is working intensively with those parents and the schools concerned to finalise the arrangements for the 2025-26 school year. In addition, the NCSE is working closely with parents who came forward post the February deadline to support them into available placements.

This year, in order to ensure new special classes could open as quickly as possible for the 2025-26 school year, the NCSE prioritised work with medium and larger primary schools that



have available accommodation but do not have an existing special class. This approach maximises the use of existing space that can be reconfigured efficiently while also ensuring that new provision continues to be established.

The increased number of schools with special classes provides parents with greater choice and will also reduce the distances that some children are travelling to access a special class place. This will remain a priority for the 2026-27 school year.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** I cannot accept what the Minister of State has said to me. I know what he has said to be untrue. I am happy to share information with him after this session. I have stood in a school in Athlone - Scoil na gCeithre Máistrí - that was approached by the NCSE to open a second ASD class. I stood in the classroom. The plaster was drying on the wall when the letter of suppression came in from the NCSE. That class had three enrolments already. I am not saying the Minister of State is the reason behind this but what he has said does not have any credibility. I have physically stood in the classroom. I have a copy of the letter of suppression here in front of me. It was sent to the school on 3 July. It is dated 4 June. In the interim, on 8 June, that school was told to continue to go ahead with the works that were being undertaken for the ASD class. I am happy to share this with the Minister of State. I have sent in parliamentary questions and the answer I got back was less than satisfactory. It referred to “some amount.” I have approached the NCSE but it has not come back to me with any details.

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** I assure the Deputy that the figures in relation to the number of classes being opened around the country are correct. On the individual school the Deputy mentioned, I am very happy to take the details from her after the session and I will work with her to try to get a satisfactory conclusion to it. I have no difficulty in doing that. I have to say that the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and I have done significant work on this over the last number of months. We have had weekly meetings with the NCSE and the Department to make sure we have special classes and places across the country to accommodate the need that was identified and is continuing to be identified. In some of the schools, we have been working to try to find resolutions to it. I would appreciate if the Deputy could give me the sequence of letters she has referred to and I will take the matter up.

There is an awful lot of work being done. I thank all the school communities across the country who have been so accommodating. A lot of them have bent over backwards to make sure they are opening special classes. I will discuss the specific issue with the Deputy after the session and try to get clarity.

**Deputy Sorca Clarke:** There are good working relationships 99% of the time between schools and the NCSE when it comes to opening ASD classes. The same can be said for this specific school in Athlone, which already has an ASD class in its Gaelscoil. However, the Minister of State is familiar with the 2022 document entitled “Autism Good Practice Guidance for Schools”, which clearly states that autistic students who attend Irish-medium schools should be taught through Irish, as this is the language in their school environment. I also have a copy of correspondence that clearly outlines that the NCSE strongly indicated to this school that its ASD class should be run through English. That is not acceptable. This is a Gaelscoil; all classes are taught through Irish. The NCSE has no right or authority to call into question the ethos of any school. I would put this in the same category as anybody walking into a school operating through another religion or a non-denominational school and asking it to change its ethos. It is simply not on.

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**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** I have some personal experience of Gaelscoileanna and Gaelcholáistí that opened special classes, and they would be taught through the medium of Irish. What the Deputy has said has been brought to our attention before by people, but it is clear that it is whatever the medium is in the school, in this case the medium of Irish. Some of the schools operating special classes are hugely successful and the school ethos is important. I take that point. If a special class is opening in a school taught through the medium of Irish, that class should be taught through the medium of Irish. That is clearly understood, certainly by me, and it should be understood by everybody. I will follow that up internally, but the point is well made.

### **Schools Building Projects**

85. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Education and Youth the status of school building projects across Cork county of which her Department is aware, in tabular form; the stage of the process they are currently at; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [40175/25]

87. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education and Youth if she will provide a list of all capital projects currently underway in Cork city and county, in tabular form; the stages the various projects are at; the amount of capital estimated and spent on each project to date; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38583/25]

**Minister for Education and Youth Deputy Helen McEntee:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 85 and 87 together.

My Department has a strong track record of delivery. Since 2020, we have invested more than €6 billion in our schools throughout the country under the national development plan, involving the completion of more than 1,400 school building projects. It has provided almost 100,000 additional and replacement school places, significantly increased provision for special education and has upgraded and modernised our school infrastructure with new science laboratories, technology rooms, home economics rooms, multimedia suites, mainstream classrooms, special education tuition rooms and special education classrooms. The impact of this will be felt in communities right across the country. This includes more than 80 school building projects, approximately 57 completed special schools delivering more than 300 new classrooms, modernised school accommodation, more than 1,000 new classrooms, and modernised accommodation for SEN provision built in mainstream schools.

Since 2020, the total capital investment in County Cork schools is in the region of €715 million. This has delivered more than 150 large-scale, additional accommodation and modular school building projects and includes 12 new school buildings. Currently, there are close to 50 school building projects under construction in Cork. There are also more than 170 school building projects in County Cork in the pipeline. These are at various stages of design, of which 19 are for new school buildings. The pipeline includes school building projects in six special schools, of which three are new school buildings, delivering more than 100 new classrooms and modernised school accommodation along with more than 160 projects delivering new classrooms and modernised accommodation for SEN provision in mainstream schools. My Department also announced the opening of a new special school for the coming school year that will be based in Carrignavar and open initially on an interim basis in a Gaelscoil in Fermoy.

Additionally, there are more than 80 small-scale school building improvement projects either under construction or in the pipeline in County Cork at this time, through climate action, emergency work and summer works schemes. Within Cork city specifically, 11 projects are currently under construction, with 42 projects in design phases. This includes seven new school buildings along with 28 smaller scale improvement projects in the pipeline.

The position on individual projects evolves all the time as they advance through various stages. However, Deputies and the schools themselves can look at the status of these different projects, which are set out on the Government website. This is updated on a regular basis to reflect project progress through the various stages of capital appraisal, site acquisition, design, tender and construction. The Deputy will appreciate the ones I have mentioned. However, given the volume of information across a large number of projects, many of which are delivered on a devolved basis by individual school authorities, if the Deputy would like more specific information, I can provide it after today because there is quite a long list there.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I thank the Minister and I would appreciate a list in writing. The reason I asked the question was not to come in here to backslap and say we were all doing great. I taught for 15 years. I was deputy chair of Cork ETB for five of those, and the rate of capital expenditure has been phenomenal in the past number of years, particularly in Cork. That has to be recognised. We have seen projects in my constituency like the new special school in Carrignavar, which the Minister referenced. I think Scoil Mhuire gan Smál in Blarney cost in the region of €80 million. The biggest school campus in the country is in Carrigtwohill in my neighbouring constituency of Cork East. These are massive infrastructural projects. The boards of management and school managements in those circumstances have fought and worked hard for them.

I raise this question because I am looking at voluntary boards, boards of management and school principals that do not necessarily have the expertise. I know the powers are devolved and they get a team to work with them. I think it is worth a rethink in how we do these projects because these people do not necessarily have the expertise, yet they take so much upon themselves and there is pressure with that. Will the Minister register that in her response?

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** I acknowledge the significant work that goes into any construction project. I acknowledge that, for a lot of principals in schools, this does not happen overnight. It takes many years of initial working with the Department to get that approval, identifying the design team, and going through the design stages and the various pieces of work that have to happen. Insofar as possible, the Department's objective is always to support the school. Where there is an ETB, a huge amount of work is often devolved to the ETBs, which identify the design teams. Where that is not the case, there is a structure within the buildings unit in the Department to help identify the design team, support the principal and board of management through the process and make sure as many projects as possible can be delivered.

There is always the need to work within the budget we have. While we have had significant investment taking place for the past number of years, there are 4,000 schools across the country and many of them are old and need upgrading. We also know that, while the population is decreasing in some areas, it is continuing to increase in others. We need to make sure we are still building new schools and creating more capacity. That is exactly what is happening in Cork, not just in primary and secondary, but also in the significant number of special schools that are being developed.

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Insofar as possible, the Department endeavours to support principals, but we are open to any other proposals or suggestions as to how we can improve that working with schools.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I recognise that the Department is always proactive in my engagements with it. As an educator, though, I have concerns, and the Minister may have touched on something there. Cork ETB has a skill set that many voluntary schools would not have. While all schools are not under the patronage of Cork ETB, it has a specific set of skills. It might be worth considering in future that large-scale projects could use the local expertise in the various ETBs across the country.

I remember teaching in a school a decade ago. The Minister might recall that the Sammon construction company had a number of projects in the country at that time, but it collapsed. Our school was 90% complete at the time, but because of difficulties surrounding that situation, we were left looking out the window of the old school at the new school that was nearly finished. We could not go into it for two and a half years because we could not get certification. That is just one example of some of the pressures and demands placed on boards of management. Whether they are equipped or not to deal with those specific situations, they will require the expertise and leadership of something like the ETB.

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** We had a similar scenario in my constituency with the same company where there was a school almost built. I am pleased to say that, similar to the Deputy's own, the school is built and the students are there. It is a fantastic complex for them.

We always need to look at how we can improve the structures that are there. There is certainly a level of expertise within our ETBs, but also within the Department. Our principals and boards of management also have a certain level of expertise, but their job is not to build projects. My objective over the next number of years is to make sure we can provide as much support for our principals as possible, whether it is administrative support or easing the burden of some of the work they are now expected to do and that they perhaps would not have done in the past, while they are, at the same time, managing and, in our smaller schools, also teaching in some cases.

Where we can, we will increase the resources and supports available to our teachers. At the same time, we will make sure the resources and expertise of the Department, in particular the buildings unit, are made readily available to our schools when they are needed. As I said, this is not about back-slapping but it is important to stress that a huge amount of work is happening. Obviously, that is work done by the Department working hand in hand with many of the schools, principals and boards of management.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Deputy John Connolly will ask Question No. 86 on behalf of Deputy McAuliffe.

### **Special Educational Needs**

86. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Education and Youth the number of sanctioned classes nationally for children with additional needs, as announced earlier this year; the number hoped to be operational in autumn 2025 in the Dublin North-West constituency; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [40000/25]

**Deputy John Connolly:** Deputy McAuliffe has asked a pertinent question that is relevant to his constituency but in which I think we all have an interest. It is to ask the number of sanctioned special classes for children with additional needs, as announced earlier this year. The pertinent part is Deputy McAuliffe's request for the number of such classes it is hoped will be operational in autumn 2025.

I have raised with the Minister and the Taoiseach the challenge in filling teaching positions. A Department payroll review highlighted 1,200 vacancies in the primary sector during the last term of the school year. I see a great challenge in filling these positions. I ask for an update on that.

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** I thank the Deputy for his question and Deputy McAuliffe for his interest in this matter. I thank both Deputies for their continuing interest in education. It is hugely important that it is brought to the fore in the House. Education is a hugely important part of everyone's life, so it is hugely important that we strive to get it right.

The National Council for Special Education, NCSE, is the statutory agency with responsibility for the provision of special education places. As I alluded to earlier this morning, there are over 407 new special classes sanctioned for the coming school year. The NCSE does not hold information on special education provision broken down by constituency, but I can say there are 103 new special classes sanctioned for the 2025-26 school year across Dublin, including 81 at primary and 22 at post-primary level. An updated list of these classes is available on the NCSE website, and I am also happy to share this information with the House and the Deputy. Combined with the 300 new special school places, this brings to 2,700 the number of new school places for children with special educational needs.

This additional capacity, together with the movement of children across existing classes, means that the Department and the NCSE have created more capacity than children known to the NCSE by the deadline of February 2025. The NCSE has advised me that outside of Dublin, all children known to it by the February deadline who required a special class placement at primary and post-primary level have received a place. For a small number of children in the Dublin area who are seeking a special class or special school placement, the NCSE is working intensively with the parents and schools concerned to finalise the arrangements.

On the specific issue the Deputy raised, of the special classes that have been sanctioned, over 80% involve a reconfiguration of existing capacity within school buildings. We have sanctioned 407 in total, and it is hoped they will all open. However, I will get the information the Deputy requested to him as a matter of urgency.

**Deputy John Connolly:** I am always conscious when we are discussing this topic of the review that was undertaken of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act recently. The research that went into that highlighted clearly that the term "additional needs" is preferable to "special education". I am conscious of that and that my language should be more appropriate.

I very much welcome the recent announcement by the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, that training in teacher training colleges will now include a period where the teacher will undertake teaching practice in a classroom for children with additional needs. That will enhance the standard of the teachers being produced.

To return to the first point I made, I am concerned there will not be sufficient teachers in



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September to fill the additional 400 places that have been developed through the Minister's efforts for classes for children with additional needs. I say that in light of recent data from the Department showing there are already a large number of vacancies in the sector. That is reaffirmed by data provided by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, INTO. It is a great concern of mine, and schools are concerned by that as well.

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** The review of the EPSEN Act was very important research. I commend all those who helped with the review. Launched recently, it provides very good information, including on additional needs.

Teacher and SNA recruitment is kept under constant review by the Department. Many of the boards of management of schools and education and training boards are conducting interviews in these weeks to fill vacancies. Teachers also get additional training. It is important to note that many great teachers are coming through the colleges and going into the education system. We have to be very mindful of the possibility that there will be teacher shortages in future. We are working to keep that under review. Boards of management and the Department are working to ensure that staff are in place.

**Deputy John Connolly:** I concur with the Minister of State on the quality of the teaching personnel who are being produced by our teaching colleges. I just think we need more of them. We genuinely need to review that. There are gaps and vacancies that will not be filled in September. I am concerned about that and I think we need to expand the number of teacher training places.

I will bring two other points to the floor for discussion with the Minister of State, one being the categories of classes for children with additional needs. The Minister of State and I had a meeting about this yesterday with parents from the Down Syndrome Ireland Galway branch who are concerned that there is not a sufficient number of the different categories of classes for children with additional needs being provided. In County Galway, for example, there are only two classes for children with mild general learning disabilities. County Galway is the second largest geographical county in the island. It is not fair that children have to travel extensive distances to attend the appropriate class.

I am sure the Minister of State will be aware of the review conducted by the inspectorate of the admissions policies of primary and post-primary schools for autistic children and young people. That review expressed some concerns. In its findings, the inspectorate used the term "concerning", and the main concern was that policies in some schools, if they were implemented as written, could prevent children with the greatest level of need from accessing a place in a class for children with additional needs.

**Deputy Michael Moynihan:** We have had many discussions in recent weeks. The Deputy mentioned the deputation from the Down Syndrome Ireland Galway branch who were here yesterday to discuss mild general learning classes. ASD classes are opening across the country based on the need being presented. We have to be mindful of children with other additional needs and ensuring they are accommodated within the school system. That point has been well made by groups throughout the country and it is one we are very conscious of and keeping under constant review.

On the issue of admissions and the inspectorate report, my understanding is that a circular was issued after that review. It is important that the admissions policy is kept constantly un-

der review because it will enable children to get into schools. We need to put an awful lot of thought into it in future as well.

*Question No. 87 taken with Question No. 85.*

### **Energy Conservation**

88. **Deputy Barry Ward** asked the Minister for Education and Youth the position regarding the percentage of eligible schools that have completed or commenced work to install solar panels under the free scheme for schools; if she will consider providing funding to allow private schools to take part in this scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38827/25]

**Deputy Barry Ward:** My question is about the free solar panel scheme for schools, how many schools are in the scheme in progress and whether it can it be extended to private schools.

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** The schools photovoltaic, PV, programme provides eligible schools with up to 6 kW peak of roof-mounted solar photovoltaic installations on their roofs, which equates to approximately 14 solar panels. The schools PV programme is funded by the Government's climate action fund in line with the Government's recognition that taking action on climate change is central to Ireland's social and economic development. It is assisting schools in reducing their energy costs and, most importantly, carbon footprint as part of the response to meeting the 2030 and 2050 climate action plan targets for the schools' sector.

The overall programme will see up to 24 MW of installed renewable energy provision on schools, with associated savings in the region of €5.5 million per year across the 4,000 schools. The installation of solar panels directly assists schools to reduce their carbon emissions and energy costs, while also educating pupils and the wider school community about the benefits of solar technology. Since the launch of the programme in November 2023, 85% of schools, or 3,300 schools, have progressed to tender stage, with 92% of those, some 3,020 schools, so far approved for funding. This is a high rate and a significant number of schools that have gone past the early stages. To date, 44% of eligible schools, or 1,713 schools, have confirmed their installations are complete. I have been in many of these schools and while they are at an early stage, they anticipate their bills will reduce. We are hoping to see a significant cost reduction for them.

The Department's overall approach for projects delivered under the school building programme is to focus on the needs of primary and post-primary schools in the free scheme. This approach reflects how fee-charging schools have an additional source of income which is often not available to schools in the free education scheme. The scheme is funded by the Government's Climate Action Fund which comes within the ambit of the Department of Climate, Environment and Energy. I am open to exploring, with my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, the possibility of recognised fee-charging schools that are perhaps unable to afford solar panels from their own resources coming within the scope of the schools PV programme, which is due to finish in 2026. There is time to engage with the Minister to see if there is a way it could be extended to the schools I mentioned.

**Deputy Barry Ward:** I thank the Minister and am delighted to hear her answer. I welcome this scheme; it is a great one. Even the rate of take-up the Minister outlined is impressive and is key to meeting our climate targets. It allows schools, as much as the rest of society, to address

their emissions and reduce their carbon footprint.

The Minister said fee-paying schools and private schools, and we must remember that not all private schools are fee-paying, may have access to fees that non-fee paying or non-private schools do not have. While I accept that, at the same time, if we are committed to this scheme as one that will reduce carbon emissions and our dependence on fossil fuels and allow us to get more renewable energy and, therefore, benefit the whole country, should it not be rolled out automatically to all those schools, rather than deciding that if one school takes in fees, it is ineligible or to parse the scheme in those terms? If the scheme works - and it clearly does - and it reduces emissions and our dependence on fossil fuels, then surely what is good for the goose is good for the gander and it will be good for all schools.

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** I agree fully with the Deputy. We should be getting to a situation where all our schools and public buildings have solar panels, insofar as is possible. This will feed into our overall reduction and climate targets but also will support our schools in reducing their costs. This is one of the biggest challenges we currently face in making sure we identify ways schools can reduce their costs.

It is heartening and welcome to see that 93% of the schools that are able to access the scheme have already expressed interest and a significant number of those are moving to tender phase. Less than 50%, which is still a high number, are at the stage where solar panels have been installed. I would like to see if we can expand the scheme further. As I said, we might look initially at fee-paying schools that cannot afford to install solar panels. That ranges from smaller to larger schools and they are not just in the Deputy's constituency but in other parts of the country as well.

I will engage with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, as the scheme is funded through his Department. It would be for the Minister to decide as to how it could be expanded but I am open to working with him and Deputy Ward to see if we can do that.

**Deputy Barry Ward:** I am very grateful to hear the Minister is open to the expansion of this scheme. I appreciate what she has said. I believe the take-up would be strong among all schools if the eligibility criteria were extended. I understand entirely that no resource is infinite and the Government has to spend money where it is needed most. I welcome the Minister's commitment to engaging with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, on possibly expanding the scheme before its conclusion.

There is a danger we perceive private schools as being schools with lots of money. The Minister will know there are many private schools, particularly those that address a minority need, whether a religious or other need, that charge fees but are not wealthy schools. The patrons, parents and families of those schools are not necessarily wealthy. They may be fee-paying or private schools but they still have limited resources. If this scheme is to work well, it should be rolled out to all schools.

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** I accept what the Deputy is saying. It is not always the case that a fee-paying school has infinite resources. However, it is the case that some schools do have the ability to pay for this. It is about looking at the resources we have and ensuring everyone can benefit from the changes which will not just help support our climate objectives but also help reduce costs.

In the time I have left, I will outline what exactly is being funded under the programme to

date. Schools will fund up to 6 kW of roof-mounted solar PV - approximately 14 solar panels - and all associated inverters and cabling to connect to the panels of the school's mains distribution board. Monitoring software is also provided to each school to allow review and discussion of the energy generated each day for the staff and students. As I said at the outset, this is an opportunity for the students to learn and understand what exactly is happening. Minimal enabling works required to enable completion of the installation are also funded on a case-by-case basis. Additional items such as access provisions, minor enabling works to existing electrical infrastructure and connection to the grid are also included to allow unused solar energy to feed into the grid from schools when closed, which is really important because we are coming into the summer period. Schools are closed now so it is important they can feed into it.

To the Deputy's specific point, I will work with him and engage with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien.

*Question No. 89 taken with Written Answers.*

### **Mental Health Services**

91. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Education and Youth if she will provide an update on the progress of the €5 million pilot programme of counselling and well-being and mental health supports for the academic years 2024-25; to provide a breakdown of the progress in Cork in particular; if there are plans to expand the programme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [40008/25]

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I ask the Minister for to provide an

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** I thank Deputy Burke for raising this matter. This is an important pilot programme that has been rolled out.

My Department is committed to supporting the emotional well-being of our children. In 2023, the establishment of a €5 million pilot programme of counselling and mental health supports for primary schools was announced. In budget 2025, the pilot received additional funding which has allowed it to continue into this year. It is broken up into two different strands.

Strand 1 is the provision of one-to-one counselling to support small numbers of children in schools. These are in counties Cavan, Laois, Leitrim, Longford, Mayo, Monaghan and Tipperary. We have panels of pre-approved private counsellors in place to provide counselling and there are currently 45 counsellors available. In the 2023-24 school year, more than 2,800 counselling sessions took place and 371 children – I am pleased to say - availed of counselling provision. In the 2024-25 school year, which has just finished, more than 5,600 counselling sessions took place and at least 653 children have availed of counselling provision. Again, it is really wonderful to see those numbers increase.

Strand 2 of the pilot is the establishment of education well-being teams to support 78 schools in cluster areas in Cork, Carlow, Dublin 7 and 16. To date, 20 education well-being practitioners have been recruited. Five education well-being practitioners provide weekly support to the 20 schools in the Cork strand 2 cluster. The focus of the support provided is on strengthening whole-school preventative approaches. This includes the provision of psycho-educational support for parents and teachers and the provision of early intervention on an individual and

group basis to children with mild to emerging need using low-level therapeutically informed approaches. The schools received a payment of €2,000 to promote and support well-being-focused initiatives among their school communities.

The pilot is being externally evaluated. On strand 2 in particular, which applies to Cork, there has been really positive feedback from the schools, parents and children involved, giving support to the schools so they can support every single child. While the one-to-one counselling is really important here, there is positive feedback from the broader practitioner work that is happening.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I thank the Minister and welcome the success of this scheme. I am concerned, however, about whether it will continue. On Monday last, I met with Barnardos in Knocknaheeny in Cork where a programme is based. As the Minister will know, Barnardos total budget for the year is approximately €15 million. It gets €12 million through Tusla and there is a shortfall of approximately €3 million, which it is challenging. Barnardos does similar projects and meets a number of people to give support to children who are going to school and giving support to parents. I very much welcome this programme is in place and hope it continues. I ask the Minister to outline what the intentions are in respect of rolling it out to the areas I represent in Cork city. What are the long-term plans for this whole area? This is an essential programme, especially the provision of support to parents.

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** I agree with Deputy Burke that any way in which we can provide support to our students at any age or level should be welcomed. It is my intention to continue the work on strands 1 and 2 in the areas under the pilot scheme, to put this programme in place as quickly as possible and to try to expand it further. That comes down to measures and what can be achieved in the budget, and this something I will be working on over the coming weeks with our colleague, the Minister, Deputy Chambers. I do see the benefits of it. While, as I said, the evaluation report is still under way and will be completed by September, we are already getting really positive feedback. What we must ask is whether we are rolling out both strands, where there is the direct, one-to-one counselling, or whether it would be better to roll out the broader supports being provided through the well-being practitioners. It is then about ensuring we have the staff to do it. While we have 45 counsellors under the first panel and the strand, to expand this across the whole country would obviously be greatly intensive in terms of just identifying and finding the practitioners to do it. All this must be evaluated and looked at, but it is certainly something I am open to looking at.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I ask those in the Public Gallery to please leave quietly. I call Deputy Colm Burke.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I thank the Minister. One of the issues I raised concerned Barnardos and the work it is doing. These are two separate programmes, but this is about co-ordination and working together. It is extremely important that this happens. The work the Department is doing means it has now acquired a great deal of expertise. It is the same with Barnardos and what it is doing. It also has a large amount of expertise. It is about pooling it and delivering a comprehensive service in areas and giving support. I must compliment the Department on the amount of work it has done in this area. In real terms, while it is spending €5 million, it is a huge saving in the long term for the State. All these projects really benefit the children and families and the State in the long term in respect of assisting people at a very early age.

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** I agree with the Deputy regarding the importance of being able to



support young people early, especially where we know issues are emerging. It is crucial, most importantly, to the young people, but also to our society as a whole. I agree with the Deputy as well that it is important that in the evaluation, we are looking at the work of those in strands 1 and 2, but perhaps also at how they are also working with other organisations. I will check to see that this is a part of the evaluation because it is really important all the different strands, organisations and agencies are working together and collaborating insofar as possible. This is certainly something I will do.

This is a pilot for our primary schools but important work is also happening in our second schools as well and this is something that is more nationwide. In addition to the counselling pilot, my Department, in partnership with Jigsaw, which we all know is an extremely important organisation in our communities, has a national programme of mental health and well-being resources and training for post-primary schools known as Neart. It is being rolled out. I only officially launched it at the beginning of my term - I think it was in March or April. At that stage already, because it had been available to schools, there was a really high take-up by schools. In one of the schools in my area, I was able to see the benefits it has had already where students engaged with the programme and who were then able to give peer-to-peer support - transition year students with first year students. A great deal of good work is happening and we obviously want to see this expanded.

*Question No. 92 taken with Written Answers.*

### **Departmental Schemes**

**93. Deputy Edward Timmins** asked the Minister for Education and Youth further to the roll out and installation of solar panels in schools, if there are plans to work the ESB in relation to prioritising schools for installation or adjusting the payment rate for schools without smart metres to sell electricity back into the grid (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [40201/25]

**Deputy Edward Timmins:** A little over a year ago, as the Minister knows, the Government started to roll out a scheme of supplying free solar panels to schools. This is a very worthwhile initiative. However, there is a problem. Many schools do not have smart meters, which means they cannot sell excess electricity back to the grid. This installation is taking way too long. I know of a school that will not get a smart meter until 2028. Many schools are now only getting 25% of the electricity generated as a credit, whereas they should be earning much more. Can the Government work to improve the time for installation by the ESB?

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** I thank the Deputy. The schools PV programme is funded by the Government's climate action fund in line with our recognition that taking action on climate change is central to our social and economic development. It is assisting schools in reducing their energy costs and carbon footprint as part of the response to meeting the 2030 and 2050 climate action plan targets for the schools' sector.

The schools PV programme, as the Deputy said, provides eligible schools with up to 6 kW peak of roof-mounted solar photovoltaic installations on their roofs, which equates to approximately 14 solar panels. The overall programme will see up to 24 MW of installed renewable energy provision on schools, with associated savings in the region of €5.5 million per year across the 4,000 schools. The meter replacement programme is being delivered by ESB Net-

works in co-operation with the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, and all electricity supply companies.

Schools can apply online to the ESB for a smart meter, which may see the ESB prioritise them for early 2028 installation. Currently, the type of meter in the school referred to by the Deputy is not being replaced until 2028 under the phasing of the ESB smart meter programme. In the meantime, the school will receive an estimated or calculated rebate from their supplier without a smart meter. This estimated export is calculated by ESB Networks. The estimate is based on the size of a school's solar panel system, how much energy it typically produces and how much of that energy is likely sent to the grid. All this information is then used to calculate a fair estimate of how much electricity the school exports.

Taking into account what the Deputy said about the timeline, while there is a system in place to try to mitigate the gap until the meters will be installed, I have asked my Department to engage with the ESB to see if there are opportunities to prioritise smart meter installations in schools so we can try to move this timeline forward. I am very happy to engage with the Deputy and the ESB to see if we can do things faster and move things along. Schools can also access competitive electricity and fuel rates through the Office of Government Procurement, OGP, frameworks. Currently, the electricity supplier offers a microgeneration export rate of 21 cent per kilowatt-hour for electricity exported to the grid.

**Deputy Edward Timmins:** I thank the Minister. The schools are currently given a 25% credit at, say, 18 cent per kilowatt hour. The schools are closed most of the year. Their generation during this time is huge, and more so since they are closed during much of the peak solar times in the summer. The other issue is that the 10 kW roll out is too small for many schools. They require a much greater coverage of solar panels. I am not saying that larger systems should be fully funded, but they should be supported to some degree, for example, to 50% or 75% of the cost. This will save schools large amounts of money. A small 10 kW system is not appropriate for a large school. We should have a programme appropriately sized for the schools. The one-size-fits-all model is not the best way.

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** This is something that has been brought to my attention before in some of the schools I visited, especially in larger schools, where I have been asked whether they could get more solar panels for all the reasons the Deputy outlined, including to help to reduce costs and ensure the system is appropriate to the scale and size of the school. The scheme's structure was put in place some time ago. I have been informed that the 6 kW peak was specifically chosen so the grid connection process is covered under ESB Networks process, which is the NC6 inform-and-fit notification process, unlike the others called the NC7 and NC8 mini and small-scale generator connection processes. There are no additional costs for schools under this process and there are no grid restrictions limiting export. These were the reasons I was given as to why this was set out, but again, I am happy to engage with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien. Looking at the scheme, it has been rolled out very well and many schools have applied for it but, at the same time, there is still a year and a half to go until the scheme is finalised. It would be a welcome opportunity to sit down with the Minister and look at how it is being rolled out, how effective it is and if there are changes that could potentially be made along the lines the Deputy suggested.

**Deputy Edward Timmins:** On a related matter, this programme can help with the running costs of primary schools. Schools have severe financial difficulties. Many schools are in

deficit. I have seen how the ancillary grant, for example, does not cover the cost of caretaking. Could this be increased to match the cost? Additionally, I believe we need to look at increasing the capitation grant further from the new rate of €224 per child. The Parliamentary Budget Office has said it would cost approximately €40 million per annum to increase the amount to €299 per child.

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** There are two objectives to the installation of the solar panels. The first is to help us to achieve our targets and ensure the schools and the Department of education play their roles in helping to achieve our 2030 and 2050 targets. Second, this is also a real opportunity for us to help to reduce costs for the schools. Many of the schools have just installed solar panels, the 44% that are already there, so it is too early to tell how much of a benefit it will be for them, or what reduction will be seen, but it is certainly estimated that around €5.5 million will be saved across the schools' estate once all the solar panels are installed. Obviously, the more we can provide and the further we can reduce the costs for schools, the better and this is certainly an objective in terms of the capitation and the ancillary supports. It is obviously my objective, and that of the Government, to ensure we continue to increase our supports for schools where they are needed and to look at other ways in which we can reduce costs, with solar panels being one of them. I mentioned before that we need to look at the issue of insurance and how much schools are paying for it and if there is a way we can work to reduce that cost too, so we are not just giving extra money but reducing costs at the same time.

### **School Curriculum**

94. **Deputy Edward Timmins** asked the Minister for Education and Youth if there are plans to review the transition year programme to include practical life skills as part of the compulsory requirement across all schools: personal legal rights, household management, personal finance, taxation and social welfare and the driver theory test; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [40202/25]

**Deputy Edward Timmins:** We have a great secondary education system. It is one of the cornerstones of our success as a nation. However, given it is largely academically-based, we need to look at ways of bringing life skills to our children that will better prepare them for the real world. In particular, I refer to the transition year programme. This is a great programme which offers students an opportunity to learn new skills. Can it be extended to cover more aspects of daily life that will benefit our children as they enter adult life?

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** Transition year is a valuable programme for students that offers opportunities to develop future life skills for personal, social and academic development and to experience other aspects of adult and working life. Transition year can bring a unique and important value in the life of students.

Each school designs its own transition year programme, within set guidelines, to suit the needs and interests of its students. In establishing its own distinctive programme content, schools are advised to take into consideration students' needs, parents' views, employers and the wider interests of the local community.

As part of the redevelopment of senior cycle programme, a new transition year programme statement was published in September 2024, which provides schools with a framework for developing their own bespoke transition year programmes.

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Over the 2024-2025 school year, all schools had the opportunity to audit their current transition year offering and revise it, where necessary, in line with the updated programme statement. The new programme statement now applies to programmes commencing in the next school year, 2025-2026, across all schools.

Sixty thousand students will avail of transition year. There is a real opportunity, which had not existed in the past, to make sure that what they are doing in that time is as effective and supportive as possible for them, and in some of the ways the Deputy outlined.

The programme statement sets out four student dimensions as the core foundations upon which transition year programmes should be designed. The four student dimensions centre on personal growth, being a learner, civic and community engagement, and career development, respectively. The being-a-learner dimension, in particular, offers the opportunity for schools to offer additional learning experiences to transition year, TY, students, including life skills and literacy and numeracy initiatives.

The programme statement continues to offer schools a significant level of autonomy while placing more structure on the design of transition year programmes.

What would be helpful, at this stage, given it is a new statement for transition year and that so many more students are doing it now, is that there would be a review at a certain point to see exactly what type of programmes and what type of modules schools are using, how effective they are and how students are responding to them. That could inform any changes that might need to be made.

**Deputy Edward Timmins:** I will mention in particular some items that should be included, for example, knowledge of finance and how to manage finance. This is important as it affects everyone. It should cover understanding of income tax and all other taxes. It should also educate about loans and mortgages and explain the difference between different types of loans. Second, it should include legal education and understanding of one's legal rights. It should also include how the political system works, how democracy and elections are conducted and the difference between Departments and local authorities. It should also educate our young on the political systems all over the world and the whole are of critical thinking.

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** I fully support what the Deputy is suggesting, in that we provide students with life skills. These are skills that we all need at certain stages, whether moving into our own home, setting up a new business or exploring different opportunities. Transition year, in a way unlike the rest of the curriculum, is a real opportunity to be able to explore those different avenues.

There is a set of guidelines but it is still open to every school to choose whether or not they could apply those certain type of modules that the Deputy has mentioned. Until we have a full review and see exactly how schools are now applying the new structure and system, we will not be able to see exactly how many are partaking in some of those areas.

I will ask my Department to look at how we can review the changes that are taking place and get a better understanding of what type of modules the 60,000 students are taking up, how effective they are and whether there is more that we can do to encourage these type of modules in the transition year programme.

**Deputy Edward Timmins:** I will list some other items but the list is not exhaustive. Many

schools run the mini-company programme in conjunction with the student enterprise programme supported by the local enterprise offices but this programme is only offered to a limited number of students in schools. Could we offer a programme to all students on the following: the skills and steps required in setting up a business; the driver theory test; online safety and the risks and benefits of the online world; and communication, including both verbal and written skills? People who have real-world experience in the above-mentioned areas could contribute to many of these programmes. They could also offer an element of mentoring to young people and bridge the gap between the school and world they live in and the realities they will face when they become adults.

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** First, in terms of driver theory but, more broadly, road safety, it is something we really have to focus in on for transition year. Last October, there was collaboration between my Department and the Road Safety Authority, RSA, where they developed a specific programme, Road Safety Matters. It was launched to help students become safer road users. The programme, which has been developed by the RSA, is also supported by An Garda Síochána and officially sponsored by Irish Public Bodies Mutual Insurances. This is specifically for transition year students. It is specifically acknowledging that there is maybe greater flexibility in the time available to support students in understanding the rules of the road but, most importantly, making sure they are safe drivers when they go about their theory test and when they start to drive. They learn the importance of sharing the road, developing the knowledge and skills and values and qualities to prepare them as road users as well. In the past year or so, while we have made significant progress in reducing the number of road deaths, we have started to see an incline in the other way. The earlier we can engage with young people to make sure they are use roads safely, the better.

