



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE  
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**

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

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## DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Déardaoín, 18 Meán Fómhair 2025*

*Thursday, 18 September 2025*

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

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

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### **Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions**

#### **Defence Forces**

1. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence his plans to ensure sufficient funding is provided to resource Joint Induction Training Centre, JITC, Gormanston, Baldonnell, Haulbowline and DFTC infrastructure master plans. [49298/25]

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** This question relates to funding, primarily for training locations at Gormanston, Baldonnell, Haulbowline and the DFTC, and the infrastructure master plans for same.

**Tánaiste and Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Harris):** The revised national development plan capital allocation for the defence Vote group for the period 2026 to 2030 is €1.7 billion. This represents an increase of €600 million, or 55%, on the previous baseline of €1.1 billion. For 2026, the defence capital allocation will increase by €85 million, or 40%, to €300 million. Capital investment in defence primarily provides for the renewal, retention and acquisition of major defence equipment and infrastructural platforms - expenditure which enhances and supports our military capabilities and therefore contributes to a more secure and resilient society. The revised capital allocations now provided to defence will assist ongoing efforts at modernising and upgrading our equipment and built infrastructure platforms, and will enable progression on key elements of our commitments within LOA 2 as outlined in the Commission on the Defence Forces report.

The Deputy will note that following the conclusion of the process of agreeing overall departmental allocations, all Departments were requested to consider and outline our sectoral priority projects for delivery over the period to 2030. In that regard, my Department is now prioritising within the revised NDP allocations to meet its sectoral targets and obligations. I have two things to tell the Deputy. On budget day, we will be in a position to publish the proj-

ects we intend to deliver on in 2026 so I will have more details that are specific to the Deputy's question then. Also, this autumn we will be expected to publish the sectoral investment plans for the next number of years.

The delivery of infrastructural projects outlined in the infrastructure development plan and the master plan programme is being planned as part of this process. This will encompass consideration of the joint induction training centre in Gormanston, Baldonnell, Haulbowline and DFTC infrastructure master plans and will reflect fully on key factors such as funding availability and contractual commitments to inform future infrastructural needs and priorities.

To make a long story short, we have seen a very significant increase in our capital budget for defence. I welcome that; it was badly needed. It is my Department's job, in conjunction with the Defence Forces, to publish sectoral investment plans to show how we intend to allocate those resources against specific projects and we will do that in the coming weeks.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** I thank the Tánaiste. For the record, I appreciate there are constraints, given the window we are in, in terms of what the Tánaiste can tell me. What he will tell me is another question, maybe. In general, I put on record that we support increasing defence expenditure provided it is done in a wise and rational way. It is vitally important that we are investing in the areas of most relevance to us as an island nation, and also in building the Defence Forces on a stable foundation through training, equipment and ensuring that, with the recruits we are bringing in, we are able to arrest the slide in establishment numbers in the Defence Forces. We also need to ensure the equipment and the environment in which recruits are trained are to the highest standard. The issues relating to Gormanston have been well publicised. The consensus is that the current location is in a state of disrepair and not fit for purpose. That is a challenge. There is a need to address the training infrastructure for new recruits at the other key locations of the Defence Forces training college, including locations at the Curragh and the Glen of Imaal, but also at Baldonnell and Haulbowline. I will come back to the issues relating to cadets.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I largely agree with Deputy Ó Laoghaire. I welcome and acknowledge the fact that there is, broadly, cross-party support and support across the House for increased spending on defence and security. We will have different views and perspectives, perhaps, on where to prioritise that level of spending. However, we all recognise as a militarily unaligned neutral country that we still have to take our own defence and security capability seriously, particularly when it comes to supporting key infrastructures and having a better understanding of what happens above in our skies and below in our waters. To do all of that, we could have all of the shiny equipment we want but we need to have the men and women of Óglaigh na hÉireann to carry out those tasks and keep our country safe. That is why investing in its training facilities is really important.

In fairness to the Defence Forces and the Department of Defence, I think the work they have undertaken in terms of developing a series of master plans for each installation to future proof them for 20 to 30 years is a sensible way of doing it. It will identify from the outset the infrastructural requirements in line with capability developments for each installation but will also then allow a pipeline of projects to get each of those facilities to where we wish them to be.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** To come back to some of the brass tacks in terms of the training objectives outlined in the report of the Commission on the Defence Forces, there was one objective for the future and another that I hope has been progressed a bit. Will the Tánaiste

give an update on it? It was recommended that a new communication information workshop facility at the training centre would commence in 2024. The cadet school headquarters was to be completed in 2023. Will the Tánaiste confirm that those targets set out in the commission's report have been achieved and whether we are currently on schedule? It is proposed by 2027 to have the establishment of an officer training centre comprising the existing cadet school and a new officer candidate school, which would conduct potential late-entry officer courses and Reserve officer courses every two years. That is to be done by 2027. Are we on schedule for the officer training centre, incorporating some of the existing infrastructure, by 2027? Have the communication information services workshop and the new garaging facilities, which were meant to have been completed by this stage, in fact been completed?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I will check that for the Deputy as I do not have that information in my notes and I do not want to mislead the House. I am not aware that they are not on track but I will check and come back to the Deputy on that today.

Yes, we are on track for 2027. As the Deputy rightly said at the outset, I do not want to get ahead of ourselves here in the sense that, in fairness to all parts of the defence infrastructure, we need to go through a rigorous process of which project and when, and that pipeline and prioritisation. We will be in a position to publish the projects we intend to deliver in 2026 very shortly. We will also be in a position a couple of weeks later to publish the sectoral investment plan for defence project by project. That will take us out for the next five years. That work is now under way. I have met the Chief of Staff on this issue together with senior officials in my Department. They are now preparing those investment plans. They are doing so from a position of having a lot of extra capital funding, from a low base - let us be truthful. Even with a lot of additional funding there still needs to be that sense of prioritisation and that work is under way.

## **Pension Provisions**

2. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence if pension entitlements will be transferred to the widow of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [49022/25]

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** It was not my initial intention to raise this as a priority question this morning but I am glad of the opportunity. It relates to the pension entitlements of deceased Defence Forces officer Peter Flood and transferring those to entitlements to his widow.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. As the Deputy knows, public service pension schemes, including for the Defence Forces, provide for the payment of spouses' and children's pensions. However, such pensions are only payable where the deceased had been a member of the relevant spouses' and children's scheme.

I do not want to delve too much into somebody's information but the facts of this case have been examined previously and I am advised that, unfortunately, the individual in question was not a member of the relevant Defence Forces contributory spouses' and children's pension scheme. Without personalising it to any individual, people have an opportunity to opt in or opt out of the original scheme and an opportunity to opt in or out of a revised scheme. I think that opportunity in regard to the revised scheme would have arisen in 1985. Out of respect to the individuals involved, I will send a more detailed note on the individual's circumstances but, more broadly, my Department would be in correspondence with anybody who has such queries and

it would have provided any relevant documents that may have been filled out and showed any paperwork involved where people would have made a decision on which scheme to join or not. I do not wish my answer to sound cold because I of course have sympathy for the situation that has arisen but the factual position is that there is not a legal entitlement or, indeed, an ability to pay a spouse's pension where somebody has not opted in to such a scheme.

Membership of the original spouses' and children's contributory pension scheme was compulsory in the case of soldiers who enlisted after 31 January 1978 but it was optional in the case of soldiers already serving at that time. In other words, people who served before 1978 had to choose to opt in or not opt in. Soldiers already serving on 31 January 1978 were included as members of the scheme unless they made a positive option in writing not to become members. It was made clear to all such soldiers that no benefits could be paid under the scheme to their dependants and they would not be afforded an opportunity of joining the scheme at a later date. However, since then a second opportunity was granted in 1985 where people had a further opportunity to opt in.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** The reason I raise the issue - the family understand and have been informed of the circumstances by the Defence Forces - is that the individual in question left school after his communion, had no formal education and, in the words of his own family, had severe literacy issues. He found sanctuary in the Defence Forces. He served there for 22 years and had multiple tours of Lebanon. He was a proud Defence Forces member and was always sure and had told his family that if anything happened him, his beautiful wife and his family would be looked after.

*9 o'clock*

There is no blame here as such but I am seeking a way to address this. We are going to spend the next couple of weeks talking about a cost-of-living crisis and its impacts. This is what happens when circumstances transpire that leave people on the outside of a particular scheme. It is no one's fault as such but we need to be cognisant of the fact that if someone does not have a formal education and has severe literacy issues, any forms, be they in 1985 or whenever, can be quite intimidating and difficult.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I am sympathetic to the broader point the Deputy is making and I certainly extend my thanks and that of the State to the individual for their service with distinction in our Defence Forces. Neither the Deputy nor I were around in the seventies or eighties but my note tells me that, at the time, detailed information was provided and there were extensive briefings. There was meant to be that firm cut-off of 1978 and then they gave another opportunity in 1985 for people to reconsider their decision. I make that point more broadly than for any individual. As the long-standing provisions in relation to the Defence Forces contributory spouses' and children's pension schemes are of common application across all public service spouses' and children's pension schemes, the situation of surviving spouses of deceased military personnel cannot be considered in isolation. Any change here would have significant policy and cost implications for all public sector pension areas if we were to reopen that concept of a spouses' and children's scheme. I will ask the Department of Social Protection to also take a look to see if there is any further advice or information that can be provided to the family. I will also correspond with the Deputy on the issue further.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** I thank the Tánaiste. I will not delve too much further into the details of this. I look forward to his more detailed response and anything the Department of Social

Protection can do. I will come back through him if I believe there are any further avenues we can pursue.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I am very happy to do that.

### **Maritime Jurisdiction**

3. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence to provide an update on the national maritime security strategy; and the level of funding that has been committed for 2026 and 2027. [49299/25]

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** The area of maritime security is one of the most salient to us as an island nation. If we are talking about increasing defence expenditure, we must surely ensure that our seas are safeguarded against traditional threats but also against new and expanding threats such as threats to undersea cables, hybrid threats and so on. A maritime security strategy is obviously something that is very timely but it is vitally important that the resources will follow it. Will the Tánaiste outline the timescale in question regarding the development of the security strategy and the funding commitments that will follow?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** At the outset, I very much agree with the Deputy. For an island nation, the development of a robust, comprehensive national maritime security strategy is key. Indeed, this was identified as a priority in last year's defence policy review. I am pleased to say that the strategy is now being developed in consultation with national and international stakeholders and it is expected to be delivered to me for consideration before the end of the year. In support of the development of the strategy, my Department held a public consultation over the summer to gauge people's views and to try to build consensus on the diverse threats, risks, challenges and opportunities that are faced by our country in the maritime domain. I am pleased to say the public consultation got a lot of engagement. Approximately 300 submissions were received from a wide range of interested parties and stakeholders, including a number of Departments, academia and industry, but also members of the public. Initial analysis of the submissions has now taken place. I got a note on this the other day. It indicated that there is strong support for a strategy. There is also a very clear understanding from the public of Ireland's most urgent maritime security challenges, particularly the growing threats to critical undersea infrastructure; that came up quite a lot. We also detected significant support for international co-operation to improve maritime security. Analysis of the submissions is ongoing and the input gathered will serve as a critical foundation for shaping a robust and forward-looking national maritime security strategy to ensure Ireland is well prepared to meet current and future challenges in our maritime domain.

Regarding the funding of any capabilities or the funding of the strategy as per the previous question, capital funding of €1.7 billion has been allocated to the defence development plan for the period 2026 to 2030. This is an increase of €600 million and a 55% increase on our capital funding from the previous baseline figure. This indicates a significant commitment to continuing to increase investment in our defence infrastructure as well. We will be outlining how we intend to take that forward in our sectoral investment plan in the coming weeks.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** Addressing this in a way that is sustainable will require some current spending as well as capital spending and I might come back to that in my last contribution. The threats that are potentially faced are multiple. There are obviously the tradi-

tional issues that the Defence Forces faced in ensuring the protection of Irish waters in a fishing and general sort of sense but also as regards the issue of the undersea cables. I understand more than 95% of international data and voice transfers are routed through undersea fibre-optic cables. When you combine that with Ireland's particular situation in terms of the technology industry and the clustering of the tech businesses in Ireland, it makes Ireland particularly vulnerable. There is also the issue of an increasing number of shadow ships and so on coming into Irish waters. The Defence Forces have dealt with this appropriately but ensuring they have the capacity to continue doing so as these threats potentially increase is going to be crucially important. There is also the issue of the full radar picture which needs to be addressed from a capital funding point of view.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I agree with that. We will get to it in a second but there will of course be current public expenditure as well, including making sure we have the men and women to operate and implement any such infrastructure and that we grow the size of our navy as well. Last year's defence policy review did recommend a focus on maritime security because of our assessed threat level, our geographic position and our responsibility and commitment to support security and defence of Europe. We are a small island in the north Atlantic. Our maritime footprint, our exclusive economic zone, is seven times our land area and our waters are currently home to a considerable percentage of transatlantic data communication. We have significant energy infrastructure running through our waters, particularly gas pipelines and electricity interconnectors. Our most recent national risk assessment, which my own Department co-ordinates, identified damage to undersea infrastructure as one of the 22 key risks for our country. The focus of the new strategy in its initial phase will be on national security and defence matters and we will develop a strategy that combines an enhanced awareness but also a prioritisation of the protection of our critical infrastructure, especially that undersea infrastructure. The Deputy will be aware of the work that is under way in the development of our sonar capability for the Naval Service and this is a priority project at this time.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** On that, and it partially relates to my first question, it is important after the budget that the Department would publish a document outlining where we now stand with the revised capital development plan and to mark that against the report of the Commission on the Defence Forces. That would be a useful document if it were possible to achieve. One of the areas in which the gap between the current reality and the ambition is most stark is in our naval capacity. The Naval Service is still in a very under-resourced state. The manner in which it has conducted itself as regards some of the issues that have arisen has been exemplary but we still have the embarrassing situation where boats have been put to sea without a functioning main gun. That is primarily due to lack of personnel and expertise. One of the issues I have raised in the past - the Minister has talked about service level commitment schemes for certain ranks - relates to one of the roles that are most difficult to obtain and retain for the Defence Forces, namely, artificers. They are hugely in demand in the private sector. That needs to be looked at in the scheme.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** The Deputy is right to highlight a particular challenge when it comes to our Naval Service. I join him in thanking its members for their exemplary service. We do need to grow our navy and that requires more men and women in our Naval Service. It also requires more than me just saying that at a headline level. It also involves identifying, as the Deputy rightly said, the specialist skills. What becomes very clear very quickly is that a couple of individuals with certain skill sets not being there can result in a ship not being able to go to sea. The pinch points that are there are real. They often relate to very specialist skills.

That is why I have asked the Defence Forces and the Department of Defence to jointly produce a plan of action for the Naval Service. I am expecting to receive that very shortly - within a matter of weeks. There are then opportunities, both in the context of the budget and the capital plan which I have referenced, but also the local bargaining provisions that are available under the public sector pay agreements, to consider some of those specialist issues referenced by the Deputy in terms of various allowances that can be considered.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** There is only so far 1% will go.