More broadly, on the issues the Deputy raised around the life skills, we have a real opportunity now that nearly every student is able to avail of transition year to make sure they are learning real practical skills. The review that I have mentioned will, hopefully, identify where that is happening.

### **Information and Communications Technology**

95. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Education and Youth if she recognises that the introduction of one-to-one digital policies in schools can put an impossible financial burden on some parents; the measures she is taking to support parents and students who are unable to afford digital devices in one-to-one digital schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [40113/25]

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** Decisions regarding the use and deployment of digital technology in schools is a matter for the board of management of each school in the context of their digital learning planning. It is very much open to the schools to decide how they adopt and change. Schools are advised to consult with members of the school community, including parents, when planning any introduction of digital technologies. It is important that a school, if it is deciding to move to iPads or certain technologies, that it engages with parents first and make sure that whatever it is doing is affordable.

The Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027 was published in 2022. It is underpinned by funding of €200 million over the course of the strategy to support its implementation, which was committed to under the national development plan.



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The most recent tranche of funding of €35 million issued to all recognised primary, special schools and post-primary schools in May 2025. To date, €135 million of the €200 million has been paid out. This funding is directly to support schools, whether in buying laptops, ICT PCs or any other types of equipment.

The funding issues directly to schools, as they are best placed to determine the needs of their own students and have autonomy to do so. It can be used to fund ICT infrastructure, as required in the schools, but also can provide for loan schemes for devices for students as appropriate.

I recognise that the back to school costs on parents can place real financial pressure on families. We need to make sure that we are providing as much support as possible.

Schools are becoming more digital. They are becoming more technology focused. While there may be a slight contribution from parents, we need to make sure as far as possible that we are providing the funding. Since 2015, €325 million has been provided. Obviously, my objective is to make sure that the remainder of the committed €200 million is provided for in the next two years and that under a new NDP we have further ICT support being provided.

There is an opportunity as well, with the roll-out of the free books scheme, where there is money left over in schools. Where there is a changeover, books are coming back and they do not have to buy new books, schools can also use that fund for digital technologies as well. I accept we are at the early stages and that is not necessarily available to them, but we are trying to provide as many supports as possible.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** I have heard the response repeatedly. There needs to be an acknowledgement by the Minister and within the Department that there are two things happening here. The first is a funding crisis in our schools overall. There is a massive shortfall. There is an expectation, because the Government is saying it will not bring in a cost-of-living package, that next year will be worse than this year. The second is a shift towards digital technology. It is not small money. In some cases, it is €800 over two years. There are parents who simply cannot afford that. The suggestion that the funding the Minister provides, which is wholly inadequate to cover the running costs of schools, can be used to provide a loan scheme for parents is simply detached from reality. We need a bespoke response for these parents.

The Minister has seen the Irish League of Credit Unions report yesterday in terms of the high cost of going back to school. In fact, the cost is increasing.

*12 o'clock*

Notwithstanding the positive moves on back to school, there needs to be a bespoke response for the small number of parents who are completely exposed to these costs.

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** I will give an example. For a 100-pupil primary school, €4,533 is allocated. For a 500-pupil school, the amount is €14,665. For a post-primary, there is a basic grant of €2,000 plus €30.40 per mainstream student. It is not the intention that schools will be buying iPads every year or that every student will need to use them at every stage of the school day. It is to make sure the school has enough technology in order that every child has access to them at different stages. The €325 million that is being provided will continue to be added on. We will get to the point where schools have the technology they need, including whiteboards and TVs, after which it is funding for replacements that is being provided. I want to ensure that schools have clarity on when they will get the grant. A sum of €35 million was announced this

year. For next year, I want schools to know when they will be getting it. They need to know they will get it at the same time the following year in order that they can plan ahead. This is about providing resources so that schools will have them. They do not need to be replaced or bought new every year. That is what we are working towards.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** The Minister and I share a constituency. She must be aware of what is happening and she must have been contacted. Earlier, she referenced a school that is moving to digital. I have been contacted by parents with children in that school and by parents across the State who have been part of a consultation but whose opinion is not reflected in the policy of the school. They simply cannot afford new digital devices and they are really exposed. Notwithstanding that they have been pointed towards the credit unions or other financial supports, they simply cannot afford this additional cost. It is simply not true to say that the school should provide a loan for them or that the funding the Minister is providing will provide a solution. It is not providing a solution for these parents. There needs to be a recognition of that and dedicated support for them.

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** We have dedicated support and funding for schools, with a commitment for €200 million over the lifetime of the strategy. Through the NDP and the next strategy, we will commit even more funding. Some €325 million has been invested specifically to provide technology in our schools, recognising that is how things are going and that technology is a really positive part of how children learn. I am absolutely committed to ensuring that we continue to support our schools and that they have the technology and equipment they need. We will reach the point where schools will no longer have to replace the technology they have, where they will have all the equipment they need and where this top-up funding will essentially make sure that every new student is able to avail of what is available.

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### **Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions**

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Níl dabht ar bith go bhfuil níos mó agus níos mó teaghlaigh ar fud an Stáit ag streachailt agus iad ag iarraidh íoc as billí leictreachais agus billí gáis. Ag an am céanna, tá an Rialtas ag caitheamh leis seo mar is go síleann sé go bhfuil géarchéim na gcostas maireachtála thart cheana féin. Tá sé ag diúltú pacáiste costas maireachtála a chur ar fáil i mbuiséad mhí Dheireadh Fómhair. Tá sé ag ullmhú chun na faoisimh fuinnimh atá ansin a bhaint de dhaoine agus iad ag brath go mór orthu. Tá sé sin scannalach.

Workers and families are being hammered by rip-off electricity and gas prices. Households have been hit with some of the highest energy costs in Europe, forking out far above what people in other countries are paying. Figures published this morning by the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities, CRU, lay bare the hard realities that folks face. The number of households in arrears on their electricity and gas bills has jumped by 70,000 in the past year. This means that over 300,000 households are behind on their electricity bills and over 175,000 are behind on their gas bills. The Tánaiste should let that sink in for a moment. Today, as the Dáil breaks up for the summer, hundreds of thousands of working families cannot meet the bills for heating and lighting their homes. That is disgraceful. Is it any wonder, particularly when we have seen their bills shoot up by hundreds of euro in recent years? Families simply cannot

absorb this type of shock to their finances. Now, the Government's plan is to cancel the energy credits that they so desperately need and have relied on.

The Government has dug in and continues to refuse to agree to have a cost-of-living package in October's budget. Those on fixed incomes are at greater risk of poverty and need greater support. This ever-worsening cost-of-living crisis has widened significantly. More families and working people are struggling to get by. Even families with two incomes coming into the house find it harder than ever to keep up with the bills. The out-of-control prices that people are being forced to pay right across the board are pushing households to the brink. They can forget about keeping their heads above water. Many families are wondering how they stop sinking even further. It is not lost on these families that as they are hammered by rip-off prices in respect of electricity and gas, energy companies are recording bumper profits. The ESB recorded operating profits of over €1 billion in 2023, with the figure for last year very close to that again. SSE Airtricity made hundreds of millions of euro in profits in the past two years. These companies are laughing all the way to the bank while working households are being taken for a ride.

These are the people the Tánaiste claims to understand. He told the *Sunday Independent* at the weekend that he understands what working families are going through and that he gets it. If he genuinely got it, he would understand that runaway electricity and gas bills are putting massive pressure on households. If he genuinely got it, he would do something about that. He would understand that the pressure is going to crank up even more in the autumn and winter when families are putting on their heat and lights earlier and leaving them on for longer.

The Government's plan to unplug energy credits in the budget will push more and more working families to the brink. How many more households have to go into arrears before it sees there is a need to act? There are 300,000 households unable to pay for their electricity and 175,000 unable to pay their gas bills. Does the Tánaiste really get it? The Government just cannot swan off for the summer break and leave people in the lurch with stress and uncertainty. It needs to introduce a cost-of-living package, continue with energy credits and tell workers and families that it will not cancel the help they rely on to pay these massive energy bills this autumn.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. First, let us very clearly acknowledge that there is a real problem in this country when it comes to energy prices. The facts are clear in relation to that, which is why we called this out very clearly in our programme for Government and acknowledged the pressure increased energy costs place on households and, indeed, businesses. We are seeking ways to lower those prices while also accelerating the pace of the development of renewables. That is why we have established a new national energy affordability task force to look at the structural reforms we can undertake in this country to reduce the cost of energy and electricity. It is expected to come back with an interim plan to look at issues relating to energy efficiency upgrades, the social protection supports we have a place, CRU customer protection measures and further efforts we can provide to incentivise tariff switching with the savings that households and consumers can make in that regard.

I want people at home to know that we are taking measures in the here and now to assist them with the cost of living. Indeed, we are also taking measures in the here and now to specifically assist people with energy. Let me share details of some of those. The measures are being taken right now. For example, in the past week or so, over 221,000 children received the back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance. That is helping many of the households the Deputy referenced. From September every child who goes back to primary school or second-

any school will receive free schoolbooks. That is helping households with the cost of living. General measures, such as every primary school child getting free hot school meals, reducing school transport fees and rolling out free GP care, all have an impact in assisting households with the cost of living in the here and now.

Specifically on energy, on coming to office, the Government took a rapid decision to extend the 9% VAT rate on gas and electricity. This was a real, practical measure to help people with gas and electricity bills. We put in place a 40% reduction in the renewable electricity public service obligation levy. That will also save people money on their electricity bills. We have significantly expanded the fuel allowance in order that thousands more people, particularly older people, will qualify. They will not have to wait for the budget. That will happen from September. From then, more people will receive the fuel allowance than ever before. Compare that to the controversy we have seen with our nearest neighbours where they are talking about cutting fuel allowance payments. We are expanding them. For people who get into real difficulty, we have a social welfare system that also gives exceptional needs payments. I want people to know that. That is available for people who experience a particularly difficult bill as well. I know Deputies will know that through their offices. These are just a number of the measures we are taking in addition to reducing childcare costs, increasing student grants from September and increasing public sector pay, which will again increase on 1 August.

**Deputy Cathy Bennett:** Unbelievable.

**The Tánaiste:** Please do not paint a picture that nothing is happening to help people in the here and now.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** Not enough is happening.

**The Tánaiste:** There is an air of unreality about Deputy Doherty's contribution today and many of the contributions we have had during this Leader's Questions slot over the last number of weeks. Being very honest with the people of Ireland, one would have to go back a long, long time to find a summer recess-----

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** Being honest with the people of Ireland?

**The Tánaiste:** Deputy Doherty probably does not need Deputy Hearne's help. One would have to go back a very long time to find a summer recess in which we have seen a moment of greater economic uncertainty, yet Deputy Doherty does not want to talk about trade, he does not want to talk about tariffs and he does not want to talk about the 48,000 people who work in pharma in this country. He does not want to talk about global uncertainty. He has never seen something he does not want to spend more money on but we have to be honest with the Irish people. We cannot keep saying "spend, spend, spend". The Deputy talked about working people and working families. Does he know what I am going to do? Make sure they can keep working-----

**Deputy Cathy Bennett:** Keep paying taxes.

**The Tánaiste:** -----by protecting their jobs at this dangerous moment. We will support families but we will also support the economy, something the Deputy does not like talking about very often.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** At least we can put that debate to bed; the Tánaiste does not get

it. He simply does not get it. The Tánaiste stood there and the unreality-----

**Deputy Noel Grealish:** I hope we do not get it if it is what the Deputy is saying.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** The facts are staring the Tánaiste in the face. He talked about what the Government was doing in terms of energy. Did he not see what the commission released today? Does he know how many people are going into further debt or cannot pay their energy bills since January of this year? In four months, it has increased by 63,000 households. That is since this Government came into office. This means that, for the first time, we have 300,000 households that cannot pay their electricity bills and 175,000 that cannot pay to heat their homes with gas. The Tánaiste stands there as if he gets it. He does not.

There needs to be a cost-of-living package in this year's budget. The Government needs to introduce energy credits. What the Tánaiste has said here and the signal he has sent to those families who, under this and the previous Governments, cannot pay their bills is that they are on their own.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Conclude, Deputy Doherty.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Energy credits have to be delivered in this year's budget. Otherwise, that is the message the Tánaiste is sending people. There needs to be a cost-of-living package. Yes, we understand there is instability but there was also instability in the last number of years. We have a surplus at this point in time and the Government is happier to provide €186,000 to landlords as a tax credit than actually support people to heat their homes and keep the lights on.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

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

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** The Government has all the wrong priorities. It should introduce a cost-of-living package-----

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

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** -----because what is happening under its watch is nothing but scandalous.

**The Tánaiste:** I presume I will get the few extra seconds, too. If the Deputy genuinely believes that the economic challenge facing our country this summer is the equivalent to moments of economic challenge over the last couple of summers, I really worry for his level of economic literacy. If he genuinely thinks-----

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** What about Covid?

**The Tánaiste:** -----that this situation with tariffs, trade, pharma and global uncertainty is the same as it was last summer, come on. He is better than that.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** I did not say that.

**The Tánaiste:** The Deputy did. The record-----

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Is the Tánaiste suggesting the pandemic was not an issue?



**The Tánaiste:** Deputy Doherty spends a lot of his political career standing up and saying the Government does not get it, it does not understand, it is out of touch. Does the Deputy know what I know? I know who owns SuperValu.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**The Tánaiste:** It is not an American multinational. I know who owns SuperValu.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** The Tánaiste did not know how many Covies there had been, though, did he?

**The Tánaiste:** It sponsors the GAA. It sponsors Tidy Towns. It is in-----

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Its profits went up 39% in the last four years. Its profits went up.

**The Tánaiste:** -----towns and villages across the country. It is a proud, Irish company. The Deputy thought it was owned by an American multinational and he wants Paschal Donohoe's job? He wants Paschal Donohoe's job and he does not even know who owns SuperValu or cannot even use Google? Give me a break.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Its profits went up 39%. He did nothing about it. He did nothing about it because he has no answer.

**The Tánaiste:** Give me a break, Deputy. Does he know who had the answer? ChatGPT. Paschal Donohoe or Pearse Doherty. We know who we want running the finances.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Order, please.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** The Tánaiste has no answer. Pathetic.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Quiet, please.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** People looking in on this debate today will have their heads in their hands.

**The Tánaiste:** Here we go.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** They are worried about putting food on their tables and turning their lights on. We have this kind of behaviour going on. I do not think either of the Deputies gets it, to be honest.

**The Tánaiste:** I do not need this sort of lecture from the Deputy.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** There are economic clouds on the horizon and there is a growing sense of worry about what the future holds. Coupled with that is a lot of frustration with the Government's moralising about this budget. Having splashed the cash in an attempt to buy votes last year, its message has suddenly changed. Now that an election is no longer on the cards, one-off payments are a bad idea. The Social Democrats told the Government that last year. We told it to invest in sustainable measures that would assist people and their long-term futures. We told it to target the measures and target supports for people. It ignored us. It proceeded with a giveaway budget that was a cynical piece of electioneering. Fine Gael likes to style itself as a party of fiscal probity, giving lectures to the public about the importance of counting pennies, but the reality is it has been throwing public money around like snuff at a

wake. The Government's spending in a few short years has increased by nearly 50%. In 2020, it cost €70 billion to run the country. We have gone from spending €70 billion to nearly €110 billion this year, €40 billion more in the budget. What do we have to show for it? We have a housing crisis that is spiralling out of control. We have record homelessness. We have disability services that are threadbare. We have soaring levels of child poverty. We have a cost-of-living crisis that is escalating and we have energy and water infrastructure that is crumbling.

The reality is this Government is an epic waster. It has wasted time, opportunity and a generational opportunity to invest in a better future. It has wasted our money. That is why people feel so let down. They feel disillusioned. They listen to the Government pat itself on the back for its prudent financial management while they struggle with the very basics. They struggle to keep a roof over their heads, their electricity on and food on their tables. The public services they need are just not there for them.

I ask the Tánaiste to please spare us his lectures about careful budgetary planning. The reality is this Government has been reckless and feckless. It talks about the importance of infrastructure as if that has suddenly dawned on it. While Uisce Éireann warns it will run out of capacity for new homes in Dublin in three years' time, we are on course to have zero off-shore wind generation by 2030 and our electricity grid is on the verge of collapse.

Fine Gael has been in government for 14 years. I know the Tánaiste will probably stand up and try to blame the Opposition for his problems and mistakes because that seems to be the *status quo*. When will the Tánaiste take responsibility and what will he do in the budget that will actually make a real difference for people?

**The Tánaiste:** I do not blame the Opposition for any of the challenges the country faces. I just blame it for its hypocrisy. The Deputy gave out there about the one-off payments. Last year, I asked her interim leader to name one of them he did not want. I will ask Deputy Whitmore the same as well. Is it the parents in Greystones and Delgany who should not have got a double child benefit payment? Did the Deputy not want that? Did she not want the one-off additional payments to the pensioners in County Wicklow? None of the Deputies had the courage to tell me last year which of the one-off payments he or she did not think people wanted.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** Yes.

**The Tánaiste:** I offer Deputy Whitmore that chance again. Tell me which one-off payment in the social welfare code last year she is against and that the Social Democrats do not want. Was it the child benefit payment? Was it the carer's payment? Was it the fuel allowance? Just let us know because the Social Democrats would not last year. They were happy to vote in favour of them all and their offices were happy to assist people in getting information on all of them as well.

We have this thing about a united Opposition going on - or at least, I think we did. It cannot yet agree on a presidential candidate, so that is test No. 1. Now, it cannot agree on crucial budgetary matters either.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The Government cannot agree either.

**The Tánaiste:** Deputy Doherty is-----

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** We are doing a party solution.

**The Tánaiste:** It is different, okay. There is talk of a united Opposition. They are all out there on the plinth-----

*(Interruptions).*

**The Tánaiste:** Sorry, the way this works is I am asked a question and I get a chance to answer, please. A united Opposition-----

*(Interruptions).*

**The Tánaiste:** I am allowed answer the question, am I not?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** And I try to keep order, just in case.

**The Tánaiste:** We all know our roles. That is useful. The main Opposition party has asked for universal one-off measures. The Social Democrats have asked us not to do that and to do targeted measures. I am telling the House that this Government will deliver a budget in October. We will set out the parameters of that budget in the summer economic statement, which I expect to be published next week. There will then be an opportunity to debate how best to get the composition of that right. I agree with Deputy Whitmore on this. We need to invest in key areas of infrastructure. She is right about the challenges that Uisce Éireann faces. She is right about the enabling infrastructure. Deputies will see from Government in the revised national development plan next week a very significant increase in capital investment. It will enable a significant upward shift in investment in water, energy, housing and areas under pressure from a supply point of view like childcare and disability services. It is not about giving anybody a lecture on fiscal prudence. It is about saying thank God we are approaching this moment of economic instability with full employment, surpluses and, effectively, rainy-day funds. We have stood up in this House many times and people - not Deputy Whitmore, in fairness - have criticised my party and the Government for setting money aside for economic rainy days. That is looking like a better decision by the day. I agree we need targeted investments in infrastructure. The one-off measures served an important purpose at a time of extraordinarily high inflation but we made it very clear to the people in the election that, if returned to government, we were getting back to one budget each year and there would be space and capacity in that budget to make progress on many issues the Deputy and others would like to see progress on.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** In response to the Tánaiste's question, the Social Democrats would absolutely not have spent over €100 million on energy credits for holiday homes. We repeatedly said that. I do not know how anyone could justify that payment. The Tánaiste talks about Wicklow. I will tell him what people and families in Wicklow want. They want the same as families all over the country. They want to know their children, when they grow up, will have a home they can afford. They want to know if they have elderly parents and those parents need hospital care, there will be a bed available for them. They want to know that if their children have disabilities, there will be services and supports provided to them. They want to know the Government, the State and public services are sufficient and will meet their needs. The reality is that does not happen. Ireland is a wealthy country, yet so many pieces of our infrastructure and public sector just do not work. Where has all that money gone? Where has the Government invested it? We have never had as much money come into this country as over the past 14 years and we have very little to show for it.

**The Tánaiste:** I do not agree with that analysis at all. Absolutely, we have seen a significant increase in public spending and that has provided record numbers of new school places, record

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numbers of special schools and record numbers of-----

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** Homelessness.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** -----people working in our public services. It has provided record levels of investment in the public service and the things Deputy Whitmore talked about.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** There are 120 children in Wicklow town who do not have a primary school place for September.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Allow the Tánaiste to answer, please.

**The Tánaiste:** There is a constant attempt to interrupt. We had it the first time I answered the question and are having it the second time. I am trying to answer the question. I have one minute available. We are investing in public services and have put that money to good use. It is seen in communities across the length and breadth of our country. I have stood beside the Deputy at many a ribbon-cutting in County Wicklow where that money has gone.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** Actually, you have not.

**The Tánaiste:** In constituencies across the country, we have seen the benefit: new schools, Garda stations, new healthcare facilities, primary care services, expanded public transport. We have invested lots of money but we have more to do, including getting to 300,000 more homes; investing in our health, particularly infrastructure around elective hospitals; and access to therapy services. The decision my ministerial colleague, Deputy McEntee, has taken to set up a new national education therapy service will be transformational. The national development plan next week will show the people of Ireland the measures we intend to take to keep our country safe and to invest in our competitiveness and in key infrastructure.

**Deputy Roderic O’Gorman:** Last Thursday Deputy Ahern raised the issue of climate with the Tánaiste. In response the Tánaiste said:

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.

I agree with the Tánaiste. One thing we should not be doing is appointing a climate denier to lead out on the new EU 2040 climate targets but that is exactly what Fine Gael MEPs voted to do last Wednesday. Last week the European Parliament was considering the process for the EU setting its 2040 climate targets. The Patriots for Europe group - the group of Viktor Orbán and Marine le Pen - managed to get appointed as chief negotiator for the policy. That group proudly declares on its website that it calls for abandoning the European Green Deal, so we have climate change deniers setting the 2040 targets. The Greens in the European Parliament led a vote to stop this but the European People’s Party - the party of Fine Gael and the Tánaiste - supported allowing climate deniers set the 2040 targets. What is more, three of the four Fine Gael MEPs - Regina Doherty, Nina Carberry and Seán Kelly - voted to allow this happen.

Globally, we are at a crucial time in our fight to lower emissions. Critical negotiations will take place during COP30 in Belém, Brazil in November. We are all very aware of the position of the new US Administration. That is why the leadership the EU has demonstrated over so many years is so critical. Who leads out on setting the EU climate targets has never been more important. That is why the vote of the EPP and the three Fine Gael MEPs could not have come at a worse time. I have a simple question for the Tánaiste: does he think it is a good idea that a

climate denier is leading out on the EU's 2040 climate targets? What will he do about it?

**The Tánaiste:** I do not, but I do not particularly think it is a good idea that Sinn Féin chairs the Joint Committee on Defence and National Security either. Sometimes that is way things work out in terms of the division of responsibility.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** That is disgraceful. That is scandalous.

**The Tánaiste:** Am I allowed to have a view?

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Scandalous.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** Get back into your playpen.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Allow the Tánaiste to answer the question.

**The Tánaiste:** What is scandalous about me having the view that I would rather Sinn Féin did not hold that position? What is wrong with that?

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** That is a slur on Deputy Conway-Walsh and this Chair.

**The Tánaiste:** As Deputy O'Gorman will know, I am allowed to have a political view.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** That is disgraceful, calling the integrity of a Member of this House into question.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** Sure you do it all the time.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Will the Tánaiste please answer Deputy O'Gorman?

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** The Tánaiste should withdraw that comment.

**The Tánaiste:** I have no-----

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** That is a disgraceful comment against Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh-----

**The Tánaiste Leo Varadkar:** I have no intention-----

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** -----who is not here to defend herself. It is an absolute slur. It is a cheap stunt because the Tánaiste does not want to answer the questions.

**The Tánaiste:** I do not believe Sinn Féin should chair a committee on national security. It is not a shocking position for the leader of Fine Gael to hold that I do not think Sinn Féin should be anywhere near national security. I will continue to hold that view and I will work day and night to make sure it never is.

**Deputy Paschal Donohoe:** Disgraceful.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Tánaiste, you are currently dealing with Deputy O'Gorman.

**The Tánaiste:** That point I am making to Deputy O'Gorman is this. I understand the rapporteur positions on European parliamentary committees are divided up, if not quite by a d'Hondt system by a system reflecting the various strengths of parties in the Parliament. Fine Gael only has one MEP, I think, on the environment committee. It is Seán Kelly, who is a



substitute member. I also understand there was a procedural vote on the issue, rather than a substantive vote.

With the greatest of respect for committee rapporteurs, we need a sense of perspective. This person will not be the decision-maker and will not be setting the targets. Those are matters for the democratically elected members of the European Parliament. If the Deputy is being fair to my party's record in the European Parliament, as previous Green Party MEP Ciarán Cuffe was, he will acknowledge the Fine Gael Party has worked very constructively on climate issues. All Fine Gael MEPs voted for the climate restoration law, for example, which was remarked upon positively by Ciarán Cuffe. He singled out Seán Kelly for praise. Only two Irish MEPs did not vote for that: a Sinn Féin MEP and an independent MEP. I am proud of my party's record on climate and of the work the Government and Ireland is doing on climate. We certainly have a lot more work to do in relation to this.

I outlined in the House last week some areas where we need a serious acceleration and I stated the national development plan would be an opportunity to endeavour to accelerate that work. I am happy to look into further detail of the procedural matter but Fine Gael is proudly a party that believes in the need for urgent climate action. I believe anything to do with the rapporteur of the committee was a procedural matter based on the relative strength of parties and groupings in the Parliament.

**Deputy Roderic O’Gorman:** There was a vote in the European Parliament last week and three Fine Gael MEPs voted for Ondej Knotek as rapporteur on climate policy. During his term in the European Parliament, he said:

[The] policies of climate activists, as you are, are not leading to saving the climate. You are lying to people about that if they will be ambitious, that there will be no floods and so on.... But that's not true. You have no data, you have no science base, you have no impact assessments: you are just lying.

No science, no data - that is your guy, Tánaiste. That is the guy Fine Gael voted to put in this vital role. While the rest of us have moved away from denying the existence of climate change, Fine Gael MEPs have decided to appoint to this crucial role a person who denies there is science linking changes in our climate. Did the Tánaiste know his three MEPs were voting for a far right climate denier in this essential role?

**The Tánaiste:** I do not accept the Deputy's framing at all. I was endeavouring to engage constructively on this but the Deputy does not wish to, with “our guy” and “my guy” and stuff. My party's record on climate is very clear, thanks very much. We worked with Deputy O’Gorman in the last Government for five years. We worked with his predecessor, the former Minister, Eamon Ryan, around these issues as well. We have had people like Richard Bruton lead the way and play a very constructive role in terms of climate when he was Minister for climate action.

Our MEPs, I believe, voted on a procedural motion. I do not think phrases like “your guy” is a fair assertion as to what happened. We will continue to work at a European level on climate and we have shown an ability, even within our European grouping, to vote another way if and when we have a different view, even if that view is not universally popular in Ireland but we believe it is the right thing to do by our climate and the planet. That is exactly what the Fine Gael MEPs did in advance of the last European election, despite significant pressure not to do that. If

we look at the record of Seán Kelly, in particular, he is someone who represented Europe at the Paris climate agreement talks and at many international fora, including COP21. I am proud of my party's record in relation to climate and I will revert to the Deputy with a little more detail on my understanding of the procedure.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** On the last day of the Dáil, many around the country will look to mark the Government's report card, so let us have a look at it. The attendance record has been atrocious so far. It is 230 days since the general election and the Government has turned up to the Dáil for 59 of those. That is 75% of the time that has elapsed since the election in which the Government has not come to the Dáil. It has been a stay-at-home Government seeking to dodge the accountability of the national Parliament.

The Government promised it would make this country the best country in Europe to be a child, but it has presided over the implantation of unauthorised springs into children. It presided over a situation where children who did not need scoliosis and hip surgery received it, yet 245 children are still on the waiting list for scoliosis operations. The Government presided over a CHI that operated under a toxic culture and misused State funds. There are 37 children missing from Tusla. Since 2021, Tusla has made referrals to the Garda in respect of 161 children under its care who are suspected of being victims of child sexual exploitation or child trafficking. Since 2014, 235 children in State care or known to State care have died. Of them, ten were murdered and 51 died as a result of suicide or drug overdoses. When the Tánaiste first entered this Chamber, there were 457 children homeless in the State. Today, there are 5,000 children homeless in the State. The Government misled the State about 40,000 houses being built last year when 10,000 of those homes never materialised. The Government promised 41,000 homes would be built this year. It is now going to be closer to 32,000. The ESRI has stated the Government will not make next year's targets either. The Government has made record-breaking house prices, record-breaking rents and record-breaking numbers of people who are homeless at the moment. I asked the Minister for housing about how long it took to get a planning application through An Coimisiún Pleanála. He said he did not know. In many cases, it is taking more than 16 months and some applications are there for two or three years. Uisce Éireann has said it will not get around to filling all the gaps in water infrastructure that are blocking homes being built until 2050 at the moment, and there is no plan for the Apple tax to be invested so far in relation to this. The Government's solution to the housing crisis has been to make apartments smaller and darker. Its solution to rents has been to create a situation where rents will be forced up and its bright idea of a housing tsar has been shelved because of embarrassment.

There is one thing that is more affordable and more available at the moment, and that is cocaine. Criminals are doing a better job in creating a functional market for an illegal drug than the Government is in terms of housing. Rape and sexual assault are increasing in this country. The incidence of domestic violence is four times higher now than it was when the Tánaiste first entered this Chamber. The number of gardaí *per capita* and the force's morale are on the floor. Fifty-three 53 Garda stations do not have an assigned garda at the moment. Last year, 1,000 prisoners were released from prison after 24 hours because of the overcrowding in prisons at the moment.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Thank you, Deputy Tóibín, but please conclude.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** According to a reply I received today to a parliamentary question,-----

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** -----707 prisoners were unlawfully away from prison last year and there were still 131 missing from the prison system at the end of the year.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Resume your seat, Deputy Tóibín.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Is it not the case that, in the last seven months, the Government has been floundering?

**The Tánaiste:** Before I get into the politics of some of that, when we are talking about domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, which is an important topic, can we please be clear that increased reporting is a good thing?

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** No, it is not just increased reporting.

**The Tánaiste:** Let us have a little bit of decorum in how we speak in this House. The Deputy has spoken for three minutes. I am just looking to reply.

The Minister, Helen McEntee, has done more than any Minister in the history of our State in terms of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence with a zero-tolerance strategy. I am very proud of the work of this Government around the issue. We have a lot more to do on what is clearly a societal epidemic.

The Deputy obviously gave us a report card there. I thank him very much for his perspective. We also have record levels of employment. We have an economy that is running budget surpluses. We have had the ability to effectively create two national wealth funds to protect our country from economic shocks. We have been able to take real measures in the here and now, some of which I outlined, to help carers, to help increase the fuel allowance, to help improve the student grants, and to help reduce the cost of books and provide free books in our schools. We have been able to increase social welfare payments, particularly for our older citizens and our pensioners, to help them live with dignity. We have taken major steps towards housing reform, including around planning by taking the planner out of the back garden in terms of exempting a number of things people might want to do from planning. We have introduced and passed a new national planning framework so we will have enough zoned land to build the homes we need. Next week, the Deputy will see a major capital plan that we have all been working tirelessly on for a number of months that will see record levels of investment in key infrastructural areas like water, energy, housing and also the social infrastructure that is needed in our communities. We have established a national education therapy service for the first time in the history of our State to put therapists in our special schools in a co-ordinated, national way. We are undertaking major reforms in terms of how our health service operates, making sure that the rostering for our health service is done in a way that ensures the right people are there at the right times of the week, right throughout the week, including the weekend. We have made HRT free for women. We have taken clear measures to improve and reform our migration system. We have seen a section 39 pay agreement to help the workers working with people with disabilities. We have established a small business unit. We have extended the basic income scheme for artists. We have set up a Cabinet committee on water quality to fight for our farmers and try to protect our nitrates derogation, and we have reformed the way the Government delivers infrastructure, which was a key commitment we made in the election, because it takes too long to deliver key pieces of infrastructure.

This Government, which is seven months in, as the Deputy said, and with five budgets to go, has already undertaken a lot of work and we will continue to do it while he will continue to critique us from over there.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The increase in domestic violence statistics are not down to increased reporting.

**The Tánaiste:** I did not say that either.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** They are down to increased domestic violence. To hide that fact is actually dangerous as well.

**The Tánaiste:** I just asked the Deputy-----

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Let us talk about the health service, which the Tánaiste mentioned. Billions of euros have been poured into the HSE and we are getting less and less in return. The national children's hospital, which the Tánaiste signed for, is still mired in cost overruns and delays. There have been 500,000 adverse incidents in hospitals just in the last five years and 3,142 people died as a result of those adverse incidents in hospitals. Since the Government has been elected, it has spent €2.4 billion in compensation for those adverse incidents. Incredibly, 115,000 people went to accident and emergency departments last year and waited so long they left without seeing a doctor. Thirteen thousand nurses have left Ireland in the last five years, and in some years, the majority of doctors are emigrating as well. Today, we learned about 500,000 people who were in either electricity or gas arrears. The Government is putting them into debt. It collected €4.1 billion in fuel taxes last year, which is the highest ever level in the history of the State, in the jaws of a cost-of-living crisis. Carbon taxes are topping out at €1 billion-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Thank you, Deputy Tóibín. Please resume your seat.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** -----and are hardwired to increase for the next five years. The Government is hurting people at the moment.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Tánaiste to reply.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** There has never been a Government with as much access to cash, but there has never been a Government that has done so little with it.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Just for those who are counting, that was 25 seconds over the time.

**The Tánaiste:** And I have lost four.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I really wish Members would look at the clock and observe the rules of the House.

**The Tánaiste:** The Leas-Cheann Comhairle might reset my time, if that is possible. I thank him. Deputy Tóibín takes this access to cash for granted. The economy cannot be taken for granted, by the way. He just kind of glosses over that fact. The fact that we have resources is down to the good, prudent management of our country by this Government, its hard work and the hard work of the Irish people.

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I have not had as long to write Deputy Tóibín's report card as he has had to write ours, but here is my go at it. Name-calling and personalised attacks: top of the class, Peadar has excelled this term. Rinse-and-repeat attempts at sarcastic humour: significant improvement during term time.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** This is too serious.

**The Tánaiste:** Attendance: reasonable effort, but a lot of noise for a class of just two TDs. Chasing every divisive issue and seeking to divide this country and misrepresent the Government's position: A+.

**Deputy Denise Mitchell:** This is childish.

**The Tánaiste:** Actual constructive policy suggestions: no grade, do better.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I cannot believe the Tánaiste spent any time on that.

### **Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions**

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We are now moving to Deputy John Connolly under Standing Order 38A. He might make a better fist of it.

**Deputy John Connolly:** Last week, the Irish Cancer Society launched its pre-budget submission, which highlighted that patients in the west and north west face the longest wait time between cancer diagnosis and commencement of appropriate treatment. Dr. Michael McCarthy, president of the Irish Society of Medical Oncology and a consultant oncologist at University Hospital Galway, said:

Working in the West of Ireland, I see the human cost of the postcode lottery in Irish cancer care every day. Once chemotherapy is prescribed, the National Cancer Strategy states that it should start within fifteen working days. The reality in Galway is that patients are now typically waiting seven to eight weeks for their first session. With every week that passes, the risk increases that their cancer will grow, or worse that it will spread to other parts of their body.

Dr. McCarthy went on to describe the conditions of the facilities in Galway as follows:

In 2016, the day ward in Galway University Hospital had 13,000 visits. By 2024, that had increased to 25,000. Our doctors, nurses, hospital pharmacists and others have done everything they can to minimise waiting times. However, we simply don't have enough staff, space, or equipment to cope and patients are paying the price.

The report went on to note that at University Hospital Galway there is no PET scanner, meaning scans are being conducted privately at a higher cost. The hospital also needs a new CT scanner and facility. One CT scanner is 17 years old and keeps breaking down. Visit volumes have increased as patients require more intense treatment over longer durations.

The Tánaiste and I spoke previously about the work of the capital programme oversight board at University Hospital Galway and the need for progression of the infrastructure master plan it has developed. University Hospital Galway is the only model 4 hospital in the HSE west and north west region. It serves a population of more than 850,000 people and that patient



population increases to 1.1 million for cancer services for which it also covers County Clare and parts of the midlands. The Saolta group stated during the development of the master plan that the outdated and suboptimal facilities in the hospital make the provision of adequate care more challenging.

Recently, the Minister for Health launched the master plan for the hospital in Galway. Among the proposals in the master plan are additional beds, a new accident and emergency unit, a new maternity and paediatrics facility, new laboratories and a new cancer centre. I understand that the preliminary business case for the new master plan will be delivered to the Department of Health by the end of July. Interestingly, in the Irish Cancer Society's pre-budget submission, it calls on the Government to address the deficits in cancer care by prioritising cancer infrastructure in the new national development plan.

I noted that in an earlier response, the Tánaiste mentioned the social infrastructure that will be included in the new national development plan. I am looking for a commitment that the implementation of the master plan for the hospital in Galway will be included in the national development plan and will specifically include all aspects of the progression of the master plan, including the new cancer facility.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank Deputy Connolly for the question. I also thank the Saolta group and the Irish Cancer Society for the work they do, much of which the Deputy referenced. It is good work on highlighting the issue for the Deputy's constituency and region. The Government that the Deputy and I are part of is committed to improving cancer care. We are committed to ensuring better prevention, maintaining improvements we have seen in Ireland, thankfully, in many cancer survival rates and protecting and improving timely access to treatment.

As the Deputy stated, cancer services in the west and north west are delivered through a designated cancer centre in Galway, with local services operating out of smaller hospitals in the region. University Hospital Galway also supports a satellite centre for breast cancer at Letterkenny University Hospital. I am pleased to say there has been significant investment in cancer services in the west in recent years. This year, 14 additional posts were allocated to the region, which support surgical oncology, radiotherapy, survivorship and CAR T-cell immunotherapy and those with a family history of breast cancer. My understanding is that the acute haematology oncology service is also being expanded this year, with the allocation of an additional advanced nurse practitioner. These nurses provide a dedicated telephone service for patients undergoing systemic anti-cancer therapy, enabling those who are ill to avoid attending the emergency department. The additional staff will help to expand the services further and to further improve access for patients. These posts will build on growth in cancer services in recent years. Seventy-six additional staff were allocated to University Hospital Galway under the national cancer control programme between 2017 and 2022.

However, the Deputy is right to highlight the issue of capital investment, which is at the core of his question. We have seen some recent capital investment in cancer services in Galway, including the new state-of-the-art radiation oncology centre, which opened in 2023 and was a €72 million investment in cancer services. It has allowed the development of new stereotactic radiotherapy programmes to commence in January this year. As the Deputy said, a number of major capital projects are under consideration now for Galway, including a new cancer centre alongside a new emergency department, replacement laboratories and inpatient ward blocks.

I met some of the medics who were involved in the proposal for the cancer centre when I

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was in Galway in the recent past. I acknowledge the huge amount of work being done by them in good faith with the Saolta Group, the HSE and the Department of Health. I am aware of the new master plan for the hospital. It is an exciting proposition. It could be a game-changer for the west.

The statement of fact at the moment is that we are working on finalising the national development plan. We expect to be in a position to bring it to the Government on Tuesday. It will provide a significant uplift in capital investment for our health services and will provide the Minister for Health, the HSE and the Saolta Group with the certainty they need to decide on their next steps. The Minister for Health will keep in close contact with the Deputy as that progresses in the days ahead.

**Deputy John Connolly:** I appreciate the Tánaiste's response greatly. The one line that really gives me hope is his comment that the master plan for the development of the regional hospital in Galway will be a game-changer. It certainly will. Some of the preliminary works to enable it have started. Some of the outpatient services have moved to Merlin Park University Hospital and there are plans to move more services there to ensure we have a top-class facility for acute requirements and that we also have outpatient and elective services in Merlin Park University Hospital.

However, I ask that the Government look at a commitment under the social infrastructure aspect of the national development plan to make sure this master plan is fully developed and comes to fruition. My understanding is that the preliminary business case highlights that the annual financial contribution required will be 1% of the annual health budget over a ten-year period. We will see substantial benefit from that investment. It will give us the type of facility the Irish Cancer Society talks about in its pre-budget submission and reassure the patients of the west and north west.

**The Tánaiste:** I genuinely believe, like the Deputy does, that the master plan has the potential to be a game-changer for the health service in Galway and the western region. I am also taken, from a policy point of view, with the division of acute and elective services. That is how we address the challenges that patients and clinicians experience with overcrowding and access times. We all say our health service is great when you get into it. We need to improve the ways of getting into it and decoupling acute emergency care from elective care is a game-changer. It is a Sláintecare direction and the Saolta group in University Hospital Galway has done a huge amount of work to prepare for that.

The Minister for Health is passionate about delivering on elective hospitals, one of which is earmarked for Galway. I am pleased to hear the Deputy use the word "investment" because we talk a lot about how much things cost. This is an investment in people's health and health reform because capital can be a huge reform enabler for our health service. The decisions will be taken under the national development plan next week.

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

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Before I ask my question, perhaps the Leas-Cheann Comhairle will give me the opportunity on this, the last day of this term in the Dáil - although some of us will be here for committees next week and the coming weeks - to thank all the staff on behalf of Sinn Féin, and I am sure everyone else, who keep this place working and going, whether

that is in the canteen or the ushers, cleaners and the many staff who make sure the Oireachtas functions smoothly, although we can sometimes make it quite challenging for them. I wanted to put that on the record.

As the Tánaiste will be aware, on Sunday, GAA supporters from Cork and Tipperary will make the pilgrimage to Dublin and Croke Park for the all-Ireland hurling final. They will be followed the following week by folks from my county, Donegal, and from County Kerry for the football final. Many of them cannot believe their eyes when they see the prices they are being charged to book hotels in our capital city. They are being charged €450 or €500 for a room for one night, when it is a fraction of that on other weekends. It is scandalous. Those attending the Oasis gig later, next month, will face exactly the same rip-off. It is now the case that people can get a week's sun holiday cheaper than they can get two nights in Dublin. It is absolutely scandalous. I have raised this with the Government before and nothing is happening. This is just another example of the do-nothing Government. Will the Government do anything about the rip-off and price gouging that happens every summer? Whether people are trying to take their families to watch our national games or going to gigs or tourists are coming in, it is scandalous and needs to end. Will the Government do anything about this?

**The Tánaiste:** I join the Deputy in thanking all of those who work on the Leinster House campus to make this place work efficiently and effectively on behalf of the people of Ireland. I thank all the people who the people watching at home may see on their screens and the many hundreds who work in the background to make sure we have effective democracy. To everyone in this place, regardless of political perspective, I believe that all politicians, on all sides of the House, work bloody hard in the interests of their constituents. We will be back doing this hammer and tongs again soon but, in the meantime, despite sitting beside a Meath woman, I wish Donegal well in the final after the team's victory at the weekend.

The Deputy is right to highlight the issue of prices that people are experiencing. The tourism function has been moved to the Department of enterprise. This creates real synergy in terms of policies. There is an opportunity for the Minister, Deputy Peter Burke, and the Minister of State, Deputy Alan Dillon, to consider what can be done. Clearly, there are examples of price gouging and the like. There is a role for the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission and the Minister and the Minister of State intend to engage with the CCPC on this matter.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** I too thank the staff and wish everyone well for the summer break. It is very clear that IBEC is trying to manipulate the Government to exclude services from the occupied territories Bill. We have had more than 21 months of genocide. The EU is now saying that it will keep a "close watch" on Israel, so a close watch on genocide. The EU is worse than useless. At the same time, the EU said that member states should consider the legal opinion of the International Court of Justice in the context of trade with the occupied territories. It is very clear that we need sanctions now. We should not bow to domestic or international pressure on this. The fact that Mike Huckabee, a horrible racist, accused the Irish of falling into a vat of Guinness makes me more resolute that we are doing the right thing. I ask the Tánaiste to make it clear that the Government will not capitulate on the inclusion of services in the occupied territories Bill and that we can come back here and sit in August to finally pass this legislation.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy for raising this very important issue. I had a very constructive meeting with the US ambassador to Ireland this week. We discussed a variety of issues and I welcomed the opportunity to talk to him about the Irish people's very strong, almost guttural, view of the horror of what is happening in Gaza. I thank him for that respectful en-

gement. It is always important to have respectful engagement. Some of the language used by others, which the Deputy referenced, does not help the debate or discussion on policy in any way.

The Government's position on the occupied territories Bill is as I have stated it on many occasions. I thank the foreign affairs committee for the good scrutiny it has done on it. It is important that the committee hears all views. It is important that any decisions the Oireachtas takes are done with our eyes wide open and having scrutinised and considered all aspects of the Bill. A variety of people have appeared before the committee, some I absolutely agree with and some I do not. The Deputy can probably guess who those are. It is important to have had that engagement. I expect to get advice from the Attorney General over the course of the summer recess, receive the report from the committee and then advise Government on the next steps. I am happy to work constructively with the Opposition once I have received both of those.

**Deputy Liam Quaide:** I also pay tribute to the outstanding staff in the Oireachtas, with a special mention for the excellent broadcast workers here, 13 of whom will be laid off over the summer due to the precarious and unfair nature of their contracts.

Almost one year ago to the day, my party leader, Deputy Holly Cairns, raised the issue of more than 5,000 young people waiting for primary care psychology services in the Cork-Kerry region. Of this group, 109 had been waiting for between four and five years. The Tánaiste responded to Deputy Cairns by saying that there seemed to be a particular challenge in the region that he did not believe was replicated nationally. A year later, it is clear from figures I have extracted with great difficulty from the HSE that the primary care crisis is not only national, but it is also across disciplines. We have children waiting up to seven years for physiotherapy in Cork, up to six years for speech and language therapy in Dublin, up to nine and a half years for occupational therapy in Dublin, up to nine and half years for psychology in Galway and, incredibly, up to 13 and a half years for psychology in Dublin. Astonishingly, during Leaders' Questions this week, the Taoiseach denied that there had been any recruitment embargo in primary care services. Does the Tánaiste accept that he was misled by the HSE about the crisis in primary care this time last year? Does he agree that the Taoiseach distorted the reality of recruitment restrictions on primary care this week in the Dáil? Will he now commit to an urgent recruitment drive to address these out-of-control waiting lists?

**The Tánaiste:** I remember the day Deputy Cairns raised the issue and I remember that the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, was here at the time. On the issues in Cork-Kerry, my understanding was that there were recruitment challenges for funded posts. Let me refresh my memory on that and come back to the Deputy directly. The Deputy is correct that there is a nationwide challenge with access to therapy services that goes beyond any particular geographic challenges. I do not dispute that at all. We are taking a number of steps to try to get on top of this. One is the establishment of a national education therapy service, led by the Minister, Deputy McEntee. This will apply to parents who have a child in a special school, in the first instance, and then spread out to special classes and mainstream school over time. Therapy services will be provided in the schools. This will start with speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and physiotherapy. We are also looking at how we can use private capacity for assessments of need. We have seen a very significant increase in the number of people accessing assessments of need this year compared with last year. We are also increasing the number of college places, with the Minister, Deputy Lawless, to train more people. I accept that this is a very challenging area but we are taking a number of measures to try to get to a better place on it.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I join in the thanks to the many workers who make this place tick. I raise the case of the 35-year-old Irish father of three who was held by the US authorities for 100 days. He overstayed his ESTA visa by three days because of a medical condition. He was then taken by ICE and held for two months before being transferred into the regular prison system. The story is horrendous and horrifying. He was freezing on many occasions and only had a thin blanket. He was hungry and the food was of a very poor quality. The mattress was dirty and there were cockroaches and mice. He mentioned a pair of used, ripped underwear, with brown stains and jumpsuits with bloodstains and holes in them. This gives a glimpse of the horror that ICE means for so many people being deported or who face the threat of deportation from America. Did the Tánaiste raise this case and the treatment of an Irish citizen with the US ambassador when he met him earlier this week?

**The Tánaiste:** I did not, but I am very happy to receive the details from the Deputy. It is probably likely that our consular services and embassy are aware of the case. I am very happy to receive any information from the Deputy on the matter and to follow up on it. As I would be expected to say, the migration policies of any country are a matter for that country. However, we would always expect Irish citizens to be treated with dignity and respect and consular services should be provided for any Irish citizen abroad.

**Deputy Ken O'Flynn:** I hope the Tánaiste will join with me in welcoming Don José González Carballo and his wife, Justa García Toro, on their visit to Leinster House. Don José is a professor of history who is studying in Ireland at the moment.

On 3 July, ComReg activated the SMS sender ID protection register, which is a great idea. It is meant to stop the scam texts we are all receiving. More than 360,000 of them have been received to date by people who have reported it. As we know, €100 million has been lost due to scam texts. Having said that, unfortunately, the system does not appear to be working correctly. The algorithm is not working correctly and computer engineers and the engineering team have not rectified it yet. Many people are losing appointments and legitimate communications from bodies such as the HSE. CAO offers and bank alerts have been mistakenly flagged as likely scams. While I want to bring this to the Tánaiste's attention, the company does not believe that it has found the source of it. What happens in autumn is that those that are flagged as scam texts are no longer on the text system, so the likes of the HSE and Bank of Ireland have not been. I have received two of these texts, one for my hotel reservation this week, which came up as a likely scam, and another, which was a scam but was not flagged. I am asking that we communicate with ComReg that it should not roll this out further until all the technology is correct.

**The Tánaiste:** I welcome the Deputy's guests. I hope they have a pleasant visit.

I thank the Deputy for highlighting this issue, which is something everyone is trying to get on top of, but getting on top of it correctly, as the Deputy highlights, is very important. I will ask the Minister for communications to engage with the relevant authorities and ComReg and come back to the Deputy directly.

*I o'clock*

**Deputy Séamus McGrath:** An Post was in the news this week, and thankfully it has clarified that its financial position is better than previously reported. The real issue here is the closure of post offices throughout the country. Since 2015, 34 post offices have closed in Cork county and 257 post offices have closed nationwide. As we know, a post office provides much



more than just a service. It is core part of community life in many towns and villages throughout the country. It provides a social outlet for many of our citizens, which is critical to combat loneliness and provide social interaction. We need to do more to support our post offices. Postmasters have a very active role in promoting the survival of post offices and encouraging the Government to do more to support them. I ask that we actively engage with the postmasters and others to try to ensure the future and sustainability of our post office network throughout the country.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank Deputy McGrath. He is entirely right. The postmasters have, quite rightly, been vigorously engaging with us. This is an issue of concern for them and I assure the House and the postmasters that the Government is committed to a sustainable An Post and a sustainable post office network. We see it as a key component of economic and social infrastructure throughout the country. The programme for Government we have agreed states the Government will continue to provide the nationwide network of post offices with funding to ensure their sustainability and enhance the value they bring to local communities. My understanding is that an amount of approximately €10 million per annum is being provided by the Government over a three-year fixed term to An Post, which then disperses the funding across the post office network. We will continue to work and engage to make sure we can deliver on the commitment to have a sustainable post office network and to support our postmasters.

**Deputy Peter Roche:** My question is on carers. I acknowledge, as most of us do from time to time, the outstanding work Family Carers Ireland and carers in general do in our communities. I also acknowledge the increase in the income threshold in the assessment. As part of the programme for Government, there is a commitment to abolish the means test. I am anxious to know the timelines in this respect.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank Deputy Roche for raising this matter. I know he is a vocal advocate for carers and those been cared for. As he rightly said, the programme for Government includes a number of measures to support carers, including a commitment to phase out the means testing for the carer's allowance by increasing the income disregard in each budget, with a view to phasing out the means test during the lifetime of the Government. We are all determined to see meaningful progress on the means test through the lifetime of the Government and as part of the upcoming budget. I will not speculate on the upcoming budget as it would get me into all sorts of trouble, other than to say it is important that we show a roadmap for how we intend to get there and that we work together to achieve it. In the meantime, with effect from Thursday, 3 July, the income disregard did increase and this is important. All of these improvements mean that more carers can now avail of the carer's allowance payment. We are all very clear on what we want to do here. The means test for carers is mean and we want to abolish it in a way that is sustainable over the lifetime of the Government.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** I raise the issue of serious problems in our mental health services, particularly in acute mental health services. I will raise the individual case of a young man in Sligo who was murdered. His name was Jimmy Loughlin. The person who committed the murder was somebody in the care of the mental health services. When incidents like this happen the HSE is meant to carry out what is known as a serious incident report. It was not carried out in this case. It has also not been carried out in other cases, as another family has contacted me in similar circumstances. I raised this issue previously with the Taoiseach, who said the Mental Health Commission would have to investigate it. The family wrote to the Mental Health Commission, which has come back and said it does not investigate these situations. The family feels they are being stonewalled in respect of this situation. They want this issue resolved. After the

recess, will the Government meet these families and sit down and discuss this issue with them? Will it ensure that in all these circumstances serious incident reports are carried out? This will allow people to understand where the failings occurred. In these cases people were murdered by somebody with mental health problems who attacked them. In most cases the people themselves end up dying by suicide. It is a tragedy for these families. It is the impact of a failed mental health service that we need to get right. Will the Tánaiste please ensure he meets these families and that serious incident reports are carried out in all of these cases?

**The Tánaiste:** I thank Deputy Kenny for raising what is clearly a serious matter. Out of respect for the seriousness of it, I will speak directly with the Minister of State with responsibility for mental health, Deputy Butler, and see whether the meeting requested can be progressed. I will also apprise myself of the details because Deputy Kenny has raised it in the House previously.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** I wrote to the Taoiseach three times.

**The Tánaiste:** I am very happy to follow up and come back to him on it.

**Deputy Barry Ward:** The patrol of our coasts and coastal waters is a mammoth task for the Defence Forces, customs, An Garda Síochána, the RNLI and the Coast Guard. I want to put on record my admiration for those involved in the seizing of the *MV Matthew* and the drugs haul that came with it. The work done by the Defence Forces, the RNLI and An Garda Síochána has borne great fruits for this country in stopping the drug shipment. The patrolling of this enormous exclusive economic area is a very difficult task. Is there a role for more economical means, such as the use of long-range sophisticated scout drones to patrol these waters? This would also save money and carbon emissions. It is an opportunity for us to patrol these waters more effectively and do so in a more economical way.

**The Tánaiste:** Deputy Ward is entirely correct. This is a very important issue and we have to start taking national security very seriously in this country. We need to see a step change in our investment in the capability of our Defence Forces. I am very proud of the work done by all parts of Óglaigh na hÉireann but just because we are militarily neutral does not mean we do not invest in defence. In fact, in many ways it means we are more required to invest in defence. I think we are going to see a step change in investment in defence and security over the lifetime of the Government. We are really committed to looking at how we can transform the Defence Forces into a modern, fit-for-purpose organisation to meet the challenges of today and the future. The specific issue Deputy Ward has raised is correct. There is a recommendation in the report of the commission on the future of the Defence Forces on using the development of what it calls Defence Forces RPAS, or remotely piloted aircraft systems. We will be looking to progress this as quickly as possible, depending on national development plan outcomes and other funding matters.

**Deputy James O'Connor:** I raise the issue of the national average waiting time for a driver test of 14 weeks. In Dungarvan the average waiting time is 30 weeks. It is very popular with people in the east Cork area. The Tánaiste knows this is absolutely unacceptable. It has dragged on for years now. The RSA has failed to meet its targets. Is this something the Government could finally look at working towards bringing to an end?

I also reference that the people of Cork have been waiting for 20 years for something to come to an end this weekend. I wish the Cork team the best of luck against Tipperary. I am

sure the Tánaiste will be cheering them on, with most of the Government.

**Deputy Marie Sherlock:** Hear, hear.

**The Tánaiste:** The Taoiseach likes to think he takes care of the cheering for Cork but I very much look forward to attending the Cork and Tipperary game. I am looking at my Tipperary colleague, Deputy Murphy. I wish Cork and Tipperary very well at the weekend and I look forward to a very good final. I also wish Donegal and Kerry the best of luck on following weekend.

The issue Deputy O'Connor raised on driver tests is important. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, are working very hard on this. They are working with the Road Safety Authority. We need to look at how we reform the RSA. I do not say this to be critical of the RSA. It was set up to promote road safety. We all think of the late Gay Byrne, Lord rest him, and the very good work done. There is also an aspirational side that is quite separate and distinct. I know the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, are giving consideration to all of this. Specifically on the issue in Dungarvan, I will ask the Minister of State and the Minister to raise it with the RSA and come back to Deputy O'Connor directly.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** I raise the issue of the lack of gardaí in Limerick city and the perceived lack of a Garda response. In recent days, I have spoken to many community leaders who have all used the same words - "tense", "fear" and "dread" - to describe the situation. It is not fair that communities are left like this. This week alone, I was contacted by several constituents. One said a car was speeding around the area all day and there were no gardaí about. Another resident said that five motorbikes were speeding around doing wheelies since that morning and they could not get through to the Garda station. I know people in other areas will say this also but we need more gardaí in Limerick. When the new recruits come out of Templemore the Tánaiste has to ensure their deployment is not only based on population but on need. Limerick has that need. I am making several specific requests today, one of which is for more gardaí for Limerick from among those coming out of Templemore. The gardaí in Limerick do a fantastic job when they are available but they cannot be deployed or respond if they do not exist.

I ask specifically that the Tánaiste support an application that has been made for CCTV for the Garryowen area. Garryowen is a large area.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** I want to raise the issue of the lack of gardaí. It is caught between two areas where there are cameras so everything is being concentrated in Garryowen. I request additional gardaí for Limerick and CCTV for Garryowen.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank Deputy Quinlivan for raising this issue in respect of Limerick city, which he raises regularly. I am pleased to remind us all that Limerick was one of the first areas in the country to get bodycams as part of the pilot roll-out. We also saw the first conviction as a result of bodycams in Limerick. I have no doubt that measure is supporting gardaí in the work they are doing in Limerick. Of course, we all want to see more gardaí. That is why Templemore is working at full throttle again and why we are looking at options for a second Garda college. Where gardaí are allocated is a matter for the Garda Commissioner but I will certainly pass the Deputy's views regarding Limerick city and CCTV for the Garryowen area on to the Minister for justice.

**Deputy Roderic O’Gorman:** I have asked when the Government will rerun the Laura Brennan HPV vaccine catch-up campaign on a number of occasions. This morning, I spoke to Lucy, a 20-year-old student who missed the HPV vaccine when she was at school and who wants to take it up now. She has been quoted up to €600 to get the vaccine. The cost of the initial appointment with a practice nurse, multiple shots and multiple GP visits to get those shots totals €600. She is a third level student. She does not have that level of disposable income. I spoke to the Minister for Health last night. She outlined her position on the importance of the school vaccination campaign. I appreciate that but I still do not have an answer for Lucy. Why does she have to fork out €600? Why does she have to pay for potentially life-saving shots when just six months ago the Government committed to rerunning the Laura Brennan HPV vaccine catch-up campaign?

**The Tánaiste:** I sincerely thank Deputy O’Gorman for raising this very important issue. We have an opportunity to effectively eliminate cervical cancers in our country. One of the ways we can achieve that goal is by increasing HPV vaccination rates for girls by age 15 to the WHO target of 90% by 2030. The Deputy is correct that there is also a need for catch-up programmes. The programme for Government contains a commitment to extend the Laura Brennan HPV catch-up vaccination programme to anyone under 25 who missed the initial vaccination. When I mention Laura Brennan, I always think of her and her family, whom I acknowledge today. As a first step towards fulfilling this commitment, the Minister for Health told me this morning that she has decided to introduce a schools-based HPV vaccine catch-up programme without delay. This will give an opportunity to students who have previously been offered a HPV vaccine another opportunity to receive that vaccine. It is estimated that approximately 75,000 students could benefit from this, which is not a small cohort at all. Those aged 16 and older do not require parental consent to receive the vaccine as part of the catch-up programme. The uptake of the vaccine will be closely monitored. In parallel, the Minister is exploring opportunities to identify a suitable delivery model for those aged under 25 who have left school. In the meantime, it is important to have as many children of schoolgoing age as possible vaccinated. We are fully committed to this programme. The Minister intends to start it in the way I have suggested. Some 75,000 students will benefit. The Minister will then come back on a suitable delivery model for those aged under 25.

**Deputy Roderic O’Gorman:** Lucy will not benefit from that.

**The Tánaiste:** We have to start. Some 75,000 people will benefit from the catch-up programme.

**Deputy Marie Sherlock:** I am sure the Tánaiste saw the Minister for justice’s comments yesterday on a case being taken by the Irish Refugee Council in respect of how refugees, those seeking protection in our State, are being treated. Those comments were absolutely outrageous. They were deliberately designed to inflame tensions, to further the tropes that are out there and to pit refugees against homeless people. The most despicable thing is that this is not a once-off. We saw the gleeful tweets about deportations and the tough language last weekend and now we have this. I am fed up. The reality is that the Government is manufacturing a crisis on our streets by forcing men seeking international protection to visibly go homeless before they are accommodated even though there are spaces in the international protection centres. The reality is that this is putting those men in danger and causing great fear for communities, on which it has a real impact. Will the Tánaiste show leadership on this rather than pandering? The stakes are very high, particularly for the communities I represent in Dublin Central. It is like Fort Knox outside Leinster House right now. The barricades are up to protect us against

protestors. We talk about the far right but the reality is that there are people in the Tánaiste's Government-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I ask Deputy Sherlock to conclude.

**Deputy Marie Sherlock:** -----who are feeding that poisonous anti-immigrant sentiment. That has to end. People in here need to show leadership and speak to the realities.

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

**Deputy Marie Sherlock:** No, this is important.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I know it is important but you had one minute and have gone well over it.

**Deputy Marie Sherlock:** People's lives are at stake here. What the Minister for justice said yesterday was absolutely disgraceful. I hope the Tánaiste will now reflect what the Government thinks.

**The Tánaiste:** I believe and certainly hope we are all united in calling out the far right. We have all had experiences in our constituencies and communities of people trying to sow division. For the Government to effectively deal with that, it must not leave a vacuum. It must put in place the policies required for a functioning rules-based migration system. Immigration is a good thing. All of us in Government believe that. I think all of us in this House, or certainly most of us, believe that as well. Immigration is a good thing and we have benefited from people coming to our country but there must also be rules. We have to have an efficient courts system and a deportation system that works. We also have to ensure the costs we apply are the same as or similar to those in other European countries. It is about a balanced migration system that works. I am always calling out the far right. The Minister for justice is working with the full support of Government and I thank him for the work he is doing to make our migration system more efficient and more effective in advance of joining the EU asylum pact next year. Yesterday, I met with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and had an opportunity to brief him on the work this country is undertaking with regard to refugees and the work we do to support displaced people at an international level.

**Deputy Michael Murphy:** I speak today as a proud voice for Clonmel, a town with a borough charter dating back to 1608 and a place of deep history and extraordinary community spirit. Clonmel has felt the loss of its borough council profoundly since its abolition in 2014. Decision-making drifted from the people. Civic pride diminished. The unique identity of our town, forged over centuries, was quietly eroded. Does the Tánaiste agree that the abolition of borough and town councils was a mistake? The programme for Government pledges a pathway back to town-level democracy. I ask the Tánaiste to honour that pledge. Clonmel is not just a town. It is a living borough. It is home to the great outdoors, rich in culture and strong in employment. I ask that our borough council, one of only five in the country, be restored, not for the sake of nostalgia but as an act of justice and to bring about meaningful local government, renewal and the beginning of something better. The people of Clonmel are crying out for their independence from Tipperary County Council and the power base that is Nenagh.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Was it Clonmel or Kilkenny the Deputy mentioned?

**Deputy Michael Murphy:** I mentioned that there were five borough councils, one of which



was Kilkenny.

**The Tánaiste:** Does the Leas-Cheann Comhairle have an interest in this? Is the Deputy from Clonmel? I jest. I thank Deputy Murphy. He represents his community with pride and dedication. I thank him for raising this issue on behalf of the people of Clonmel. I have been delighted to be in Clonmel with him on many occasions recently to see all the work that is going on, the benefit of URDF funding, the plans for a college of further education, the regeneration of the old barracks site and the new Garda station. As he will know, there is a commitment in the programme for Government. We have established a local democracy task force. The purpose of this is to look at how to strengthen local government. The task force will look at issues in respect of structure, funding, functions, governance, accountability, local government and, importantly, the role of councillors. It will also consider how to further strengthen the framework and powers of municipal districts, including the Clonmel borough district. It will also consider the role of a small number of town-focused bodies that could be introduced again. I am proud to be a former town commissioner for Greystones so I know the benefits these commissions and councils can bring to a community. The Minister, Deputy Browne, and the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, will bring the recommendations of that task force to Cabinet in due course. I look forward to considering the matter at that time. I will keep in close contact with Deputy Murphy.

**Deputy Malcolm Byrne:** I too look forward to the publication of the national development plan in the coming weeks and to the significant investment we will see in infrastructure. The challenge, of course, relates to delivery. Our problem with certain State agencies is what I can only describe as a “Bulmers” approach to delivery - nothing added but time. Some of our delivery has been particularly poor. I would like assurance, particularly in respect of water infrastructure. I will talk about my own constituency of Wicklow-Wexford, which the Tánaiste knows very well. While Uisce Éireann has done good work with regard to the Arklow wastewater treatment plant, there have been 24 instances of water outages of 24 hours or more in Gorey town over the last 18 months. The area of Tara Hill and Ballymoney, which the Tánaiste is very familiar with, regularly experiences outages. Communities like Aughrim in County Wicklow and Ferns and Camolin in County Wexford have been waiting for more than 20 years for a wastewater treatment plant. What guarantees can we be given that, when the Government puts the investment into water and wastewater infrastructure, Uisce Éireann will actually be accountable and will deliver so we can ensure that the outages we have been experiencing will not happen at the same levels again?

**The Tánaiste:** The Bulmers analogy is important. We should always be asking if there is any added benefit from a particular layer. If there is not, it should be got rid of. For example, the Minister, Deputy James Browne brought a proposal to Cabinet recently that there were four gates to get through social housing. That is not the case now. We got rid of the fourth, third and second gates. There is now only one gate. These are the things Government has to be pretty ruthless on. If there is a reason for something being there, grand, but if there is not, we need to move it on.

The Minister, Deputy Chambers, the Taoiseach, and the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, and I are having conversations around the issues the Deputy highlighted. We are going to see a significant increase in capital spending, but how do we then ensure that delivery is as swift as possible? There are two quick points I would make. Generally, on infrastructure delivery including water, the reforms that the Minister, Deputy Chambers, introduced in his Department included the establishment of the new infrastructure delivery unit. The people there are respon-

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sible not just for counting the money but also for asking where a particular project is at. Irish Water is involved in that. Second, particularly in some smaller towns and villages, including those the Deputy referenced, we have to look at allowing developers to get on with putting in place the necessary infrastructure to Irish Water's standards. If a developer is willing to build eight, ten or 12 houses and we are prepared to allow that developer to do the internal infrastructure, why not let them do the external infrastructure as well? There is openness on the part of Irish Water in this regard.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** I am conscious this is the last day of term. The revised national development plan is going to be published within two weeks. On many occasions, I have drawn the Tánaiste's attention to the lack of infrastructure in Galway and I do so again. This is a major obstacle to development. Galway is one of the cities to be developed in a sustainable way. On the east side of the city, there is no wastewater treatment plant and there are serious problems with the network and infrastructure. For about the tenth time, I mention that one of the two major siphons under the Corrib Estuary which carry all the sewerage and wastewater from the east side of the city out to Mutton Island is in imminent danger of collapse. I raised this matter with the previous Minister of State, Malcolm Noonan, who took a particular interest in it. It was denied that this was the subject of a report to Uisce Éireann. I have rechecked the position. A report was done for Uisce Éireann, and the words used are to the effect that one of the siphons is in imminent danger of collapse. I draw that matter and the lack of infrastructure in Galway to the Tánaiste's attention.

**The Tánaiste:** We spar in this Chamber on many occasions and do not always agree on things. On a purely personal level, I wish the Deputy well. It takes guts to put your name forward for any election.

**Deputy Catherine Connolly:** Go raibh maith agat.

**The Tánaiste:** Specifically on the infrastructure in Galway, the national development plan will be an opportunity to significantly increase investment. We will be considering many projects. We discussed some of the health projects for Galway earlier.

On the Corrib Estuary issue, I will bring the Deputy's comments to the attention of Senator Noonan's successor, the Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan. I will ask the Minister of State to liaise directly with Deputy Connolly.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** I want to again raise issues relating to special education supports for schools in Wicklow. I previously raised them in the context of Topical Issues and parliamentary questions and I wrote to the Minister of State directly on two occasions. Ashford national school has two SNAs. One of them is fully allocated to one student. The schools' request for additional support was rejected and its appeal has been postponed. Marino special school in Bray had its SNA review cancelled two days before it was due to take place. They have had no information since then. The Dominican College in Wicklow was due to open an ASD classroom this September. It had accepted students on that basis and then the classroom was cancelled. St. Laurence's in Greystones had its SNA review cancelled at short notice. New Court special school is missing nearly half the SNA supports it needs. My feeling is that the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, is moving from one process to another that is due to begin in the next school year. However, that is leaving huge gaps for schools preparing for September. Can the Minister for Education please look into this matter and have it resolved?

I am not sure the Minister is aware that there are 120 primary schoolchildren in Wicklow town and Rathnew who do not have school places for September. I am aware of a number of students in Greystones who also do not have places.

**Deputy Helen McEntee:** To the Deputy's final point, my Department is engaging with the schools in the area to make sure that every child has a place. This has to happen in every area, particularly where there is a population increase. We are actively engaged in the area. If there is a need to work more closely with the Tusla education support service for schools, and in particular for students, that will happen. My understanding is that there are places available. It is about making sure children can get access to those places.

On special education supports, we have more SNAs than we have ever had before. There are 1,600 more this year. I appreciate that the need is increasing. As a result, we need to make sure that we continue to increase SNA supports and the number of special education teachers and provide places. The Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, and I are engaged in ongoing work in that regard.

Specifically in the context of reviews, there is an option for schools, if they are not happy with the allocations made by the NCSE recently, to apply to the review and appeal system. However, I accept the Deputy's point. We need to get to a position where allocations are made at a particular time in order to allow schools to have an opportunity, well before the summer recess, to make appeals in order that they will have the resources in place for September and will know exactly what they are getting. We also need to make sure that we have a system and a structure in place for the NCSE to be able to conduct reviews that are asked for and for schools to conduct reviews throughout the school year. This would mean that where SNAs are not needed in schools, and we know that is the case, they can be redeployed. We will have a new redeployment scheme coming into place next September. I appreciate that we need to make sure that we continue to increase the number of SNAs and special education teachers because demand is increasing.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** That concludes questions on policy or legislation. I join with the party leaders and others in extending our thanks to all of the staff here in Leinster House for the work they do for us in keeping the campus right and keeping all of us safe. I include the Garda in that. I wish everyone well in their work over the next number of weeks.