## **Defence Forces**

4. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence the consultation he has had with rank and file members of the Defence Forces in relation to the potential changes to their terms and conditions in the general scheme of the defence (amendment) Bill 2025, which has recently concluded pre legislative scrutiny, particularly in the context of potentially more dangerous operational parameters of non-UN sanctioned missions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [49295/25]

5. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence if he will outline his proposals to remove the triple lock neutrality protection; when he intends to bring forward a Bill; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [49300/25]

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** The general scheme of the defence (amendment) Bill 2025 represents a fundamental change to how we deploy troops overseas. For the many decades that Ireland has been participating in peacekeeping it has been under the exclusive banner of the UN. When people sign up for the Defence Forces, it is with a reasonable expectation that overseas service will be in a blue beret. Has the Minister consulted with rank and file members of the Defence Forces on this fundamental change to their terms and conditions?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I agree with Deputy Gibney that it is absolutely the Government's intention to bring about a change in terms of how we deploy our troops overseas. I am quite clear on that. Where we disagree is how we see that. I see it as entirely possible to do that while respecting being a militarily neutral country. I have spoken to many of my counterparts in countries that are militarily neutral, none of which have a triple lock in place. We have recently seen what can happen at a UN Security Council with a peacekeeping mission that has been extraordinarily successful in Lebanon and yet one permanent member of the Security Council can decide that all of a sudden it does not want it to continue.

At the outset I must say that I want to be collaborative on this. The committee on defence did a good piece of work on pre-legislative scrutiny. I am considering that and I will report to Government shortly in advance of bringing forward the full scheme. I am open to seeing how we can strengthen any legislation to provide reassurances around the role of the UN Charter. It is absolutely our intention that any mission Irish troops go on would be in keeping with the UN Charter, but that is different from us saying it must be in keeping with a UN Security Council resolution. I am certainly eager to see how we can explore that. I think Irish people are rightly proud of the role that members of the Defence Forces have played in peacekeeping missions right across the world. It is a record that dates back many decades and which has remained unbroken. The current triple lock system is broken, however. It is absolutely broken. We can talk in aspirational terms about hoping somebody fixes it one day, or that Russia changes its mind

or China changes its mind or the United States of America becomes really interested in UN Security Council reform, but that is not the real world. That is not the world we are operating in. I do not believe that anybody who is not elected in this country should have a say in where any member of Óglaigh na hÉireann goes or does not go, and that is happening now. Men and women of Óglaigh na hÉireann will not be able to go to southern Lebanon as a result, in effect, of a decision taken by people outside of this jurisdiction. I wanted them to continue, and I am sure the Deputies did as well, but they cannot. We worked to try to get that into a good place relative to where it could have been, to avoid a cliff edge and the likes, but the reality is that mission will end in 2027. We do not wish it to end in 2027. We wanted it to continue but that is the effect of the UN Security Council veto and structure today.

I have consulted with lots of people in relation to this. Obviously with the command structure that works in the Defence Forces it is often difficult to have direct conversations with serving members of the Defence Forces but we do of course talk to their representative bodies on an ongoing basis. The Oireachtas committee heard from them as well and they have made submissions, which are captured in the report that came to me. I know that the men and women of Óglaigh na hÉireann are proud of serving overseas and I imagine they would rather the democratically elected Government and Parliament of this country decide where they go rather than anybody from any other country.

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** I notice that the Tánaiste did not use the words “General Assembly” when he was describing how broken the triple lock is, so I do think we are still ignoring the fact that there is a facility within the triple lock to actually consult with the General Assembly. I would also point out that all previous Acts refer to this international United Nations force, not an international force. It is defined as, “an international force or body established, mandated, authorised, endorsed, supported, approved or otherwise sanctioned by a resolution of the UN Security Council or the General Assembly of the United Nations.” It is to be replaced with an international force that can be under the banner of any international body. From peacekeeping that is guaranteed to be peacekeeping by the UN consistent with the UN Charter, we face a pivot to opening the door to missions of a lower quality and different nature that are branded as peacekeeping or strengthening international security under this legislation. I do not believe that what the Tánaiste has described is an effective level of consultation with the very men and women who are putting their lives on the line to discuss how the context in which they do that will be changed.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** I will return to some of the things that we discussed in the committee but I might first respond on the issue of UNIFIL and what this means in terms of the UN. I wish to say clearly that I regret very much the decisions that have been taken in relation to UNIFIL. A lot of work would have gone on behind the scenes to ensure there was not a cliff edge. This was important so that the least worst outcome was avoided but it is still a bad outcome. It is a bad outcome for the regions and a bad outcome for the Irish Defence Forces. However, while it has not been said explicitly, the implication is sometimes carried by Government statements that there is a higher bar for Irish participation in UN peacekeeping missions, or something like that. Obviously that is not the case. There is no UNIFIL after the end of 2027. It ceases to exist. It is not the case that there is a higher bar for Irish participation in UN peacekeeping missions. The requirement that we have put as a sovereign State is that Irish troops participate in UN missions. It is not the case that there are UN missions, which have international respect and that standard of law, that Irish troops cannot participate in. The UNIFIL mission will end. There will no longer be a UN presence. If there is anything to fol-

low, and I doubt there will be, it will happen outside a UN mandate.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** Firstly, I agree with the Deputy's characterisation of what happened at the UN Security Council, which I believe is accurate. We did work very hard and I particularly commend the French, who held the pen in trying to come up with a compromise solution. There was a real risk that we would have seen a withdrawal of peacekeeping troops in some sort of chaotic manner from southern Lebanon. I was very worried about the safety and security, in that context, of our peacekeepers and the people of Lebanon. There is a new government in place there and a president in place. They have really taken action against Hezbollah. That idea of the international community turning its back on them at such a crucial moment was not something we could countenance. To get to the end of 2026 before withdrawal begins and then to have a full 12 months for the withdrawal to take place is a better outcome, but it is still a bad outcome. It is not what we in Ireland wanted and I do not believe it is what this Dáil wanted, but it is what has happened.

I do not mean to be combative but I believe the General Assembly piece misses the point. The reality is the General Assembly can make recommendations but one cannot overlook the role of the UN Security Council. The one time that is referenced was the time the UN Security Council was in agreement with the General Assembly. I am off to the UN for a high level week this weekend. The idea that everything is functioning well really misses the point. The UN Security Council has not been in a position to authorise a new peacekeeping mission since 2014. The world has not become more peaceful. It is utterly dysfunctional how the UN Security Council is operating. Why can we not trust ourselves as a sovereign nation? They do not have this problem in Switzerland. They do not have this problem in Austria. They are militarily neutral.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** It is called international law. We do not just get to invade other countries.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I know it is the left and the far left but Deputy Gibney is well able to speak for herself and it is her question. Switzerland follows international law very well. Does anybody doubt the neutrality of the Swiss? They do not have a triple lock. Does anybody doubt the neutrality of Austria? They do not have a triple lock. This is trying to whip up a frenzy. I have heard it: "Simon Harris and Micheál Martin want to send our sons and daughters to war." Stop. Stop. It is misleading and it is done to try to do "them and us" as part of the divisive toxicity that people engage in.

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** No one is denying the difficulties of the Security Council but the Tánaiste has given no effort to actually describe how the General Assembly could be engaged to fall back. It is in the Defence (Amendment) Act 2006. It is part of the triple lock and the Tánaiste is completely ignoring it. Constantly referencing other countries denies our history. It denies the Nice and Lisbon treaties and how we arrived at the point of the triple lock. Beside that, our association with UN mandates was way before then anyway. One cannot compare it to other countries like that. We can say that something is consistent with the UN Charter until we are blue in the face but the charter is clear around the use of force without consent and the backing of the United Nations. Everyone claims to go to war for peace, love, security and human rights but we have seen in the last 25 years how hollow those words can be. UN backing guarantees that peacekeeping missions are of high quality and that the operational parameters do not do more harm than good. We cannot send young men and women abroad into conflict zones with no blue beret and with no safeguard beyond what the Government of any given day

thinks is a good idea.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** The Swiss and the Austrians have constitutional protections in terms of neutrality so perhaps that is a conversation the Tánaiste wants to have. Instead of legislation governing the triple lock then perhaps the Tánaiste wants to have a conversation about us looking at constitutional protection for neutrality. Let us have that conversation. I suspect that is not what is in the Tánaiste's mind. If the Tánaiste is concerned about sovereignty I suggest that the Government puts this proposition to the people, given there have been two referendums in which the Irish people were assured that the triple lock would remain in place and that it was attached in protocols to European treaties. If the Tánaiste is so confident on the issue of sovereignty then I suggest he puts it to the people.

As regards the committee, a lot of the issues that were instanced by Government representatives as reasons to get rid of the triple lock are not prevented by the triple lock. Carrying out duties as military representatives, filling appointments or postings outside the State, and secondments to international organisations are not prevented by the triple lock. Conducting or participating in training is not prevented by the triple lock. Undertaking monitoring, observation or advisory duties is not prevented by the triple lock. Undertaking reconnaissance or fact-finding missions is not prevented by the triple lock. Participating in supporting duties, inspecting and evacuating stores, undertaking military close protection or undertaking humanitarian tasks - none of these are prevented by the triple lock. That was found and confirmed by the-----

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy David Maxwell:** Thank you, Deputy.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** Where are we going to send the peacekeepers if we are reliant on the UN Security Council providing a peacekeeping mission? Where are we going to send Irish peacekeepers, considering it has not supported any peacekeeping missions since 2014 and has now effectively ended-----

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Where is the Tánaiste going to send them?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** -----the largest overseas peacekeeping mission we are involved in? Where are we going to send them?

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Where are you going to send them?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** We are going to be sending them on peacekeeping missions that are consistent with the UN Charter and the approval of the Government and the approval of the Dáil. I do not understand-----

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** That would mean the triple lock then.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** The triple lock-----

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** -----is the UN Charter.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** -----requires the UN Security Council.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Eleven missions.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** The Deputy was late to my initial remark. I am very happy to have a conversation with Deputies Murphy, Gibney and Ó Laoghaire about how we can strengthen within the legislation references to the UN Charter. I even have some ideas I am happy to

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discuss with them about how we can oversight mechanisms in making sure anything our peace-keepers go on is consistent with the UN Charter. That is 100%. I value the UN. The UN is a force for good. We value multilateralism at a time when it is under attack. What I am not going to do is just sit here and suggest that we are going to just allow this to continue until Putin or anybody else changes their mind and says, “Let us reform the UN Security Council”. It is doing a disservice to the men and women of Óglaigh na hÉireann, many of whom I can tell Deputies - and Deputies ask if I speak to them - are absolutely gutted that their peacekeeping mission to Lebanon has been ended, many of which they have served on and their mothers or fathers served on previously. That is coming to an end because of the dysfunctionality of a structure the Deputy wants me to continue with. I am not going to do it.

On democracy and mandate and all that, we had a general election. We very clear in my party’s manifesto, as was Fianna Fáil, around-----

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** Fianna Fáil was not.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Fianna Fáil was not at all.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** In the current manifesto-----

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** The Tánaiste’s party was not either.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** The leader of Fianna Fáil, the Taoiseach of the country, was very clear in his views on the triple lock.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** His manifesto was not.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** He proposed it when he was Minister for Defence. I have been crystal clear with regard to it as well. We had an election and formed a government. We do not need to run back to the people to have a referendum on every issue. We are very clear, and I believe the majority of people in this country trust their own democracy and certainly not Russia’s as to where our peacekeepers go.

## Defence Forces

6. **Deputy Catherine Callaghan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence if he will, in the interests of equity, seek an increase in cadets’ pay to bring it in line with the starting pay of a three-star private given both are similarly trained and qualified; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [49483/25]

**Deputy Catherine Callaghan:** In the interests of equity, will the Tánaiste seek an increase in the starting pay of cadets to bring it line with the starting pay of a three-star private, as both are similarly trained and qualified?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank the Deputy as one of the few Members who has worn the uniform and represented our country with distinction in Óglaigh na hÉireann and indeed in southern Lebanon. She is someone who can speak with authority on a lot of these issues. I thank her for raising the matter.

She will be aware that there has been significant progress made on pay and conditions for Defence Forces personnel, particularly over the past six years. The starting pay of a school-

leaver cadet, on commissioning, was €30,884 in 2019. As of 1 August this year, that same school-leaver cadet, on commissioning to second lieutenant, is paid €45,795, an increase of 49% between now and 2019. These are figures we do not talk about. We talk about recruitment challenges. People need to start telling their constituents and get this message out there - it is €45,795, an increase of 49% since 2019. After two years at that rank, they are then promoted and their pay rises to €51,184. Where a graduate joins, the pay rate on commissioning begins at €51,184. These rates all include pensionable military service allowance.

In May 2019, a newly qualified three-star private could have expected to earn €27,759 gross per annum on completion of his or her initial training. This has now increased to €41,880. That is €27,000 to €41,000 since 2019. These are big improvements and rightfully so.

As the Deputy will be aware, different pay scales also apply during the training period for both cadets and recruits. The current pay scale applicable to cadets ranges from €25,748 to €38,526, depending on qualification. In addition, cadets are provided with accommodation with meals free of charge for the duration of their training, as part of their overall package.

The Deputy has referenced the fact that cadets are similarly trained and qualified as three-star privates during the first six months of training, and while I very much appreciate that point made, cadets are required to complete a further period of training of approximately 11 months before they are commissioned and operational. In summary, cadets are not available for duty following their initial six months training and therefore the comparison is not entirely equal. During their training periods, cadets and recruits are not paid the military service allowance. I will come back in a moment.

**Deputy Catherine Callaghan:** I thank the Tánaiste. I acknowledge his work to date on improving pay and conditions, some of which he has outlined such as quite rightly increasing pay for three-star privates and reforming the apprenticeship pathway so that technical staff beginning their careers in the Defence Forces correspond with three-star privates after six months. The Tánaiste has also overseen the introduction of the instructor's allowance and established a service commitment scheme for our air traffic controllers in the Air Corps. These are all developments that should quite rightly be applauded.

However, at present, everyone else in the Defence Forces is on approximately €43,000 after six months but cadets remain on the €25,000. I understand the points the Tánaiste outlined but in this post-2013 era of career average earnings and pensions, these cadets are getting penalised on the double in their current pay and future pensions. As we all know, cadets can now join up to the age of 39 so it is conceivable that they have families and mortgages. A business case was prepared by the Defence Forces on foot of a motion asking for this to be looked at. Can the Tánaiste please confirm if this case has been progressed?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I can confirm that this matter was raised with the Department by military management and that business case was subsequently shared with the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation. The Representative Association for Commissioned Officers, RACO, has also raised it with the Department on a number of occasions during its formal conciliation council meetings with the Department. Since the signing of the public service agreement to which members of the Permanent Defence Force are a party, all cost increasing claims can be channelled through the local bargaining process. As I said a moment ago, local bargaining discussions are under way between the Department of Defence, military authorities and the military representative associations. Parties

can bring forward proposals up to a maximum value equivalent to 3% of basic pay, with 1% to be paid from the current agreement, and the balance to be addressed in any successor agreement. There is an opportunity to examine pay and conditions, including cadet pay, through this process.