### **Taxes Consolidation (Development of Regional Film Industry) (Amendment) Bill 2025: First Stage**

**Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh:** I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 to enable the Minister to identify regions of low audiovisual capacity and to include measures in the industry development test for Section 481 tax relief to promote the development of audiovisual production outside existing major production hubs.

I am pleased to introduce an *Bille Comhdhlúite Cánacha* (*Tionscal Scannán Réigiúnach a Fhorbairt*) (*Leasú*), 2025. Irish film has gone from strength to strength in recent years. There have been Oscar wins and nominations. The success of "Kneecap", "Crá", "An Cailín Ciúin", "The Banshees of Inisherin" and other films has created much-needed employment and put Ire-

land on the world stage, agus ag déanamh cinnte de chomh maith go bhfuil ár dteanga náisiúnta i lár an aonaigh. Tagann an Bille seo sna sála ar ré as cuimse de scannánaíocht na hÉireann. Tréasláim leo siúd go léir a bhí agus atá bainteach leis na héachtaí atá bainte amach leis na blianta beaga anuas. Cabhróidh Bille Shinn Féin inniu leis an dtairbhe a scaipeadh ar fud na tíre ar bhealach níos cothroime.

Our job as legislators is to build on this tremendous success and to ensure that the benefits reach everyone and can be sustained into the future. Many in the film sector were disappointed when the culture Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, announced that he was axing the planned levy on streaming services, against the advice of the feasibility study. This levy could have provided €25 million annually for productions. Irish film needs State support, especially outside the major hubs, as is clear from the imbalance in how the industry's section 481 tax relief is spread. In 2024, 70% of recipient projects were based in Leinster and over 54% in the Dublin and Wicklow region alone, the major hub for film production capacity, with a total expenditure value of €402.9 million. As a Dublin TD, I say long may this investment last. However, compared with 62 projects in Leinster, there are only 13 in Munster, with eligibility expenditure of €25.5 million, and 11 in Connacht, with expenditure of €29 million, and just two projects in the remaining counties.

Regional imbalance has long been acknowledged as a problem in the film sector. That is why, from 2019 to 2024, a short-term tapered regional uplift tax credit provided millions of euro to address additional costs of production in places where the crews and infrastructure are not as easily available as in Dublin and Wicklow. It is a shame that the Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael Government let that uplift lapse without a long-term replacement. Other uplift schemes are welcome but do not address the regional imbalance. In its 2023 report, the budgetary oversight committee called for the regional uplift to be retained. However, the current Minister has stated that restoring the scheme is not expected to be viable due to the updated EU regional aid map. Screen Producers Ireland, which represents more than 200 companies engaged in audiovisual production across Ireland, put forward this common-sense proposal in its pre-budget submission for 2026. I welcome Luke Meany to the Public Gallery, who is here on Screen Producers Ireland's behalf, and thank him and his colleagues for the work they have done in promoting this concept.

I also take this opportunity to thank the Bills Office and the Ceann Comhairle for facilitating this Bill and the five other Bills I have introduced so far in this term. I take the opportunity to wish those in the Bills Office, the Ceann Comhairle and everyone else the best for the summer.

This Bill is simple. It would allow the Minister for culture to identify regions of low capacity and include measures in the industry development test for the section 481 tax relief to promote the development of audiovisual production outside the existing major production hubs, adding to the Minister's existing powers to apply conditions to the tax credit. This is the third Bill I have introduced in a few short months to deliver on the ten-point plan Sinn Féin set out last year for the film and audiovisual sector as part of our comprehensive arts policy. It is available to read online. Those Bills would end geo-blocking and partitionism in public service broadcasting and protect the rights of film workers and performers. The Bill I am introducing would support balanced regional development in film. Sinn Féin has listened and is acting on the needs of the Irish film industry. I hope the Government will support this Bill.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Is the Bill opposed?

**Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Helen McEntee):** No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

### **Occupying Power (Securities and Handling of Settlement Goods) Bill 2025: First Stage**

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide that the Central Bank shall not approve a prospectus for securities issued by or on behalf of a state that is an occupying power; to provide for the purposes of the Unfair Dismissals Acts 1977 to 2015 that a dismissal of an employee shall be deemed unfair where it arises from a refusal to handle goods associated with the activities of an occupying power within occupied territory; and to provide for related matters.

This is a two-part Bill. The first part is aimed at prohibiting the Central Bank from dealing with war bonds and the second relates to the protection of workers who refuse to handle goods from illegal settlements. In that regard, I wish to express special thanks to members of the SIPTU and Connect trade unions and ICTU officials who, through conversations, helped inform the second part of the Bill.

The Bill contains provisions that are intended to supplement rather than replace the provisions of the Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill 2018 or the prohibition of goods Bill, the general scheme of which is currently the subject of pre-legislative scrutiny in the Department of Foreign Affairs. The provisions of my Bill are intended to apply generally, but the situation in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories is the immediate relevant context. Central to both Bills are the obligations of the State under international law, with particular regard to the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, relative to the protection of civilian persons in a time of war.

Ireland recognises the State of Israel and maintains diplomatic relations with it. However, Ireland considers that Israel has, since June 1967 and as a matter of international law, occupied territory outside its borders illegally, including the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem - the occupied territories. Ireland recognises the borders of Israel as they stood before 1967, but it also believes that both the Israeli civilian settlements within the occupied territories and the associated economic activity to be unauthorised and unlawful. Ireland's position accords with that of the international community. UN Security Council Resolution 2334 of 23 December 2016 calls on all UN members to distinguish between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories it has occupied since 1967.

On 30 December 2022, the General Assembly of the United Nations requested the International Court of Justice, ICJ, to provide an advisory opinion on the legal consequences arising from the ongoing violation by Israel of the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination



and from its prolonged occupation, settlement and annexation of the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967. In its advisory opinion the ICJ confirmed that all states are under an obligation not to recognise as legal the situation arising from the unlawful presence of Israel in the occupied Palestinian territories. They are also under an obligation not to render aid or assistance in maintaining the situation created by Israel's illegal presence in the occupied Palestinian territories. The purpose of this Bill is to enable additional and partial discharge of the legal obligations referred to by the ICJ.

The Long Title states that the Bill is:

... entitled an Act to provide that the Central Bank shall not approve a prospectus for securities issued by or on behalf of a state that is an occupying power; to provide for the purposes of the Unfair Dismissals Acts 1977 to 2015 that a dismissal of an employee shall be deemed unfair where it arises from a refusal to handle goods associated with the activities of an occupying power within occupied territory; and to provide for related matters.

Section 2 deals with the securities issue by or on behalf of a state that is an occupying power. EU Regulation 2017/1129 governs the prospectus that must be published when securities are offered to the public or admitted to trading on a regulated market in the Union. A competent authority within one of the member states must approve the prospectus. In Ireland, the competent authority is the Central Bank.

Section 3 deals with the refusal to handle settlement goods, which it states are:

... goods produced in whole or in part within an occupied territory by a member of the civilian population of the occupying power whose presence and activities within the occupied territory are facilitated ... by the occupying power.

With reference to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, Ireland and the European Union as a whole are agreed that Israeli civilian settlements on occupied lands are illegal under international law, constitute an obstacle to peace and threaten to make a two-state solution impossible. What this Bill would do, if passed, is ensure that when workers refuse to handle goods from these illegal settlements, they would be protected from losing their jobs. It is in the spirit of what the Dunnes workers did so courageously in the 1980s and with such a wonderful aim. We need to ensure that workers are protected and that they have a right to conscientious objection when dealing, in the course of their employment, with goods sourced from illegal settlements. This is a basic principle. It must be enshrined in law, and with this Bill it would be.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Is the Bill opposed?

**Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Helen McEntee):** No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

**Wildlife (Amendment) Bill 2025: First Stage**

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend section 23 of the Wildlife Act, 1976 to include the Sprat Fish, *Sprattus sprattus*, in the Fifth Schedule of the Act; to prohibit the targeted fishing of sprat except where caught as bycatch; to provide for a moratorium on commercial sprat fishing until sufficient scientific data is available regarding sprat habitats, population dynamics, and their ecological role, to include a Just Transition for inshore fishers; and to provide for related matters.

This Bill seeks to amend the Wildlife Act 1976 to provide legal protection for the sprat by including it in the Fifth Schedule to the Act. This would prohibit the targeted fishing of sprat and place a moratorium on commercial sprat fishing until sufficient scientific data is available regarding its population dynamics, habitat use and ecological function. The Bill also specifies that incidental bycatch of protected fish species is not prohibited and that it provides for the Minister, in consultation with Minister for the marine, to revoke the protected status in the future, contingent on the development of a species-specific management plan and allocation of a sustainable quota. In recognition of the potential economic impact on fishers currently reliant on these fisheries, the Bill also mandates the development of a just transition plan, which must be done and developed in consultation with relevant stakeholders.

This will be a bit of a biology lesson. I imagine most people have no real understanding, when you mention the word “sprat”, of what sprat is. Sprat are a small fish, maybe 10 cm long. They only live for three, four or five years. They are a short-lived species. They tend to congregate in our inshore areas and the fishing for them is primarily in September. They are not hugely economically valuable. The entire sprat fishery in Ireland is worth less than €5 million per year, because most of the sprat that are caught are essentially crushed up and used in fish meal or pet food. Sprat are not used for human consumption. The value of sprat is not high from an economic perspective. However, from an ecological perspective, they are invaluable. Many marine species rely on sprat for food. Fish like cod, haddock and herring feed on sprat. Seabirds such as puffins, kittiwakes and terns feed on sprat. Whales and dolphins feed on sprat. It is estimated that over 70% of the humpbacks that would come into Irish waters are reliant on sprat for food, so they are hugely important. If we do not have sprat in our waters, we do not have seabirds, whales, dolphins and various species of other fish. They are a really important part of the food chain.

Unfortunately, because sprat are not economically viable or important, we have not really had a fisheries management focus on them to date. There is no plan for them. There is no real monitoring of them. We do not have a total allowable catch or quota in respect of them. It is pretty much a free-for-all. What we find is that a lot of inshore fishers and, indeed, some of the larger boats do focus on these fisheries in September, but there is no regulation of that. Those fishermen are not doing anything illegal, but the State needs to step in and regulate these fisheries in order that we can both manage them sustainably and do not kill the golden goose. That is what we are talking about.

This Bill would introduce the precautionary principle, which is a sort of fundamental principle in marine fisheries management. Under this principle, if we do not have the necessary data, we stop doing what we are doing and wait until we get it. Once we have the data, we can then manage things properly. In the absence of the data, we are not able to manage matters and

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are at risk of completely overfishing and collapsing the stock. The latter would be absolutely catastrophic for so many industries, the fishing industry included.

A total of 3,500 tonnes of sprat were caught in 2018. In the past few years, the figure was 15,000 tonnes. The International Council for the Exploration of the Sea, which is the EU entity that deals with fisheries, reckons that approximately 2,200 tonnes should be caught. We are way over that, and the sprat population is at real risk. The Government tried to bring in measures in 2018. There was a proposal to stop large pair trawlers from fishing within the six-mile zone. That was really welcome. Unfortunately, this move was overturned in 2020. What we have seen since then is a real focus by boats on exploiting as much as they can of this stock. At this stage, because we have had such a significant fishing of this species, we just need to stop it completely until we have the data in place. That is what this Bill will do. Hopefully, we will get support for it.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Is the Bill opposed?

**Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Helen McEntee):** No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

*Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.52 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.23p.m.*

*Sitting suspended at 1.52 p.m. and resumed at 2.23 p.m.*

### **Proceeds of Crime and Related Matters Bill 2025: Second Stage**

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

I am pleased to introduce this afternoon to Dáil Éireann the Proceeds of Crime and Related Matters Bill 2025. This Bill is a significant and necessary step forward in our efforts to ensure that Ireland's framework for tackling organised crime is robust and effective. The Cathaoirleach Gníomhach will recall that 29 years ago last month, the very brave journalist Veronica Guerin was murdered. In the aftermath of her murder, there were very significant legislative changes made by the Houses of the Oireachtas to ensure that we could combat the organised crime gangs that had such violence and influence at that time. It was apparently the case, and it still is the case, regrettably, that those crime gangs in different guises continue to exist. We can also see throughout our communities the damage and devastation that organised drug crime gangs heap on society. We see it in terms of the damage done to young people who become addicted to drugs - drugs that have been dealt to them because of the greed of those organised crime gangs. Obviously, the motivator for all these organised crime gangs when it comes to the dealing of drugs is money. They get involved in organised crime and the dealing of drugs because they want to make money from this pursuit. Let us never lose sight of the fact that what

motivates them is where we should continue to hit them.

Even yesterday, we would have seen that a very significant drug dealer pleaded guilty to very serious offences before the Circuit Criminal Court in respect of the type of drug activity in which he was involved in terms of being a multi-millionaire euro cocaine, cannabis and ketamine dealer. At the outset, I want to commend An Garda Síochána on the excellent work it did in apprehending that serious criminal and bringing him to trial and getting a conviction arising from his own admission of guilt. I commend the Dublin crime response team. I commend assistant Commissioner Paul Cleary and detective inspector Ken Holohan on the excellent work the Dublin crime response team did yesterday in apprehending what was a significant drug dealer in this country.

Of course, we need to keep at the forefront of our minds that we need to keep updating and changing our laws to ensure we can remain on top of these organised crime gangs so that we never get them in a situation where they feel comfortable about their accumulation of wealth. As I stated at the outset, the legislation that was introduced in the aftermath of Veronica Guerin's murder was revolutionary legislation. I went back and had a look at the legislation that was introduced in the summer of 1996. It was, interestingly, a Private Members' Bill in its first incarnation through the then Opposition spokesperson for Fianna Fáil, John O'Donoghue. In fairness to the Government of the day, it subsequently adopted it through the then Minister for Justice, Nora Owen, but it has had a very significant impact on the activities of criminals operating in Ireland.

When I get the opportunity, as I have had in the past, to meet justice ministers and home affairs ministers from other European countries, one of the things they wish to talk about is the proceeds of crime legislation that was introduced in Ireland and that has been operating now for 30 years. What fascinates and interests them is the fact that we have a system whereby we can have a non-criminal conviction process of attaching assets that have been generated by criminals. That was the great achievement of the Proceeds of Crime Act 1996 and, indeed, the corresponding Criminal Assets Bureau legislation, which was enacted in the same year. I commend the excellent work done by the Criminal Assets Bureau and in particular detective chief superintendent Michael Gubbins, who is the head of CAB, for the very important work it does on an ongoing basis.

The legislation before the House this afternoon is for the purpose of amending the proceeds of crime legislation and to ensure it is more effective in seeking to pursue organised crime gangs that have made a lot of money out of criminal activity. Those proceeds of crime should not be permitted to remain with them. If we have difficulties in getting criminal convictions before the courts, we should still nonetheless use the civil courts and proceeds of crime legislation to ensure we can seize their assets. That has been done very effectively in the past. If we look at the success of the Criminal Assets Bureau, Members will see it has denied criminals over €220 million since its establishment. That is a testament to its success and the importance of introducing that new statutory body.

As I said, the impact of organised crime extends far beyond financial loss. It inflicts profound social harm and erodes the fabric of our communities. Everyone in this House will be aware of the devastation that drug addiction has on young people. It destroys their lives. We really need to repeat that consistently so that people are aware that if they start experimenting with drugs, there is a serious threat that this will have a devastating impact on their lives. The people who are pushing drugs to them are doing it for one reason and one reason only; they

want to make money so they can use that wealth for their own private enjoyment. I can assure people that they will never allow themselves to become addicted in the same way as their victims have become addicted.

The wealth generated by criminal conduct is often flaunted, creating a corrosive culture where law-abiding citizens feel that the system is failing, while criminals appear to operate beyond the reach of the law. As established in the Proceeds of Crime Act 1996, the State's objective is to deprive or deny those persons of the assets or the benefits of such assets. This is crucial for restoring public confidence and demonstrating that the State is committed to justice and fairness. By removing the symbols of their power, we undermine the influence of criminals and protect communities from intimidation and exploitation. Ireland's existing laws, particularly the Proceeds of Crime Act 1996 and, indeed, the Criminal Assets Bureau Act 1996 have established, as I said, an internationally recognised and internationally influential model for seizing illicit assets. The proceeds of crime model is built on two foundational elements. The first is a system of civil forfeiture whereby rather than prosecuting offences and then trying to trace the proceeds of those crimes, it starts from the assets and builds the case that those assets have an unlawful origin.

The first is a system of civil forfeiture which, rather than prosecuting offences and trying to trace the proceeds of those crimes, starts from the assets and builds the case those assets have an unlawful origin. The second is a specialised agency - the Criminal Assets Bureau - brings together gardaí, Revenue and social protection officers, along with other specialist staff, to link their intelligence and investigations, allowing them to target sophisticated and profit-driven criminality. These building blocks have undoubtedly been effective and successful. As I said, since its inception, CAB has seized and returned more than €220 million to the Exchequer. As crime and the methods criminals use to hide their wealth continues to evolve, however, so too must our response. This Bill introduces crucial updates to confront these modern challenges, enabling faster and more efficient seizure of criminal assets whether they are gained from drug trafficking or other forms of organised crime.

Two central reforms ensure when the evidence is there of the illicit origin of assets, the State will move quickly to ensure those in possession of them cannot continue to benefit. The first is the reduction of the time required to permanently seize assets. Under current law, once the High Court has determined an asset is derived from crime, the State must wait seven years before taking final ownership. This Bill reduces that period to two years, a change designed to prevent criminals from continuing to enjoy the benefits of their illicitly gained assets longer than they have been frozen by the courts. The second is once a court has determined assets are the proceeds of crime, a receiver will be appointed to those assets specifically for the purpose of depriving those holding them of their benefit.

Furthermore, the Bill introduces new tools to freeze funds reasonably suspected of being the proceeds of crime at the earliest stages of an investigation. These are designed specifically for CAB and reflect the complexity of its investigations. A new administrative "payment freezing direction" can be issued by a senior Bureau officer for up to seven days, while a "payment freezing order" may be made by the District Court for a period of up to 90 days and may be renewed by the court for as long as it is necessary and proportionate to do so. This allows CAB to act immediately on intelligence, preventing money from being moved or dissipated while a full investigation is under way.

I am acutely aware of the importance of balancing these enhanced powers with the pro-



tection of fundamental rights and I want to provide reassurance on this point. It is crucial to emphasise this Bill is built upon a foundation of robust judicial oversight. The new powers for asset detention and freezing of accounts supervised by the District Court provide more significant powers of appointing a receiver and ordering the final forfeiture of assets remain reserved for the High Court. At every stage, a judge must be satisfied the actions taken are reasonable, necessary, and proportionate. Ultimately, these changes will pave the way for a more efficient and effective asset seizure process. The State will be better equipped to quickly deprive criminals of their wealth, disrupt their operations and return those funds to the Exchequer for the benefit of all citizens.

CAB's successes are actively reflected in the reinvestment of the proceeds of crime into the community. The community safety fund is a tangible example of how this works in practice, ensuring money taken from criminal networks is reinvested in local projects that improve safety, well-being and opportunity. This year, €4 million is available through the fund which is double the original allocation from its first year. This demonstrates our commitment to returning these resources to the public and allowing communities to benefit directly from our success in tackling organised crime.

The Bill before us today is comprised of 17 sections across three Parts. I will take the House briefly through those different Parts and sections. Part 1 of the Bill comprises of sections 1 and 2 which contain the standard preliminary provisions. Part 2 of the Bill amends the Proceeds of Crime Act 1996. Section 1A of the 1996 Act allows the seizure by a CAB officer of moveable property for an initial 24-hour period. This may be extended by the chief Bureau officer for a further 21-day period.

Section 4 of the Bill will amend this provision to allow an application to the District Court be made thereafter for further extensions, up to a maximum of 90 days in aggregate with appropriate safeguards. Section 5 creates a power to freeze financial accounts. A senior Bureau officer can issue a seven-day administrative freeze on an account where it is necessary to conduct preliminary investigations. The District Court may make a similar order for a period of up to 90 days where it is satisfied there are reasonable grounds to suspect the funds in the account are the proceeds of crime; there is a risk of the dissipation of those funds; and freezing is necessary and proportionate. Again, appropriate safeguards are in place and provision is made for the order to be challenged and revoked or varied as necessary.

Section 8 cuts the waiting time for the final seizure of criminal assets from seven years down to two, as I indicated earlier. This reform sends a clear message: once the court has decided your assets are derived from crime, you will lose them and lose them quickly. Furthermore, to bring finality and efficiency to the process, this section introduces measures to ensure issues which have already been litigated when a section 3 order is made are not re-argued. This has happened frequently in the past in situations where the freezing application is being made, arguments are made in respect of assets not being proceeds of crime and then subsequently - several years later - the issue is relitigated when it comes to the permanent seizure of the assets. There is no necessity for that relitigation. It is noteworthy there was a Supreme Court decision yesterday which partially dealt with this issue and saw no issue in respect of it. Crucially, however, the necessity to hear all parties is protected, as is the court's power to avoid a serious risk of injustice.

Section 9 is a consequential amendment which supports this new more, robust approach to the final seizure of assets. It provides flexibility by removing the time limit on consent disposal

orders. This allows CAB and a respondent to agree to the forfeiture of an asset at any stage, again avoiding needless litigation. Section 11 strengthens the powers of receivership. It creates a presumption in favour of the immediate appointment of a receiver once an interlocutory order is made. The receiver's purpose is now explicitly stated as being "to deprive the respondent of the ongoing benefit and use of the property." This ensures immediate possession of assets may be secured and the incentive to frustrate the process is removed. Again, this power is subject to avoidance of a serious risk of injustice.

Finally, within Part 2, there are several more technical and consequential amendments to align definitions and procedures with the more substantial changes introduced elsewhere in the Bill. Part 3 addresses other Acts to ensure the framework is aligned and effective. Section 15 harmonises the definition of "cash" in section 43 of the Criminal Justice Act 1994 with Regulation 2018/1672 which is the EU cash control regulation. It also makes a practical change to the rules on property seized in an interest-bearing account. Section 16 enhances the operational capacity of the bureau. First, it allows non-Garda experts in the bureau, tax inspectors and social welfare officers to sit in on interviews of detained persons for a wider range of serious offences. This brings their vital expertise right into the interview room. Second, it extends the anonymity protections for CAB officers to cover them even after they have left the bureau. This is essential and again, I commend the diligence and bravery of CAB officers who are sometimes involved in potentially dangerous work. The threats these officers may face do not stop on their leaving CAB.

Finally, section 17 is a technical provision to ensure anti-corruption laws are aligned with the changes we are making here. Let us be clear on what these measures will achieve. The Bill is not just about legal processes or receiverships; it is about delivering real-world impact by ensuring the benefits of a criminal lifestyle are not just delayed but denied. By cutting the waiting period for final seizures from seven years to two and by empowering receivers to take immediate control of assets, we are sending a clear message: the proceeds of crime will be swiftly and completely removed from those who have wronged our society. We have seen already the success of this with large, organised crime gangs which were based in Ireland that left because of the pressure from An Garda Síochána, they were being brought before the courts and because of the powers available to CAB.

Additionally, this Bill is not merely about taking from criminals; it is also about giving back to our communities who have been targeted by them. The funds seized through this enhanced process will be returned to the Exchequer and reinvested for the public good. The community safety fund is a powerful example of how money taken from organised crime is channelled directly into local projects which enhance safety and well-being across the country.

There are several matters I intend to return to on Committee Stage and I will flag the most notable of these for the information of the House now, so colleagues are aware.

The first concerns the information exchange with independent domestic statutory agencies, such as the Director of Public Prosecutions. Consultation is continuing on the data protection aspects of this matter and I expect to introduce a provision allowing for designation of appropriate bodies to receive relevant information from CAB. I expect to introduce a provision in respect of the publication of tax defaulter information in relation to CAB settlements. I am also considering further expansion of the assets held in accounts that may fall under the restraint provisions introduced in section 5. There are several further, more technical provisions that I will not go into here now, but these are also under consideration.

Many details will merit debate and I look forward to working constructively with Members as the Bill progresses. We will have an opportunity on Committee Stage to look at a number of matters in terms of what the Bill does or does not cover. I know there is general acceptance across the House of the success of the proceeds of crime legislation and the Criminal Assets Bureau legislation as they have operated in the country for the past 30 years. This Bill is a significant and important development. It means that, even if we cannot get criminal convictions against criminals who are destroying our communities, we can bring them before the civil courts and seize the assets they secured through their criminal activity. These proceeds of crime should be taken off them and invested in the communities they are trying to destroy. Everyone in the House will agree this is a commendable purpose, and that is why I commend this legislation to the House.

**Deputy Mark Ward:** I join the Minister in commending the work of CAB over the years in seizing assets from organised crime gangs. I also join in his comments concerning An Garda Síochána taking drugs off our streets, which is very much needed. Sinn Féin supports the aims of this Bill, but as the Minister mentioned, there will be a Committee Stage and we may seek to table amendments to further strengthen it then. I will speak to some of these in my contribution.

Reducing the time taken between the seizure and disposal of criminal assets is a good thing. It is a no-brainer. A reduction from seven years to two years in the time between an order being made that assets are the proceeds of crime and a final disposal order being available in respect of those assets should probably have been done a long time ago. We have seen how criminals have tied up the legal system in knots as CAB tries to take back assets, assets that are ill gotten and the proceeds of crime. As the Minister said, it is important that these assets be returned to communities.

I welcome that it will be made easier to seize funds associated with criminal activity. We should aim as a State to make it as difficult as possible for organised crime gangs to operate, not only within our communities, but also at the level of business. The practice of criminals investing in legitimate business to wash their dirty money is not a new phenomenon. In fact, it has been going on since time began. We cannot be soft on white-collar crime or dodgy business owners who facilitate it. White-collar criminals should not be allowed to operate under a shroud of acceptability. There is a direct connection between the visible crimes we see daily and criminals laundering money. The proceeds that come from street muggings, car break-ins, burglaries and other daily occurrences on our streets are filtered through these fronts. Just because these white-collar criminals do not have dirt under their fingernails does not mean their hands are clean. CAB should have the powers to tackle international and cybercrime. Money laundering, cybercrime, counterfeiting and fraud are the tools used by these white-collar criminals. Mixing with the so-called upper echelons of society and displaying the trappings of their ill-gotten gains through fancy homes, cars and golf club memberships give these white-collar criminals an air of respectability, one they do not deserve. They walk around in their flash suits looking down on people in tracksuits. The dirty money gets moved from one place to another and comes up clean on the other side, so we need to give CAB and An Garda Síochána the powers to stop this happening.

The pre-legislative scrutiny report from the justice committee recommended that an examination take place regarding the current criteria and eligibility for potential projects under the community safety innovation fund. Sinn Féin has long advocated for the reinvestment of the proceeds of crime back into the communities most affected by crimes. In fact, my party colleague Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh first raised this issue over 15 years ago. Deputy Ruairí Ó

Murchú and I introduced the Proceeds of Crime (Investment in Disadvantaged Communities) (Amendment) Bill 2021. This would have seen the proceeds of crime reinvested into communities to build resilience through our drug task forces, family resource centres, youth diversion projects, unemployment services, sports clubs and anybody involved in working in a disadvantaged area. In response to this, the Government, in fairness, established the community safety fund, to which local groups can make applications for grants. However, this application process can be arduous and the most impacted communities do not always receive approval for funding. The fund has risen from €2 million in 2022 to €4 million this year. Grants range from €20,000 to €150,000, depending on the project. We welcome the increase in this funding, but we must see the money directed to the communities most in need of it. We believe that funding allocations should be linked to the Pobal index. According to that index, parts of my community are extremely disadvantaged or very disadvantaged. I will give the Minister an example. In 2022, there were 22 successful applications for the community safety fund. Six organisations applied from the parts of my area that were highly disadvantaged and very disadvantaged, but not one of them was successful. This tells me that not all the money allocated to this fund is going to the areas most affected by crime, and this is something I want to see change.

Sinn Féin would also like to see the establishment of a mini-CAB that would target low-level criminals. A mini-Criminal Assets Bureau should be established in the areas worst affected by low- to mid-level criminals, particularly those in the drug trade. Drug debt intimidation of families is rife in working class areas. I have been calling for a local mini-CAB to take the local so-called big boys out of circulation. While they may be the big fish in a small pond locally, they are small fry overall. These low-level players may not be asset-rich, but they have lifestyles that are rich. They have the expensive clothes, the foreign holidays and the trips to the sporting events. Their lifestyles simply do not match their means and it is all played out on social media for the world to see. A mini-CAB would target these lifestyle-rich criminals. It would seek to break the attractive lifestyle of criminals that is often used to coerce young people into criminal activity. The young people in my area do not see the leaders of organised crime daily, as those individuals are far removed from the daily grind of on-street drug dealing. They do, however, see the local players and their lifestyles and this is what attracts young people into criminality. We need to support the most disadvantaged areas in building resilience to crime. These low-level players are often the drivers of drug debt intimidation. I have met parents in my area who have been forced to pay drug-related debts their children have accumulated. The debts that the children apparently owe these unscrupulous dealers are frequently exaggerated to the parents, who then end up paying exorbitant amounts back to these dealers for fear of reprisals. The money the mother borrowed from the credit union to pay the drug debt of her child flows from the low-level drug dealer right up to the upper echelons of the organised crime gangs.

Young people engaged in criminality should face the appropriate justice. In the case of minor offences, though, they should be diverted as much as possible away from the judicial system. I stress that this should be in the case of minor offences. Youth diversion projects and programmes need to meet the hard-to-reach young people, those most at risk of getting involved in crime, including those not involved in school, youth clubs and other community groups. These are the young people who have fallen through the cracks of society. Youth diversion projects should be agile enough to meet them on the streets where the criminality and antisocial behaviour is taking place. Targeted outreach should be used to persuade and help those young people to make better choices and lead them away from a life of crime.

The Minister went out and met representatives of Solas himself recently, which is welcome.

If this kind of organisation were to be expanded to other areas of Dublin and right across the State, it would be a really welcome initiative. These young people are the ones I was talking about earlier who are being targeted by older, experienced drug dealers to sell and deliver drugs. Children are being groomed by unscrupulous drug dealers. This is child abuse. The children are attracted by the flashy cars and the new runners, having a few quid in their pockets and the status of being a so-called somebody. These criminals are actually nobodies. They suck the lifeblood out of our communities and return very little. They return nothing but devastation. We need to be proactive rather than reactive and target these young people with appropriate diversionary services before they end up in the hands of the drug dealers.

The Government also needs to be careful of who it does business with and ensure that Government funds are not ending up in the pockets of organised criminals. Reports over the weekend said that the Government had paid millions of euro for IPAS accommodation to a company owned by a man currently awaiting sentencing for violent disorder. This was a man named by the Criminal Assets Bureau as being linked to the Drogheda gang feud. These reports were deeply worrying. This must be a wake-up call for the Government and shows the need for a full investigation into the granting of contracts and profiteering in the provision of IPAS accommodation. It goes to show the level of money involved in providing IPAS accommodation if people named by CAB are getting involved.

I suggest that the money seized by CAB is only the tip of the iceberg. There is so much dirty money still in the hands of criminals. In Ireland, the value of criminal markets is calculated at €1.7 billion per annum, which is slightly higher than 1% of GDP. The Minister mentioned that CAB had seized €220 million since its inception. That is really welcome, but it is only the tip of the iceberg. The Government Bill is a step in the right direction to help seize assets but it is obvious that more needs to be done.

I reiterate my point that any money seized by CAB be returned to the areas that it originated from. Extremely disadvantaged areas need this support to stop the next generation of young people becoming involved in a life of crime.

Recommendation 15 of the justice committee report states: “The Committee recommends further examination of the use of funds recovered from proceeds of crime and how such funds could be invested ... through the provision of preventative supports within communities”. This is an area that the Government must prioritise in any changes to the legislation on CAB.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Catherine Ardagh):** Before I call Deputy Quinlivan, I welcome our guests from Cavan. They are the guests of the Minister of State, Deputy Niamh Smyth.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** I thank CAB for the work it has done over the past number of years. I really want to talk about the community safety fund and how that can be enhanced.

The aims of the Bill are positive aims that my party and I support. Any efforts that attempt to deny criminals their ill-gotten gains are welcome. The message must be delivered loud and clear that crime does not pay. We have to make that a reality.

In my home city of Limerick, we have a number of ongoing feuds between criminals and criminal gangs and it is almost inevitable that lives will be lost. I have said that in this Chamber a number of times. Often, these criminal feuds are between drug dealers. The associated feuds are fuelled by their desire to increase their share of the market. Some of the places impacted are



areas of deprivation. Organised crime flourishes in areas that have been abandoned by central government. This is as true of parts of Limerick as it is of parts of inner city Dublin. The vast majority of people in these communities have retired or are hard-working people, and they just want to do the right thing. They want to make a positive impact on their local communities, but the criminal elements there who seek an illegally gained quick profit, often on the misery of others, do significant damage. These criminal elements have destroyed many people. They flaunt illegally gained wealth, and this wealth can attract vulnerable youths into their criminal grip.

Taking their ill-gotten wealth away from these anti-community elements is crucial. It demonstrates that crime does not pay, that their success, for want of a better word, will only ever be fleeting and that the State, often for the first time, will have the backs of decent people in many of these areas.

It is immensely satisfying to see this wealth return to communities through the community safety fund. Such an approach is one that Sinn Féin has advocated for years. My colleagues sitting beside me here, Deputies Mark Ward and Ruairí Ó Murchú, introduced the Proceeds of Crime (Investment in Disadvantage Communities) (Amendment) Bill in 2021. In its four-year operation to date, the community safety fund has returned €7.6 million to the communities. That is very welcome. We should be putting more back into the communities most impacted by crime.

There are elements of the fund we would like to see altered, namely, the arduous application process that often sees the funding not awarded to the communities most in need. To this end, we would like to see the funding allocation linked to the Pobal deprivation index. On that, there is no area in the State more deprived than the St. Mary's Park area of my city of Limerick. Although I am open to correction, there is no area more impacted by crack cocaine, antisocial behaviour, criminality and organised crime gangs that have devastated that area over the past number of years. I would hope that the brilliant groups in St. Mary's Park do not have to go through an arduous process and that the community safety group will telephone a number of such areas and give them the funding. We all know exactly what they need.

Limerick and other areas have had a massive problem with crack cocaine. At the same time, we have fantastic local community projects in Limerick and they do some fantastic work with limited resources. I would like to see the grant amounts available through the community safety fund increase dramatically. We also have many groups and projects doing incredible work trying to break the cycle of imprisonment in crime. They could do so much more with increased resources. This would save us money in the long term. It would keep young people out of prison.

Sinn Féin welcomes this Bill. We look forward to seeing its impact on those who do so much damage to our communities. More must be done to support the vast majority of families who are hard working and law abiding and only want to raise their children and get on with their lives.

It does not happen by accident that most of the money seized by CAB originates in areas that are highly disadvantaged. We need to see a stronger approach by the Government. I am calling on it to ring-fence the money seized by CAB and to ensure it is invested back into areas most affected by crime.

To reference the Bill itself, the Criminal Assets Bureau, since its inception in 1996, has

worked well. Its seizure of assets and wealth has had a devastating effect on criminals but has been a joy for many local residents to see. The Bill will strengthen the Criminal Assets Bureau. These new provisions will deprive criminals of illegally obtained assets. Those assets should have been returned to the communities most affected. While this is starting to be done, it needs to be speeded up.

Section 8 of the Bill seeks to amend section 4 of the Proceeds of Crime Act so that the time period between an order being made that assets are proceeds of crime and a disposal order is reduced from seven years to two years. This is a welcome amendment. It ensures that assets, such as houses, can be returned to the communities quickly.

The immediate appointment of a receiver to assets is also extremely welcome. Once in place, this will ensure that the suspect of crime is deprived of any benefit from these assets. Furthermore, the restriction or freezing of financial accounts and the detention of moveable assets in a timelier manner will ensure that the gangs and their associates are very much restricted in the use of these assets. That is very welcome.

The Criminal Assets Bureau has been a fantastic resource to target criminals and it is pleasing to see its powers will be increased. CAB is there to pounce on the proceeds of crime but we must as a State to do more to stop criminal behaviour at its inception. It is a role that the community gardaí have performed well over the past number of years. Unfortunately, we have seen their numbers slashed. We need to see these gardaí returned to areas of deprivation in urban estates. We need these communities to see the Garda in a positive light and not only see gardaí when they are undertaking raids, etc. We must also ensure that the bond between the community and the Garda remains unbroken. Increasingly, the number of community gardaí is a key link in that chain.

We also need to ensure that we focus on little - I am not sure what word I could use to describe them - criminals donning expensive watches, driving high-powered vehicles and going off on holidays, all over social media, while not seeming to explain how they earn any of that or ever work at all.

I very much welcome today's debate and the aims of the legislation but this cannot happen in isolation. We must reinvest in these communities. The State must re-engage with these communities so that we can limit the lure of the criminal lifestyle. I very much welcome these enhanced powers for the Criminal Assets Bureau.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** This is good legislation and the Minister should be commended for it.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** I thank the Deputy.

**Deputy Alan Kelly:** We will be supporting it 100%.

I also compliment CAB, its officers and the people who work there. They do very sensitive and dangerous work and their anonymity is important going forward because these criminals and their organisations have long views. It is incredibly important that we protect the people who work for CAB.

I want to acknowledge something that shows how politics works at times. CAB came into existence because of Ruairí Quinn, the former Labour Minister, working with the former Minister, Nora Owen, on a suggestion from then Deputy John O'Donoghue. That is how CAB

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came into existence. It shows that the Government and Opposition can deliver when they work collaboratively. I always remember there was a documentary about CAB - I am not sure which station it was on but it could have been TV3 - where Ruairí Quinn was interviewed. Ruairí was asked about where Nora Owen spoke to officials about the creation of CAB. The officials said they would deliberate and come back to them on whether they thought this was a good idea, to which Ruairí is quoted as supposedly saying:

You haven't [I will not use the "f" word] listened to what we said. We are going to do this and we are going to make it happen.

*3 o'clock*

They did make it happen and it has been incredibly successful, so much so that many other jurisdictions look at what we do here in Ireland. In a modern, liberal society we still have the capacity to have legislation like this that works.

The changes being brought about by this legislation are very welcome and probably should have happened before. Reducing the length of time from seven to two years is a good idea. The way in which this legislation helps to freeze funds quicker is also a good idea. The people CAB is targeting and the people we support it targeting have the capacity to frustrate through the legal system. This Bill diminishes that considerably, which is excellent and will really help the work that CAB does. Therefore, we will be supporting the legislation.

I will make two brief points. In 2020, my colleague Brendan Howlin introduced an Opposition Bill, the Proceeds of Crime (Gross Human Rights Abuses) Bill, which got to Second Stage. It was based on the Magnitsky Act. For any organisation involved in any form of human rights abuses outside the State but with assets in this State, it proposed to give CAB powers to seize those assets. While this may be more complex to legislate for, it is certainly something we should come back to. We may table amendments to this Bill to achieve that. While I accept it would be complex legislation and it may not be possible at this juncture to get it legislated for, at least we can have a discussion on what would be required. I think anybody in this State would support CAB's having those powers. When an organisation or people are operating in a way which is diminishing human rights and perpetrating human rights abuses but have assets in our country, it should be possible for them to be seized as well. Obviously, it would require a formula, a methodology and the technical details of how to do that, but we should seriously contemplate doing it.

The last issue I want to raise relates to how we use the proceeds of the assets that are seized and then sold. The way in which the community safety fund is run and the process by which applications come through are too complex and arduous. The fund should have categorisations under which various groups should be able to apply. Obviously, it can be indexed by areas that are more deprived or areas that have more crime. It should not matter if they are rural or urban areas because regarding rural crime there are certain requirements for CCTV or other technologies or mechanisms that would probably not exist in a rural area that needs funding and which community groups would be able to apply for.

There have always been problems with CCTV on motorways, as I know because I brought in one of the initial community schemes. I think it took eight years to sort out data protection issues as to who is the holder of data. It was insane, bananas, ridiculous. It had the funds. This was all about high-powered motor vehicles going up and down the motorway and people want-

ing to monitor who was coming in and out of their communities via those motorways. It took years and nobody would own the data. Through whatever provisions are possible, maybe we could also deal with that issue. Given that there is so much monitoring everywhere now, from a legislative point of view, it should be much easier than it was in the past to deal with that so that such technologies can be put into places that need them.

I commend the legislation and I compliment the Minister and his staff. It is excellent legislation which everybody in this House should support.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** I thank an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, the Ceann Comhairle's office, the ushers and all the staff here in the Oireachtas for their assistance to the Members over recent months and during this term.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Proceeds of Crime and Related Matters Bill 2025, which is vital legislation that strengthens our national ability to disrupt, dismantle and defeat serious organised crime. Let us begin with the facts. The scale of criminal profit is staggering. Across the European Union, it is estimated that criminal revenues reach €110 billion annually, equivalent to 1% of EU GDP. In Ireland, criminal activity is estimated to generate €1.7 billion per annum. That is not just numbers on a page. That is money made from the sale of illegal drugs, human trafficking, online fraud and coercive control. It is money that funds intimidation, corruption and violence. Organised crime is not abstract. It preys on the most vulnerable in our communities and its engine is money. The clear message from this Bill is that we will take that engine away.

Ireland's existing framework for seizing the proceeds of crime is already regarded internationally as a model of best practice. The Proceeds of Crime Act 1996 and the Criminal Assets Bureau Act 1996, both introduced in response to the murder of the journalist Veronica Guerin, pioneered a civil non-conviction-based approach to asset seizure. Since then, those powers have been enhanced in 2005 and 2016. However, crime evolves and so must we. This Bill delivers a modernisation of our laws in line with expert reviews, the views of stakeholders and best international practice.

Let me highlight the key reforms. First, and perhaps most significantly, the Bill reduces the period before a final disposal order can be made from seven years to just two, which is a game-changer. It means that once the courts have determined that assets are the proceeds of crime, the State can act far more quickly to strip criminals of those assets, whether they be cash, vehicles, property or other assets. Justice delayed is justice denied and this will end unnecessary delays in disrupting criminal finances.

Second, once such a determination is made, the Bill allows for the immediate and automatic appointment of a receiver, preventing any further benefit from the assets pending final disposal. There will be no more limbo and no more criminals living off illicit wealth while proceedings drag on.

Third, the Bill prevents the same legal arguments being relitigated again and again. If the courts have already found assets to be criminal in origin, that conclusion cannot be reopened every time a disposal order is made. That adds certainty and avoids delay while still preserving the right of appeal and review, where appropriate.

Fourth, it enhances the Garda's and CAB's tools at the investigative stage. For the first time, the Bill introduces new powers for restraint of funds in financial accounts. That means a CAB

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superintendent may direct a bank to freeze suspect funds for seven days, and the courts may extend that for up to 90 days. This plugs a key gap in our law and ensures that suspected dirty money cannot simply vanish overnight while investigations are ongoing. These are powerful, proportionate and well-designed reforms that reflect the professionalism and experience of the Criminal Assets Bureau, which has been central to the drafting of this legislation.

It is also important to note that the Bill protects the rights of individuals. Judicial oversight remains central to the process and there are safeguards in place to prevent injustice. Equally, it ends a situation where delay and procedural complexity can be used as tools by criminal organisations to retain illicit wealth.

Beyond these legal changes, we will continue to support the wider use of the proceeds of crime for community good. The community safety fund, now in its fourth year and with a €4 million budget for 2025, is a clear example of how we can take the money once used to fuel misery and instead use it to build safer, stronger communities. Projects tackling youth crime, drug intimidation, domestic violence and antisocial behaviour are all supported under this fund. This is justice in action. I acknowledge the programme for Government commitment to expand the powers of the Criminal Assets Bureau and increase transparency, including the power to publish tax defaulter lists. These are further steps I hope can be advanced during the coming Stages of the Bill.

This legislation sends a strong and unequivocal message. Ireland will not be a safe haven for criminal wealth. We will find it, freeze it and take it through due process and the rule of law. In doing so, we will hit criminal organisations where it hurts - their finances.

I commend the Minister, Deputy Jim O’Callaghan, his officials and the Criminal Assets Bureau on their work on this ground-breaking legislation to tackle serious crime. This cannot come soon enough. I take heart from the Minister’s experience and legal background, which have enriched the legislation we have today. I hope all Members of the House will support it.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Catherine Ardagh):** Before proceeding, I welcome the Norwegian ambassador, H.E. Mr. Aslak Brun, to the Distinguished Visitors Gallery.

**Deputy Barry Ward:** I share the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach’s sentiments and welcome the Norwegian ambassador.

I welcome this legislation, which was brought to Cabinet by the then Minister, Deputy Helen McEntee, in January last year and has progressed since then. It is a very welcome development of the law in relation to the seizure of criminal assets. I will start by making a point on the drafting of the Bill and the way it is presented, which the Minister, and certainly his officials, have heard me make before. In any amending legislation, there are a series of amendments which are very difficult to understand without reference to the principal Act. In this case, the principal Act is the Proceeds of Crime Act 1996. In order to read this Bill and see what it means, you have to have a copy of the Act open in front of you. As the Bill also amends other legislative instruments, reference will have to be made to them as well. Time and again, I make the point that when we are introducing amending legislation that amends an existing Act, it is more appropriate to repeal in the original Act the section that is being amended and restate it in the new Bill so it is clear what is actually being done. Any ordinary citizen coming to read this Bill would then not need to open copies of a series of pieces of other legislation to compare, contrast and see what changes have been made and the import of those changes.



We should be passing legislation that is easily accessible for every citizen, and every lawyer. As somebody who has sometimes had to go through a series of pieces of legislation, it can be very difficult to see exactly what the up-to-date position is in relation to the law. We can solve that problem as a Legislature by consolidating legislation rather than passing a number of amending Acts. This is not a bad example in terms of the proceeds of crime Act but there are other examples in legislation. I have in mind the Road Traffic Acts, for example, where it is very difficult to understand what the latest iteration of legislation coming from these Houses actually says. I encourage consolidation. That said, this is not a bad example. There is a principal Act and other legislation referred to but it is relatively clear for anybody who knows the situation what this Bill is doing. I also welcome what the Bill is doing.

As previous speakers said, Ireland has a history in this area of which it can very proud. In the aftermath of the assassination and murder of Veronica Guerin, action was taken by the Government at that time. It was led by Nora Owen, the then Minister for Justice, and it put in place a very radical regime for dealing with assets that are the proceeds of crime. As the Minister knows, jurisdictions and colleagues throughout Europe are bending over backwards to follow Ireland in this regard and take the lessons we have learned in how we have dealt with this. As other contributors said, the best way to hit criminal gangs, organised criminal groups and those profiting from crime is in their pockets. To take away assets and the proceeds of crime is the best way of having an impact on their activities and reducing the profitability and impetus that drives that criminal activity.

The development of this law is hugely important. It is a law that must evolve with the process because, as the Minister knows, the same criminal gangs that are profiting from crime in this jurisdiction are constantly changing their methodologies and modus of operation to be ahead of the law and An Garda Síochána. An Garda Síochána does a very effective job keeping up with these gangs but this Legislature must do that as well.

I welcome this evolution in the law. I note it essentially streamlines the process in many respects, particularly the seizure of assets and the opportunity for the freezing of accounts to frustrate the possibility that somebody might be able to evacuate funds or get them away from the claws of the Criminal Assets Bureau or the authorities in this jurisdiction. That is a reasonable measure. However, I sound a small note of caution in relation to how long those freezing orders can continue for without coming before a court or being properly litigated, if I can put it that way. Sometimes, if it is an administrative process, whereby an account or asset is frozen, the freezing order can be renewed over and over again, albeit with judicial oversight, but without proper litigation and a real opportunity for the person who is in charge of, responsible for or owns that asset to come before a court and explain why it should not be frozen. In the circumstances where an asset is frozen on an administrative basis, there should be an opportunity for a person to come to court. More important, there should be an opportunity for that person to know the basis on which the freezing order has been made. Having dealt with people in this situation, my understanding is this is not always available to them. There is an inequality of arms in that regard. If you expect somebody to go into the District Court or any other court to lift a freezing order, if they do not know the basis for the order having been made, it is very difficult for them to properly litigate that in the way we would expect them to be able to in the normal way.

I also acknowledge that the Bill will shorten the period of time available to the State to dispose of those assets once they have been seized, from seven years to two years. While I welcome that, I again sound a note of caution insofar as my understanding - I have not been able

to get that out of the Bill - is that this will not frustrate any appeal process and the assets will not be disposed of before the expiration of any appeal process. That being the case, this is an entirely sensible measure that allows the short-circuiting of a process that has taken far too long up to now. The notion that the State has to maintain assets for seven years before they can be disposed of is blocking the benefit of the proceeds of crime for the Exchequer. When they are taken away from the criminals involved, they should be able to be redistributed.

I will finish on the community safety fund, a hugely important initiative. It is a young fund, relative to this legislation. I am not sure it is directly the Minister's responsibility but can we please focus it on education and literacy initiatives in disadvantaged areas. There is a programme in place in Loughlinstown in north County Wicklow, which is really good but is crying out for funding. The community safety fund is exactly the kind of fund that should be contributing to that because it will stem future crime.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Tá muid sásta déileáil leis seo inniu. Without a doubt, we are all very happy to be dealing with this legislation. On some level, I agree with whoever said earlier that we need this to happen as quickly as possible. It should have happened earlier.

We all know why the Criminal Assets Bureau was set up. We have all seen what it has done at State level and locally. There is nobody who does not like to see crime is made to pay, whether that is through the courts or through the civil courts, as the Minister said, and that there is a financial sanction for crime. As I speak about sanctions, I agree that we need legislation and a conversation on dealing with organisations, individuals and persons associated with States or companies that may be profiting from or involved in humans rights abuses. We all understand what is going on today, whether we are talking about the genocide in Israel or the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It cannot be okay that certain people can get away scot-free in relation to that. No different from the street dealer or the person who moves the funny money about, we need to ensure there is a sanction.

We all accept that the war on drugs has been lost, in the traditional sense in which it was understood. We need to have a trauma-informed and health-led policy and to ensure we look after those who are suffering from addiction. We need to do everything we can to divert young people who may fall into criminality and deal with disadvantaged communities which feel this most. What did the *Irish Examiner* say this week? Its headline read "Available, affordable, potent: Ireland is being hit by a 'perfect storm' of cocaine". We all understand cocaine permeates every socioeconomic group but we also know the real harm and drug debt intimidation it brings. An awful lot of it is focused in working-class areas and in those areas that are impacted the most. We need a real conversation on dealing with this level of crime. We need family supports and diversion pieces. Youth diversion projects like Greentown or the Escapeline operation in England help children who are being groomed or used by criminal entities to be removed from that environment. We need the likes of specialist health nurses who will engage with families. I believe that is planned but we need to see it happen. We need to give supports to families and wider communities that require it. In some cases, we are dealing with the out-workings of poverty.

Deputy Ward spoke of the Bill I was lucky enough to co-sponsor with him, the Proceeds of Crime (Investment in Disadvantaged Communities) (Amendment) Bill. That was us stating, as I think we would all agree, that we needed money to be taken from these people who have their heel on the neck of many in our communities and returned to organisations. There will never be enough money in that. We need to resource everything, including the supports required, addic-

tion services and, beyond that, adequate policing to deal with the bad examples. We can walk into many estates and point out houses of people who, for a considerable period of time, have been making money off the backs of their neighbours, and none of it is good enough. At this stage, it is not just off the backs of their neighbours. It is chasing after grandparents for drug bet money. We accept there is a need for streamlining this. There is support for this but we need a wider discussion on dealing with drug crime and its impact on communities.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** I welcome the Bill. We support it fully but intend to table some amendments on Committee Stage which we think will strengthen it. In my constituency, particularly in the north-inner city, and in a number of other constituencies in Ireland, there is a heart-breaking sight that many of us have grown accustomed to: young people, children, teenagers, kids on scramblers, kids hanging around corners with nothing to do, kids being used - I mean that word very deliberately - as runners in drug networks, carrying out drop-offs, collecting debts, standing watch, kids who are still in primary school being given roles in organised crime because they are seen as less likely to be stopped or to be held responsible. That is exactly what we are dealing with here, not the glamourised version of crime seen in tabloids or crime dramas but the slow erosion of community by criminal networks that know how to exploit poverty, trauma and the absence of opportunity.

That is why the work of the Criminal Assets Bureau is so vital. When CAB seizes a house bought with drug money, that is not just a headline. It is a message and an intervention. It tells people, especially young people, that there is a limit to how long crime can pay, that there are consequences and a State watching and willing to act.

The Bill will strengthen CAB's ability to act and that is really welcome. It gives CAB powers to freeze accounts more quickly, whether cash or crypto. It shortens the time it has to wait before an asset can be permanently seized from seven years to two. It allows courts to appoint receivers so criminal assets cannot be used while a case drags on. It closes off legal loopholes that allow delay and stalling. It is practical and smart legislation and we support it.

Seizing the assets should only be one step. The real power is in what we do next. That money, those homes and those cars must be reinvested in full directly into the communities where the harm was done and where criminality has taken hold because the State failed to show up often enough or strongly enough. We should have a clear and visible pipeline. All money taken from crime goes back into youth services, family supports, addiction services, education and community policing. That is how we rebuild trust and break the cycle.

I acknowledge funds have been allocated through the community safety and innovation fund. That is very welcome but 100% of assets should be going back into communities. Crime does not just destroy lives. It costs a huge amount of money to the Exchequer in Garda time, health costs, lost opportunities, court backlogs and the price communities pay every time a child is pulled into the system. We cannot do the same thing over and over and expect different results. Seizing assets is part of the solution but, on its own, it is not enough. We have seen that.

We have to talk honestly about intervening directly with people involved in drug networks, not just the top brass but the foot soldiers, the young people caught up early and who often end up in prison with untreated trauma, addiction and no exit plan. If we are serious about breaking the cycle, we need to wrap those people in the full care of the State. That means better prison conditions, not just tougher ones. It means access to education and rehabilitation for those in prison. We need a better understanding of what prisons are for and what purpose they should

serve. This should mean fully funded probation services, transitional housing, trauma supports and employment schemes. It means a real investment in community-based alternatives to prison, especially for young people. Too many people go into prison with problems and come out with worse ones. That is not justice. That is a revolving door and it is costing us in every sense of the word.

We need a mini-CAB approach, targeting mid-level players before they become untouchable. We all know how certain high-level crime gangs operate now and how hard it is to dismantle that level of operation once they are international, their networks stretch across borders and their assets are moved offshore. There is a level before all that: the flashy operators in their 20s and 30s who control estates, drive financed cars, have two or three apartments in someone else's name and have built mini empires in local communities. We need to hit those assets early. We need a dedicated, fast response mechanism to freeze and investigate assets at that mid level before it becomes a full-blown cartel. If we wait too long, the structures become too strong and we are already playing catch-up.

Let us talk once more about the kids on the scramblers. If they are 13 now, they are in sixth class or first year. If we do nothing and all they see is the gangland lads get rich, live fast and rarely get caught, we know where they will be at 18. If they see assets being seized and the money going into youth clubs that give them purpose, if they are met by outreach workers and Garda youth diversion projects and if they are seen not just as risks but as children worth saving, then we change the outcome and interrupt the cycle. We get better, fairer, safer communities not by accident, but by design.

I support the Bill. It gives us stronger tools to disrupt organised crime but legislation like this only works if it is matched with investment, vision and a willingness to tackle inequality and exclusion head-on. Let us take the money but then give it back to the communities destroyed by the harm. Let us build a system which does not just punish crime but prevents it, understands it and replaces it with opportunity.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** The issue of crime is something that is feared as much as anything else across many parts of rural Ireland in particular and in my constituency. We saw today that three people have pleaded guilty to manslaughter for the desperate attack on Tom Niland, an elderly man living alone in a rural area who was set upon, badly beaten and subsequently passed away. The fear that kind of situation instils in people in rural communities is terrifying. It is important to recognise that for elderly people in rural, isolated areas and other areas, the fear of being set upon like that is a real terror in their lives, particularly if they live alone. It is important we have legislation which deals adequately with people who would carry out such attacks. I commend the gardaí on the investigation into that case and the outcome of it but it still does not undo the loss to the family, friends and community. It is the same thing in many areas where people are in fear of crime, yet we live in a relatively safe society and that is important to recognise. It is a tiny minority of people who engage in these actions and activities.

The Criminal Assets Bureau was a game-changer when it came to dismantling criminal gangs, particularly in the drugs industry. The work around that by the State and its agencies has to be commended - not just the Garda, but others as well. It is important to recognise that even in communities, like many of those in inner-city Dublin, where there are serious problems with high levels of criminality and drug addiction, it is a small minority of people who are involved. In these communities, 80%, 90% or 95% of people are decent, hardworking, ordinary individuals who want to get on with their lives and to build and live in a decent society. However, the

small minority of individuals to whom I refer continue to cause huge difficulties in that regard. A report into that by Dr. Johnny Connolly a couple of years ago provided a very good assessment of the situation. One of the things to come out of the report was there had to be something done to ensure younger people are not attracted to the lifestyle being put on show by these criminals, who are not bashful about how they live their lives. Being able to attack their assets and take them down is very important.

The Criminal Assets Bureau has done great work and could do much more. One of those things it could do in that regard would be to go after the people at a slightly lower level in the food chain, ensuring that there is a mechanism to attack them and their lifestyle in order that it does not become something that is attractive to younger people. Unfortunately, in many communities, very young children are being used by some of these criminal gangs, particularly for running drugs and that sort of thing. That is not just in inner-city areas; it is in every town in the country. The habit of criminality developed at a young age takes a long time to break. If those to whom I refer end up in prison as youngsters, they go on to a life of crime that has no future for them or their communities.

The motivation we must all have is to ensure we have adequate legislation in place to deal with this matter. I support the Bill and I understand why what is proposed is being done. More can be done in this area. We need to do more to build the resistance and capacity of these communities to deal with what is happening. To do that, we need to have more resources in place. There needs to be a greater emphasis on putting youth facilities and addiction facilities in place. It is very important to recognise that this legislation does not stand alone and that there is a need for much more support around it.

**Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty:** I welcome the Proceeds of Crime and Related Matters Bill, which, as the Minister said, represents a major upgrade of existing legislation. I welcome the fact it will reduce from seven years to two the time between a judicial determination of an asset being the proceeds of crime and a final disposal order being available. I especially welcome the immediate and automatic appointment of a receiver in respect of assets to ensure that respondents cannot continue to benefit pending final disposal orders being made. This will happen subject to the normal caveats against a risk of injustice. I will continue in that vein in a few moments when commenting on the role of the receiver.

First, however, I welcome how the Bill strengthens CAB's investigative powers, including in the context of the freezing of bank accounts. Like previous speakers, I support the strengthening of the community safety fund. A sum of €4 million will be available through the fund this year - the amount involved is increasing - but there definitely is scope, given the overall CAB budget, to massively increase the community element. The money involved should be ringfenced to ensure it services those communities that most need it, namely those that are often decimated by drugs and drug dealing and related intimidation. These communities are identified as being in need by the Pobal HP deprivation index. Any moneys raised should also go towards local youth diversion projects and meaningful community projects.

Perhaps the Minister can clarify the position in this regard when replying but I am of the view that where properties are seized by CAB, the Government and the agency should look at putting these assets into use as quickly as possible. The immediate and automatic appointment of a receiver would provide some leeway in this regard. I envisage a situation, for example, whereby a four-bedroom house, after a two-year period and following any appeals, could be transferred immediately to a family on a local authority housing list or to an approved housing



body. Before that, however, someone who is near or at the top of the housing list and who is in receipt of the housing assistance payment could be allowed live at the property while the final adjudication is being made, with any rental income going to the receiver. In the case of a successful appeal by the individuals concerned, that revenue would go to them. As we have seen, however, it is more likely that it would go into CAB's coffers for distribution to good causes. If there is any legal mechanism to facilitate this, I would welcome it.

I reiterate what some colleagues said about the idea of establishing a mini-CAB to go after some of the smaller individuals and raise funds. We should be able to seize things like scooters that are used for antisocial purposes. This is not directly related, but it should be looked at too.

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** I welcome the Bill and commend the great work of the members of An Garda Síochána and those officers who work in the Criminal Assets Bureau.

It is important that we tackle criminals at source. The best way to do this is by tackling the proceeds of crime. We welcome that the turnaround time will be reduced from seven years to two years. This is something for which we in Aontú have for quite some time. I ask the Minister to please ensure that we try to reinvest this money in the communities involved and in An Garda Síochána.

An Garda Síochána is really struggling in Mayo. I recently spoke to a garda in Castlebar Garda Station who told me when members of An Garda Síochána are attending court or out sick, the station cannot function on occasion. In the past three years, my constituency of Mayo has received just one new garda recruit. I spoke to the Garda Commissioner last year. He told me about the number of D19 transfer requests from gardaí. These are, in the main, young people from Mayo, Roscommon and Galway who are working in Dublin and who are seeking to relocate back to Mayo or other counties. They cannot do so because, as the Commissioner stated, An Garda Síochána just does not have the manpower in Dublin to allow this to happen. Dublin is being prioritised in that sense, while Mayo and other counties in the west are being left without gardaí.

It is important that we address the issues relating to An Garda Síochána and tackle the problems around morale and bureaucratic practices. The new geographical units are not working. The regions are far too large and this is causing a massive deterioration in terms of the type of proactive policing practices that have built up since the foundation of the State. Deputy Tóibín and Aontú have long argued that money should be recouped and ringfenced for An Garda Síochána. It is important the Minister tackles the issues relating to the force. Being a garda used to be an intergenerational job. It was a job that a father would pass on to his son. Indeed, three generations of some families have served in the Garda. That link has been broken. It was broken before the Minister's time. He is going to have a significant job to do to address this. The truth is that fathers are no longer passing the baton on to their sons. In fact, they are telling them to get out of the force. I know gardaí who are seeking to relocate back to Mayo and because that request cannot be facilitated, they are leaving the force. They cannot afford to live in Dublin. They are young people who are happy to continue to be gardaí, but not happy to continue to work in the capital and therefore they are willing to go back to work on farms, in pubs or in shops and leave An Garda Síochána as a result. The Minister needs to work on this. There are hundreds of applications, or D19 requests, which cannot be facilitated through no fault of the gardaí. It is the fault of the Government and the Minister's predecessors who reduced An Garda Síochána to the difficulties it is facing with bureaucratic practices and the lack of proactive policing that is now happening.

Gardaí tell me that being in An Garda Síochána used to be a job where people were out on the street tackling criminals but more often than not now, it is a job where they are tied up in knots behind screens because of the level of accountability in the job. I know it is true because I was recently out on a bank holiday weekend, one of the busiest weekends of the year, and there were no gardaí to be seen on the street. That is reflective of where we are at the moment.

I ask the Minister to ensure the issues in the force are addressed and that the money is used to tackle those issues and support An Garda Síochána.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I looked at the briefing paper. We agree, as I think most people here do, that we should reduce the timeframe from seven to two years for the disposal of assets identified as proceeds of crime. The Bill strengthens the Criminal Assets Bureau, CAB, giving it power to restrain and seize assets before the High Court. A process introduces new restraint orders to prevent transactions linked to suspected proceeds of crime and the automatic appointment of a receiver to private individuals' benefits from criminal assets. We certainly agree with all these things.

However, we should focus going forward on nipping crime in the bud. That is what we are failing to do at this time. I hate to agree with the Deputy in a statement he made a moment ago, but I have to because it is common sense that we have lost the law on drugs. He said the law on drugs is lost. It is a sad statement to make, but it is a factual statement. Years of a lack of resources in An Garda Síochána have left us in that situation. It is neglect. I noticed in west Cork that the drugs unit in Bantry is now closed because - and I have raised the issue - of the lack of gardaí in west Cork. There is a Bandon drugs unit but, mother of God, there is a huge coastline from Mizen Head to Sheep's Head and the Beara Peninsula. I will not say it is unmanned, because there has been serious apprehension of drugs in recent years, even recently, by An Garda Síochána in west Cork. I commend Chief Superintendent Vincent O'Sullivan and his gardaí, but there is only so much he can work with. If the numbers are down, the numbers are facts and the facts are there. The number of gardaí in west Cork is down. I would appreciate if the Minister would send me the number of gardaí so that I can prove to him that it is down. How will the Minister turn that around?

When it comes to drugs they are brought in mainly by sea. I am surrounded by sea; my constituency is. The nearest parish west of mine is New York. I live on the Mizen Head. If I head to Barryroe or Timoleague, I am surrounded by sea. Kinsale and the whole area is on the sea. They are the areas the Minister needs to be spending his resources on. That is where the drugs are coming in and these guys are walking away free, unless An Garda Síochána is majorly on top of its game but it cannot be when it is under-resourced. That is an area the Minister needs to look at. We need to keep looking at how we nip crime in the bud along that line.

An issue I brought up last week, which is an important one, related to the towns and villages of west Cork, such as Skibbereen, Clonakilty and Dunmanway. I have been waiting for eight days for an answer from the Minister's Department about why CCTV was turned off in those towns. Surely be to God, he could give me a fair and honest answer in a couple of days and at least see where we are going with it. Councillor Daniel Sexton has raised it at council level and the council is not giving an answer other than that it will try to meet the Department this week to see where it can go. Why is CCTV being turned off? Is it being turned off throughout the rest of Ireland? It is leaving communities wide open. Local communities fundraised for it. The community lurks and the business watches to make sure it has that little bit of additional security so that if these lunatics are peddling drugs out there, they will be seen on CCTV. They know they

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are being watched by the local people, because An Garda Síochána cannot do everything. Then automatically - bang, bang, bang - switches went down last Tuesday in west Cork. CCTV was blacked out in west Cork last Tuesday and the Minister's Department cannot answer me in eight days as to why that happened.

Is there any hope of turning this around? How quickly can it be turned around for the safety of the people? I am being honest and fair. I wrote to the Minister twice. I ask him to answer the question, to give a fair and honest answer. Let us sit down with the bodies that be to see whether we can resolve this. I do not know whether there are others. I am told Kinsale, Bantry and Schull are still switched on. Are others in the country in the same situation? Are there more? Is this the way it has gone? Will CCTV be switched off in our country? That will make our communities extremely vulnerable and wide-open to crime. Why did the community alert groups meet with the local Garda Síochána in the first place to put it there? It was to keep their communities safe. Why are they switched off today? That answer needs to be forthcoming. I need that answer immediately. The Dáil should not be sitting this evening until we get straight answers. I do not care if it is this evening, tomorrow morning or Saturday or Sunday morning, I want an answer for those people. I keep asking for it and I am not getting it from the Minister. It looks like it has to come from his Department. I plead with the Minister once again to look into it. As far as I am concerned, it is a huge issue in west Cork in order that we can at least keep people safe.

Regarding young people, we need to encourage more from the Department or wherever in relation to gardaí. One initiative in west Cork has worked well. It is the Garda Youth Awards. They are trying to pat young people on the back, give them a purpose and let them know they have done some good and that they are there and things can be changed. The likes of Damien White, Brigid Hartnett, Jonathan McCarthy, Ian O'Callaghan, Don Davis and others put together the Garda Youth Award. Chloe Anne O'Callaghan from my area won it this year and others from other communities such as Bantry and elsewhere won it other year. It is a great way to give young people a boost. Everyone points the finger and tells young people they are involved in this and that. They are not. Chloe-Anne is not involved. She is a great athlete from my area and involved in all the community initiatives. She got a little bit of honour for that and it gave her a boost and gives others a boost to meet the same standard going forward.

We also have to look at the protection of gardaí. This is a serious issue. They have a responsibility of non-disclosure in their communities and they do not want to be whistleblowers, but they are concerned. They are out on the roads trying to prevent drugs coming into communities. There is one jeep and one BMW from Cork city all the way down to Castletownbere and gardaí have told me that when they stand on the side of the road, they have little or no coloured clothing in comparison with the ambulance service, which is completely well clothed and well covered. The Garda vehicles are not covered and the gardaí feel unsafe on the side of the road. Remember these are people who have young families. They are not making up the story. I would not come in making up a story because it is a serious issue, especially given recent events. That prompted their call that they need further and proper protective gear going forward, especially coloured gear, for their safety on the side of the road. They are keeping us safe in the long term. That is what they say to me. The vehicle is not properly illuminated. They are not properly illuminated in comparison with the ambulance service, which has complete and utter illuminated clothing. That is an area they would like the Minister to look into.

This Bill makes good reading. It tightens rules to prevent re-litigation on access to proceeds of crimes. It broadens CAB powers for data sharing domestically and internationally. It extends

CAB staff anonymity provisions and reflects evolving EU asset confiscation standards but does not fully address international protocols. In its approach to crime prevention and deterrents, the Bill focuses specifically on targeting the financial assets of criminals. Independent Ireland is focused on stricter sentencing and eliminating suspended sentences for serious crimes and supporting Garda retention. Independent Ireland was very clear that we need stricter sentences. Often, when I look at sentences, I scratch my head, because some very serious crimes get very light sentences. On the other hand, someone might steal something - which is not a good thing to do and they must be apprehended - and might have even given back the money and they still get a jail sentence. I wonder if there could be a better balance because we see a lot of heavy crimes being walked around. I listened to some of the parties here today who said they support this and that there is concern in their communities about it. I will pick one party, the Social Democrats, whose mission statement says the party believes: “that in line with international best-practice, a policy of decriminalisation should be pursued in respect of the possession of drugs for personal consumption.” I do not agree with that, because if we are going to accept it in the back door, we may as well accept it in the front door. That is a crazy system. They cannot come in here afterwards and say that the country has gone mad in relation to drugs’ crime if they are saying that in a small way it is fine. It is not; drugs are drugs and that is the bottom line. The only time I ever stood up here for any type of drugs was for medicinal cannabis for a very ill child. That type of set up is totally different.

I would appreciate if the Minister would look into the areas I mentioned, especially CCTV, which is a huge issue. The Minister should consider how he can further support Garda youth awards and our gardaí, be they in west Cork, Galway or wherever else. There should be more gardaí on the beat. I will pick out one garda in west Cork, Jonathan McCarthy, who lives in the area. He nips crime in the bud. He knows where it is going wrong before it goes wrong. I have seen young people going wrong and I have seen him putting them right, because he is living in Ballydehob. That is difficult because the locals go to his door to call him and tell him he is needed somewhere. That is not fair and it is difficult for a garda but he is an example of great type of garda we have. They really know how to help a community to make sure things get sorted and usually it irons itself out. That is the type of garda we need in the force and that we need to be promoting in our communities and we need more of them. We do not have that many of them. They are not there because they are not adequately resourced and I would appreciate the Minister working on that going forward.

**Deputy Gillian Toole:** I will be very careful if I go to west Cork on my holidays. I thank the Deputy for the heads up.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** It is okay, I will mind you.

**Deputy Gillian Toole:** On a more serious note, I thank the Minister, his team and I presume The Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers for the sterling work on what I consider to be a future-proofing and highly considered safeguarding of the next generations of the country. I also express my gratitude to our juvenile liaison officers. I will name two of them in particular from County Meath, garda Barbara Kelly and garda Aisling Connor and the entire community team there, the support workers of the youth diversion projects, the community and voluntary leaders of the drug and alcohol task forces, the members of the strengthening families programmes and all of the volunteers who participate in night leagues and who help with community buses. This is fantastic work and it sets the tone. I will not tell the Minister what to do next, or otherwise. This in itself is fantastic and it opens the door to other far-reaching work.