I am pleased that interest in applying for a cadetship remains extremely high, with 1,819 applicants this year alone, and the Permanent Defence Force is currently in the process of making offers to successful candidates. It is anticipated that a class of 80 cadets will be inducted in October. I am also pleased the business case is with the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, and I will continue to keep the Deputy up to date on that.

**Deputy Catherine Callaghan:** I thank the Tánaiste, and I am happy to hear that it is with the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation. I implore him to follow that matter up with the Department, as neither the conciliation and arbitration scheme or national pay talks are going to address this low pay, given the no cost increasing caveat in the national pay deals, as he mentioned. Therefore, some political will is required here to address the matter. Local bargaining is not going to be enough. In the spirit of fair pay for a fair day's work, let us be very clear: our members of the Defence Forces do not just do any old job. They serve this country and bring honour to this country both here and abroad. On their behalf and on behalf of their families, I ask the Tánaiste to continue to liaise with the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation to seek an increase in cadets' pay to bring it in line. As the system currently stands, it takes up to five years for a cadet's salary to equalise with non-commissioned soldiers in an instance where both military personnel begin their service on the same day and are both similarly trained and qualified.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I acknowledge the point the Deputy made. The men and women of Óglaigh na hÉireann, those who serve our country and wear the uniform, do absolutely serve with distinction. I am extraordinarily proud of them and the honour they bring here, at home and abroad. I know that is a sense shared across this House and certainly across society as well. I thank RACO and PDFORRA for the advocacy they carry out on behalf of their members and for that good structure we have to engage with them.

As I have said, a business case has been prepared on this issue regarding cadets. It has been submitted to the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, and there are opportunities to consider these. I reference the local bargaining because it is there and focuses all of our minds on prioritising what is next with respect to improving terms and conditions. There will also be successor pay agreements in the not-too-distant future. I am certainly eager to keep in touch with the Deputy, RACO and others in relation to this in the weeks and months ahead.

*Dáil Éireann*  
**Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions**

**Military Neutrality**

7. **Deputy John Clendennen** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence to clarify the precise change to the triple lock that recently announced legislation will result in; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [48880/25]

11. **Deputy Donna McGettigan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence his plans for the triple lock given recent comments by the Minister for Health and by other members of the Government proposing to scrap or undermine it, despite it being the expressed will of the people to retain it. [48759/25]

12. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence if he plans to remove the triple lock by the end of 2025; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [49151/25]

39. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence to provide details of the Government's decision to remove the triple lock; if the UN General Assembly can sanction peacekeeping missions by bypassing a veto at the UN Security Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [49268/25]

55. **Deputy John Clendennen** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence if the proposed changes to the triple lock will impact Ireland's policy of being militarily neutral; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [48881/25]

**Deputy John Clendennen:** For clarity, I am going to go with Questions Nos. 7 and 55 together. The Government's intention is to change legislation to the triple lock mechanism that governs the deployment of Irish troops overseas. At present, as the Tánaiste knows, that requires the approval of the Government, the Dáil and a mandate from the United Nations. Could he clarify precisely what changes are now being proposed, and outline if this will materially affect both Ireland's tradition of neutrality and the democratic safeguards that have existed up to this point?

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell):** Does Deputy McGettigan want to add to that quickly?

**Deputy Donna McGettigan:** No.

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell):** Deputy Murphy, quickly.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I will bluntly ask this question of the Tánaiste. Where does he want to send troops that he cannot currently send them under the triple lock? Does he agree with the Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, and the call of the so-called coalition of the willing, where he is willing to send Irish troops on the ground, presumably without an agreed UN peacekeeping mission? Otherwise, that would meet the requirements of the triple lock. Where does the Tánaiste want to send troops that he cannot currently send them?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 7, 11, 12, 39 and 55 together. There is a very fair question on this later. The deployment of any troops to Ukraine would have to be in the context of a peace agreement. We are not talking about sending our troops to a war-

zone or a place where there is an active war. It would only be in the context of a peace agreement. I do not believe we should recuse ourselves from that conversation. Our peacekeepers serve with absolute distinction. I am open to considering their being sent on a peacekeeping mission to Ukraine, if there was peace. However, all the talk about peace is happening while Putin continues his reign of terror. We might return to that in a moment.

I thank Deputy Clendennen for his questions. I previously clarified my intentions with regard to the proposed amendments to legislation governing the overseas deployment of the Defence Forces in the proposed defence (amendment) Bill. This was agreed by Cabinet on 4 March this year. As I mentioned, the pre-legislative scrutiny process which provided an Oireachtas all-party committee with the opportunity to examine the Heads of the Bill and to consult directly with stakeholders on the draft heads of the Bill, was completed at the end of July. I thank the committee for its work. My Department is examining the committee's report on the matter. We will give serious consideration to the recommendations the committee has put forward, some of which are very sensible.

Under the current proposals in the general scheme to amend the existing legislation, the requirement for a UN mandate will be removed. I wish to underline that the legislation in place currently allows members of the UN Security Council, by means of a veto or often a threat of a veto, to bind Ireland's hands in its international engagement. The veto by a UN Security Council member on a proposed resolution for a full and unconditional ceasefire in Gaza on 4 June last is further evidence of this and it is simply untenable for the Government to continue with this policy.

I strongly believe therefore that such considerations on international engagement should be within our sovereign control and the decision making within remain the remit of the Government and the Dáil, which have been democratically elected by the people of Ireland.

I recognise, however, that in removing the UN Security Council mandate requirement, alternative safeguards are needed to underpin the future despatch of Defence Forces personnel. I am genuinely up for having a detailed discussion on this when we produce the full Bill and, therefore, in parallel to removing the UN mandate requirement, I have proposed that the governing principles will be included in law and will be underpinned in primary legislation. These have been proposed in the Bill I published. It will require that the mandate of these operations must be consistent with and must adhere to the principles of the UN Charter and international law. These principles are being refined further to ensure appropriate legal effect as part of the drafting process. I say on the record of the House that I am open to considering whether they need to be tightened further or whether other structures need to be put in place because we owe it to any Irish peacekeepers and want to make sure they are deployed on a peacekeeping mission only in line with UN Charter and in line with international law. That is this country's record of peacekeeping.

As I mentioned earlier, it is my intention is to bring this Bill to the Government in the coming months. The speed at which that Bill progresses is a matter for the Oireachtas. I hope to commence discussion on the Bill this year. There will be plenty of time, as there needs to be, to debate the draft legislation in the Dáil and the Seanad, and ample opportunity to scrutinise the proposals at each stage.

Concerning the role of the UN General Assembly, the UN Charter unequivocally sets out the primacy of the UN Security Council with regard to all matters relating to international peace

and security. While the General Assembly can make recommendations to member states, resolutions of the General Assembly cannot compel action. The charter is clear on that. Ultimately, while the UN General Assembly can make recommendations to member states, under the UN Charter the Security Council alone has the power to take decisions which member states are obliged to implement. In practice, therefore, UN peacekeeping operations are only ever deployed on the basis of mandates from the UN Security Council and overseas deployments to peacekeeping operations involving the Defence Forces has only ever taken place on the basis of that Security Council mandate.

Finally, as I have outlined and I wish to continue to stress, the Government has been clear that it has no desire to alter Ireland's policy on military neutrality and the amendments proposed will do nothing to change Ireland's traditional position of military neutrality, which is characterised by Ireland's non-participation in any military alliance. Our engagement overseas will continue to be firmly and exclusively grounded in the principles of the UN Charter and of international law.

**Deputy John Clendennen:** I thank the Tánaiste for the details and his repeated clarity provided surrounding the proposed changes. Many people seem to remain unclear as to why the Government believes it necessary to move away from the existing triple lock. The cynic in me questions whether there is a co-ordinated campaign of misinformation in relation to this matter-----

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Yes.

**Deputy John Clendennen:** -----claiming it will compromise our neutrality. I wonder where that comes from.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** There is, it comes from the Government-----

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell):** Deputy Murphy-----

**Deputy John Clendennen:** Will the Deputy let me speak?

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell):** Deputy Murphy, allow the Deputy to speak.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** The Deputy asked a question and I am answering it.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I think he meant it in a different way.

*(Interruptions).*

**Deputy John Clendennen:** Many believe the triple lock has provided a clear reassurance to the Irish people that our participation overseas is grounded in neutrality and a UN mandate. However, in an ever-increasingly precarious and uncertain world, we should not find ourselves in a position where the likes of peacekeeping missions by Irish troops could be vetoed by UN member states.

There has been mention of Ukraine and in practical terms when a ceasefire and peace agreement is eventually reached there, hopefully sooner rather than later, we should not be at the mercy of countries that have built reputations on vetoes at the UN Security Council and essen-

tially prevented deployment of Irish troops on such peacekeeping missions. Domestically, it is important that this legislation ensures that future overseas deployments continue to have broad political legitimacy and I ask for that reassurance today.

**Deputy Donna McGettigan:** I support the triple lock and want it retained. The vast majority of us do not want Irish troops to serve anywhere unless it is as peacekeepers under the auspices of the UN. Opinion polls have consistently shown that. It was enacted to reassure the voters of the State that we would not become involved in an EU army, NATO or any other military alliances. The Government is now clearly determined to abandon the reassurances given to the people. Our military neutrality is already being undermined by the use of Shannon International Airport in my hometown as a U.S. military stopover point. That must stop. We want to see ethical investment in Shannon, not a continuation or increase in its use as a military airport. The Minister for Health also said that we have given away our decision making because we cannot trust ourselves. The fact is the Government had to reassure the people that there would be checks and balances on decision making because the people do not trust it. The Government does not want an independent foreign policy but the ability to sign us up to military alliances in which our decision making truly will be abandoned.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** In answer to Deputy Clendennen's question, there is a cynical campaign of misinformation. It is coming from the Government. It is suggesting that we are going to get rid of the triple lock but there is no need to worry because we are going to stay within the framework of the UN Charter. That is not honest, unless the Tánaiste does not understand the UN Charter. There are two circumstances under the charter whereby a country can legally, under international law, send troops abroad: the first is self-defence, which is not covered by the triple lock, and the second is where it is authorised by the UN Security Council. That is literally what Article 53 states. When the Tánaiste said we are going to get rid of the triple lock but do not worry because we will stay in the UN Charter, it does not make any sense. For example, in the context of Ukraine, the Tánaiste said we will send troops to Ukraine but only in the context of a peacekeeping agreement. Is that a UN-endorsed peacekeeping agreement? In that case it would meet the requirements of the triple lock. However, if it is not, in which case presumably it is not a peacekeeping agreement when one of the warring parties, Russia, the invader, is clearly still at war, then we are sending troops to participate in a conflict. Is this why the Tánaiste in his answer regarding the heads of the Bill referred to maintaining the principles of the UN Charter?

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell):** I thank the Deputy.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** That is not accidental because he is talking about the vague, broad principles in Article 2 of the UN Charter in contrast to giving a commitment to stay within the articles of the UN Charter, which are exactly the same as the triple lock.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** To be clear on this Ukraine issue - I never wished to accuse the Deputy of this but there is an effort to be a bit mischievous here - there is no question whatsoever of Irish troops being deployed to a war or playing any role in anything other than peacekeeping. We live on the Continent of Europe and I believe we have an obligation to assist in peacekeeping on our Continent should that situation arise. It is beyond an abstract conversation at the moment because there is no indication at all that Putin wishes to see anything like peace as he continues to invade EU airspace in terms of the drones in Romania and Poland, and indeed continue to terrorise the civilian population. However, if we get to a moment where there is a peace agreement that requires peacekeepers, why would we not consider at that moment

deploying our troops?

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Why would we not? Because of vetos-----

**Deputy Simon Harris:** It is possible in that scenario that the UN Security Council, because Russia is on it. The Deputy does not know that and I do not know that. However, it is also possible, in answer to Deputy Clendennen's question, that we could see a scenario more broadly - and I am not talking about Ukraine - where EU countries may wish to deploy peacekeepers, where the OSCE may wish to deploy peacekeepers or where there may be regional requests for peacekeeping missions that do not have the support of Russia, China or of the US for economic reasons or whatever else. I do not see what the difficulty with that is because-----

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** They are not-----

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I accept the point the Deputy is making on the UN Charter's reference to the UN Security Council. However, I think the principles of the UN Charter matter. I am happy to tease out that legislation. It may suit Members to try to divide us further on this issue but what we are trying to do is a modest proposal. We are trying to produce primary legislation that makes it clear we are only interested in deploying our troops for peacekeeping missions and the other maritime surveillance missions that we already know about. How do we do that in a way that works in a world where the UN Security Council is not functioning as we would wish it to function? That is the debate we are having. We are not having a debate about neutrality, NATO membership or sending our sons or daughters to war, or any of the hyperbole I have heard. If we can have a debate that is focused on what we are trying to achieve, we could, heaven forbid, do a good day's work in this place by productively taking forward an issue that supports the men and women of Óglaigh na hÉireann and ensures we can stay true to our values.

That phrase, "international law", is also important. We will only participate in anything in line with the principles of the UN Charter and international law. I fully agree with Deputy McGettigan that the Irish people value neutrality; so do I. However, I do not agree that the majority of people wish to see the retention of the triple lock. I have seen no evidence of that. Insofar as one can follow polling, a significant majority of people are open to changes to the triple lock. That is a matter for discussion.

We are already involved in training missions, for example, EUMAM, through which we are helping to train Ukrainians. We should also do that for the Lebanese armed forces. Why can we not work with our neighbours, friends and allies on peacekeeping missions without needing Vladimir Putin's permission?

**Deputy John Clendennen:** I thank the Tánaiste. Irish troops have served with distinction at Camp Shamrock for several decades, none more than Deputy Callaghan who has just departed the Chamber. We have a proud and unbroken record of deployment of troops to Lebanon. We must protect that in the best interests of Óglaigh na hÉireann as our only full-scale peacekeeping mission in the world today.

We must reiterate the point that this debate is about the opportunity for the deployment of peacekeeping missions around the world and removing that element of UN authorisation will not be seen as a weakening of our international neutrality at a time when investment in military defences is increasingly important. I commend the Tánaiste's work in this area. It is important that he has given reassurance to the public that military offence is categorically not on the agen-

da. We must reassure the public that Ireland will never drift into overseas military operations that have some level of EU backing without them being in compliance with the UN Charter.

**Deputy Donna McGettigan:** Sinn Féin supports investing in our military, air force and naval services to overcome the chronic neglect they have suffered under this and previous Governments. We are not a major military power and should not strive to become one. Our standing in the world should rest firmly on our neutrality and independence. We should seek to assert influence from that basis. Any military spending in excess of what is absolutely necessary will produce profits for arms manufacturers at the expense of the people of Ireland. We are suffering through a housing crisis and the last thing we can afford is the military adventurism of this Government. Sinn Féin in government would hold a referendum to enshrine our neutrality in the Constitution. Why has the Government not agreed to do the same? Clearly, it is because the Government knows that the people would vote against it. The Government knows it is in defiance of the will of the people. We will oppose any attempt to undermine the triple lock by this Government.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** We are getting somewhere here. The Tánaiste accepted that the point of getting rid of the triple lock is to be able to send troops outside of the framework of the UN Charter - not just outside the principles but outside the articles of the UN Charter, which govern international law in respect of where troops can be sent abroad. That is the reason to get rid of the triple lock. The Tánaiste may say that we are only ever going to send troops on missions that are called peacekeeping missions. Does he know what Putin called his invasion of Ukraine? He said it was a peacekeeping mission. When the US led the invasion of Iraq, it was for humanitarian and democratic reasons. When the US invaded Afghanistan, it was the same. These days, no country ever says it is doing something for its own imperialist interests. Countries always dress it up as peacekeeping.

The top civil servant in the Tánaiste's Department admitted to me at a committee meeting that if it were not for the triple lock, Irish troops could have been sent to participate in the invasion of Iraq. The Tánaiste's political commitment that we will only send troops on peacekeeping missions is not worth anything under this Government. The Government will be gone at a certain point and we will have new governments. If we get rid of the triple lock, there will be no legal requirement that we will be within the framework of international law.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** I will raise three points. I have made most of my primary arguments but I have three matters to clarify. I am not specifically addressing Deputy Clendennen, but there has been talk of misinformation. Some Government Deputies have tried to say that the issue of the triple lock has nothing to do with neutrality. The idea that the legislation that references how Irish troops are deployed outside the State as part of international forces has nothing to do with neutrality is quite a statement. It is a remarkable suggestion that it has nothing to do with neutrality.

My second point relates to where we send Irish troops on peacekeeping missions. It is important that we find other peacekeeping missions. It is important in terms of our standing internationally and the development of our Defence Forces. Irish troops currently participate in three of 11 peacekeeping missions. There are plenty of other peacekeeping missions to participate in.

The Tánaiste referenced the Fine Gael manifesto. Certainly the Fianna Fáil manifesto was silent. I had to go back and check whether there was reference to the triple lock or legislation

of that kind in the Fine Gael manifesto. There was no such reference in the manifesto. I looked at it and there is no reference in the manifesto to removing the triple lock or legislation of any kind. The Tánaiste can look at it again if he has forgotten what was in it.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank the Deputy for reading the manifesto. We made it clear, and I recall making it clear, during the general election, but I appreciate the Deputy reading the manifesto. I closely read the Sinn Féin manifesto.

I have quite a few things to say. To Deputy Clendennen's point, we should acknowledge the men and women serving at Camp Shamrock. We all do so, and that is an important point. It has been a difficult period for them because of the region in which they have been serving. They have been dealing with the horrific murder of Private Seán Rooney. We continue to fight for justice and work with his mum, Natasha, in that regard. There has also been all the debate about whether there will be a renewal of the mandate and all the uncertainty of that. Throughout all of that, they have served with distinction. I know that point unites us.

The idea of Ireland becoming a major military power or engaging in military adventurism is at such a remove from the reality. We are spending so little on defence relative to other countries. We are trying to get to a level whereby we can protect our undersea cables and have a better idea of what goes on in our skies. Even when we get to LOA 2 or LOA 3, we are not spending like a military power or any country that wishes to be a military power. That is not what we wish to be at all. We wish to be a country that can keep itself and its people safe, has a better idea of what goes on in our sea and skies and plays a role in peacekeeping. That is what we want to do.

I always find it hard to agree with Deputy Murphy, but I agree that this Government will be gone at some point and there will be a new government. I take the point about how political commitments translate into primary legislation. It is a fair point. I ask the Deputy to bring forward proposals, as I am sure he will. Let us tease it through. We are going to change the triple lock. That is our proposal as a Government. We are going to bring forward proposals to this House. We have published a general scheme. It has been scrutinised by the Oireachtas committee. Some good ideas have come back from that cross-party committee, on which I am reflecting. There is an openness from me and the Government to further strengthen commitments around the UN Charter. I ask the Deputy to bring forward proposals in that regard. If the Opposition's approach is to say, "No, nay, never, we will not talk to you about it and will just vote you down", that is grand, but it is not the most constructive way to try to engage in the legislation that we have a duty to try to get right.

What is going on in Gaza is a genocide. We agree on that point. We were one of the first countries, certainly in Europe, to call it a genocide. The UN independent inquiry now agrees. I often hear from people who support the triple lock that they want Ireland to be able to assist more in Gaza. I have even heard people ask if our military or Air Corps could become involved. None of that can happen under the triple lock. We must try to look at the situation. Do Deputies believe there will be, whether through unanimity or not, a veto in respect of Gaza and the two-state solution at the UN Security Council? I do not believe that.

What about Ukraine and peacekeeping? There are real issues here that are going to come to the fore in the time ahead. We must have legislation whereby Ireland remains militarily neutral and unaligned, but which also provides some degree of flexibility in the countries and parts of the world to which we deploy peacekeepers to reflect and advance our values.

## Departmental Strategies

8. **Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence to provide an update on the development of a national strategy for the resilience of critical entities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [48912/25]

**Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí:** My question concerns an issue with which the Tánaiste will be familiar with, that is, the urgent need to build resilience in our national systems in line with EU regulations. I am asking for an update on the development of a national strategy for the resilience of critical entities.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. The critical entities resilience, CER, directive is part of the European Union-wide effort to increase the resilience of essential services that provide vital societal functions in all member states of the European Union. My Department has transposed this directive by way of the resilience of critical entities regulations 2024. I am pleased that Ireland was among the first member states to transpose directive on time. The regulations apply to 11 essential services in different sectors of the economy, ranging from the energy and transport sectors through to large-scale food production, processing and distribution. Essentially the purpose of the regulations is to create a framework to ensure that critical entities are able to prevent, resist, absorb and recover from disruptive incidents, whether they are caused by natural hazards, accidents, terrorism, insider threats or public health emergencies.

My Department conducted an extensive engagement programme with relevant policy Departments, bilaterally and through the Government task force on emergency planning since 2021. This was done for negotiations on the directive and also the subsequent transposition of the directive into Irish law. Since the transposition last year, engagement has continued in order to develop our resilience of critical entities strategy. This is a key element of the new regulatory framework. The strategy will lay out the framework for the identification of critical entities in the essential service sectors in the State, and the specific obligations and resilience-enhancement measures required from each of the critical entities. The strategy will also outline a mechanism for information-sharing and developing a collaborative public and private approach to the resilience of the essential services.

My Department is currently in consultation with all competent authorities and relevant Departments and agencies for each sector to develop a strategy for the resilience of critical entities, which is to be published in 2026 in line with requirements of the directive. Step 1 was to negotiate the directive and step 2 was to transpose it. We were one of the first countries in Europe to do that. Under step 3, under the transposition, you need to produce a strategy, by 2026. I am pleased to say we are on track to do that.

**Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí:** It is good to hear that Ireland is leading out when it comes to the transposition of the regulations. Disruptive incidents, whether caused by national hazards or malicious actors, have the potential to inflict immense damage on Ireland. We saw what happened with Storm Éowyn and the damage it did to communities across Ireland, but we also saw the real value of EU solidarity. The EU civil protection mechanism kicked in, with 13 power generators from the Commission's reserve and four generators from Denmark, to help to provide electricity on the ground. Then Copernicus was activated, supplying analytical support to our national authorities. Of course, there was also good co-operation between the energy companies internationally, providing boots on the ground in the form of crews. This sort of

co-operation is a core strength of the European Union. Sharing information, conducting joint risk assessments and participating in advisory missions will be central to safeguarding critical infrastructure in Europe.

The Tánaiste might just comment in a little more detail on steps 2 and 3 in terms of the transposition.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank Deputy Ó Muirí. I agree with everything he said. To state the obvious, it is true that we are all living in a world that is becoming so much more interdependent. That is why it is right that Europe lead on this in demanding that all member states put in place plans but also learn from each other in relation to this.

To expand a little more, the strategy will set out our national approach, our strategic objectives and the priorities for the improvement of our resilience across each of the critical entities. I am very proud of how our country endeavours to respond when something goes wrong, but I am also very conscious that we need to do better and, each time, build up a greater level of resilience, preparedness, planning and co-ordination regarding future events. The strategy will outline where the strategic objectives are, but it will also outline very clearly, in respect of each sector that is a critical entity, what the priority projects for improvements are. The strategy will be issued under the auspices of the Government task force on emergency planning, which I chair, and will meet the requirements of the regulation.

This strategy will build on our established national risk-assessment methodology to meet the requirements of the regulation, including identifying our essential services and establishing a governance framework. I am out of time but I can send the Deputy more information.

**Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí:** I thank the Tánaiste. The programme for Government was mentioned earlier. It rightly highlights the need to strengthen national security to protect Irish citizens, maintain public order and ensure the safety of communities in Ireland. We all hear about and are aware of reports of foreign actors probing underseas communications, energy infrastructure and other installations. While we hope our preparations are never tested, we cannot afford to be caught on the back foot when it comes to the national security of critical facilities and infrastructure like that in question. This is why the State-led strategic gas reserve, for example, is so important. That must also be dealt with on a secure basis and put on a secure footing. Ireland cannot allow itself to be in a position where large parts of the country are left without energy for weeks on end because of either an incident or, more worrying, malicious acts of other entities. Failing to deliver the floating storage unit is a risk that is neither acceptable nor appropriate for the Government to take. We must follow through on commitments outlined in the programme for Government, building the capacity to respond swiftly and effectively to emerging threats to our daily lives in co-operation with our European partners. It is an essential investment in the future safety and security of generations.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I agree with that 100%. I fully support swift progress on the programme for Government commitments on this. For far too long, politics here has been prisoner to ideology rather than the obligations we have as a Government and Oireachtas to make sure key services, including the provision of energy, an absolutely vital component, can continue in a whole variety of situations. I assure the House that while we obviously do not discuss these matters in detail, a lot of work goes on in the background on responding to various threats and challenges that our country, or indeed any country, could encounter in relation to contingency planning. One of the decisions this new Government took was the establishment of a national

security council, which co-ordinates at a senior level of government – with me, the Taoiseach and one or two other Ministers in key positions, along with the Chief of Staff, the Garda Commissioner and others – on the various issues in relation to our national security.

This will be an important step. We have been publishing our national risk assessment for quite a number of years. This takes it to the next level, outlining the specific actions each of our critical entity sectors will take.

## **Defence Forces**

9. **Deputy Shay Brennan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence if he will report on plans for a properly resourced office of veterans' affairs. [48992/25]

**Deputy Keira Keogh:** The contribution of our Defence Forces, both at home and abroad, is undoubtedly a source of incredible pride for us as Irish people. Could the Tánaiste please outline the plans to further support our veterans of the Defence Forces? I notice that in the programme for Government, there are plans to establish a properly resourced office for veteran affairs.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank Deputy Keogh for raising this issue. This is an area I want us to do so much better on. There is already good work done in relation to veterans. I am very pleased that my Department provides funding to a number of veteran associations. I have met and visited them. How we support, acknowledge and recognise the role of men and women who served in Óglaigh na hÉireann, at home and abroad, is really important. I fully agree with Deputy Keogh on this.

There is a firm commitment in the programme for Government to establish a dedicated office for veteran affairs, and I have instructed my Department to expedite the establishment of this office. I see an office of veteran affairs as playing a really important role in becoming, effectively, a one-stop shop where our veterans can seek support, co-ordination and information regarding a range of supports. I see a cross-government element to how this works. I refer to an office of veteran affairs that can advocate within the system, across Departments and agencies, on various issues relating to veterans, including health, social protection and housing.

I am very conscious that we can learn from other countries on this. I am pleased to say that, in the first instance, we are going to set up a dedicated office for veteran affairs. I want to get that up and running very quickly. It will have to evolve and grow, but it is important that it be established. I will very much work with Deputy Keogh and other Deputies on this.

I recognise the outstanding contribution made to the State by our ex-service personnel. In this regard, the Defence Forces will be hosting Veterans Day in McKee Barracks on 29 September. I recently visited the Organisation of National Ex-Service Personnel, ONE, in Brú na bhFiann in Smithfield and I was very impressed with its facilities and the work it does there.

In addition to the payment of over €300 million on pensions to over 13,000 ex-service personnel and their dependants, my Department provides support to two recognised veteran associations. These associations, which represent all former personnel, are the Irish United Nations Veterans Association and ONE.

My officials and I regularly meet these recognised veterans associations, as well as the As-

sociation of Retired Commissioned Officers and the Retired Enlisted Members Association, to discuss matters of concern to their members. My Department now has service level agreements with IUNVA and ONE, under which an annual grant is paid to both organisations in order to assist with their administrative overheads. I am pleased these grants increased substantially in 2022, and they have also been increased again this year. As a further means of assistance, since 2021 my Department has been securing dormant accounts funding to assist both organisations with specific projects.

The 2025 programme for Government commits to establishing a dedicated office of veterans affairs. It will be based in my Department. I intend to see this office established as a matter of priority.

**Deputy Keira Keogh:** I thank the Tánaiste. Could I take ten seconds of my one minute to thank his Department and our ambassadors for the work they did on getting Gena Heraty and other hostages released from Haiti? It is much appreciated.

I acknowledge the tremendous work done by the organisations the Tánaiste mentioned, including ONE, the Association of Retired Commissioned Officers and the Irish United Nations Veterans Association. It is great to hear there is cross-government work to get the veteran affairs office established but we need clear timelines because our veterans have worked in really challenging circumstances.

*10 o'clock*

They come home and transition into work life with patchy mental health supports. We know there is an increased risk of homelessness. I also think of Private Billy Kedian, whose family waited over two decades for him to be posthumously awarded the distinguished service medal with honour. We need a robust support for our veterans.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank the Deputy for mentioning Gena Heraty. It gives me an opportunity to pay tribute to her. I had the honour of speaking to her on the phone a while back. She is the closest thing I have ever encountered to a living saint. In Westport, County Mayo, and right across Ireland, there is great relief that Gena has been released from captivity. I thank her for the incredible work she does. I think of her family, who went through such a torrid time, but I am really glad Gena is doing well. I send her my very best.

The office of veterans' affairs is an important recommendation. It was included in the report of the Commission on the Defence Forces. We put it in our programme for Government. I have made it a priority that we get it up and running. We are consulting with the veteran associations to get it established as quickly as possible. I want to see it established in some form this year. We need to consider its role, responsibility and the required resources, but we should get it up and running, even if we get it up and running and then have to grow it in the time ahead. To date, consultation meetings have been held with ONE and the Association of Retired Commissioned Officers, ARCO. We are scheduling meetings with the other two representative associations I mentioned.