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The community safety fund is pivotal and the growth from €2 million to €4 million is welcomed. It is important how the money is used within the communities, as is the use of data to target specific areas where it will be of most benefit and will be most far-reaching in enabling children to reach their full potential, while limiting the individuals who suck the lifeblood out of communities and families.

I will not repeat everything that my colleagues have said. I see the Minister is taking plenty of notes. He does not need any more to add to his list. I want to mention two areas in particular, for when funds are being distributed. I agree that further investment in the fiscal and human resources of An Garda Síochána is needed but investment is also needed in drug, alcohol and mental health supports, in collaboration with the HSE and the ETBs, particularly those that provide tutors to the local training initiatives and the special community employment schemes. I will refer to two in particular, in County Meath. The first is Meath Opportunities for Training, the local training initiative, linked to Tabor House, which supports people in recovery from drugs and alcohol. There is also the special community employment scheme in Navan, which assists people to regain life skills and to upskill. As we know, from other debates in the House, there are funding gaps for tutors who provide this invaluable service. I do not think there will be any shortage of extremely deserving, community-based organisations that will help people to recover and will also help safeguard young people and deliver them from life-limiting and life-damaging interactions with the drugs trade.

I applaud and commend the Minister for his work thus far.

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Jim O’Callaghan):** I thank all my colleagues for their contributions. It is also notable and unusual that everyone who spoke is very much in favour of the legislation, with full support across the House. I welcome that. It is also important that people who are involved in criminality and generating wealth from it, know that there is unanimity in this House in our opposition to them and in our desire to combat them.

I will deal with some of the issues that were raised by colleagues. Deputy Mark Ward spoke about white-collar crime. It is the case that CAB does go after this type of crime. CAB does not only go after people involved in drug dealing or other such activities. Deputy Ward also spoke about the community safety fund, as did many other colleagues. There is a desire for the money to go back into the areas that are most affected by it and there is an application process. It may be the case that some communities are better informed when it comes to filling out application forms. That could be a legitimate comment in respect of the matter. If that is so, those communities need to be informed about the fund. People in this House and elsewhere would be happy to assist them in filling out the application forms. Deputy Ward also asked about a mini CAB. In fairness, to CAB, it goes after people in terms of assets which are the proceeds of crime, even if they are amounts in the low thousands of euro. CAB does not have a hierarchy that says it should only go after the millionaire criminals. It does target the lifestyle of rich criminals. CAB does a lot of observation work and it looks at people’s lifestyles. A lot of work goes on under the surface that we do not hear about or discuss in this House.

Deputy Ward also spoke about youth diversion. We need to ensure that we have as many youth diversion programmes operating as possible. Later this year, I hope to be in a situation where every area will have a functioning youth diversion programme, powered by the Probation Service.

Deputy Quinlivan referred to the feuds in Limerick. It is worth noting that there were sig-



nificant feuds in Limerick before and the gardaí got on top of them and dealt with them. CAB played a significant role in that as well. Regrettably, it is probably always the case that when one crime gang is got rid of, someone else will rise up and take their place. The important thing is that the Garda will be on their case and CAB will be following them closely after that. The message should go out that it is a pointless activity getting involved in crime. It may generate money in the short term but in the long term it will result in imprisonment and a person's assets being seized and a very negative reflection on their life.

Deputy Kelly made some comments about the role of Ruairí Quinn in the proceeds of crime legislation. I am beginning to see now that success has many fathers. I mentioned John O'Donoghue and Deputy Ward mentioned Nora Owen. I commend the Government and Members of the Oireachtas back in 1996 for coming up with this innovative idea. Deputy Kelly also spoke about Brendan Howlin's legislation from some years ago, the Proceeds of Crime (Gross Human Rights Abuses) Bill 2020.

*4 o'clock*

I have not had an opportunity to look at it. I would have thought it would be fairly difficult to try to transpose a provision such as this into Irish law. My understanding from listening to Deputy Kelly is that it is legislation that would permit the Criminal Assets Bureau to seize assets belonging to other countries present in this jurisdiction if those countries were involved in an abuse of human rights. The legislation dealing with seizing assets from criminals in this country is difficult enough, as we can see from the complexity of it, and I am not in a position to start going around seizing assets in respect of human rights abuses around the world. However, I look forward to seeing the amendment Deputy Kelly said he would bring forward in respect of it and, to use Civil Service speak, I would say it will be a very challenging amendment. We will look at it in due course.

I thank Deputy Devlin for his contribution. Something I thought about when I was listening to Deputy Devlin was the fact that, earlier this week, there was the decision of the Supreme Court on Routeback. This was a situation where the Supreme Court overturned a decision of the Court of Appeal that refused to allow new evidence to be heard in respect of a proceeds of crime application. From a brief perusal of it, I think the reason was that the Supreme Court said there was new evidence. We are entitled statutorily to change the rules, as we are doing, to say the matter cannot be opened up again.

Deputy Barry Ward mentioned we needed a consolidated version of Bills that come before the House. It is difficult enough to prepare a Bill without having a consolidated version of very large legislation. If people are looking for this, the Law Reform Commission frequently publishes consolidated updated versions of legislation. The Proceeds of Crime Act on the Law Reform Commission's website includes all the most recent amendments. If they are enacted into law, these amendments will be included also.

Deputy Ward also said we had to exercise caution when it came to freezing orders. Certainly when we look at the legislation, fair procedures are built into it. It has withstood constitutional challenge by various persons. Much of this legislation was tested in the Supreme Court shortly after its enactment in 1996 and it was found to be constitutional.

Deputy Ó Murchú echoed the point made by Deputy Kelly on trying to use the legislation for the purpose of human rights abuses. The best way to deal with issues such as this is through

the sanctions imposed at EU level. That is how we deal with sanctions and freezing of assets belonging to certain persons from Russia. It can only be done when there is agreement at EU level. Deputy Ó Murchú also mentioned the issue of cocaine that, regrettably, is prevalent throughout our society.

Deputy Gannon welcomed the Bill. He referred to it as a smart piece of legislation. He spoke about addiction. Addiction is the real consequence of the criminal activity of people delivering and dealing in drugs. It has had disastrous consequences for young people who get caught up in addiction. I regret to say, however, that no part of the country is immune to this addiction and every constituency of every TD in the House has addiction issues. I have seen it myself from visiting addiction services. Deputy Gannon also spoke about having a mini-CAB. I repeat the point I made in response to Deputy Mark Ward, namely, that CAB goes after small amounts of assets if it believes they are the proceeds of crime.

Deputy Kenny mentioned how people in Ireland feared crime. This is true but we need to be balanced in our understanding of it. Ireland is, relative to other countries, a safe country. There will be crime in a country with a successful economy. When money is available, regrettably, people will fall for the attraction of drugs, although they should not do so.

In terms of proceeds of crime applications before the courts, there are very many of them. It is not a case that there is a small number of applications. I had a look at the legal diary as I was listening to colleagues and today there was a proceeds of crime list in the High Court with 22 items. A lot of work is going on in respect of the Criminal Assets Bureau.

Deputy Gogarty welcomed the Bill and asked whether the properties that were frozen could be rented out. In practical terms, when a section 3 freezing order is made, the property is sold. Then the money is collected by the receiver and the money becomes the issue in dispute. It is the practice of CAB after freezing an asset to sell it to liquidate it, if I can use this expression, to get the money. Then there is a dispute about who is entitled to the money, and that is determined by the courts.

Deputy Paul Lawless said gardaí in Mayo were struggling. That was not my experience of gardaí in Mayo when I was there doing the Colm Horkan run a couple of weeks ago. I saw a great sense of community spirit from the gardaí in Charlestown and I believe it operates throughout Mayo. Deputy Lawless mentioned, as did Deputy Michael Collins, that he wanted to see more gardaí on the streets. The biggest problem I face as the Minister for justice is that, everywhere I go, people say they want to see more gardaí. I am limited in the numbers I have. It is my job to try to recruit more. I cannot start going around saying I will give a couple of gardaí to certain constituencies. I do not get involved in that. It is a matter for the Commissioner. It would be inappropriate if a Minister for justice started going around directing where gardaí should go.

Deputy Michael Collins spoke about how we had lost the war on drugs. I disagree with this. The alternative is that we just put up our hands and say we will legalise drugs and let them come in. The addiction levels would increase significantly. We have seen experiments in other parts of the world, such as America and Canada. They have legalised drugs and it has been a disaster for them. The number of psychotic episodes for young people has shot through the roof and addiction levels have increased. It has become a bigger problem. We are better off having it criminalised.

I do not have an answer for Deputy Collins on CCTV but local authorities are responsible for the operation of it.

Question put and agreed to.

### **Proceeds of Crime and Related Matters Bill 2025: Referral to Select Committee**

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

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration pursuant to Standing Orders 103(2)(b) and 188(1).

Question put and agreed to.

### **Message from Select Committee**

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Select Committee on Health has completed its consideration of the Health Information Bill 2024 and has made amendments thereto and has amended the Title to read as follows:

An Act to give further effect to Regulation (EU) 2025/327 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 February 2025 on the European Health Data Space and amending Directive 2011/24/EU and Regulation (EU) 2024/2847 and for those and other purposes to provide for a duty for health services providers to share, in certain circumstances, a patient’s personal health data with other health services providers also providing care and treatment to the patient; to provide for the creation and assignment by the Health Service Executive of an Electronic Health Record in respect of every patient; to provide for the information that shall be contained in an Electronic Health Record; to provide that a health services provider shall record the personal public service number of each of his or her patients; to provide that the Health Service Executive may, where appropriate, use a personal public service number to identify a patient; to provide for access to all, or part of, an Electronic Health Record by certain categories of person; to provide for the restriction of such access in certain circumstances; to provide a patient with information in relation to access to his or her Electronic Health Record; to provide for the Minister to make regulations for the purposes of this Act; to provide for the purposes in relation to which an Electronic Health Record may be used; to provide that the Health Service Executive may enter into reciprocal arrangements with other jurisdictions in relation to the exchange of information contained in an Electronic Health Record; to provide that the Health Service Executive may request health services providers to provide the Health Service Executive with certain classes of personal health data; to provide that the Health Service Executive may request certain persons to provide the Health Service Executive with certain categories of health information; to provide that the Health Service Executive may make an application to the Circuit Court where a person fails to comply with a request; to provide for the purposes for which the Health Service Executive may use health information provided to it in accordance with this Act; to provide that the Health Service Executive shall prepare and publish guidelines for the purposes of this Act; and to provide for related matters.

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## **Central Bank (Amendment) Bill 2025: Second Stage [Private Members]**

**Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy):** I move:

“That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

I am pleased to bring the Central Bank Amendment Bill 2025 before the House. The Bill was initiated as a Private Members’ Bill by Deputy Catherine Ardagh in February and, with her agreement, the Government has decided to use Government speaking time to prioritise its introduction before the recess and make the relevant amendments on Committee Stage. The legislation reflects not only a programme for Government commitment but is the right thing to do. We are ensuring those who have survived cancer can access mortgage protection insurance without discrimination based on their past diagnosis.

The journey cancer survivors face is arduous and filled with uncertainty. However, when in remission their hopes are to rebuild, continue onwards and upwards, and plan with their families. For too long, though, cancer survivors in Ireland have faced a challenging and unfair situation whereby they can be refused cover or be charged higher premiums because of their past diagnoses. The Bill aims to put a stop to this by giving effect to the right to be forgotten concept that is now becoming recognised throughout Europe.

I take this opportunity to thank Deputy Ardagh for her unwavering dedication and hard work in bringing this critical issue to the forefront of our national agenda. Deputy Ardagh’s determined efforts, including introducing the Central Bank (Amendment) Bill and previously championing it in the Seanad, are to be noted in the House. While this is a programme for Government commitment, I wanted to prioritise it on taking office in the Department of Finance at the end of January. It is legislation I was determined to progress in the first six months of my brief. Therefore, to ensure efficient progression of the Bill through the Houses, the Government has taken the right decision to progress the Bill in Government time, subject to amendments that will be worked on over the summer. Why does the Bill matter? This Bill is about fairness, dignity and recognising the resilience of individuals who have overcome one of life’s greatest challenges. Their past struggles should not define their future opportunities. I firmly believe that we should be guided by these struggles to make something better if we have the ability to do so. Cancer touches a great many of us in Ireland, including myself and my family. I lost two siblings to cancer and I see it as a great privilege to be in a position to effect positive change today.

The Bill reflects a broader societal commitment to support cancer survivors, ensuring that recovery from cancer is not a barrier to accessing mortgage protection. It gives statutory weight to protections that were previously voluntary, making them enforceable by law. This is a crucial step forward. At the heart of the Bill is the straightforward but powerful principle that, where survivors have completed treatment and remained in remission for a defined period, a past cancer diagnosis should not be held against them in the underwriting of mortgage protection insurance. This is a vital safeguard that allows survivors to rebuild their lives without fear of discrimination or financial exclusion.

Some Deputies might rightly ask why we are doing this now when it has been spoken about for years. The Government was instrumental in moving the sector to act with the introduction of Insurance Ireland’s voluntary code of practice on mortgage protection for cancer survivors in December 2023. This was a crucial first step. Key elements of the code included a commitment

from participating insurers not to consider a cancer diagnosis where the applicant had completed treatment more than seven years ago, or five years ago for individuals diagnosed when under the age of 18, and a cap of €500,000 on the sum assured for those covered under the code.

The Government's initial approach was to consider and observe how this voluntary code functioned in practice before seeking to enshrine similar provisions in law. We wanted to avoid rushing into legislation that could be impractical or leave unintended gaps or legal consequences. Forvis Mazars conducted an independent review of the code in May 2025 on behalf of Insurance Ireland. The review confirmed that the code broadly works as intended but it also identified limitations. Its voluntary nature means that not all insurers are bound by it. The €500,000 cap and seven-year remission period exclude some survivors, particularly those with larger mortgage needs or longer treatment histories. Alongside this, the Department of Finance reviewed similar frameworks across the EU, looking at countries like France, Belgium and Luxembourg where laws on the right to be forgotten are already in place. We have learned a great deal from these countries' experiences.

All of this groundwork was essential. Having completed it, the Government is now in a position to propose Committee Stage amendments to the legislation as initiated to refine the Bill and ensure that it is legally robust, in compliance with EU law and Solvency II regulatory standards, operationally practical for insurers and regulators, and fair and effective for cancer survivors seeking mortgage protection insurance. While I understand the frustration behind calls to act sooner, I assure the House that this careful and evidence-based approach ensures the best long-term outcome for cancer survivors and the stability of the market.

The involvement of a number of organisations has been crucial and that too deserves recognition. It is important to highlight that the industry came to the table and that this legislation reflects progress rather than punishment. Above all, the tireless advocacy work of the Irish Cancer Society has been instrumental in giving survivors a voice.

Some may question why the Bill focuses solely on cancer survivors and mortgage protection insurance and does not cover other financial products or medical conditions. The answer is one of prioritisation and pragmatism. In legislation and policy, it is vital to take a stepwise approach similar to other EU member states, focusing first on where the need is greatest and where there is the clearest evidence base. Mortgage protection insurance is a critical financial product tied directly to one of the most fundamental aspects of life, that is, securing a home. It is the area where discrimination against cancer survivors has been most pronounced and where protections are most urgently needed. Expanding the scope prematurely without the detailed actuarial and legal groundwork we have done here could introduce unintended consequences such as legal uncertainty, which would delay protection for cancer survivors, or indirectly impacting other insurance products and premiums. It was prudent of the Government to ensure these were avoided.

The amendments we are proposing on Committee Stage will clarify this focus, aligning the Bill's scope precisely with the existing voluntary code and European best practice. This targeted scope will ensure effective protection for cancer survivors where it matters most, avoid unintended impacts on other insurance products and sectors, and provide a clear and manageable framework for enforcement and complaints resolution. I will bring forward a number of amendments on Committee Stage following detailed consideration by Department of Finance officials, engagement with the Attorney General's office and key stakeholders, and the approval of Government.



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It is my intention that these amendments will: focus the scope of the Bill to mortgage protection insurance exclusively to focus protections where they are most needed; align it with the principles of the voluntary code; specify definitions as to what constitutes a cancer survivor for the purposes of this legislation, reflecting clinical and actuarial evidence on remission periods; set clear parameters around the remission period and sum assured thresholds, balancing protections and the management of prudential risk; designate the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman's office as the complaints and dispute resolution authority to provide an accessible and effective enforcement mechanism, thereby clarifying the powers and responsibilities of the Central Bank of Ireland; and ensure compliance with EU monetary and financial rules and other relevant legal frameworks to avoid unintended conflicts or risks. Each of these amendments will be carefully considered to ensure the Bill is not only meaningful, but also operationally viable, legally sound and capable of delivering real protections to cancer survivors.

This Bill is priority legislation for Government, reflecting our commitment under the programme for Government and our responsibility to those affected. The Government is firmly committed to ensuring that this legislation is progressed in a timely manner. With the co-operation of both this House and the Seanad, it is my intention that the Bill will be enacted before the end of the year. Following Second Stage, which I hope the Bill will pass today, my officials will engage closely with the Attorney General's office on the precise drafting of the amendments in the areas I have outlined. These amendments will be subject to legal scrutiny to ensure compliance with all relevant domestic and EU laws. I assure all Members that, while we are on Second Stage, the substantive and critical amendments to make the Bill workable and effective will be brought forward on Committee Stage. This is where detailed scrutiny and improvements will occur.

I wish to clearly emphasise that this Bill reflects our society's values of fairness, resilience and support for those who have survived cancer. It is the product of careful work, broad consultation and a commitment to getting it right for the long term. We are now at a crucial stage that will define how these protections are delivered in practice. The amendments in the areas I have signalled will ensure the Bill is fit for purpose and delivers on our promise. I ask all Members of the House to support the Bill on Committee Stage, to work constructively with us to improve it, and to demonstrate that we stand together for cancer survivors and for fairness in financial services. I look forward to listening to the contributions today and to a productive and informed debate.

**Deputy Máire Devine:** At the outset, we welcome this Bill. Ensuring the right to be forgotten is essential for people who have overcome cancer. For people who face a diagnosis of that kind, purchasing a home might not be the first thing on their mind but shelter and owning a home are so important that many will quickly realise they are facing not only a battle with cancer but, even when they are on the far side of cancer, a battle to simply be treated like everyone else by the banks and insurance companies that are the modern gatekeepers of home ownership. We welcome the Bill and the Government can be assured of our support. In many ways, this is long overdue. We saw France introduce legislation almost a decade ago. In Ireland, we saw a voluntary code recently adopted by the insurance industry. Insurance companies can choose whether they adhere to the code in each individual case. The long-standing default to self-regulation has not served us well. That voluntary code only applies to mortgage protection insurance, not other types of insurance. That said, the fact that we are looking at this policy area raises many more questions. Are five years cancer free a fair threshold to set for the right to be forgotten? We have to add the difficult years of battling cancer. Only when people are finally

cancer free does the clock start, and then they have to wait five years to apply for mortgages. That does not seem right to me. We need to look hard at it.

I hope the Government will be sincerely open to looking at how we can go further than what is set out in the Bill. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have a long track record of siding with the banks, including allowing them to sell upwards of 100,000 mortgages to vulture funds, many for no reason and without consent. The families deserve justice there. The banks are allowed to enjoy corporation tax relief while boasting a combined profit of €5 billion last year alone and despite never fully repaying the Irish people for bailing them out. This is an opportunity for the Government to show it is on the side of the ordinary people and not the banks. Ordinary people deserve so much more.

Make no mistake, bank and insurance companies do not want this even if they will not say that publicly. If it is to pass, they want it as narrow as possible, with the wait time for a fresh start as long as possible. A year after the first all-clear from a doctor should be more than enough. People need to be able to move on with their lives, especially with lives they felt had been threatened.

We have to think about why we are only talking about cancer. There are many serious medical conditions that mean people cannot access mortgages, either because the banks will not lend or insurance companies will not provide the insurance banks require to issue a mortgage. My colleague Deputy Conway-Walsh was dealing with a case a couple of years ago where a woman who previously suffered from eating disorders had been denied insurance. She was denied precisely because she was continuing therapy to ensure she did not relapse. She was effectively being punished for doing the right thing, seeking help and staying healthy. I believe that, eventually, due to that woman bravely speaking out and political pressure, she was offered coverage, but nobody should have to go down that route.

This leads me to another area. It is not often that lending is the greatest barrier. As in the story I mentioned, the issue is often in accessing the mortgage protection insurance. This is where we need to be careful to ensure the legislation has the intended effect. Not only must people not be denied coverage, but we also need to ensure they are offered fair and affordable premiums. If someone gets an offer but the monthly cost is extortionate, then the barrier to accessing mortgages will remain. This issue is sometimes kicked around between the banks and the insurance company. The approach is hands-off and that it is somebody else's problem. The insurance companies will say that, where they will not insure, there are exemptions under section 126 of the Consumer Credit Act while banks will say that insurance companies should be providing insurance. It is a Mexican stand-off, and people are denied mortgages for not having mortgage protection insurance and are quoted extortionate premiums. Many people do know that they can argue the case with the bank.

I welcome this legislation and we will be supporting it, but I ask the Minister of State to take those issues on board.

**Deputy Catherine Ardagh:** It is very welcome to see the Central Bank (Amendment) Bill 2025, also known as the right to be forgotten Bill, now before the House on Second Stage. It is a significant moment for cancer survivors across Ireland and for all those who have campaigned for fair treatment when it comes to access to mortgage protection and financial products following a cancer diagnosis. It is also a meaningful moment for me personally. I first introduced this legislation in the Seanad in October 2022 after working very closely with the Irish Cancer

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Society, survivor advocates and legal colleagues. That original Bill progressed to Committee Stage with strong cross-party support, including from Deputy Devine's former colleague Senator Paul Gavan. There was positive engagement from the then Government. Unfortunately, the Bill lapsed with the dissolution of the Oireachtas but the injustice it aimed to address never went away. The challenge remained and so did the commitment to fix it, including in the programme for Government, as the Minister of State, Deputy Troy has said.

I am proud to see this Bill return today as a Government Bill. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, for his dedication in ensuring this legislation was brought forward. He has worked hand in hand with me to ensure it progressed from a concept to Cabinet and now to this Chamber.

A Cheann Comhairle, the aim of this legislation is simple but essential. It is to ensure that a person who has recovered from cancer is not subject to ongoing discrimination by financial providers, particularly when applying for mortgage protection. I hope that other products will be available, like travel insurance. The Bill provides that once a defined recovery period has passed since treatment concluded, survivors will no longer be required to disclose their cancer diagnoses when applying for financial products. We all know how damaging this kind of post-treatment discrimination can be, with people having to relive their cancer diagnoses. I have heard from people who were unable to draw down a mortgage at the very last minute because of their historic illnesses. Others were quoted prohibitively high premiums or asked to submit updated medical reports despite being in remission for many years. For many, it has meant house purchases collapsing at the very last minute, family plans being put on hold, or feeling trapped by a system that continues to define them by the most difficult chapter in their lives. This is not acceptable. This is what the Minister of State, Deputy Troy's and my Bill seeks to address.

We are not acting in isolation. A number of other EU member states, including France, Germany and the Netherlands, have already legislated for the right to be forgotten. Ireland is now catching up with the standard and delivering on our programme for Government commitment to protect cancer survivors and enshrine this in our law. The Bill also builds upon the voluntary code of practice introduced by Insurance Ireland in 2023. That code has had a positive impact and I acknowledge Insurance Ireland and the insurance companies that have adopted it. However, voluntary measures are not enough. They are not enforceable and do not provide certainty to applicants and cancer survivors. This Bill gives legal effect to that protection and creates a consistent and fair approach for all. The Bill includes clear provisions for its enforcement. It establishes offences for breaches, sets out penalties and enables appropriate authorities to investigate and act. While the specific oversight body may be clarified in future regulations as the Minister of State indicated, the intent is clear. Providers who breach the law should be held accountable and survivors should have real recourse when they are treated unfairly.

I know there will be discussion on Committee Stage around timelines set out in the Bill, including the current reference to five years post treatment. I welcome debate and we should engage fully with clinical experts and stakeholders to ensure the law reflects best practice. However, the underlying principle must be maintained that a person who has recovered should not be forced to continually relive his or her diagnosis in the context of financial applications. It is about fairness but also about privacy and dignity.

I acknowledge the continued leadership of the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, who has championed this Bill and has worked across Departments to ensure it received the support it needed to get here today. I also want to thank Commissioner Michael McGrath, who supported

the original Bill in the Seanad. I also acknowledge Insurance Ireland for its comprehensive engagement, and the Irish Cancer Society, which has championed this Bill since 2022. I commend the officials in the Department of Finance for their detailed and practical engagement with me and my team and for their clear commitment to delivering a workable and effective Bill. I thank all my colleagues on a cross-party basis who have supported this Bill. I thank the Irish Cancer Society's patient advocates, who have tirelessly advocated for the right to be forgotten to be enshrined in Irish law.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Well done, Deputy. Next is Deputy Cian O'Callaghan.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** On behalf of the Social Democrats, I welcome and support this Bill. I commend Deputy Ardagh for all her work on this over the years. I commend the Minister of State and the Department for running with it. I particularly acknowledge all of the work done by the Irish Cancer Society and its patient advocates over the years in campaigning for this. Indeed, they have not just campaigned for this important measure but there is all the work they are doing. It is incredible to see people who are battling cancer also taking the time to fight for better conditions for themselves and for other people fighting and battling cancer. This is long overdue legislation. People who have beaten cancer should never be discriminated against. I agree with the comments made earlier about the five year threshold. That needs to be looked at because it is quite long, especially when you consider what people have already gone through. They have gone through the fight and often a prolonged period with a loss of income. Having come through all of that, to have to wait another five years is a long time in terms of not facing these measures. That is why the intent of the Bill is very welcome and I strongly support it.

The other point I make is that the Irish Cancer Society plays an absolutely critical role in the supports it gives and the gaps it fills. We have come a long way as a country in better treatments and better outcomes for people fighting cancer, but there are significant gaps in support that the Irish Cancer Society fills, and without which individuals and families supporting them would be in an even more difficult place. It is important to acknowledge that but to also say, as legislators, in addition to this Bill we have more to do to support people fighting cancer. Too much of that is being left on the shoulders of the Irish Cancer Society. It does a very good role, but I know, without the additional supports it gives, people would be in an even more difficult situation. When someone is battling cancer, they should not be worrying about the practicalities and finances and they should not have all the additional stress from that, but they do. Because of the work of volunteers in the Irish Cancer Society some of that gap is filled, but it should not just be left on them.

Only one in four cancer survivors felt they were treated fairly when it came to buying financial products, according to research the Irish Cancer Society undertook. That underlines the importance of this Bill. Once again, I commend Deputy Ardagh and the Minister of State for running with this. I acknowledge that. It is good that there are times we can all work together in this House. It is good that this is one of these times.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Independent Ireland is proud to speak in strong support of this Bill today. This Bill speaks to the very core of fairness, common sense and compassion in public policy. It is a simple but powerful measure that will make a real difference in the lives of thousands of our people who have already been through hell and back. The financial discrimination faced by cancer survivors in Ireland is an ongoing quiet injustice. Survivors, who are ordinary men and women, mothers and fathers, workers and neighbours are being punished

financially for something they have already overcome with unimaginable courage. These are people who have beaten the odds, endured the hardest years of their lives and yet face fresh barriers when they try to move forward like higher insurance premiums, denied mortgages and repeated invasive questions about their past. This is not acceptable in a modern, fair and compassionate republic.

Ireland's cancer survival rate has improved dramatically in recent decades thanks to advances in medicine and better healthcare. More than 220,000 people are living with or beyond cancer in Ireland today. These are not statistics. These are families, communities and lives that are reclaimed. Despite this medical progress our financial system remains stuck in the past. Ireland lags behind countries like France, Belgium and the Netherlands where this right is already protected in law. Insurance Ireland's voluntary code is welcome, but voluntary is not enough. Voluntary codes do not deliver certainty, accountability or enforceability. Why does this Bill matter? This is not a technical or financial issue. It is a question of dignity, fairness and equality. People who have survived cancer should not have to carry that label like a financial scarlet letter for the rest of their lives. After five years, post-treatment survivors deserve the right to move forward free from unfair discrimination. The Bill will ensure they cannot be penalised or excluded from financial services solely due to past illness. Their privacy is protected and there is no need to disclose what should no longer be relevant. There are penalties for financial institutions that refuse to respect these new standards.

This is about putting an end to unnecessary punishment. If medicine says they are clear, the law should say the same. It is about sovereignty and common sense regulations. We should not need Brussels to tell us how to treat our citizens with fairness. We should make our own laws. The law should serve people, especially those who have already suffered. This is the State standing by them. We know too well how faceless corporations can wield disproportionate powers. The Bill restores balance with a clear legal definition of what constitutes discrimination in this context. These are concrete protections after five years post-treatment, clear, understandable and enforceable. It shows legal recognition that cancer survivors have a right to financial inclusion and privacy, practical enforcement through fines and penalties, no room for evasion and flexibility for future Ministers to issue regulations to ensure these protections keep pace with developments.

I had a serious issue I raised in the Dáil approximately a month ago about health insurance. I will not bother naming the health insurance company now because it got resolved, but it should not have had to go the way it went. This has to be looked into at the highest level. You and I take out health insurance, which this person did in my constituency. I think he was paying €1,470 every year, thankfully without ever having to make a drawback. He got cancer and needed a special type of treatment for cancer. He was told that under his cover from the health company he had comprehensive cover. However, when he knocked on the door after many years of paying €1,470, he was told it was not that type of cover. I cannot remember the exact name of the medical treatment that gentleman needed, it was pharma something - I have it in the office - but Lord God the fight started for his very survival; fighting for your survival and fighting for your rights. He had health insurance. If company is doing it, the whole lot of them are doing it and selling it. If I have comprehensive car insurance, I expect if I went outside the gate and God forbid I hit another car, that I would have full cover. I do not understand how you can have comprehensive cover and it is not comprehensive. That is what we were led to believe all of our lives anyway. That is what this gentleman thought. He was 100% sure in a terrible time of need that he had cover, and he had that bit of relief behind him. He was told he



did not and to move on, and I was told to move on, but I did not. We brought it here to the floor of Dáil Éireann and the company decided to step back and to cover the gentleman, and rightly so it should. Imagine the unimaginable upset for that family to think these were the lengths they had to go to for their rights.

How many more have been treated like that? How many more did not have a voice? How many more politicians decided to ignore the plea from their constituents? Is this happening on a regular basis? I hope in this Bill going forward, which we will be supporting, that the Minister of State will look into that area too, so when they say comprehensive cancer cover, it means 100% cover. If not, they should be honest and say it is only 50% or 60% cover or whatever and name the types of cancers covered so people know when they pay that they will not be out of pocket essentially.

I commend Cancer Connect in west Cork. I have often raised the efforts of Cancer Connect in west Cork and the amount of people working there under the guidance of Helen and a fantastic team in the offices in west Cork. They deliver cancer care. They deliver a free transport service in west Cork. I was part of the organisation that was set up maybe 25 years ago. Everybody gets picked up in the community who wants to go for their chemotherapy, radiotherapy or whatever treatment they need to get. They are taken by bus from the door to the door free of charge so at least it alleviates that. If it is the case that it is a rare type of cancer and you have to be careful that it might have a spread, there is a car service. I extend a huge thank you to Helen, the working team and the car drivers. Each car driver is voluntary. Most of them are retired people who have decided to give up their time free of charge to take people to Cork for their chemotherapy and drop them home in the evening. That is great relief for people. I know the State was never asked until recently, because it is growing and growing. There is a huge number of cars on the road. Last year there was an initial promise of €50,000 under the budget and they got €50,000. They gratefully accept €50,000 and they are not complaining. This is an area that should be looked into going forward because Cancer Connect requires full funding, with €100,000 desperately required to deliver a cancer service for people. The service has gone to Kerry and it is now being copied around the country. It is a voluntary service that deserves funding.

I am proud to see Ireland moving in step with leading European countries with this Bill, but this is about Irish people first, not Europe. We do this because it is right for Ireland. That said, harmonising with best practice strengthens our reputation for fairness and decency. Behind every statistic are people with names, families and futures, survivors trying to secure homes for their families, parents seeking life insurance for peace of mind and workers trying to rebuild their financial security after illness. They deserve better than bureaucratic suspicion and financial punishment.

This is a small legislative change but a huge change in the lives of those affected. Independent Ireland welcomes the Bill with open arms because it embodies our values. We call on all Deputies to set aside party lines and support this fair, necessary and overdue Bill. Let us ensure that survivors are celebrated, not penalised. Let us pass this Bill and send a clear message in Ireland that cancer survivors have the right not to be always remembered but to be remembered by lawmakers as citizens worthy of fairness, dignity and respect.

In my last speech in the Dáil before the summer break, I thank the Ceann Comhairle, the Leas-Cheann Comhairle, the ushers and all the staff in Dáil Éireann who have been most kind to us as individuals, and all TDs. I wish them the best.

I would appreciate if Cancer Connect were to become an issue, especially in west Cork and we looked at delivery there. In fairness, the Taoiseach came down to Bantry last year and spoke very highly of the service. That is hugely important. The insurance companies cannot get away with the stunt they are trying to pull here by telling people they have comprehensive cover when they do not have it. That is not good enough, especially when it comes to cancer. People have enough worries on their minds when they are diagnosed with something. The last thing they want is to find out the company that promised them something, and which they spent years handing over their money to, tried to pull a scam on them. That is the way I look at it and I cannot see how any other person could see it otherwise. The insurance company was not genuine in this case and left somebody in a bad way. Thankfully, the matter was resolved but it is not have happened.

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** I welcome this fundamentally important Bill. Aontú has been campaigning for this for a long time. The right to be forgotten is crucially important for cancer survivors. We welcome and support this right 100%. The State has effectively punished cancer survivors and victims on the double. The first way is in terms of delayed treatment and diagnosis. The Irish Cancer Society this week launched a report stating that five out of six targets are being missed by the State. In the second instance, they are punished through financial discrimination. The idea that cancer survivors have been locked out of home ownership is a sad and shocking state of affairs. I have met many cancer survivors. I knocked on the doors of rented houses where the tenants had survived cancer for five, six or seven years and were still locked out of the ability to own their homes. This is at a time when rents are doubling because of the Government's policies. This is, therefore, a fundamentally important Bill, which we welcome with open arms.

I also raise the variations in cancer diagnosis. It is a well-known fact that early detection and diagnosis improves the prognosis for individual patients. The Irish Cancer Society outlined recently that there are shocking variations when it comes to cancer diagnosis. There are geographical variations and, indeed, a postcode lottery when it comes to cancer. However, there are also significant variations in public and private treatment, which is hard to believe in this day and age. For example, radiotherapy equipment with a lifespan of ten years is still in operation after 17 years. This has a significant impact in terms of servicing, etc., which knocks these machines out of action for some time. There are no PET scanners in public hospitals in Galway, Limerick and Waterford, which is hard to believe in this day and age.

From memory, over the past ten years, the number of patients treated for cancer at the Galway centre of excellence has doubled, but that has not been reflected in investments, staff numbers and physical space. Figures released to Aontú recently show there has been a 12% disparity between cancer patients in the public system versus those in the private system. The survival rate for breast cancer is 81% in the public system and 93% in the private system. That is a shocking situation. Coupled with the geographical disparity, it is a major task on which the Minister of State needs to work.