The Deputy mentioned the specific issue of mental health supports to veterans. This is an important point. As with other members of society, former members of the Permanent Defence Force can, of course, experience difficulties. They can often find themselves in unique circumstances relative to the rest of our population. In such circumstances, there is access to supports, including through ONE, an organisation we fund. It has services, including critical incident

stress management services. There is a 24-hour confidential counselling, referral and support helpline and primary medical care from a dedicated team of Defence Forces medical officers and contracted civilian GPs, but there is much more we need to do in this area.

Other countries have done a lot in this space. Many countries have a dedicated minister of state for veteran affairs. That is a natural progression we should see over time, with a greater focus on the work done by the men and women who have served on peacekeeping missions. The establishment of this office is an important step. It is a priority. I expect good progress on it this year and to build on it in 2026.

**Deputy Keira Keogh:** I acknowledge the good work that is being done, but there are some veterans who are still falling between the cracks in relation to waiting lists for mental health services and the risks of homelessness. I think of the potential end of the UNIFIL mission in Lebanon. When our troops return home, they are transitioning from a highly structured environment with a very close community, to other work and back into their families. We have to step up to the plate to ensure we are giving them adequate mental health supports and adequate financial supports. The Tánaiste mentioned the €300 million pot for pensions, but there needs to be that co-ordinated, efficient, robust support so we ensure none of our veterans fall between the cracks and we reward them for the service they have given to the country.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I fully agree. You are entirely right. If I felt everything was perfect, I would not passionately believe we need to establish the office of veteran affairs. The Deputy is entirely right. There is a need for a greater sustained focus and co-ordination on the range of issues veterans can experience in the here and now, as the Deputy said, immediately after leaving the Defence Forces and returning from a mission, but also years down the road. We have a duty to them after their service to our country.

On the issue of housing, I was very impressed by the work being done by the organisation ONE, when I visited it in Smithfield, where housing options are provided for people who have served as veterans and who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. It has very exciting plans to further expand the number of locations across the country, which my Department and other Departments are endeavouring to try to assist them with now.

This is an area where we are in a better place as a country in our awareness of veterans and the supports that are there than we were a number of years ago. There is still a journey to go. If we can establish an office of veterans' affairs, that will in and of itself mean a lot to people because it is recognition. It will be a very public statement of recognition for anybody who has served that we see them, hear them, want to work with them, have their back, want to better co-ordinate how we support them and thank them for their service. That is why it is a priority to establish this. I will certainly keep in close contact with the Deputy on it.

## Middle East

10. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence the engagements there have been with the Lebanese authorities following the re-examination of the case against individuals charged in Lebanon in relation to the death of a person (details supplied); the status of the other investigations carried out into the death; when these reports will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [48885/25]

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Obviously, we remember the sacrifice of Seán Rooney. We also remember the case where Joshua Phelan, Nathan Bryan and Shane Kearney were injured. We are all absolutely shocked by Mohammad Ayyad not being there in court and by the pitiful sentences. These are being re-examined and there is a promise, to some degree, of more action. What have the Tánaiste's engagements been with the Lebanese authorities? Is there any news about where Mohammad Ayyad is? Is there any follow-up on where those cases are?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank the Deputy, who rightly raises this issue with me regularly. It is important we continue to keep the focus and pressure in terms of justice on these matters.

Since the events of 14 December 2022, in which Private Seán Rooney was killed, and Trooper Shane Kearney and other personnel from the 121st Battalion were injured, the Government has consistently expressed determination that all of the facts and circumstances of the incident be fully established and that no stone be left unturned to ensure those responsible are brought to justice. Both I and my officials have consistently raised this matter with the Lebanese authorities on a regular basis. I assure the Deputy and the House we will continue to do so. I can also confirm there has been sustained and constructive engagement with the UN Secretariat on this matter over the past two and a half years through Ireland's Permanent Mission to the United Nations in New York.

The last hearing of the trial was held on 28 July. My officials, members of the Defence Forces, Ireland's ambassador and our honorary consul to Lebanon, and the Department's Lebanese lawyer all attended the hearing along with a member of Private Rooney's family. The hearing saw the conclusion of the court proceedings, with one defendant convicted of murder and the attempted killing of other Irish personnel. A variety of lighter custodial sentences and fines were imposed on others involved in the incident, including the full acquittal of one defendant.

Following this hearing, the Deputy will be aware that both I and the Taoiseach expressed our extreme disappointment at the lenient sentences imposed on a number of the defendants. In seeking to express the Government's disappointment with the sentences handed down, and while being fully mindful of the independence of the Lebanese judicial system, I wrote to the Lebanese Government, including the ministers for defence, justice and foreign affairs, following the hearing. In my letters, I expressed the disappointment of the Government of Ireland at the leniency of the sentences handed down to the defendants in the case and urged the Lebanese authorities to do everything in their power to apprehend the main defendant so he can serve his sentence.

I have since followed up with phone calls to the Lebanese ministers for defence and justice, after which the Lebanese Minister of Justice confirmed to me that an appeal on the sentencing had been lodged to the military court. Just this week, I issued further correspondence to the Lebanese authorities seeking details on the appeals process. I will remain fully engaged in the progress of the appeals process and will ensure that family members continue to be updated.

Regarding the coroner's inquest into the death of Private Rooney, further hearings will take place in the coming months. Both my Department and the Defence Forces are co-operating with this process in full.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** It is absolutely necessary that the Tánaiste maintain communication with the family and the pressure be maintained, not only on the Lebanese authorities but also on the UN. Is the Tánaiste reasonably happy that there is a free flow of information at this

point from the UN? There were promises that information would be provided to the family, but I am not sure that all has been done. We need to ensure that happens. Is there any further news regarding Mohammad Ayyad, who was not there in court? This obviously leads to major worries.

We should maintain whatever pressure we can because Private Rooney made the ultimate sacrifice. We know the issues there are in relation to that UNIFIL mission. It is absolutely right that we stand by him and his memory, but also that the UN does justice.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I should have also said that an independent inquiry is being undertaken by Mr. Michael Delaney SC, which is ongoing. This review is examining the internal tactics, techniques, processes and procedures employed by the Defence Forces with a view to determining whether there are any lessons to be learned from the circumstances surrounding Private Rooney's death. Mr. Delaney is expected to present a report to me in quarter 4 of this year.

I have raised the apprehension of the person convicted specifically with the justice minister of Lebanon. I told him how vital it is not only that justice be served in court, but that there is no point giving out a big sentence if the person has still not been apprehended. He assured me that this remains a priority for the justice forces and the Lebanese Government. I will continue to monitor that.

My Department is in very close contact with the UN Secretariat but more importantly, we are keeping in very close contact with Private Rooney's family, particularly Natasha, his mum. I will continue to ensure she is kept fully up to date. I will attend the UN General Assembly in the coming days, where I hope I may have an opportunity to further discuss this issue.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Many of us became worried about some of stories in the public domain, including that Mohammad Ayyad was not even in Lebanon, so there is a necessity for pressure to be put on the Lebanese regime. Is the Tánaiste reasonably happy that the UN is providing that information? I assume that the Government will maintain pressure to ensure this happens, particularly with regard to information for the family.

Regarding the Army pensions case involving John McNeela, whose son Michael made the ultimate sacrifice in Lebanon while peacekeeping, we all know that the allowance paid to John's wife when she died was not transferred to him. The Tánaiste promised to update the legislation. Is there a possibility of finding an administrative solution? Could we have a timeline on that? It is right that we do right by the memory and families of those who have made the ultimate sacrifice in peacekeeping.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I am aware that the UN is providing information but my satisfaction will depend on whether the family are satisfied, so I want to keep in close contact with them. I had the honour of meeting John McNeela at the national day of commemoration. When I met him, I credited the Deputy regarding his advocacy of the family's situation. We are committed to rectifying this in primary legislation and I spoke to my Secretary General in recent days about this. It will need to be changed through primary legislation. I am not sure there is an administrative solution but I have asked for the quickest Bill into which to insert this amendment. If it can be a vehicle other than a defence Bill, I am open to that. We are engaging with the Office of the Attorney General and the Department of Social Protection. I will try to come back to the Deputy with a timeline in the next couple of weeks as to how we can move this

forward. It does not necessarily have to wait for defence legislation. Other legislation could move more quickly.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** And whether it can be retrospective.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** Let me check that with the Attorney General as well.

*Questions Nos. 11 and 12 taken with Question No. 7.*

### **Defence Forces**

13. **Deputy Noel McCarthy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence the amount of funding allocated for the development of Defence Forces infrastructure in each of the past five years, the number of projects completed in that period, the number under way and if he will make a statement on the matter. [49093/25]

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I thank the Deputy for his question and for the opportunity to discuss the considerable investment made by my Department in the Defence Forces over the past five years. This is much-needed investment when we have to do more in terms of our national security and defence. The Defence Forces infrastructure development plan, IDP, sets out a programme of project delivery for the years 2023 to 2027. The programme reflects the complex environment in which the Defence Forces operate and the need for appropriate infrastructure to provide accommodation and training of personnel as well as the maintenance and storage of equipment.

There has been a consistent commitment to capital works development and the improvement of military installations and barracks across the country. The amount of funding given towards such developments has increased significantly year on year. For example, €37 million was allocated in 2021. This has risen this year to €62.5 million. I hope this level of investment demonstrates our continued commitment to ensuring the development of our military infrastructure.

I am pleased to say that over the past five years, 43 capital infrastructure projects were completed across Defence Forces installations and barracks. Some of the most notable projects include the upgrade and refurbishment of blocks within the historic McKee Barracks, the new training and accommodation facility at Renmore, the Cadet School at the Defence Forces Training Centre in the Curragh Camp and the upgrade of block 4 accommodation at Haulbowline. All the completed projects represent a significant step towards enhancing the experiences of our Defence Forces personnel by providing them with a high-quality, modern living and working environment.

This year alone, 13 projects are under way at construction stage, many of which are due to finish in the next 12 months, with a combined value of €60 million. Most notable are the new military medical facility at Casement Aerodrome, the new gym and obstacle course along with the locker block at the Joint Induction Training Centre at Gormanston campus, and the refurbishment of block 1 accommodation in Collins Barracks. I am very pleased to say that the significant extra capital investment we have received in the national development plan will enable us to spend a lot more on capital. This is a very significant rise, at about €600 million for Defence Force capital over the next five years compared with the previous five.

**Deputy Noel McCarthy:** I acknowledge the important work of Defence Forces personnel. I have seen it at first hand with family members directly involved. I firmly believe that Defence Forces infrastructure and equipment must be of a modern standard to meet their operational capabilities and defence responsibilities. I therefore welcome the revised national development plan allocation to upgrade and modernise Defence Forces infrastructure and the fact that planning is being undertaken. I believe a modern progressive Defence Forces with associated equipment and infrastructure would further encourage those who are interested in pursuing a career in the Defence Forces to enlist. I acknowledge that some of these projects are complex and require long lead-in times but I ask the Tánaiste to keep these developments at the forefront of his thinking and that of his Department.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I acknowledge the Deputy's family's proud tradition of service in our Defence Forces. I know that he will very much agree that investing in our defence infrastructure is not just about investment in buildings or vehicles. It is actually an investment in our people, in keeping them safe, providing them with the best equipment and ensuring they are trained to the highest possible standard. It is about ensuring our soldiers, sailors and air crew can carry out their duties in a safe and secure environment. I am really pleased to inform the Deputy that we have a number of really significant capital projects at various stages of the procurement pipeline, including the significant investment we will make in sonar and radar capabilities, which I believe will be transformational.

I know the Deputy may be particularly interested in some of the projects in his own county of Cork, so let me take the opportunity to highlight two of them. They involve the upgrade of two buildings, namely, block 4 accommodation and block 9 office accommodation at the naval base in Haulbowline. One involves €7.8 million, while the other involves €17.4 million. I am also pleased to say that we have seen a refurbishment of block 1 accommodation in Collins Barracks at an investment of €4.9 million. Millions are being invested in the defence facilities in Cork.

**Deputy Noel McCarthy:** I thank the Minister for his very positive response. I welcome the news about Haulbowline and Collins Barracks. It is very positive news. Could the Tánaiste give me an update on the Department's development of a national maritime security strategy? Approval has also been given for Defence Forces participating in the EU's common information sharing environment. Could the Tánaiste provide further insight into what information is being shared as part of this agreement?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** These are very significant developments that have taken place. Regarding the need to develop a national maritime security strategy, the waters over which we have exclusive economic authority are about seven times larger than the land mass of this country, so we have to have a better understanding and better security structures in place regarding that. This is why we are leading on the national maritime security strategy. We ran a public consultation over the summer and received about 300 responses. I expect to receive the national maritime security strategy by the end of the year. That is another key step in terms of the security of our country.

Regarding the common information sharing exchange, the Deputy is correct in saying that I took the decision for the Defence Forces to opt in to this. This basically a sharing system for when we become aware of something in our waters. A lot of this would have happened on an *ad hoc* basis in the past as good relations are already in place, but we need to better co-ordinate information when we see something in our seas that can move into somebody else's seas. We

are seeing more and more of this happening. We are seeing more and more bad actors in this space. This system provides us with an exchange to co-ordinate that information sharing and is working well.

*Question No. 14 replied to with Written Answers.*

## **Defence Forces**

**15. Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Defence the number of residential Defence Forces buildings that are currently not habitable, and if he will make a statement on the matter. [49304/25]

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** Our Defence Forces camps have a large number of residential buildings, many of which are either not in use or uninhabitable. About 85% of the buildings in Cork are uninhabitable, while the number across the State is 153, with 71 buildings unoccupied and 79 uninhabitable. I appreciate that the circumstances are a bit different from those when they were first built, but there is still scope for more residential capacity and there is a question about whether they can be brought back into use for residential or other uses.

**Deputy Simon Harris:** There are currently 80 uninhabitable residential Defence Forces buildings. None of these uninhabitable properties can be brought up to a habitable standard without significant work. Many of them were built prior to the introduction of building regulations, for example. As such, considerable work will be needed to bring them up to modern standards. Consultants were commissioned to assess the condition of the Defence Forces vacant housing stock and its suitability for conversion or refurbishment to provide for additional single living-in accommodation for Defence Forces personnel. My officials are subsequently engaged with the Defence Forces to have these projects included in the existing infrastructure development plan and have discussed the prioritisation of same. It is intended to begin the procurement phase for this project in 2026. These developments will dovetail with an extensive wider programme of Defence Forces accommodation procurement, especially investment in accommodation for serving personnel. I advise the Deputy that since the launch of the infrastructure development plan in January 2020 a lot of accommodation projects have been completed. I think it is €49.7 million worth of projects for the accommodation space providing 775 beds.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** Some of what exists on the various campuses dates from a different time in the context of what is expected in terms of accommodation, but also with respect to family arrangements and so on. It is nonetheless the case there is a housing crisis so it is easy to understand why people feel frustrated. We have members of the Defence Forces who are struggling to find accommodation, especially when they are based near urban centres. Certainly in Cork it can be difficult for people, particularly if they are recent enough recruits and maybe on the lower end of the pay scale, to find accommodation near Collins Barracks, Haulbowline or Lynch Camp in Fermoy. Right across the State it is frustrating to see places that are described as residential buildings in this condition. As I said, in Cork 84% of them are uninhabitable. Across the board it is similar enough, with 80 being uninhabitable of 153, which is a little over half.

The Minister has outlined a plan of operation. Has he a sense, maybe, of the timeline? Is it his view it is desirable for some of these buildings to come back into use as accommodation for people to live in? What is his sense of it?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** The Deputy is not wrong, but it is a balance to do with what is a sensible investment. Are we better off spending money on new accommodation projects and getting on with that and driving forward on that? We see the 775 beds that have been completed since 2020. Nearly €50 million was spent on that. There are 12 other accommodation projects under way, providing in excess of 500 additional beds. That is 775 plus 500. We need to make a call, and we will in 2026 with this procurement plan, about what might be salvageable with the level of investment. Obviously if there is anything that can be done then we will do that but we are only going to put our Defence Forces personnel into accommodation that would meet what the Deputy and I would consider to be of the reasonable and decent standard they are entitled to. I am very much committed to overhauling both the built environment and the working conditions for the men and women of the Defence Forces. I hope this significant increase in investment outlines that commitment. We will have to make a call in 2026 about the uninhabitable accommodation and what can and cannot be made habitable. I see that as part of our overall accommodation plan for the Defence Forces.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** Related to a previous question, one of the considerations should be former Defence Forces personnel who, for various reasons, have low incomes and find it difficult to find accommodation. Obviously it should have the same standards the Minister has in mind. That should also be a consideration when we are looking at residential blocks.

I am aware there will be a detailed assessment of this, but are the issues primarily with layout and modern building regulations or are there many of these buildings where the problem is the actual fabric and the question is whether the building is salvageable, for residential use or otherwise?

**Deputy Simon Harris:** I would have to get the Deputy a detailed building-by-building breakdown, but my understanding is the ones assessed to be uninhabitable are deemed so because there is a very significant requirement of work to bring them into any sort of line with modern building regulations, rather than it being more preferential to have something laid out in a different way. I am happy to get the Deputy more information on it but we have commissioned consultants to assess the condition of the housing stock and identify what might be suitable for conversion or refurbishment versus what does not make sense to work on from a value-for-money point of view.

The Deputy's point about those who previously served is a good one. He will be familiar with the work of ONE. I think it has housing facilities in his county. It is eager to do more and I think to do more in Cork. I am happy to work with the Deputy on that. I am very impressed on the return on investment, to be blunt. I do not mean that in terms of money but the success ONE has in people transitioning from its accommodation into housing and into a stable life, quite frankly, after some very difficult circumstances. There is definitely room to do more work with that organisation and we are in active discussion with it on that.

## **Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions**

### **Energy Prices**

82. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the measures he is taking to address the fact that 300,000 households are in arrears on their energy bills; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [49202/25]

**Deputy Pa Daly:** Household bills are 70% above what they were in 2022 and the value of arrears has jumped by almost 50%, even with the electricity credits each winter. There are 300,000 people in arrears. The Government has said it does not want electricity credits to be the new normal but the rise in prices and the number of people in arrears are an emergency and not normal either. This demands an emergency response.

**Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Alan Dillon):** I thank the Deputy. I convey the apologies of the Minister, Deputy O'Brien. He is at an EU Environment Council meeting on the 2040 environmental targets. We sought a swap but due to the Dáil resuming that was very difficult.

On the Deputy's question, the Government has made a number of important commitments in respect of addressing the continued high cost of energy. The programme for Government acknowledges the increased energy cost pressures on households and businesses and commits to bringing forward taxation measures to help contain energy costs. The Government approved an extension of the 9% VAT rate currently applied to gas and electricity by a further six months to October 2025 at an estimated cost of €85 million with the net benefit to households from 1 May to 31 October being approximately €26.60 with respect to electricity and €20.28 with respect to gas. This is traditionally 13.5% but has been 9% since 2022 in response to the energy price crisis.

In June 2025, my Department established the national energy affordability task force to identify, assess and implement measures that will enhance energy affordability for households and businesses while delivering key renewable commitments and protecting security of supply and economic stability. A key output of this task force will be to develop an energy affordability action plan which will identify a comprehensive range of solutions, including demand-side solutions for households to allow them to adjust their energy demand and avail of low-cost renewable energy. Task force members are currently working to finalise the preparation of an interim report, which will set out measures for consideration as part of the budget 2026 process.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** It is more than unfortunate the Minister is not here in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis to address the concerns of people who are really struggling in an emergency.

Over the summer households have been hit with a spate of emergency hikes from Energia, Flogas, Pinergy and SSE Airtricity. They have been told they can expect another at least another €200 to be whacked onto their annual energy bills. In the first week back in the Dáil the Minister does not show to tell us what he is going to do about it. All we know is the supports that have been there over the last number of years are going to be ripped away despite Irish energy costs being the highest in Europe, at €500 above average and 70% above 2022 levels. When I asked the Minister via parliamentary question what impact he thought the withdrawal of energy credits would have, I was told it was not a matter for the Minister but for the CRU. I find

it very hard to believe the impact of policy choices is not the responsibility of the Government, as outlined in the letter from the Leas-Cheann Comhairle, and that it has no duty to consider and analyse its efforts. The CRU might be surprised to hear about this.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** We have as a Government delivered over €3.3 billion in credits to over 2.3 million households in recent times, but we need to be strategic with this upcoming budget. Once-off measures are certainly not a long-term fix. That is why, as I said earlier, we have established the national energy affordability task force which is preparing an interim report to inform budget 2026. We are also looking at structural reforms, not just short-term relief. As I said earlier, we have extended the reduced VAT rate on energy to help households directly and we are very much focused on targeted sustainable measures, not just repeating the same approach. We are also investing record funding in energy upgrades that will permanently lower bills for many of those at most risk.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** The Government could not have had a more targeted measure than the energy credits that we have had for the last number of years and people are facing the same if not higher energy prices now. The Government continues to blame everyone apart from itself for it. The costs are due to political choices about whose energy needs get prioritised, who pays and who is protected. However, the Government has chosen to prioritise the energy needs of data centres and the profits of energy companies rather than ordinary people who are trying to keep the lights on and stay warm. If we want to bring down energy prices in the long term, the market needs a radical overhaul. We need major reform of the *status quo* with new measures to hold the energy companies to account rather than the blatant profiteering that has been taking place. We also need a fair funding model for our grid and the renewable transition rather than the Government's regressive approach which makes households shoulder a disproportionate burden of the cost of the network charges and the PSO levy rather than placing the burden on the data centres, which are, relatively speaking, let off the hook. It is possible to change this and I ask the Government to reconsider and redress the unjust burden placed on small businesses and households.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** In the context of what we are discussing, the reality is that Ireland operates in a liberalised EU energy market where prices are set commercially, not by governments. That said, we are not passive observers in this regard. The CRU has statutory powers to oversee suppliers' conduct. We have recently strengthened its protections for consumers this winter. On profits, I accept that energy companies have posted strong returns recently but it is worth noting that ESB profits are being reinvested into infrastructure and renewables. We need to ensure that we continue to invest in our grid and that we have security of supply. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has written to many of the suppliers directly and has scheduled meetings to push for stronger supports for many householders feeling the burden of increased prices.

## Energy Policy

83. **Deputy Ciarán Ahern** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment if he or his Department have been lobbied with regard to the promised increase in the quantity of oil and gas which is to be purchased from the United States of America by the European Union; the contribution that this State is expected to make towards such an increase, and-or the potential for related loosening of environmental and climate regulations and human rights safeguards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [49306/25]

**Deputy Ciarán Ahern:** My question relates to proposals under the recent trade agreement between the EU and the Trump Administration. The ridiculous tariffs got the headlines, but under this agreement the EU has further bent the knee to “king” Trump and agreed to massively increase the level of fossil fuels being purchased from the United States - €750 billion worth. There have also been reports of US officials, including its energy secretary, Chris Wright, engaging in extensive lobbying with EU member states on this matter, seeking the loosening of environmental protections. Has the Minister of State or his Department been lobbied on these issues by US officials or by officials from within the EU or other member states?

**Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Timmy Dooley):** I appreciate the Deputy’s question. Ireland engages with the US across a broad range of multilateral energy forums, from the United Nations and the G20, where Ireland is a guest country under the current South African Presidency, to the IEA and IRENA. While respecting different policy emphases regarding, for example, energy mix and the role of renewables in particular, we also enjoy an excellent bilateral relationship with United States colleagues on issues related to energy and beyond.

In relation to gas specifically, my Department has had regular engagements on the topic of gas security of supply with various European and international ministries and embassies, including the US Embassy, where our officials discussed the development of a State-led strategic gas emergency reserve, in the form of a floating storage and regasification unit to secure and protect Ireland’s energy systems from the consequences of any disruption to our subsea gas pipelines. This proactive intervention, once developed, will ensure that Ireland’s largest commercial entities that rely on gas for production of pharmaceutical products, medical devices, IT, manufacturing, food and beverages will not experience a disruption to their energy supplies if damage to gas subsea pipelines occurs. The strategic reserve facility will be State-owned and the contract for replenishing with LNG will be through open-market procurement.

There has been no request from, nor promise given to, the US with regard to a diminution of Ireland’s application of EU standards with regard to, for example, environmental assessment of infrastructural projects. Nor has Ireland agreed to increase the amount of oil imported from the US. In fact, our overall reliance on oil is decreasing in line with our climate ambitions.

Around 80% of Ireland’s gas supply comes from two interconnector pipelines from the UK, a well-diversified source, and the remaining 20% of natural gas is supplied from the Corrib gas field, off the coast of Mayo. Ireland currently has no other gas supply or entry points.

In relation to energy infrastructure delivery more generally, over the last five years Ireland, along with other EU member states, has looked to support the acceleration of planning for, and delivery of, energy installations through legislation introduced to modernise both the terrestrial planning system and marine planning system. However, Ireland’s environmental assessment process has not been diluted and remains a robust process, and nor has there been a reduction in our ambitious climate goals and objectives.

**Deputy Ciarán Ahern:** The Minister of State will be aware of our concerns on this side of the House with the Government’s plans to overturn the previous Government’s ban on the importation of fracked gas to facilitate the State-led strategic LNG reserve. I am sure the Minister of State is aware of the implications this will have for Shannon LNG and other commercial operators. It is opening the door, inadvertently or otherwise, to massive commercial importation of fracked gas. The Minister of State can make all the claims he wants about commitment to

climate action, but importing this highly polluting fossil fuel at this time in our climate struggle and building new fossil fuel infrastructure really calls that commitment in question. I am glad to hear that the Government has not made any new commitments, but what are we going to do in other areas to make up for the inevitable increase in emissions from recent decisions the Government has made, including now the importation of fracked gas? What will we do in other areas to mitigate that?

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** The Government's intention on the installation of a facility like the floating LNG facility that is proposed is that it is being led by the State rather than a commercial entity. It is being done in a controlled manner that will, as I outlined in the earlier answer, allow us to protect a critical supply in the event of anything happening to the two interconnectors or indeed the subsea pipeline which connects the Corrib field. It is a protection system and will not increase the usage of gas. Those of us who believe in the transition away from fossil fuels to cleaner and renewable energy still recognise that gas will be that transition fuel for quite some time, recognising that the wind does not blow all the time and the sun does not shine all the time.

Last Friday, I launched the Government's next wave of offshore wind energy proposals. We are starting the process of developing a designated marine plan around our coastline which will identify sites suitable for fixed-bottom and floating wind generation. That is our direction of travel and we are committed to that. As the Deputy knows, by 2030 we intend to have another 5 GW of electricity in construction and by 2040 an additional 15 GW. We are absolutely committed to renewables but we must accept that we must have protections in the event of anything happening to the supplies of gas that are already there.

**Deputy Ciarán Ahern:** I accept and understand the energy security concerns here. However, the point I am making is that overturning this ban on the importation of fracked gas has opened the door not just to a State-led facility but to commercial exploitation and importation of fracked gas, using the same rules that the State is using to allow it. That is the problem. While the State facility may not be the most damaging way of going about things, it seems the commercial importation of fracked gas will now happen and An Coimisiún Pleanála is adjudicating on that at the moment. That is the huge problem here. Whether it is inadvertent or otherwise, the Government's decision here is potentially opening the door to massive importation of gas and increased gas use at a time when we are trying to avoid that. That is our problem here. There is a backsliding here on our climate commitments. We are asking the Government to stand up for our climate, to find other ways and to have red lines. The Minister of State needs to say to his Department, "We know there are energy security concerns, but find another way with no more fossil fuel infrastructure."

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** In addition to our support for the renewable energy sector, particularly with wind and solar, we are also enhancing our support for biogas. The Deputy will know that the Government has a strategy on that. We will see seven or eight projects in the very near future coming into play for that biogas system through the anaerobic digestion system. We are absolutely committed to eliminating, insofar and as quickly as we possibly can, the dependence on fossil fuels to power our economy, while also recognising that our economy is growing with significant demands. We want to move away from using gas to generate electricity. We want to capture more of the renewable energy off our shoreline and utilise biogas as an appropriate means to further displace the importation of fossil fuels.

*Dáil Éireann*  
**Data Centres**

84. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the measures he is taking to address the concerns raised by senior Government officials regarding the impact of data centres on household bills and housing development; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [49203/25]

**Deputy Pa Daly:** Officials warned that the Government's approach to data centres is posing a threat to housing targets and driving up our energy costs. Does the Government plan to continue to bury its head in the sand or is it going to tackle this head on? I am not sure which Minister of State is going to take this question, but if it is the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, I was listening to him on Radio Kerry last week when he was talking about marine planning. He criticised the Government, saying it needed to move away from navel-gazing and that it had sat on its laurels. Is the Government sitting on its laurels on this issue also, or is it actually going to do something about it?

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** The programme for Government sets out a clear policy direction that balances energy, housing, climate and economic development. It recognises that increased and unprecedented investment in our electricity grid and generation capacity is essential to meet future demand, not just for data centres but for housing, electric vehicles, heat pumps and a growing population. The electricity and gas retail market in Ireland operates under a European regulatory regime. Prices are set by suppliers as entirely commercial and operational matters. However, the CRU has statutory responsibility for consumer protection. It is currently reviewing investment proposals under price review 6, PR6. Under PR6, the CRU has proposed a record €18 billion investment in the grid between 2026 and 2030, with €14.1 billion guaranteed. The Government is underpinning this with €3.5 billion in equity support for EirGrid and ESB Networks. This represents a step change in infrastructure delivery, ensuring our grid can support both economic growth and housing delivery.

While already contracted data centres will be accommodated in the near term, the Government has committed to developing a plan-led approach for future large energy users. This will align with our decarbonisation objectives, supporting Ireland's knowledge-led economy and providing certainty for the sector.