While we are in the process of improving the circumstances for victims and survivors of cancer, the Minister of State needs to recognise the significant financial cost of having cancer in this country. Car parking charges, for example, are significant, particularly in Dublin and Galway. Many of my constituents have to travel to Galway regularly. There is a significant cost in terms of fuel, cars, taxis and buses and parking charges. The Government should remove parking charges for patients with cancer. A certain number of hospitals have done this already but, with the Minister of State's intervention, that could happen overnight. While it may seem

small to the Minister of State and me, in the fullness of our health, please God, it would make a significant impact on cancer patients.

Having a cancer diagnosis comes with significant worry and anxiety, emotionally, for the patient and their family because of all the things that go through their heads. Financial anxiety should not be heaped upon them and, where possible, the burden of the financial cost should be removed. An answer to a parliamentary question released to Aontú outlined that hospital car parks are generating extraordinary revenue. From whom is that being extracted? The hospitals are creaming it off the most vulnerable people in our society. I want the Minister of State to reduce the cost of car parking for cancer patients and other patients and remove that particular cost.

The cost of buying a bottle of water or whatever it may be in a hospital vending machine is double what it is in a shop. If I could have the Minister of State's attention briefly, why are vending machines in hospitals so expensive? Could he address that issue? Could he look into it and see what we can do as a Parliament to try to reduce that cost? Anything he or the House can do to remove additional costs and stress from people who have cancer and significant illnesses is a good thing. This is a step in the right direction. The right to be forgotten and the ability of cancer survivors to access financial products like mortgages are fundamentally important, but we cannot stop here. There is much more work to be done. There is significant work to do on reducing the costs for cancer patients, on car parking charges and on variations in geography. It is difficult to believe that someone diagnosed with cancer in the west has a reduced survival rate and someone diagnosed with cancer in a public hospital *versus* a private hospital has a significantly reduced chance of survival. I ask the Minister of State to look at the important issues I have raised and perhaps come back to me with a review of those key points.

I thank the Ceann Comhairle and Oireachtas staff for their professionalism and assistance in my first term in Dáil Éireann.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Well done, Deputy. I congratulate him on getting to the end of his first term. I am afraid we have no more speakers so I call the Minister of State to make his closing speech.

**Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy):** I thank all Members who contributed to this important debate on the Central Bank (Amendment) Bill 2025. It is fair to say the tone of the discussion, by and large, has been thoughtful, constructive and, above all, compassionate, reflecting the seriousness and humanity of the issue at stake. This Bill is not just about insurance regulation but fairness, restoring dignity and ensuring those who have survived cancer are treated with justice not judgment.

I acknowledge the contributions from across the political spectrum. As previous speakers have said, we are coming to the end of the Dáil term. Usually, on Thursday evenings, it is harder to get contributors to debates regardless of how serious or important the matter is. I thank those who have given up their time this evening. It is fair to say there has been a clear and shared recognition that cancer survivors deserve better and their past illnesses should not be a barrier to home ownership.

Some of the contributions strayed much wider and further than what the Bill intends to do. All I can say to those who made other suggestions relevant to other Departments - this is a Department of Finance Bill - is we will pass on their suggestions to the relevant Minister or

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Minister of State in the Department of Health. I appreciate that any Deputy will take the opportunity to raise points relevant to supporting people undergoing treatment for cancer. I take those points in the spirit in which they were given and will certainly refer them to the relevant Minister to see what can be done.

We are not legislating in the abstract here; we are responding to very real barriers faced by our fellow citizens. I thank Deputy Ardagh, who has a long-standing commitment to this issue and has brought us to where we are today. Her work in raising this, both in the Seanad in the previous term and in the Dáil, in partnership with the Irish Cancer Society and its CEO, the former Senator Averil Power, laid the foundation for what is very much a priority of mine now. This is also a priority Bill for the Government. It is right that Deputy Ardagh's determination is reflected in the progress made today.

Several important points were raised during this debate. Some Members asked whether we were going far enough, while others questioned whether we should move faster or broaden the scope of the protections. These are fair questions and I assure Members they will be taken seriously as we move to Committee Stage. I stress that our approach from the outset has been guided by a careful, evidence-based and legally sound pathway. We have deliberately chosen to start with mortgage protection insurance because it is where the problem is most acute and the benefits of reform will be felt most directly.

The risk, if we broaden the scope too far too quickly, is that we may end up unintentionally driving up premiums for everybody else. We have to take a step-by-step approach, which allows us to deliver the protections now without compromising legal certainty or operational viability.

We heard concerns of enforcement. I reiterate the Government will bring forward amendments on Committee Stage to strengthen enforcement by designating the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman as the appropriate body to handle complaints. This will ensure cancer survivors have a clear and trusted avenue for redress, while hoping they will never have to go down that route. Deputy Collins gave an example of a cancer survivor who, thanks to the Deputy's advocacy in this House, had a matter resolved on the floor of the Dáil. Had it not been resolved here, I reiterate that where any health insurance company fails to offer compensation or payout based on the terms and conditions of the policy, it is open to the policyholder to refer a complaint to the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman.

We will clarify definitions, remission periods and coverage thresholds, all of which are essential to making this law effective in practice and fair application. It is unfair to say, however, that we are not going far enough in some instances because many countries have not introduced this measure. Even those that have introduced it recent years, such as Italy, the period to be in remission is ten years. In Portugal, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, the period is also set at ten years. The only two countries that have introduced this with a shorter period than we have provided are France and Belgium. France introduced this initially with a period of ten years before graduated the period down to eight years and then five years. As I said in my opening contribution, we have looked at international best practice and we did not just pluck figures from the sky. There is reason and rationale for the timeframes we have proposed but we are open to suggestions that may come forward on Committee Stage and we will give them due consideration.

Following the conclusion of Second Stage today, the Bill will proceed to Committee Stage.

This will be a critical phase in which the amendments signalled in my opening remarks and raised in today's debate will be formally tabled and debated. The Department of Finance, working closely with the Attorney General's office, is finalising the drafting of these amendments to ensure they are legally robust, aligned with the EU Solvency II rules and operationally sound for insurers and regulators alike. We will also continue to engage with stakeholders, including patient groups and industry representatives, to ensure the Bill strikes the right balance, delivering real protections for survivors while maintaining the integrity of the insurance framework.

Subject to the outcome of Committee and Report Stages, it remains the Government's intention to enact this legislation as quickly as possible. Ultimately, this Bill is a statement of the kind of society we want to be - one that does not define people by their illness, which recognises recovery, resilience and the right to rebuild one's life and which does not let bureaucratic or financial barriers stand in the way of something as fundamental as securing a home. By progressing this legislation, we are not only fulfilling a programme for Government commitment but also honouring the experiences of those who have overcome enormous personal challenge. Let us move forward together with purpose and compassion and hopefully bring this Bill to completion before the end of the year.

Question put and agreed to.

*Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 5 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 5.03 p.m.*

*Sitting suspended at 5 p.m. and resumed at 5.03 p.m.*

### **Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters**

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

Deputies Barry Heneghan, Naoise Ó Muirí and Cian O'Callaghan - To discuss the lack of community infrastructure in Clongriffin and Belmayne.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss a proposal by Kerry VFI pubs to allow for a draught excise rebate.

Deputy Edward Timmins - To discuss the growth and development of the Irish Stock Exchange.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue - To discuss the design of the entrance to the Rush side of the Rush and Lusk train station.

Deputy Louis O'Hara - To discuss the need for updated wind energy development guidelines.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness - To discuss water and wastewater infrastructure in County Waterford.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - To discuss the crisis of capacity at University Hospital Limerick.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly - To discuss water infrastructure provision in Kildare.



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Deputy Emer Currie - To discuss the inclusion of commercial bus operators in the planned expansion of free travel to children under the age of nine.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss the dog breeding national register and compliance with standards.

Deputy Tom Brabazon - To discuss the long-term sustainability of the fishing industry.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe - To discuss wait times for audiology appointments, nationally and in Dublin North West.

Deputy Gillian Toole - To discuss excess and unexpected mortality levels in nursing homes.

Deputy Paul Lawless - To discuss the annual notification of the number of terminations of pregnancies report.

The matters raised by Deputies Barry Heneghan, Naoise Ó Muirí and Cian O'Callaghan, Maurice Quinlivan, Edward Timmins, Pádraig O'Sullivan and Paul McAuliffe have been selected for discussion.

## **Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate**

### **Housing Policy**

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** I am raising this issue in relation to the situation in Clongriffin and Belmayne. It is a very large community. The start of development there happened about 20 years ago. Many people moved in there then and started out in their lives. They did not have families at that stage. Since then, they have formed families. Children have been born, grown up and become young adults. Over this time, there has been a huge deficit in the community infrastructure very necessary in any area to ensure it thrives and not just housing. Even though it was initially developed 20 years ago, there was stop-and-start development with the crash. There has been a lot more development in recent years and it is coming close now to being completed, and will be completed over the next number of years.

This is an area with a population of almost 14,000 people. There are 7,600 homes in the current pipeline too, so the population is going to increase significantly. We are talking about the size of a significant town and yet that really important community infrastructure is missing and there is this deficit. I acknowledge that Dublin City Council has recently set up a project office to help bring the area to completion in respect of the facilities needed. These include a new library, indoor sports facilities, community and cultural facilities, a new Garda station, a HSE primary care centre, more sports pitches and all the things to make a decent-sized town thrive. DCC has committed €13 million to ensure there is the necessary completion for the area and that the community infrastructure, which is so important, is also delivered. However, it cannot be delivered by Dublin City Council on its own. A contribution from the Government is needed as well. DCC submitted a very good proposal to the national development plan, which was supported by the local community, local community organisations and local community public representatives, including my constituency colleagues and me. If there is going to be completion in the area and a cohesive community, it is crucial that we get the investment input

in the context of the national development plan as well. This is absolutely crucial.

What we are asking as a cross-party group of constituency TDs - this Topical Issue matter was submitted by a couple of my colleagues too, Deputies Naoise Ó Muirí and Barry Heneghan - is that the Government look at this very seriously and make a contribution. We are noting that the area did not get a lot of the development levies planned and envisaged for the area because of changes that happened concerning some of the housing provided, which meant development levies were therefore not required. I am not talking about the recent waiver scheme but about other aspects that had substitute revenues coming from central Government. There was a lot of housing without development levies at all. There is, then, this deficit in funding for infrastructure. I ask the Minister of State to look at this matter urgently. There must be a significant contribution in this regard from the central Government in the national development plan. It is critical we invest in infrastructural and housing, but we must also invest in sustainable, cohesive communities.

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Niall Collins):** I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I note he is raising it in conjunction with his two colleagues, who, unfortunately, are not here to partake. I recall that my Fianna Fáil colleague, the other TD in the area, Tom Brabazon, raised this issue at a Fianna Fáil party meeting recently when we were discussing the whole area of sustainable communities.

In the first instance it should be noted that the provision of amenities and services is a core element of the statutory plan-making process by local authorities and is key to promoting the development of balanced and sustainable communities. Section 10 of the Planning and Development Act 2000 requires planning authorities to include objectives in their development plan to integrate social, community and cultural objectives with planning for residential and other development. The section further provides that objectives must also be included for the preservation, improvement and extension of amenities and recreational amenities. In practice, planning authorities comply with these requirements through the inclusion in their plan of relevant objectives, policy support and development management standards for such amenities and services, including within new residential developments, as well as identifying suitable locations for such facilities on a stand-alone basis through the zoning of land for recreation, social and community uses.

The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage has provided formal guidance to planning authorities on the preparation of development plans, including on the provision of accompanying amenities for new communities, through the Development Plans - Guidelines for Planning Authorities 2022. These guidelines were issued under section 28 of the Planning and Development Act 2000 and planning authorities are required to have regard to them in the performance of their functions. As noted in these guidelines, the implementation of the development plan is a key strategic focus for the relevant local authorities, Dublin City Council and Fingal County Council in this instance, and they must use their wide range of functions in housing, transport, amenities development and infrastructural delivery to achieve the objectives of the plan, including in relation to the provision of amenities.

The making of a development plan is a reserved function of the elected members of each planning authority. A planning authority or An Coimisiún Pleanála may also attach a condition to a grant of planning permission requiring the payment of a contribution in respect of public infrastructure and facilities that it is intended will be provided by or on behalf of a local authority. This may include open spaces and recreational and community facilities. The basis for

such contributions is set out in a development contribution scheme as adopted by the elected members. In addition, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage provides funding to local authorities through the €2 billion Urban Regeneration and Development Fund, URDF, which is supporting a programme of significant transformational capital projects that will contribute to the regeneration and rejuvenation of Ireland's cities and other large towns, in line with the objectives of the national planning framework and the national development plan.

The Belmayne and Clongriffin areas were provided with funding through the Department's Local Infrastructure Housing Activation Fund, LIHAF, for improved local road access, pedestrian facilities and access to public transport in the area, including Clongriffin train station.

It is noted that, under section 213 of the Planning Act, a local authority is empowered, for the purposes of performing any of its functions, including giving effect to, or facilitating the implementation of, its development plan, to acquire land, permanently or temporarily, by agreement or compulsorily.

In accordance with section 63(3) of the Local Government Act 2001, local authorities are independent in the performance of their functions and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage has no role in relation to the planning or provision of amenities and services in individual local authority areas.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** I thank the Minister of State for the response. I acknowledge that Deputy Denise Mitchell has been very supportive, along with the other TDs for this area and all the public representatives from all parties, in supporting the local communities on this. I know the Minister of State has not written his response but there are a few things in it that are factually wrong. Neither Clongriffin nor Belmayne, or any part of them, is in the Fingal County Council area. They are entirely in Dublin City Council. I know the Minister of State does not know this but it is disappointing that the Department, in writing this answer, does not know this.

Second, it is factually wrong to talk about the LIHAF funding providing access to Clongriffin train-DART station because that LIHAF funding was provided for access. That funding was never drawn down, but it was provided for access in the Baldoyle area, which is in Fingal County Council, and which, also, is not in Clongriffin or Belmayne. It is disappointing that the Department, in writing this response, could not get its facts right.

Third, on the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund, there was an application to Dublin City Council for funding from that but it was rejected and no funding was received. That also was a disappointment for the area.

Fourth, to reiterate, the reason there is a particular deficit in community infrastructure here is not because the local authority has not been following the steps set out in the reply. It is because Government was not providing a sufficient amount of social housing in other areas and a lot of housing here was then provided, which was not initially planned, and for which there were no development levies. While the area was planned to have development levies to pay for community infrastructure, due to Government policy a lot of that housing came without any development levies. The problem with that is that it still needs infrastructure. Social housing still needs infrastructure. If you are going to get social housing, which is desperately needed, it has to come with infrastructure and community facilities. To be fair to Dublin City Council, it is trying to fix this. They are putting in €13 million but Government has got to do a bit of the lifting here as well.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** As I stated at the outset, the provision of amenities and services is a core element of the plan-making process and is key to promoting the development of balanced and sustainable communities.

Section 10 of the Planning and Development Act 2000 sets out mandatory objectives which must be addressed by local authorities in their development plan, including objectives for the integration of the planning and sustainable development of the area with the social, community and cultural requirements of the area and its population. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage has supported the local communities in this planning function through the publication of ministerial guidelines, including Development Plans - Guidelines for Planning Authorities in 2022, providing for a strategic approach to the implementation of new development with a wide range of amenities and supporting community and social infrastructure critical to planning and sustainable communities.

Implementation and delivery of the provision of necessary amenities for new residential areas is a key responsibility of local authorities working in tandem with developers, infrastructure providers, Government agencies and others to ensure the sustainable development and quality of environment of such areas for new residents.

I will take on board the factual inaccuracies the Deputy said were presented and I will communicate them back.

### **Hospital Overcrowding**

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** I mean no disrespect to the Minister of State, Deputy Collins, but I would have hoped a Minister from the Department of Health would have come in. The last time I had a Topical Issue at least I was told it would be the Minister of State, Deputy Collins, which I appreciated. I had a Topical Issue on crime but nobody from the Department of justice. I want to put that on the record. I will write to the Ceann Comhairle about it because it is bad road to be going down. We are trying to raise important issues to us and we do not get that chance often. It is important that a Minister from the line Department comes in. Again, I mean no disrespect to the Minister of State, Deputy Collins. The Minister of State is from my own county and I know him for a number of years.

The capacity issues of University Hospital Limerick continue unabated and they risk patient safety. In each year since the Fine Gael-Fianna Fáil Coalition was established in 2020, the trolley numbers at University Hospital Limerick have got steadily worse. Already this year, we have seen 12,998 people treated in this manner. In 2024, it was 23,203 people. In 2023, it was 21,400 people and the previous year, it was 18,012 people. The coalition parties have failed again and again to address the capacity issues at University Hospital Limerick. Indeed, since Fine Gael entered government in 2011, there has been a 585% increase in trolley numbers in my local hospital.

Each of those left on a hospital trolley in a hospital corridor is somebody who has presented to the hospital and has been assessed and deemed in need of a hospital bed and yet no bed is available to them. The people of Limerick and the mid-west region deserve much better. The staff at University Hospital Limerick deserve much better. It is not good enough that 1,899 people were treated in June this year in conditions that are devoid of privacy and dignity. For the record, June saw 233 more people treated on trolleys than in June 2024.

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Despite this issue being raised on so many occasions in this Chamber for more than five years by me and despite it also being raised on so many occasions by consultant doctors, patient advocacy groups and nurses' organisations, there is no real progress being made.

Last week I had the pleasure of meeting with the members of the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, INMO, the nurses' union. They highlighted how often their members were asked to care for multitudes of patients - numbers that are clearly not safe or acceptable. Nurses, doctors and other medical professions at University Hospital Limerick do their best, in most cases, in the most challenging of circumstances, but they are exhausted. The hospital struggles to retain nursing staff. Who could blame these nurses departing for jobs in places such as Australia and Dubai? Once there, they have job security, a lesser ratio of patients per nurse and accommodation options near their place of work. In Limerick, the average rent is €2,400 per month, and beyond the affordability of many nurses.

We are halfway through the year and already 13,000 people have been treated on trolleys in one hospital. This is an utter disgrace and a complete abandonment of the people of Limerick and the mid-west. A Government that is serious about addressing the obscene nature of the overcrowding in UHL, which has caused the cancellation of elective procedures and excessive emergency department wait times, would have said that the number is far too high. Indeed, I would suggest that such a Government would have taken robust action to stem the tide of increased numbers.

Over recent years, we have had commitments to build two 96-bed units, each of which may deliver an additional 48 beds. While I welcome any increase in capacity, it is simply not good enough. It is not enough when you consider that UL Hospitals Group itself advises a minimum of 400 beds is needed to deal with the capacity. Even that number does not consider the projected population growth in the mid-west region.

This is a crisis. It happens every day and needs an emergency response. Too often, there has been the tragic avoidable loss of life at University Hospital Limerick with the issue of overcrowding deemed a contributing factor. One thinks of the loss of young Aoife Johnston. We are 12 months on from the publication of the Clarke report into Aoife's avoidable death and since then, the capacity challenges at UHL have only worsened.

Last October Sinn Féin brought forward a motion in the Dáil, in part on the establishment of an additional model 3 hospital in the mid-west region.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy will get to come back in a second time.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** The Government did not oppose that motion and we await a response from HIQA.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** I thank Deputy Quinlivan for giving me the opportunity to address the House on capacity at University Hospital Limerick and provide an update on measures that are being taken to alleviate overcrowding. Reducing emergency department overcrowding and reducing waiting lists is a priority for this Government. Many patients are still waiting too long for hospital appointments and treatments. UHL has one of the busiest emergency departments in Ireland. Presentations totalled 87,194 in 2024. Between January and June this year, emergency department attendances at UHL were 9% higher than in the same period last year. Despite this, the daily average of patients counted on trolleys at 8 a.m. during this period is down 3% compared with the same period in 2024. However, too many patients are being



treated on trolleys at UHL. More capacity is required but this must also be supported by a range of reforms across health services in the region.

There has been ongoing investment in additional capacity at UHL in recent years. UHL's annual budget spend has increased from €265 million in 2019 to €507 million in 2024. A package of wide-ranging reform measures is also being implemented. These measures are aimed at capacity and reform of the health system in the region, including increased staffing levels. Staffing at UHL has grown by 48%, an increase of 1,337 whole-time-equivalent staff, from 2019 to May 2025.

More beds are needed in the hospital and across the mid-west region. Through Government investment, 140 new beds have opened in UHL since 2020. This includes the successful delivery of two fast-tracked 16-bed inpatient blocks which opened in December 2024 and in June this year. More new bed blocks are being developed which will provide up to 292 additional beds by 2028. This includes two 96-bed blocks, the first of which is expected to open in September 2025.

Bed capacity is being further expanded throughout the region through the acute hospital inpatient bed capacity expansion plan. This will deliver 572 new inpatient beds in the region by 2031, including 24 new beds at Nenagh Hospital, 48 new beds at Ennis Hospital and 42 new beds at St. John's Hospital in Limerick. In addition, 25 virtual ward beds are operating at UHL.

In May 2024, the Health and Information Quality Authority, HIQA, was requested to conduct a review of urgent and emergency care in the mid-west region. The primary objective of this work is to ensure safe, quality acute care in the region. As part of this review, HIQA was requested to consider the case for a second emergency department in the context of the population changes in recent years and the ongoing pressures at UHL. HIQA published the terms of reference for this review in August 2024. A preliminary briefing was received at the end of February. This preliminary briefing was published in March by the Minister for Health. A final report is expected in September 2025. The Minister will then consider the findings of the report to ensure that the appropriate actions are taken to ensure safe urgent and emergency care that is both safe and of high quality. I would like to reassure the Deputy, and all patients and people in the mid-west, that this Government is fully committed to improving health services in the region.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** I thank the Minister of State, but it does not give me any confidence. In the last line of his response he said, "I would like to reassure the Deputy, and all patients... in the mid-west, that this Government is fully committed to improving health services in the region." I have received the same reply since 2016 when I first started raising this nine years ago. The fact remains that we have record numbers of people attending University Hospital Limerick, with June of this year having the highest June number ever. The Government's plan will not address this issue.

I am not sure if the Minister of State is aware that the second 96-bed unit that he mentioned has been referred to An Coimisiún Pleanála. That means we will face at least a two-year delay on that one. I would like to know what the Government intends to do in the interim as we plough through the An Coimisiún Pleanála delay on that. People are entitled to object to planning applications if they want but this will cause chaos in Limerick because we were depending on this 96-bed unit being delivered sooner than that. This will potentially add two years on to that. What will the Government do in the interim to solve the problem we have?

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The sum total of the Government's plan to solve the crisis is to introduce a few additional beds, which is not really good enough. It is talking about 2028, in three years' time and potentially two years later than that. In Limerick city and county, where the Minister of State lives, the people he and I represent cannot wait that long. We need immediate action that treats the situation with the urgency it deserves. In recent weeks an average of 100 people per day have been on trolleys and the hospital is simply not designed for that. We have had a new emergency department since 2017. It was never designed properly for the numbers presenting to the hospital. The UL Hospitals Group advises that a minimum of 400 beds are needed and even that number does not consider the projected growth of population in the mid-west region which we all know will grow exponentially. The figures the Government is offering are dramatically short of what is needed in University Hospital Limerick. I do not get any comfort from the response the Minister of State gave and the people in Limerick and the mid-west will not get any comfort either.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** There is no doubt that when people get through the emergency department at UHL, the care and treatment they receive up the house and in their journey through UHL in the main is very good and very high quality.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** I agree.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** That needs to be acknowledged and put on the record. Very often, the political narrative around UHL dismisses the very fine work that is going on there at all levels by porters, nurses, doctors, senior house officers, consultants and those at administration level. Of course, there have been some very unfortunate high-profile individual cases which have been in the news. They should never have happened but unfortunately they did happen. However, in the main people get great treatment and care at UHL.

I do not agree with Deputy Quinlivan when he says there has been no progress.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** I said no recent progress.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** I have outlined the significant investment and the significant progress that the Government has made over recent years, particularly since Fianna Fáil returned to government in 2020 by almost doubling the operational budget, increasing the workforce by well over 1,000 and increasing bed capacity. There has been a robust response. The Deputy said there has not been a robust response. I would argue that he is wrong. There has been a robust response. When Sinn Féin people discuss UHL, I never hear what their proposals are. The Deputy has not outlined here today and I have never heard him outline previously what Sinn Féin would do in government about UHL.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** We had the last Dáil motion on UHL which was passed.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** Sorry, I have the floor. Sinn Féin describes the problem and provides a commentary on the problem, which is fine and we are all well able to do that. What would Sinn Féin do differently? How would it resource it differently?

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** We are the only party that actually called for-----

**Deputy Niall Collins:** Sinn Féin has never outlined a detailed proposal.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** Yes, we have

**Deputy Niall Collins:** It will not take An Coimisiún Pleanála two years to reach a decision on the second 96-unit block.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** That concludes the question. I thank the Minister of State.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** The delivery time for decisions through An Coimisiún Pleanála has drastically fallen, thankfully.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Minister of State.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** I passed UHL recently; it is a massive building site.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Minister of State is way over time.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** There is huge investment going on there.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We have to move on.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** A lot has been done and I accept that more needs to be done. It is incumbent on everybody to point out the positives of it as well.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** We are way over time and the Minister of State is out of order.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** There are challenges there, but there are plenty of positives.

### **Disability Services**

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** In our constituency offices, we frequently receive queries about different State services and requests for appointments. Where possible we are able to make progress for people. Recently I was taken aback when Christopher, a constituent of mine from Whitehall, contacted me regarding an audiology appointment. It was in fact his daughter who was in touch with me. He was informed that the soonest audiology appointment which would be available to him would be in December 2026. I am assured that urgent cases are dealt with more speedily, but that is of little comfort to Christopher who is seeking an appointment and who is slowly losing the hearing that he has. I understand from Chime that this is not unique and that over 8,000 people are waiting for audiology appointments.

I am looking for the Minister for Health to take measures that might assist in waiting list initiatives specifically for audiology appointments. There has been some progress with children's audiology and I believe over €750,000 was identified for funding to try to fast-track those children who are waiting for audiology appointments. Whether you are young or old, the loss of your hearing is a very scary thing and is something that isolates you. I know that as many older people lose their hearing, they feel more and more removed from their own family, their neighbours and their friends. They perhaps do not attend the same events they would have attended. It can be a very isolating experience. It is for that reason I hope we might be able to take some measures on this matter. I would appreciate it if he could update the House.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** On behalf of the Minister for Health, I thank Deputy McAuliffe for raising this important matter. Addressing waiting lists is a high priority for the Government and substantial investment has been made to address waiting lists across a range of acute and community health services. A previous review of audiology services, published by the Health Ser-

vice Executive in 2011 as the national audiology review group report, identified shortcomings including access issues, poor information flow, inadequate staffing and unacceptable waiting times. The report made recommendations to address these concerns. Most of these recommendations have been implemented, including the roll-out of a national audiology clinical management system for community services, which is facilitating improved waiting list management. The national audiology clinical management system clearly indicates that the demand on HSE audiology services is increasing year-on-year, especially with the ageing demographic of the population as Ireland ages.

The system also provides information to improve the prioritisation of patients according to clinical need. However, there is still much work to do in relation to the community audiology waiting lists. The World Health Organization's World Report on Hearing, published in March 2021, recommended that governments develop a comprehensive people-centred hearing care plan within their national health care plan. The Minister for Health established the national hearing care plan working group in August 2024. The group is tasked with making recommendations around developing a holistic model of hearing care in Ireland. The group is jointly chaired by the Department of Health and the HSE and membership is drawn from relevant stakeholders, including the Irish Society of Hearing Aid Audiologists, the Irish Academy of Audiology, and the Department of Social Protection.

The group has developed a workstream, including subgroups to progress important matters. The group is considering the current level of hearing care provision in Ireland, current capacity constraints and opportunities within the HSE and the appropriate linkage between public and private provision of care to maximise positive outcomes for patients, including reductions in waiting times. While the work of the group progresses, funding has been allocated in 2025 to address children's waiting lists as part of the waiting list action plan by using suitable external providers. The HSE advises that the appropriate tender documents have been finalised. The HSE will soon complete the identification of suitable external providers. Once a list of such providers is finalised, the funding will be allocated to each regional executive officer on a *pro rata* basis to ensure that the longest-waiting children aged four and over are seen as a matter of priority.

Importantly, this will increase capacity within the HSE to prioritise the assessment of adults waiting for community audiology services. This is especially important for older adults as appropriate hearing care is a vital factor in them remaining connected to their families and local communities.

**Deputy Paul McAuliffe:** I welcome the initiative for children. The Minister of State is right. That will free up capacity within the system for adults. I acknowledge those people with more urgent cases are seen more urgently than in December 2026, without that length of a waiting line. It is actually very difficult to track that because when you ask the HSE for what is the average waiting times for audiology services are, it tells us the system it uses will not allow it to calculate the average waiting times. It is very difficult to back up what the HSE is telling us in terms of the prioritisation of more serious cases and overall improvements.

I accept the bona fides of the Minister for Health on this to progress the matter and to put in place the waiting list working group and the management of audiology services. I welcome the initiative for children and the impact that will have. I hope that means that Christopher in Whitehall will get his appointment sooner than December 2026. If I pass the details of the case onto the Minister of State, he might be able to pass them to the Minister for Health, who

might be able to intervene in this matter. This is a very serious case. I raise it on behalf of one constituent but there are, of course, many more. Chime Ireland tells us it wants to see a waiting list initiative specifically for audiology services. In this case, it is in regard to Grangegorman which is a great new primary care centre that serves much of the northside of Dublin. However, there are other centres around the country that also need waiting list initiatives. I appreciate the Minister of State's intervention on it.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** If the Deputy passes on the details to me, I will absolutely convey them to the Minister for Health and the HSE. I will also be conveying to the Minister and the HSE the urgency the Deputy has articulated. As I outlined in my initial contribution, the HSE has partaken in a process as to how it intends to address this issue. It is at a cross-roads now in terms of coming out of a tender process and appointing providers who will deal with the demand within our community. It is very important, particularly for younger children who are at such a young, vulnerable developmental age where being challenged with their hearing is a huge burden they have to bear. We have to give them every opportunity.

### **Financial Services**

**Deputy Edward Timmins:** I thank the Minister for the opportunity to raise the importance of the Irish Stock Exchange to the Irish economy and to the growth of our indigenous Irish companies. I welcome the commitments in the programme for Government to support the Irish Stock Exchange. However, I would like to see this commitment followed up with concrete action to ensure its growth and success. I am glad to see the Tánaiste met the Stock Exchange team on Tuesday and I hope he will take away some of their requests. I know a request is with the Minister for Finance for a meeting ahead of the budget.

Many brilliant companies have come through the Irish Stock Exchange, including Ryanair, Smurfit Kappa and the Dalata Hotel Group. The Irish Stock Exchange also supports a thriving ecosystem of brokers, advisers and legal services, etc. Ireland has been losing out by not supporting more indigenous enterprises to access private capital through public markets, which is evidenced by the relatively small number of IPOs here over the past decade. Many Irish companies choose to go abroad, particularly to the US. I know the Government is prioritising improving our competitiveness. I suggest a vibrant stock exchange here in Dublin is essential to achieving those goals. If we are serious about growing our indigenous enterprise base, we must build the right environment to allow companies to scale using all sources of capital, including public equity markets.

The programme for Government commits to exploring ways to enhance the Irish Stock Exchange as a vital source of equity and growth for indigenous businesses. This must now be backed by decisive action. Ahead of budget 2026, I urge the Government to deliver on these commitments by building on the progress made in budget 2025. Specifically, Euronext Dublin has proposed targeted, relevant and costed measures for budget 2026 that would support more Irish companies to accelerate their growth by raising finance in capital equity markets by way of IPO. These proposals include introducing a stamp duty exemption on the trading of shares in companies valued under €1 billion; increasing the lifetime limit for capital gains tax entrepreneur relief by €1 million to €2 million, specifically for disposal of shares on approved EEA markets; creating an incentivised saving and investment account scheme; and establishing an Irish equity market growth fund to provide equity finance to companies listed or intended to list



on Irish markets, with a particular focus on Irish scale-ups.

Ireland currently employs a stamp duty of 1% on the trading of shares. However, Ireland's rate is an outlier when compared with other European states, many of whom have a 0% rate or at most, a 0.2% or 0.3% rate. Stamp duty should be exempted from the trading of shares for smaller and mid-cap companies. In Ireland, none of our retail banks offer equity products to retail investors. In the UK, the ISA is used widely by people to save money and let it grow over many years. In Ireland, there is €60 billion sitting in current accounts losing value. This is money that could be put to work and would allow people to generate additional income over the years, while incentivising financial security. An Irish saving and investment account would help achieve this. I look forward to hearing from the Minister about his planned engagement with Euronext Dublin and the Government's plan to support this vital source of equity capital ahead of budget 2026.

**Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy):** I thank Deputy Timmins for providing me with the opportunity to speak on this matter. Ireland's equity markets are diverse, encompassing public and private participants and a wider ecosystem that includes a large number of professional services firms. It is clear that public equity markets in Europe, including Ireland, have faced significant challenges over the past decade for a variety of overlapping reasons, including competition from private equity and from more liquid US capital markets. The increasing importance of large stock market indices linked to the rise in passive investment strategies has also been a pull factor in listings activity gravitating towards the largest stock exchanges. As such, EU solutions will need to be found to address the common challenges faced by EU exchanges.

The European Commission has launched the savings and investments union strategy, which includes measures to advance the capital markets union, CMU, project and which has support from ministers, Heads of State and Governments. The strategy identifies key measures to help companies access public equity markets, such as the establishment of EU markets infrastructure, reforms to listings rules and measures designed to increase retail investor participation in capital markets and to promote SME investment research. These measures build on those contained within the CMU action plan of 2020, which included a number of legislative files, including the Listings Act, the European Single Access Point and the Markets in Financial Instruments Directive, MiFID, II review, which are currently being transposed. The savings and investments union strategy will build on the progress made by the CMU action plan. Ireland is a strong supporter of this initiative and is actively involved in its development, including measures specifically designed to promote companies seeking to access funding through initial public offerings.

At national level, it is the Government's strongly held view that Ireland's capital markets are essential to the growth of homegrown businesses, especially those aiming to expand internationally. This was most recently evidenced by the introduction of a corporation tax relief for listing expenses announced as part of budget 2025 and which is now in place with an overall expenses limit of €1 million per listing.

When introducing budget 2025, the then Minister for Finance, Deputy Chambers, announced he had decided to examine further potential measures. He stated:

To further support Irish businesses to grow and scale, in the coming year my Department will, subject to state aid considerations, introduce a stamp duty exemption. This measure

would enable Irish SMEs to access equity via financial trading platforms designed to support their funding needs.

This position is reflected in the 2025 Programme for Government: Securing Ireland's Future, which states that the Government will, "Explore opportunities to enhance the Irish Stock Exchange as a vital source of equity and growth for indigenous businesses". The Department of Finance is engaged in giving effect to that commitment and has actively engaged with Euronext Dublin, formerly the Irish Stock Exchange, as part of that work. I met with the CEO and some members of his management team recently. It is very much part of the programme of work in the Department of Finance at the moment.

**Deputy Edward Timmins:** I thank the Minister of State for his reply. The threat of US tariffs has made it even more urgent for us to support Irish indigenous companies, and the Stock Exchange is crucial to this goal. While foreign multinational companies have created great prosperity in this State, geopolitical difficulties have underscored the need to ensure a positive regulatory landscape for Irish companies to grow and succeed in. Ireland will assume the Presidency of the European Union in the second half of 2026. I hope that the implementation of the EU savings and investments union will be a core priority of our Presidency.