Let me be clear, data centres are a core enabler of our technology-rich innovation economy. Ireland has successfully attracted global leaders in this space. This must be balanced with the needs of communities, housing developments and energy affordability. That is why system operators assess future demands, including housing targets, population growth and climate goals, and the Government is scaling up investment in critical infrastructure to ensure that all customers benefit and that Ireland's energy system remains secure, affordable and fit for purpose.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** The large energy users the Minister of State is talking about are relatively getting off the hook and they are pushing up household bills. In a confidential memo recently released to us under a freedom of information, FOI, request, the Secretary General of the Department of public expenditure warned that soaring electricity demand, largely attributable to data centres, is forcing the State to spend heavily on new power generation and grid upgrades. As the grid is paid for through network charges, this is inevitably leading to surging household bills.

A single data centre can use as much as electricity as the whole city of Kilkenny. The memo

also pointed out that data centres were a risk to energy security, to the extent that there is need to “direct Government intervention in the electricity market to purchase generation capacity on an emergency, non-market basis”. All of this is going to have to be paid by the taxpayer through electricity bills, leading to a disproportionate and unfair burden on households. Not only is this unsustainable, it is also regressive. Price review 6, as the Minister of State mentioned, represents the perfect opportunity to right this wrong, but the draft decision, unfortunately, seems to extend it further. Will the Minister of State commit to doing something about it to alleviate the burden?

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** Let us be clear: households are not subsidising data centres. All users of our electricity grid contribute to its development. The CRU, as the independent regulator, ensures costs are fairly and proportionally allocated. In fact, extra large energy users, including data centres, have seen network costs increase in recent years compared with those for domestic customers. Price review 6 is a great opportunity. Transmission costs for data centres are expected to stabilise and reduce, reflecting the reversal of recent increases linked to security of supply. It is important to have that balance, as I said earlier. Housing is the Government’s number one priority. That is reflected in the national development plan where we have allocated more than €35 billion over the next decade to housing, while also understanding the need for other key infrastructure, such as energy and water infrastructure. That is why the national development plan has been published and is very much focused around programme for Government commitments.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** Why then is the Secretary General of the Department saying what is being said and that housing is being threatened by the larger users of electricity? The current proposal in price review 6 is to increase network charges for households. Presumably, the Minister of State does not disagree with that. At the same time, the proposal is to decrease charges relatively for data centres. This is unjustifiable. The excuse used by a lot of the energy providers, such as Energia, is that their network charges are rising.

Small businesses are complaining that it is the same. Data centres are the ones driving up energy demand and gobbling up all the new capacity on the grid, but they have consistently not been paying their fair share. I agree with the Minister of State that there is a need for data centres but let them pay their fair share. Their bills have been subsidised for years by small and medium enterprises and households as part of the large energy user subvention. We in Sinn Féin believe that the determination of price review 6 in December must reflect these facts and right these historical wrongs.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I thank the Deputy. First, the Secretary General of our Department rightly pointed out that policy choices must be made, and we are making them. Certainly, that is why we are investing in housing, the grid and water infrastructure. These are the three pillars that will support sustainable development in this country. The idea that data centres are being prioritised over homes is not supported by facts. That will not happen under price review 6. We are investing in the grid like never before, not just to connect more homes but to ensure we can distribute the renewable energy we are generating across the country and provide homes, businesses and communities with more green renewable energy. The CRU is independent. This review includes a medium-term outlook in terms of balancing housing and climate targets. It is about how we can ensure houses are delivered and our economic development is not staggered.

*Dáil Éireann*  
**Just Transition**

85. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the amount of funding provided to projects and initiatives in County Laois from the national and European just transition funds, under the various headings, to date in 2025, by recipients; the amount granted to each, and the purposes for which it is to be used; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [49377/25]

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** The issue I am raising with the Ministers of State relates to the distribution of the just transition funding that came from the European Union and the €16 million that came from the State. I have concerns in this regard. It is supposed to be for the former peat harvesting areas. Under EU funding, they are designated as coal regions. The State made the case successfully for funding for the former peat harvesting areas, like the midlands, that are affected. County Laois is one of those areas. I am delighted that there are two Ministers of State in the Chamber to address this because I have questions around it.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** I thank Deputy Stanley. From previous Oireachtas terms, I know he has shown a great interest in this particular area and championed it over that time. In total, more than €29.2 million under the EU just transition fund has been allocated to projects that are fully or partially based in County Laois. Of this, almost €3.6 million has been approved for projects under way solely within County Laois, while more than €25.6 million has been approved for projects across several counties, including County Laois. I will provide the Deputy with the full breakdown of these allocations in tabular form, including details of the recipients, projects and amount of support allocated. That information will be provided to the Deputy in that format afterwards.

The diverse range of projects being supported include Emo Court and Estate development, sustainable tourist accommodation in The Forum in Mountmellick, the development of Canal Road Business Park in Portarlinton and the Poet's Cottage Community Café in Camross. All information on projects under the EU just transition fund is publicly available on the beneficiaries section of the Eastern and Midlands Regional Assembly website, the managing authority for the fund. We will provide the details to the Deputy in tabular form afterwards.

The national just transition fund closed in December 2024 and disseminated no funds over the course of 2025. The Minister keeps the operation of the fund under review, including consideration of future calls.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I have a record of the projects that got funding. My concern is that the worst affected areas did not get funding. It was not targeted at them.

Money was allocated by Laois County Council for tourism, which is good, for example to Emo Court. It is located in the middle of the county. I also welcome funding for The Forum in Mountmellick. It is good news that the Junction 17 business park was allocated €1 million. The Poet's Cottage community cafe in Camross also benefited, as well as the business park in Portarlinton, which was allocated €1 million. That is all good. However, some of the funding went to derelict pubs in areas with no connection to Bord na Móna workers. I am talking about towns like Mountrath, Mountmellick and Borris-in-Ossory. One project was funded in Mountmellick, but no funding has gone into projects in Borris-in-Ossory or the Abbeylax area. Former Bord na Móna workers and families are asking me where the benefit is from the total funding of €185 million. That is the question being asked of me as a public representative and

I do not have a good answer for them.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** I have an extensive list, which I can share with the Deputy. If there is a necessity to meet with some of his constituents about their concerns, I am happy to meet with them. This was a call-led approach, so it was dependent on projects being brought forward to seek funding. It was not as if the Government identified specific locations and sought to create a demand around that. The programme was in place and the calls went out for applications for funding, which were assessed against the criteria during the process. If the Deputy has concerns about specific areas, we will be happy to meet with him and attempt to work through them.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I thank the Minister of State. My concern is that of the total available fund of €185 million, a reply to a previous parliamentary question shows that approximately €93 million has been spent. The reply to the question was received about a month ago. We are about 50% of the way through the funding. The feeling I get from people who have been showing an interest in the fund is that it is being rushed a bit. If we are halfway through spending the money, which is a lot of money, we must be careful about where the remaining €92 million or so is spent. I ask the Minister of State to take an interest in the matter. If need be, we should slow down the process. Perhaps there are deadlines from the EU that have to be met. If that is the case, perhaps the Minister of State would clarify that, but if that is not the case then we should pause the process, take it easy and make sure that the money goes to good projects.

In particular, I want to highlight that, according to the reply to the parliamentary question, only €3.6 million has gone to specific projects in County Laois out of €185 million. That is a very small amount for a county that was badly affected. I refer to towns like Mountrath, Mountmellick and Borris-in-Ossory and the Abbeyleix area where there are a lot of former Bord na Móna workers. I worked with a lot of them. Mountrath was very badly hit.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** In fairness to the Deputy, he has always made those points. I appreciate his interest in this matter. The Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, launched a public consultation on the development of Ireland's social climate plan last Thursday. The plan will set out measures to be financed under the EU Social Climate Fund over the period 2026 to 2032. The EU Social Climate Fund is the first EU fund developed with the explicit purpose of alleviating potential energy and transport poverty occurring from the transition towards clean mobility and decarbonised built environment. There may be some opportunities arising from that fund for the Deputy to focus on. We are trying to ensure that the funds that are available meet the needs of those who were impacted to the greatest extent as a result of moving away from the harvesting of peat in the region. The Deputy has identified some areas. It is in the interests of the Government to work with those communities that are most affected to ensure that the transition is as seamless as possible. That is a big statement, because no matter what was done, there was going to be a significant impact on those communities.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Minister of State.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** I recognise the efforts many communities have made to try to assist. Deputy Stanley should please share with us if there are other viable projects or assistance is required.

*Dáil Éireann*  
**Recycling Policy**

86. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the proportion of plastics collected under the deposit return scheme that are processed overseas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [49283/25]

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** My question is about the deposit return scheme, DRS. What percentage of plastics and cans that are collected via the scheme are processed here and what percentage are processed abroad?

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I thank the Deputy for the question. The deposit return scheme was introduced in February 2024 to encourage higher recycling rates for plastic bottles and cans and to help Ireland meet its EU recycling targets.

Since becoming fully operational in June, 2024, the scheme has delivered strong results. According to Re-turn, the scheme operator, Ireland achieved a 66% collection rate in 2024, which has since increased to 76%, based on rolling averages in early 2025. This puts us firmly on track to meet our EU target of 77% by the end of the year.

Under the single-use plastics directive, producers must use 25% recycled content in PET bottles by 2025, increasing to 30% by 2030. The DRS is critical in supplying the high-quality recyclate that is needed to meet the targets.

While the collection and recycling of containers returned is an operational matter for Re-turn, I can confirm that all material collected is first processed at its contracted facility in Limerick. From there, it is sent to licensed facilities in Ireland, the UK or Europe for final recycling. In 2024, 34% of PET collected was recycled in Ireland, with the remaining 66% exported, primarily to the UK and the EU. This reflects current market capacity and the need for specialised facilities to handle high-grade recyclate. Importantly, one of the long-term benefits of the DRS is the potential to establish Ireland's first bottle-to-bottle recycling plant. This would allow us to retain the economic value of this material, reduce reliance on exports and further strengthen our circular economy.

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** It is very important that this was sold as an environmental measure. It is clear that a significant volume of material is leaving the country. Does the Minister of State have an assessment of the emissions in that regard? What work is he undertaking to ensure we have the capacity and facilities available in this country?

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** The reality is that Ireland currently does not have a facility capable of fully recycling PET bottles into new food-safe drinks containers. Some operators do look at the processing of PET into flakes. That said, the DRS has created a consistent stream of high-quality recyclate. Re-turn is actively exploring the viability of establishing Ireland's first bottle-to-bottle recycling plant. Building a stable supply chain is a direct dividend of the scheme. There is a strong strategic opportunity here also, both economically and environmentally, to ensure that such a plant is established in Ireland.

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** I agree that such a plant should be established but the introduction of the plant should have happened in advance of the scheme. There is a great deal of inconvenience involved. A significant amount of money is going to a private company, which gives rise to a number of questions that I hope we will soon address. It is very important that a bottle-to-bottle recycling plant be set up. Does the Minister of State have a timeline for when the facility

will be made available and be able to process the material in this country?

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** The Deputy should bear in mind that the current technical capacity was not in place previously. The scheme was only introduced in June 2024.

*11 o'clock*

The company had to establish a supply chain to strategically invest in a facility of this type. Thanks to the DRS, we now have a supply chain and market conditions that are favourable and make economic sense to establish a facility like this. We are all in agreement that we need develop it, but this was not a policy failure. The initiation of the scheme has provided huge benefits, and we know that from many litter studies around the country. Indeed, there is a current supply chain where 33% of all PET is recycled in Ireland currently. We have to look at how we can keep the remainder on the island and ensure it goes back into a more circular system bottle to bottle.

## **Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions**

### **Environmental Schemes**

87. **Deputy Catherine Callaghan** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment his plans for an expansion of the funding of the circular economy innovation grant scheme in 2025. [49232/25]

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I am pleased to confirm that the 2025 funding round for the circular economy innovation grant scheme, CEIGS, was launched on 10 September. This scheme is a key driver of Ireland's transition to a circular economy supporting innovative projects led by social enterprises, voluntary and community organisations and small businesses. Since its launch in April 2021, we have awarded €1.8 million to 36 projects while tackling priority areas, such as food waste, plastics, single-use packaging, construction, textiles and general waste.

These projects are delivering real impact from BladeBridge repurposing wind turbines blades into public infrastructure to Happy Earth developing a compostable alternative to medical plastics. From 2025, the scheme will again be administered in partnership with Community Foundation Ireland with €650,000 in total funding available. Individual grants will range from €40,000 to €50,000 enabling a broad range of organisations to scale their ideas and deliver measurable circular outcomes. Projects under this round are expected to focus on plastics, construction circularity, food waste prevention and critical raw material recovery. These are all aligned to Ireland's circular economy strategy and our climate action plan. This scheme is not just about funding; it is also about accelerating innovation, empowering communities and shining a spotlight on many of these scalable solutions so they can be replicated nationwide.

**Deputy Catherine Callaghan:** I thank the Minister of State. I welcome the funding that has been spent in this important area. In the most recent round of funding, small commercial start-ups and SMEs dominated the list of companies that had been awarded funding with only two, The Rediscovery Centre and We Make Good, accurately described as community enter-

prises. While these commercial start-up contributions to the industrial transition to circularity are welcome, and indeed, go a long way to making the changes in mindset that the Minister of State has outlined his answer, there are non-profit social enterprises, such as ones I have visited in County Carlow, the Be Kind Project, supported by Carlow County Development Partnership and the proposed midlands food retribution hub, which is a joint collaboration between Kilkenny LEADER Partnership and the Clean Technology Centre. They are just two local community enterprises in my constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny that could benefit not only from the CEIGS, but could also spread awareness of the circularity principles in their communities. While funding remains at a constant level, it is hard for these types of firms to make their case against commercial start-ups with large economic potential. Is consideration being given to expanding the grants going forward?

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I am in full agreement that we need to continue to scale-up the scheme to sustain the investment by many SMEs and community organisations. That is why at the end of this year we will have allocated over €2.4 million. We need to continue on that trajectory of supporting many of these pioneering projects. I had the opportunity to visit the Irish Manufacturing Research facility in Mullingar to see the work of Circulêire. I have also been to the Rediscovery Centre. Tremendous work is being done, but the question is how we bring that to the next level. That is important because without funding and support, it is difficult. We want to deliver more ambition under this scheme. We look forward to many applicants putting forward their ideas. We have seen over 36 projects being supported last year. I hope we can ensure through a communications campaign that many areas across the country, including the Deputy's constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny, can be supported. I welcome any discussions on any projects brought to my attention.