There has been much media attention - indeed too much - on delistings from the Irish market. Delistings are a natural part of the cycle. Last year, there were 129 delistings across seven Euronext markets. Only five of these happened in Ireland. The problem is not the scale of delisting but the lack of a pipeline of new companies seeking to list. From other European and Euronext markets with pipelines of new listings, we have seen that government policy has significant influence. Reducing exit taxes on exchange-traded funds, ETFs, may incentivise investment in such funds and lead to more trade on exchanges. Unless there are accompanying policy initiatives to increase the number of new listings, however, reducing these taxes will not guarantee the future of the Irish Stock Exchange and ETFs will be of no benefit to Ireland's real economy or Irish companies. There are not enough Irish stocks or stocks traded in Ireland to put into an ETF basket. Even if exit taxes were reduced, the rate would still be 33% higher than the 0% we have proposed for an incentivised saving and investment account scheme, which would be subject to an investment limit of €40,000 and which we believe would have a much greater impact on shifting domestic savings into productive investments in the real economy.

**Deputy Robert Troy:** I will outline one EU-level capital markets initiative that officials in the Department of Finance are working on. That is the Listings Act. It is a package of measures agreed late last year and currently being transposed by the Department of Finance and the Department of enterprise. It supports improved access to market-based sources of financing for EU companies, particularly smaller firms such as those listed on SME growth markets. Key elements of the Listings Act include the introduction of simpler prospectus rules and requirements, more proportionate market abuse rules and provisions to allow companies use multiple-vote share structures, thereby allowing company founders to retain control while accessing funding on public markets.

The Listings Act also introduces measures to encourage and enhance the production and distribution of investment research on mid-sized companies and SMEs. This is essential if we are to encourage investment in such companies. The simplification and harmonisation of prospectus rules will make it easier and less expensive for growing indigenous businesses to list on the Irish Stock Exchange. I am pleased to inform the House that the Minister has decided to raise the prospectus exemption threshold to €12 million from the current €8 million. This will

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reduce the regulatory burden for smaller issuers and increase their access to capital in order to invest for long-term growth.

The Deputy is right that the value of money on retail deposit offers major potential. The savings and investments union, on which the Government is hugely engaged, will be a channel to do that.

We are also in the process of updating the Ireland for Finance strategy, in respect of which there is a commitment in the programme for Government. A public consultation process in that regard will open in the coming weeks, and I encourage submission to it. We hope to publish the strategy early in the new year.

## Animal Welfare

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Collins, for coming in to take this matter. It relates to dog-breeding establishments. I am looking for details on the number of pups bred in the country every year and the numbers exported. I listed in the text of the Topical Issue I submitted the various bits and pieces I am seeking.

I have dealt with many animal rights groups and charities in recent years. Some of the stuff I have seen has been eye-opening. Some of the facts, statistics and images I have seen at first hand are appalling. The State and the Government have a great deal to do to ensure that dog-breeding establishments are compliant and regulated and that where issues arise, the repercussions are felt by those offending or not in compliance.

Nearly 7,500 dogs entered Irish pounds last years according to the Department of Rural and Community Development. The Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals estimates that the numbers of cats and dogs surrendered between January and November last year were up 49% and 44%, respectively, and that 30,000 pups are bred in licensed establishments every year. Other animal welfare groups estimate the figure could be anywhere from 70,000 to 80,000 pups *per annum*.

To give an example of how big and lucrative the industry is in Ireland, the UK has a population 15 times larger than ours and yet we produce half the number of pups that are bred there. That shows the extent of the dog-breeding in this country. Much of it is done properly and correctly by responsible breeders, but, unfortunately, much of it goes under the radar. Some 25,770 pups were listed for sale on *dogs.ie* in 2024. Annually, we are told the figure of registered pups bred in licensed establishments is typically 7,000 or 8,000. How were there 25,500 pups for sale on *dogs.ie* in 2024? That is something we need to reconcile and correct.

Some of the practices in the sector are very concerning. It is an industry estimated to be worth around €150 million per annum. We need to look at legislation that will restrict the number of breeding bitches we permit dog breeders to have. At present one can have six breeding bitches. That needs to be revised downwards, in the context of the capacity of these establishments and animal welfare being at the centre of it. We need to tighten up on alleged tax avoidance by those breeders, particularly in non-registered or backyard breeding establishments. There is a clear case for Revenue to be looking at this. We also need to tighten up on the issue of dog licensing and micro-chipping to ensure there is compliance. I was in the Dáil a number of weeks ago when a Fine Gael TD, Deputy O'Connell, raised the issue of a recent court case

where a person clearly in breach and found guilty of numerous animal welfare abuses was fined a measly €500. Anybody who knows anything about the industry knows the pups are often going for €1,000 or €2,000. When we have a system that does not disincentivise that type of behaviour, people will continue to take their chances and operate under the radar.

Recently, Barry Roche, a journalist in the *Irish Examiner*, had a story about a conviction in Charleville which I might mention in my supplementary contribution.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** I thank Deputy O’Sullivan for raising this matter with respect to dog breeding establishments and the number of exports internationally. The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine has asked me to take this matter on his behalf. The Dog Breeding Establishments Act provides a regulatory framework for the licensing, monitoring and inspection of dog breeding establishments by local authorities and where a serious and immediate threat exists to public health or animal health and welfare for the closure of such establishments. Local authorities are responsible for the enforcement of the Act. Section 9 of the Act states that each local authority shall cause to be established and maintained a register of dog breeding establishments situated in its functional area. Therefore, the legal responsibility to maintain a register of dog breeding establishments is a matter for each local authority.

However, recommendation 11 of the Report of the Working Group on Control of Dogs recommended that a centralised national database of dog breeding establishments should be created. In 2023, the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht reached out to local authorities to collate their registers. The Dog Breeding Establishment National Register was then published on *gov.ie*. Data on the number of pups bred in dog breeding establishments was not requested at that time. In March 2025, information was requested from local authorities to update the register, to include the number of female dogs in each dog breeding establishment, but the number of pups bred was not requested as part of these returns. The updated register will be published on *gov.ie* in the coming weeks once all the returns have been collated, based on the information that was provided by the local authorities.

Regarding the number of dogs exported internationally, these are facilitated through commercial movements. Commercial movement of pets is defined where a pet, or pets, are either travelling unaccompanied, or are travelling for the use of trading, or for shows, sporting events or where an owner has more than five pets travelling. All commercial movements of dogs require certification. The type of certification is dependent on whether the destination is to other EU countries or non-EU countries. The number of dogs exported commercially from Ireland in the past five years are as follows: in 2020, 8,993; in 2021, 10,581; in 2022, 7,089; in 2023, 9,440; and in 2024, 8,768. Certification must be signed off by a veterinary inspector in the regional veterinary office of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. An exporter must contact their local regional veterinary office to have an inspection of the shipment of dogs completed prior to travel. The regional veterinary office inspection includes relevant paperwork, vaccines, microchips, health certificates, animal welfare and confirmation that the exporter is registered with the Department.

As part of the programme for Government, this Government is addressing the disjointed approach to dog control issues ensuring all legislation and policy related to the control of dogs, dog welfare, and dog breeding establishments will rest with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. As the Deputy knows, there is a mechanism by which transfers of functions happen when new Governments take up office and when new Departments are established. Policy and legislative responsibility for the Dog Breeding Establishments Act 2020 is

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due to transfer to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine from the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht imminently. Both Departments are working closely together to ensure the smooth transfer of functions.

**Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan:** I thank the Minister of State. I know it is not his Department but I appreciate the figures. I was already familiar with many of them. For example, one statistic was that in 2024, a figure of 8,768 pups were exported. The ISPCA and the DSPCA both estimate that around 40,000 or 50,000 pups were exported. I trust the charities on the ground. As public representatives, when we get a report of a horse, a dog or whatever in jeopardy, we know they are the people dealing with it everyday. Basically, the State is gives them a few bob every year to sustain them in the hope that we are ticking the boxes. Essentially, that is what we have done over the last few years. I trust their figures more than I trust the Department's figures. When they tell me there is more than 40,000 pups being exported every year, I trust them and not necessarily the figures the Minister of State read out.

The Minister of State rightly said it is the responsibility of the local authorities. I can only speak about Cork but I think we have three dog wardens in the city at the moment. I think it is a bit better in the county where there are approximately six. They are not tasked with enforcing the stuff they are faced with.

I am just on the phone to a journalist, Barry Roche, who had an article in the *Irish Examiner* a couple of weeks back about somebody who was found guilty in Charleville. The crimes that are being committed and the gain for these people in taking the chance and going under the radar far outstrip the sanctions and penalties they are faced with if they get caught.

I am aware this will all come under the Department of agriculture but I have a concern about that. I understand why it is being done, because the vets are with the Department of agriculture, but there are not enough vets. The vets will say there are not enough of them. They do not even have powers to do unsanctioned visits or inspections of properties.

The Minister of State and I live in the part of the country where most of this puppy farm culture is, namely, north Cork, west Limerick and parts of Kerry. The numbers being paraded are frankly astounding. It is an industry worth more than €120 million or 130 million. It needs to be better regulated and tightened up. Ultimately, we need to improve animal welfare standards.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** I absolutely agree with the Deputy that more needs to be done in this area. The whole area of dog breeding is a huge industry at the moment. The 2019 Act was a very progressive start but we must revisit it and probably update it. I have always been a huge advocate of animal welfare. We must always strive to continue to do more to promote a better culture of animal welfare, whether it is for dogs, cats, horses or whatever. I want to acknowledge the hundreds of animal welfare groups around the country. They do receive funding from the Department of agriculture but it is not enough. They need more. Unfortunately, they have to rely on their own fundraising mechanisms too much and we need to resource them a little bit better. I want give a particular shout out to the DEEL Sighthound Rescue organisation in Limerick, Star Rescue and Limerick Animal Welfare. I have first-hand knowledge of the very fine work they do.

I want to refer to the 2010 Act. I remember, because I was here, when the then Minister, John Gormley, brought in the Dog Breeding Establishments Bill. The Opposition at the time cynically used it as a ploy or political tactic to try to wind up everyone involved in outdoor



pursuits, whether they were gun clubs, hunting clubs or fishing clubs, that this was going to be the thin end of the wedge and that the Government had a covert agenda of trying to shut down outdoor activities.

*6 o'clock*

It was brilliant legislation at the time. It needs to be updated now and it needs to be better resourced, but at the time, it brought in a regulatory regime around puppy farms and breeding establishments which had got out of control. The ironic thing about it was that John Gormley brought it in in 2010. There was an election in 2011. Parties swapped over and one of the first things then Minister, Phil Hogan, did was commence the legislation when the Opposition of the time was cynical.

I remember when I was canvassing for the 2016 election, I went into a farmyard and met a fella who said he had had strong, robust words with me back in 2010 about the Dog Breeding Establishments Act. He said I told him what it was about, but he did not agree with me and did not believe me at the time. He wanted to compliment me because what I had said was right. A few years later, people saw the good in it. Unfortunately, a lot of groups were misled at the time. That legislation needs to be updated because 2010 was 15 years ago at this point. A lot of people do a lot of good work on animal welfare.

### **Criminal Justice (Promotion of Restorative Justice) (Amendment) Bill 2023: Second Stage [Private Members]**

**Deputy Pa Daly:** I move: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

I am delighted to propose that the Criminal Justice (Promotion of Restorative Justice) (Amendment) Bill 2023 move to Committee Stage. I thank Deputy Quinlivan for co-signing the Bill and Professor Ian Marder of Maynooth University who did a lot of work in helping us to prepare the Bill. I also thank Leigh Daly who worked in my office and the Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers, OPLA, for its work in helping us along with the Bill.

Many changes to criminal justice are needed, but what better place to start than with something that is a win-win for everyone. I understand the Government is not opposing the Bill and I welcome its co-operative response.

This morning in the newspapers we learned about plans to increase capacity in our jails. Our courts face long delays. Prisons are overcrowded. They are dangerous places to work and also to be incarcerated for prisoners. This is unlikely to help people to achieve their full potential after offending. Meanwhile, victims’ services are inaccessible in many places and drastically underfunded. These problems are far from unique to Ireland, but as we seek to move our country forward in health and economic systems, we must also reform criminal justice so that everyone who suffers from crime or experiences the criminal justice system is able to contribute fully to this process.

Restorative justice can help to reset our justice system and this Bill could provide advantages for victims of crime and the wider community and prevent recidivism by those who commit crime. Recidivism rates in Ireland are high, with 60% of offenders committing another offence within three years. That has to be tackled.

The mission statement of An Garda Síochána says its mission is to tackle crime and the causes of crime, but also the fear of crime. We also aspire to have a criminal justice system that will be just, make us all feel safer and meet the needs of victims of crime. I saw first hand when working in the courts, although it was on an *ad hoc* basis, how meeting the accused person can reduce fear and anxiety in victims. What if our system, as Professor Marder has said, sought to address and repair the damage caused by crime with a view to meeting the needs of those affected? What if all those with a stake in an offence had the opportunity to come together to explore how to make amends for what happened and stop it happening again? We collaborated to draft the Private Members' Bill to try to achieve this and I hope it will promote a process of restorative justice, which research shows helps victims to recover from crime and reduces reoffending.

Restorative justice is when dialogue takes place between a victim of crime and someone who has committed a crime against them in the presence of an independent person who is trained to prepare and manage such conversations. It can be face to face, but it does not have to be and the people involved can also invite other people to support them. The process is voluntary. No one is forced to participate and it is flexible. If one person does not wish to participate or if, for example, a direct victim or perpetrator cannot be identified, it is still possible to offer a process to the other person, with their families, other supporters or members of the community. It has existed for many years and can take place alongside cautions administered by juvenile liaison officers and trained gardaí. It can also occur in adult courts. In some counties judges can refer people to restorative justice between conviction and sentencing. The Probation Service has a restorative justice and victim services unit where trained officers can use restorative justice when people receive community or prison sentences. These services can change people's lives.

The Department of justice funded research by Professor Marder on restorative justice. Case studies showed in his research that it results in high levels of victim satisfaction, helps victims to recover from crime and supports people to stop offending. It also allows victims to be heard, to tell the person responsible how they were affected and express what they think should happen next. To people who have committed offences, this may also be the one process that does not feel designed to bring them down through stigma and punishment. Those people are more likely to pay reparations or engage with support services through restorative justice than if the matter were dealt with through the courts. The problem is that it is rarely offered. There are huge gaps around the country and low levels of use, even of the existing services. Only 400 referrals to restorative justice were made in 2022 and 700 in 2019. We want a proper system.

Funding is essential. It can help the victims of crime who get the opportunity for restorative justice. This Bill will encourage gardaí, prosecutors and judges to refer cases to explore whether this is possible. It will be the first law in Ireland to encourage referrals with no pressure to participate. While existing laws do not prevent cases being referred before conviction, this Bill would explicitly permit and encourage it. Victims would benefit. As an EU report on victims' rights noted, victims can benefit enormously from the opportunity to resolve cases outside courts. If they want to participate they can.

I will conclude there because I am sharing time with my colleagues, but I am glad the Government is supporting the Bill.

**Deputy Maurice Quinlivan:** I thank Deputy Daly and Professor Ian Marder of the criminology department in Maynooth University who helped us to draft the Bill initially. We introduced the Criminal Justice (Promotion of Restorative Justice) (Amendment) Bill 2023 in

December 2023. It fulfils several objectives for the State, the victims of crime and alleged perpetrators. If enacted, I strongly believe it will be of benefit to victims of crime, perpetrators and the wider community.

Restorative justice involves a dialogue taking place between the victim of a crime and the alleged perpetrator of a crime with an independent person who is trained to prepare and manage such conversations. These conversations can be held directly or indirectly via the third party. It may not be applicable to all crime and it is a voluntary process for all parties. That is important. A broad range of research has been done, which identified benefits as regards reoffending rates for certain offenders and high satisfaction rates among victims who can express how the crime affected them and seek reparations and commitments from the alleged offender. Restorative justice can work and has worked. The European Forum for Justice showed that there was an 85% satisfaction rate among victims who engaged in restorative justice programmes. In many cases restorative justice can lead to positive outcomes.

This Bill seeks that the option of the restorative justice approach be explicitly encouraged and promoted by the courts between charge and conviction and between conviction and sentencing. The victims of crime legislation allows for discretion for judges. I hope this Bill will clarify the process, offer victims closure and avoid prison sentences by helping offenders through rehabilitation. This can be a key component of our criminal justice system. It currently remains an under-utilised resource.

A mapping exercise by Dr Ian Marder, an associate professor in criminology at Maynooth University school of law, found significant gaps in restorative justice provision. Less than 1% of cases in the State are referred to restorative justice programmes. While there was an expansion of the restorative justice programme in Munster extending these services to Cork and Kerry, the legislative framework needs to be updated.

The Bill we are debating today will encourage gardaí, prosecutors and judges to refer cases to restorative justice providers who would then be tasked with discovering whether the parties involved would like to participate. In addition, while there is currently no obstacle to cases being referred pre-conviction, this Bill will explicitly encourage and permit it, opening new referral pathways. This allows victims to benefit at an earlier stage in the criminal justice process.

During my remarks on First Stage of the Bill, I made mention of shoplifting as an example of the type of crime for which those prosecuted could avail of the restorative justice programme. Shoplifting can be an opportunistic or a more organised crime. During the contribution, I spoke about the feedback the then Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment had received from grocery stores and newsagents' representative bodies. They spoke of their members being the victims of approximately 1,000 shoplifting incidents per week. They spoke of how, often young shoplifters feel as if they can operate with impunity. A young shoplifter may only see the item as one or two that they stole but they do not see the total cost of the impact of the crime on the business owners and their employees, who are often young people. Could restorative make a justice for these offenders and the business owners? Too often, we see so-called petty crime ignite a situation that escalates far beyond the original more minor damage, such as a broken window. Often, these situations escalate due to local tensions and a failure to hold to account those involved in such crimes. The use of restorative justice may temper these situations and ensure that any potential escalation is avoided.

Restorative justice, as I said, can be positive and for victims it also offers them the oppor-

tunity to confront the offender, outline the impact of the crime and seek apology. The alleged perpetrator may gain an understanding of how their crime has consequences for others. It may allow them to explain why they committed the offence and it may save them from a custodial sentence. Both the last and the current programmes for Government committed to restorative justice, so we hope this legislation progresses as soon as it can. As previously mentioned, engaging in a restorative justice programme can help avoid penal convictions and in some cases, lead to an avoidance of custodial sentences. As it stands, our prisons are operating beyond capacity. We have in excess of 5,000 prisoners and bed capacity for 4,600. In my own city of Limerick, overcapacity is leading to dangerous conditions for staff and inmates. The women's section of Limerick Prison is 48% over capacity, while the male section is 28% over capacity. The National Commission on Restorative Justice noted that if restorative justice was applied more widely, somewhere between 3,200 and 7,200 cases of restorative justice could take place each year in relation to adults before the courts.

It further projects that between 290 and 579 would be diverted from being given a custodial sentence, leading to a reduction of between 42 and 85 prison places per year. The estimated savings range from between €4.1 million and €8.8 million. Of course we would need to look at these figures in terms of the current data but the point is clear that restorative justice can lead to a decrease in the prison population and a saving for the taxpayer. If we maximise the use of restorative justice, as this Bill will enable us to do, it will result in not only a decrease in custodial sentences, but also significant savings for the State. Any effort that can safely avoid a prison sentence while providing justice to the victims of crime, as restorative justice does, must be considered, as we look to ease the tension and danger that overcrowded prisons can create.

A Department of justice policy paper on restorative justice notes that the use of restorative justice as a response to offending is supported by rigorous international evidence, indicating high levels of victim and offender satisfaction with the process. It also notes positive results for the support of victim recovery and offenders desisting from crime, high levels of compliance with actions that are agreed through restorative justice and strong participation from those offered the chance to engage.

In December 2021, the Council of Europe recommended making restorative justice available for all offences and at all stages of the criminal justice process. It noted that all victims and perpetrators should be given information and opportunities to determine whether restorative justice is the best option for them. Restorative justice can become an important tool in the battle against criminality. It can be an important tool in diverting people from custodial sentences and a life marked by crime. It should be given the opportunity to play a more important role in our criminal justice system. I thank the Minister of State for his attention and his consideration of this Bill.

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Niall Collins):** I am happy to address Dáil Éireann on the final piece of business for this term. I thank the two Deputies who we have just heard from and also to acknowledge former Deputy, Patricia Ryan. All three were involved in introducing this Private Member's Bill in December 2023. The Bill addresses a topical issue in the administration of a fair system of justice and one which has the potential to contribute to more efficient use of prison capacity, while ensuring that the rights of victims are upheld. The stated purpose of the Bill is to clarify the processes and procedures for referrals to restorative justice schemes, with the aim of increasing their use in the criminal justice system. The Deputies anticipate that this would aid in giving victims closure and improving victim recovery and satisfaction with the justice system.

It also envisions that participation in restorative measures would mean that, in some cases, prison sentences can be avoided. It is hoped that this rehabilitative approach would lead to decreased re-offending rates and assist in freeing up our overburdened court system and prison system. Earlier this week, my colleague, the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, received approval from Cabinet not to oppose this Bill on Second Stage. It is well intentioned and it aligns with the programme for Government commitment to continue to roll out nationally the voluntary restorative justice programme.

Restorative justice is provided for in the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Act 2017. It is defined as being any scheme through which, with the consent of each party, a victim and an offender or alleged offender, engage with one another to resolve, with the assistance of an impartial third party, matters arising from the relevant offence, or alleged offence. In recognition of the differing needs of children, the Children Act 2001 includes tailored provisions for restorative justice for those under 18 years old. This is administered through the system of youth diversion programmes, which are overseen by An Garda Síochána.

Evidence shows that a restorative justice approach can support victims to recover from the impact of a crime, as well as serving to reduce re-offending. This is an integral part of the work of the Probation Service, which established a restorative justice and victim services unit in 2018. Restorative justice programmes are available across the country and at most stages of the criminal justice process. For some lower-tariff offences, it can mean that an offender may be diverted from prosecution, while it comes into play after a conviction for more serious offences. Restorative justice schemes are operated by the Probation Service and through several community-based organisations that receive referrals at specific points in the criminal justice process. Five community-based organisations are currently being funded to provide restorative justice programmes across the country.

The Government has supported the provision of restorative justice in budget 2025, with an additional €4 million for the Probation Service, bringing the total budget to over €60 million. A key role of the Probation Service is to support the expansion of restorative justice and crime diversion programmes, as well as step-down facilities and community-based alternatives to imprisonment.

I will now turn to the amendments that would be introduced by the Bill. As I mentioned, restorative justice in Ireland is provided for in the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Act 2017, with certain tailored provisions for those under 18 in the Children Act 2001. Section 26 of the 2017 Act provides for restorative justice schemes on the basis that an offender acknowledges the basic fact of the offence, that both the victim and the offender provide free and informed consent to a restorative justice agreement and that an agreement between the parties can be taken into account by the courts in any criminal proceedings relating to the offence. This Bill would insert new sections into section 26 to create certain points throughout the criminal justice process where restorative justice schemes must be considered. The courts would be encouraged to refer cases to restorative justice schemes between a charge and a conviction. After a scheme is completed, the courts would choose to resume the proceedings or dismiss the charges, as appropriate. An Garda Síochána and the Director of Public Prosecutions would be given power to refer a broader selection of cases to restorative justice schemes, after a person has been charged and before prosecution begins and to review the decision to prosecute, if appropriate. The adult caution scheme currently operates in this space for summary offences, that is, offences on the minor end of the scale that carry a maximum penalty of 12 months imprisonment. The Bill would also prevent an offender's engagement with a restorative justice provider from being



used as evidence of guilt in any later proceedings against them. I will come back to that in a moment.

It is acknowledged that restorative justice is not suitable for every offender or every victim. A broad range of research has identified clear benefits, most notably positive impacts on the re-offending rates of some offenders who in certain cases are provided with an opportunity to make good the harm they have done. The research also shows high satisfaction among victims who take part. They are given the opportunity to express their feelings and show how the offence has affected them, as well as being able to seek reparation and commitments on future behaviour.

However, while the intention behind the Bill as proposed by the Deputies has merit, the Office of the Attorney General has relayed concerns about a misalignment with the existing policy on restorative justice. The Bill requires that an offender's participation in a restorative justice scheme will be inadmissible as evidence of guilt. This is likely to be problematic in later proceedings where an individual's character is of relevance. If this evidence cannot be used in a court, there is a risk for later criminal proceedings due to fair procedures considerations. The right to a fair hearing is rooted in the Constitution and this includes, among other things, a requirement for the courts to ensure a thorough and impartial examination of all of the available evidence.

While this inadmissibility is similar in character to the inadmissibility of evidence of participation by a child in a youth diversion programme, this is part of the tailored set of criminal justice procedures provided for in the Children Act 2001, in recognition of the specific needs of children. International and domestic law acknowledge the unique developmental needs of children, and the particular benefits a tailored rehabilitative approach has for them.

Restorative justice for children is delivered through the Garda youth diversion programme. A key requirement for inclusion in the diversion programme is the acceptance of responsibility for offending behaviour. Similarly, the 2017 Act requires offenders to acknowledge the basic facts of the offence committed, which presupposes an acceptance of guilt. The 2017 Act further provides that a restorative justice agreement may be considered in any criminal proceedings relating to the offence. In effect, participation in a scheme generally functions to decrease penalties. It is not clear how an amendment that provides for participation not to be used as evidence of guilt could sit comfortably alongside the provisions in the 2017 Act.

The Bill also provides that, without prejudice to any other way of dealing with the case, after an agreement has been reached through restorative justice a court may dismiss the charge on its merits. Dismissing a charge on its merits suggests the fundamental ingredients of the offence are in some way lacking. This is a matter of such importance to the fair administration of justice that it would be addressed by a court in the normal course of proceedings. Restorative justice does not address the offence itself. Instead, it is focused on dealing with the loss, damage and hurt caused to the victim. The existing language in the 2017 Act provides sufficient scope to a court to dismiss a charge and it should not consider reference to a case being dismissed on its merits.

The amended legislation would not provide for restorative justice schemes in circumstances other than those outlined in its provisions. It is not clear whether this would affect the operation of the schemes that take place after a conviction, whether as part of the conditions of a sentence or otherwise. The officials have advised there is a potential overlap between the provisions as

drafted and the adult caution scheme, which is operated by An Garda Síochána where a prosecution for a summary of events is not in the public interest. Further consideration is required to parse the overlapping elements and make sure we are not creating space for unintended consequences.

The National Vetting Bureau Acts of 2012 to 2016 provide essential safeguards for the protection of the most vulnerable people in our society. The Acts provide for the vetting of anyone who would have access to children or vulnerable adults as part of their work or in the course of voluntary activities. The Garda National Vetting Bureau consults all of the relevant records available to it to produce a vetting disclosure, and this is used to inform employment decisions. Further consideration is required to ensure that vetting disclosures will not be affected in light of the inadmissibility provision. Our duty to safeguard the safety and welfare of children and vulnerable people is paramount.

The legal advice received from the Office of the Attorney General has also highlighted some issues of a drafting and technical nature. I am satisfied these are not insurmountable and could be satisfactorily addressed. I am pleased to be able to inform the House that work is under way in the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration that will go some way towards addressing the issues the Bill sets out to tackle. In May, the Probation Service published a three-year action plan, Restorative Justice Action Plan 2025 - 2027: Repairing Harm and Empowering Voices through Restorative Justice. This has the objective of increasing restorative justice referrals and interventions by 10% in each year of the plan. The plan aims to increase the availability and access to restorative justice, enhance the effectiveness of probation interventions, reduce recidivism and create a more inclusive society.

Officials in the Department are also considering the outcome of a review of the Criminal Justice (Community Sanctions) Bill 2014, which advocates for the use of community sanctions in their own right as opposed to solely as an alternative to a custodial sentence. This would contribute to reduced reliance on our prison system. The review also seeks to strengthen the suite of restorative justice interventions.

Any change we might make to the administration of justice must fully account for the engagement of constitutional rights and our duty to children and vulnerable people. I thank the Deputies opposite for tabling the Bill. There is a worthwhile objective behind the proposals and, on the basis I have outlined, the Government will not oppose the Bill.

**Deputy Mark Ward:** As the Minister of State said, this is the last Bill to be taken prior to the recess so I want to take this opportunity to thank all of the Oireachtas staff for all their work over the year, and let them know I will not be taking my full ten minutes and they might get out a little bit earlier. I am happy to speak on this important Bill. I thank my colleagues Deputies Quinlivan and Daly for the work that has gone into it. I am the Sinn Féin spokesperson for community safety and youth justice, and I want to see more approaches taken to reduce crime and recidivism. Restorative justice is one of the ways we are able to achieve this.

Restorative justice brings the perpetrator of a crime face to face with the victim of that crime. It allows the victim to question the motives of the person and ask why they did it, why they chose them and whether they feel guilty for what they have done. It can be very empowering for the victim to be able to look the person in the eye and pick apart what they did and why they did it. It can also be life-altering for the person who committed the crime in the first place to have to address somebody they have hurt or harmed directly. It humanises the victim and

helps a person to see the impact the crime has had on the victim.

We know restorative justice has helped to reduce reoffending. This is why the Sinn Féin Bill is so important. It aims to increase opportunities to refer somebody to restorative justice by creating obligations on justice professionals to make these referrals. It is very similar to what happens in the North. It is very important to put on the record that the Bill will not force anybody to take part in restorative justice. There is no pressure. People can make this decision themselves. It will give them the opportunity to avail of it on their journey through the justice system.

The benefit of encouraging more people to engage in restorative justice practices is that we can reduce the number of people who end up in our prisons which, as the Minister of State knows, are seriously over capacity at present. As I mentioned previously, we can also reduce the rate of recidivism. The Minister of State mentioned amending legislation with regard to children. I am happy to work with him and table amendments on young people going into restorative justice practices. If we are serious about reducing crime and making our communities safe, we need to embed restorative justice practices in our justice system. I welcome the fact the Government will not oppose the Bill.

Dr. Ian Marder has been mentioned. I spoke to him recently to get an understanding of restorative justice practices and I thank him for this. I heard the Minister of State, Dr. Marder and our spokesperson on justice, Deputy Carthy, on the radio recently. A commitment was made, which I do not think the Minister of State referenced in his statement, to a 10% increase on a yearly basis in the number of people using restorative justice. It is welcome that the target is there but we need to be a bit more ambitious. I have worked in organisations that practise restorative justice. Even though I was not directly involved, through youth organisations I have seen at first hand the benefits it has not only for the victim of the crime, but also for the community and for the young person involved in crime. It leads to positive change.

The Minister of State mentioned youth diversion projects. That is really welcome. We had a debate earlier and the Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan, talked about having youth justice projects right across the State. I hope the Government sticks to that commitment because it is really needed. We need targeted youth diversion projects in our areas. In my own area, we have recently had upheaval as the result of a feud. We could have done with a properly resourced youth diversion project in the area, which could have dealt with the issue. We will be looking to progress that as well.

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Niall Collins):** I thank the Deputy very much for his contribution. I know he has a great interest in this area. He has partaken in discussions on youth diversion before.

At the core of our democratic model is the idea that no policy or proposal is above criticism and that the exchange of ideas that takes place here ensures that new policy and legislation reflects the needs of our people. With that in mind, I thank the Deputies for bringing forward their proposed amendments and for their contributions. I assure them that I have listened and I agree with the underlying aim, which is to improve the way we administer restorative justice. With the right approach, it is possible to further the use of restorative justice to improve the fairness and effectiveness of the criminal justice system for both victims and offenders.

As noted earlier, the proposals are broadly in line with Government policy. On that basis,

the Government has agreed not to oppose the Bill. However, the legal advice received from the Office of the Attorney General has highlighted some concerns. As with any new legislation, it is important to commit the necessary time and effort to ensure the provisions will actually do what it is intended and will not cause problems elsewhere or result in unintended consequences. One of the potential unintended consequences of this Bill is the possibility of issues arising with the constitutional requirement for fair procedures in the administration of the law. The provision that proof of involvement in a restorative justice scheme will not be admissible as evidence of guilt in later criminal proceedings may prove problematic where the individual's character is material to a case. If this kind of evidence is not admissible, there is a risk that the courts may not be in a position to appropriately consider all of the available evidence in order to come to a sound verdict.

The provision for inadmissibility could also affect the administration of the Garda vetting system. It is important to ensure that participation in restorative justice schemes does not adversely affect vetting disclosures in cases where this information is relevant. Ensuring the safety and well-being of the children and vulnerable adults protected by the vetting legislation must remain a top priority. At this juncture, it is unclear how the operation of restorative schemes under the Bill would affect the schemes that currently take place after a conviction, whether as part of the conditions of a sentence or otherwise. This is one of several issues that will require close attention if proposals are to be progressed.

The provision for a court to dismiss a charge on its merits after a restorative justice scheme is completed also presents a problem. Dismissing a charge on its merits implies that the essential elements of the offence are somehow deficient so this does not reflect the purpose of the schemes. Restorative justice does not address the components of an offence. Instead, it is intended to mitigate some of the loss, damage or hurt caused to the victim.

I have already outlined the Government's support for restorative justice. We have provided an extra €4 million in funding for the Probation Service this year in pursuit of this commitment, bringing its total funding to €60 million in 2025. Additional money is going towards the expansion of restorative justice and crime diversion programmes, including stepdown facilities and community-based alternatives to imprisonment. Promoting restorative justice is a priority for this Government, as set out in our programme for Government. Earlier, I mentioned some of the progress we have made so far. We are committed to ensuring that this continues apace. The Bill broadly aligns with Government policy in this area. I anticipate further discussion and debate on this subject in the future.

I again offer my appreciation to the Deputies for submitting their proposals to the Dáil for this evening's debate. As this is the last piece of business before the summer recess, like previous speakers I will take the opportunity, on my own behalf and on behalf of the Government and the Fianna Fáil Party, to thank the Ceann Comhairle and all of the staff of the Houses of the Oireachtas for their sterling work. We look forward to coming back duly refreshed after the summer recess. I also thank the staff of the Department of justice, to which I am assigned, for their commitment to the work assigned to us. I also thank the staff in my own constituency office for their dedication and for ensuring we provide a fantastic service to my constituents in County Limerick.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** I will briefly wrap up. I would like to be associated with all the comments made regarding the staff, the Ceann Comhairle, the Department of justice and my own party. I have a couple of brief points to make. There should be very few limits, if any, on restorative

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justice. I see what the Minister of State is saying about dismissing cases but cases are commonly dismissed under the probation Act anyway. The Minister of State also mentioned that this could affect Garda vetting. There was a Garda vetting Bill that proposed something like the Safe Pass, which would protect children and vulnerable adults and also make the system a bit more flexible. I thank the Government for its support. Let us have a further debate when the Bill gets to Committee Stage. We can do something that will provide referral pathways at every point in the criminal justice system, have such referrals happen as often as possible and provide the resources and funding to improve the system in its totality.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Minister. I mean Deputy. You were nearly elevated before September.

**Deputy Mark Ward:** He would not have minded.

Question put and agreed to.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** As we come to the end of the current Dáil session and head into the summer recess, I want to personally thank the Deputies for their co-operation, which I trust and hope will continue when we return in September. On behalf of all the Members, I thank Mr. Peter Finnegan and his team for their support and hard work. I further thank the Superintendent and his team of ushers, who keep us safe, and the catering team, who keep us fed and watered. I thank my own staff, both in my office here and at local level, for their valuable support and assistance over the past six months and before. I hope everybody has a very productive summer. I look forward to seeing you all in September, refreshed and ready to go.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 6.38 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 17 Meán Fómhair 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.38 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Wednesday, 17 September 2025.