**Deputy Catherine Callaghan:** That is music to my ears. I am glad to hear that. I wish to follow up on the Minister of State's point. There has been a large degree of support from the local authorities in Carlow and Kilkenny and they have been proactive with circular economy initiatives. For example, Carlow County Council recently completed a survey of businesses in the county to assess attitudes towards the circular economy and to inform future policy with regards to circularity in the county. Kilkenny County Council adopted a waste action plan from 2024 to 2030 showcasing the centrality of waste management and the circular economy initiatives within its area. That showcases a desire to promote the circular economy locally. As the Minister of State outlined, greater funding opportunities for community enterprises will absolutely align with the goals. However, to date, no organisation with a base in Carlow or Kilkenny has received any funding under the terms of the scheme. On their behalf, I commend the Minister of State on his work to date in the most important area and to encourage him to please continue to be as ambitious as he is in this regard to expand CEIGS funding further.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I thank the Deputy for her interest in this area. It needs to be a bottom-up, top-down led approach. We are looking to publish the draft of the circular economy strategy. A key area of focus will be targeted actions. Local authorities can play a huge part within the local government system. However, we need a stronger uptake around innovation in these areas. We will have a public consultation. We will welcome feedback from businesses, SMEs and many of the social enterprise organisations on what they would like to see this scheme comprising of. We are focusing on textiles, construction and packaging as being key principles in this scheme in terms of areas of priority. We have a journey to go on this. I look forward to building more initiatives within the circular economy in many areas across business and local authorities.

## Environmental Schemes

88. **Deputy John Clendennen** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the status of the operation of the home energy upgrade loan scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [48877/25]

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** The home energy upgrade loan scheme, HEULS, was launched in April 2024. It is intended to play a crucial role in helping homeowners invest in their energy upgrades to make their homes warmer, healthier and more comfortable with lower emissions and lower bills. It was developed by my Department in conjunction with the Department of Finance, Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, SBCI, Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, and European Investment Bank.

The scheme is available nationwide and homeowners can borrow from €5,000 to €75,000 on an unsecured basis for a term of up to ten years at significantly lower interest rates than those currently on the market. Rates start from as low as 2.99% depending on the finance provider. PTSB was the first lender to join in April 2024. AIB and Bank of Ireland joined in June 2024. In 2025, the group of participating lenders has been expanded to include Avant Money in partnership with An Post and seven credit unions from the Irish League of Credit Unions. By the end of 2024, 245 loans to a value of €11.9 million were drawn down, and by the end of June 2025 this had risen to 580 loans to a value of €28.5 million.

In line with the programme for Government, in addition to expanding the number of lenders under the scheme, a key focus of the Department across 2025 has been the continued promotion of the scheme to drive uptake. This also includes the progression of a comprehensive marketing and communications campaign to scale up activity in the home energy upgrade loan scheme. While I am aware, and it can be seen from the numbers, that it probably did not drive on as quickly as people expected, now that there are the array of lenders and with that campaign being organised I expect there to be a significant uptake. The 3% interest rate in the current market is a very good rate and one we all have a duty insofar as we can to try to promote within our own spheres of influence.

**Deputy John Clendennen:** I thank the Minister of State and welcome the progress made. I agree with him on the sentiments around interest rates and the take-up. The demand for retrofitting is definitely rising but we need to monitor the correlation of draw-downs versus retrofit. There is a body of work to be done here where there is essentially cash investment in retrofitting. It is welcome but I am not so sure the broader consumer understands the need to invest. We have many debates in this House about the need for energy credits and so on but we would be better served if we invested in this area for the longer term. The only way to bring down energy bills is by investing in renewables and that is the way forward.

In my own county there are situations where central heating by peat fuel is up to 40% compared to a national average of 4%. Whether it is turf fuel or oil boilers the gap between those and heat pumps is significant and there is a body of work to be done to bridge that gap.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** I thank the Deputy for pointing that out. That has been a feature. As we go to the air to water systems the costs are significant but the long-term rewards are real. When homes are brought up to a higher energy rating and appropriately insulated, there is a significant financial reward over time. When that is coupled with the use of solar panels, that reduces consumption in the first instance, thereby reducing bills. At the end of the day, society

is changing a lot in being mindful of our CO2 emissions but until it is made financially feasible and viable people will not be minded to take the next step, which is to invest their own money in protecting the environment more generally. People are willing and better educated about the benefits for the wider aspect of society but I fully agree with the Deputy that we have to make this financially viable and demonstrate there is a financial return through reduced costs over time. Of course, upgrading somebody's home is improving an asset and preserving and protecting it into the future. I thank the Deputy for his interest.

**Deputy John Clendennen:** For anyone to make a decision on a loan, he or she will consider three key, fundamental points. These are the interest rate, affordability and the loan term. That really determines whether it is feasible or viable. There is one particular cohort, which is our elderly, where the term of the loan may not make sense for them. There is a body of work to do on energy poverty and climate action. I would like to see HVO and wood pellets recognised as an intermediate measure. I mentioned the gap between peat fuel and heat pumps and I believe the likes of HVO and wood pellets should be recognised. There is also an immediate, easy fix, with no disruption to elderly people, through solar panels. We should consider a national scheme where there is free insulation, supported by an SEAI grant, with microgeneration actually funding the installers to the stage where it is paid for. The homeowner will get immediate benefit and will get the transfer of ownership once the full payment has been made. That is a measure we need to introduce for our elderly because right now, it is simply neither feasible or viable to invest in retrofitting.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** A scheme has been deployed for those most under threat of energy poverty where the entirety of the cost is recovered. That is clearly for those in low income homes, whether they be elderly or significantly dependent on social supports. The Deputy should not hold me to this but I think 25,000 homes have been upgraded in that particular sphere. That is an area that can be looked at.

This will require further review but any investment in a home to reduce CO2 output, rather than going for the full retrofit, would be beneficial and helpful to the environment so it may be possible to look at some staging measures. I accept there are people for whom a ten-year cycle would be significant and would probably preclude them in terms of their own thinking. I am happy to take those issues on board and see what we can do in the future to devise a diverse range of schemes.

*Question No. 89 taken with Written Answers.*

### **Recycling Policy**

90. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment his views on whether the deposit return scheme has been a success to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [49284/25]

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** Has the DRS been a success? I am not just asking about the environmental aspect but about the financials behind company, the percentage of unclaimed deposits and where that money has gone and the impact will the scheme have on families right across Ireland who may well experience higher bin collection fees as a result of the DRS.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** The deposit return scheme was introduced in February 2024 to help

Ireland to meet ambitious EU recycling targets and to encourage more sustainable consumer behaviour. I am pleased to report the scheme has made a strong start and is delivering on its core objectives. Re-turn, the not-for-profit operator, has seen the registration of 287 producers covering over 11,000 products and the installation of 2,750 reverse vending machines nationwide. These machines are now a familiar and effective part of recycling infrastructure, with financial support provided to small retailers to ensure widespread access.

The scheme is having a very positive environmental impact, according to the Coastwatch annual marine litter survey. The lowest levels of bottle and can litter on Irish shores was recorded in over 25 years in 2024. Similarly, IBAL reported a 50% drop in litter from bottles and cans since the scheme launched.

Beyond the environmental benefits, the DRS has enabled fundraising initiatives. The Return for Children campaign, developed with six major children's charities, has raised over €215,000 to date, which is a powerful example of how circular economy initiatives can deliver social value alongside environmental gains. The DRS is a real and important element of circular economy measures and its early success reflects the strong collaboration between Government, producers, retailers and the community.

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** The deposit return scheme has become another tax but it is not like a normal tax that might be used to pay teachers, nurses and gardaí. This is a tax that is going into a private organisation. Last year, at the end of 2024 the company had more than 100 million deposits from unclaimed bottles and cans. Last year, the company had a cash pile of €90 million after expenses. The CEO's salary is not declared. That is what I am asking the Minister of State. I am not disputing the fact there has been an increase in recycling, which is welcome and positive. However, there are other aspects to this. This is a significant sum running to millions of euro. It is essentially a tax not used for the running of this State and that is what I am asking the Minister of State to address. Will he please deal with the question? Is he satisfied with the level of money and unclaimed items in the company? Where is that money going? How much are the staff and CEO being paid? The people of Ireland have no choice but to pay this tax.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I reassure the House that the unredeemed deposits are a normal and expected feature of deposit return schemes internationally. As of the end of 2024, €320 million had been refunded to consumers with €66 million remaining unclaimed. This is not a failure. It reflects the early phases of the scheme but it also will naturally reduce as we move forward towards our EU targets of 90% redemption. Importantly, these funds do not sit idle. Re-turn itself is a not-for-profit organisation. They are being reinvested into the scheme. If we look at the 23% VAT liability, repaying initial start-up costs, expanding reverse vending machines, infrastructure, funding, educational campaigns and contributing to other contingency measures, the reinvestment is essential as part of the scheme. Will we see a reduction in that year on year. The Department is satisfied. It is under appropriate regulatory and administrative controls and we review it on annual basis.

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** It is over €66 million of unclaimed items in one year. The Minister of State has talked about controls. I have asked him how much the CEO is getting paid and what the salaries in this organisation are. That is the level of control I expect him to declare before us in the Dáil. It is unacceptable that he talks simply about the environmental aspect without addressing the issue the people of Ireland have, which is where the money is going, how much the CEO and senior management in return are getting paid and what the situation is regarding the bin companies. Is it the case that the recycling companies across Ireland will

increase their fees? Will families across the country who are struggling in this cost-of-living crisis see their bin fees rise as a result of this? What is the Minister of State going to do to ensure families are protected?

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** The Deputy rightly asks the questions regarding the unredeemed deposits. I have outlined the reinvestment into the operational costs for setting up the DRS. I have also outlined-----

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** The salaries?

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** -----that will see a reduction in those unredeemed deposits as we move forward with more campaigns and more informative education. We are also looking at expanding the DRS for municipal bulk machines to ensure people can come to municipal areas and to address that.

Regarding the salaries, as I said earlier, Re-turn is a not-for-profit organisation. Individual salaries are not reported to the Department. Re-turn is required to publish its overall remuneration and benefits costs in its annual report and that was published last July. From our perspective, we are in continuous engagement with Re-turn, which operates the scheme, and we want to see continuous improvement in how it is being led.

## **Wind Energy Generation**

91. **Deputy Noel McCarthy** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the proposed timeline for auctions for the delivery of the three other sites identified in the designated maritime area plan, which are not included in the Tonn Nua offshore wind auction; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [49265/25]

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** I thank Deputy McCarthy and note his interest in this important issue. The south coast designated maritime area plan, DMAP, was adopted by the Oireachtas in 2024 and designates four development areas for fixed-bottom offshore wind development. An auction process is due to commence on 22 September for the first of these areas, the so-called Tonn Nua site, with capacity for a 900 MW offshore wind farm. We anticipate that a winner will be announced for this site on 9 December. The Tonn Nua project is expected to be operational by 2034 subject to planning consent, which is the next wave of it.

Specifically then on the Deputy's area of concern, arrangements are being made to bring the remaining three south coast DMAP sites to market, ensuring a consistent pipeline of offshore developments will take place over the coming years. A further pipeline of development sites within the national DMAP will follow from 2028 onwards. However, the precise approach to bringing the remaining three south coast DMAP sites to auction may depend on a range of factors, including grid connection options, availability of engineering and environmental data, and market conditions. These matters are being examined in consultation with the offshore wind industry with a view to bringing the sites to auction from 2026 onwards.

Separately, just last week, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and I announced the publication of the national DMAP proposal and accompanying public participation statement. That national DMAP will ultimately designate renewable energy sites around Ireland's coast that are suitable for offshore wind development, including fixed, floating and floating demonstration locations.

The proposal set out information on the scope of the overall plan, timeframes and the required steps in the development of the DMAP over the next two years, as well as the Government's commitment to extensive and inclusive consultation with the public and stakeholders throughout the process.

**Deputy Noel McCarthy:** I thank the Minister of State for his response. I appreciate the efforts that are being made by his Department to progress the south coast DMAP options. I welcome the fact that the first offshore wind option for Tonn Nua areas is expected to begin shortly, with the contracts to be awarded before the end of the year. This is significant progress since the south coast DMAP was first approved last October but it is important that we continue this progress with the development of the other areas of Lí Ban, Manannán and Danu. The development of offshore wind is vital in ensuring our climate change targets and this project promotes sustainability and the security and reliability of supply. I therefore ask the Minister that the remaining options be progressed as soon as possible.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** I know the Deputy's interest and concern in this from conversations and consultations that I, other Ministers and the Department have had with those who will seek to build out these facilities. The next auction, as I said, will be later this year. We are hopeful there will be a number of bidders. The important thing then for those who do not win is that they see a further opportunity. One will obviously win. There may be three, four or whatever number of others. It is important from our perspective that we can show that there is a pipeline of opportunities for the others to follow quickly. We are very conscious of that. Some work has to be done between the Department and EirGrid to develop options for further connecting the grid to lead on to those three sites within the overall DMAP. It is about giving certainty, first of all, that the Government is absolutely committed to offshore renewables and then showing that there is a pipeline, not just with those additional three but also around our coastline, as we progress towards 2040, by which point we have commitments to generate up to 20 GW of electricity off our shoreline. We are keenly aware of the necessity to do exactly as the Deputy has identified and I thank him for his interest in that area.

**Deputy Noel McCarthy:** Will the Minister of State provide further information on the exact board of the implementation programme body, IPB? I understand that the IPB is set up to oversee the south coast DMAP but what is the exact make-up of the group and how often have they met to date? I believe the IPB is supported in its work by a marine ecosystems group and other working groups, which will develop an implementation plan and recommend the scope of regional land surveys. Has the membership of this group been decided yet, and if so, has an implementation plan been presented?

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** I do not have that information available to me today but I am happy to come back to the Deputy directly with it.

**Deputy Noel McCarthy:** I appreciate that.

## Solar Energy Guidelines

92. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment if he will expand the warmer homes scheme to include solar; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [48994/25]

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** A study by UCC over the last number of years has identified that over 1 million homes in Ireland are suitable for solar and that one quarter of all electricity needed could be produced for those homes. It would have huge saving costs for homes. Unfortunately, though, low-income homes are often locked out of the ability to have solar because their households simply cannot afford it. The costs can run into the thousands. Will the Minister of State expand the warmer homes scheme to include solar and make a statement on the matter?

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I thank Deputy Whitmore. The warmer homes scheme, operated by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, on behalf of the Department, is really important in efforts to tackle energy poverty and improve the energy efficiency of homes for those most in need. It is fully funded through carbon tax receipts and the European Regional Development Fund. Last year saw a record spend of almost €230 million, resulting in 7,743 upgrades being provided to low-income households. This year, we have increased the budget to €280 million, allowing for deeper and more complex retrofits. The average cost of upgrades has risen from €2,600 in 2015 to over €29,000 in 2025, reflecting the scale and ambition of the programme. The scheme follows a fabric-first approach, prioritising installation and ventilation to reduce heat loss before replacing heating systems in line with building regulations and best practice. At present, solar PV is not offered as a standard upgrade under the scheme. However, the SEAI is piloting the installation of renewable technologies, including heat pumps and, in a small number of cases, solar PV where major renovations are taking place. These pilots are helping us assess the suitability of such technologies in the context of energy poverty and long-term value for money. The scope of upgrades under the scheme is kept under ongoing review and my Department continues to work closely with the SEAI to ensure we maximise the impact of every euro spent.

The homes built before 2011 are eligible for part-funded solar PV grants under separate SEAI programmes. We remain committed to ensuring that low-income households benefit from Ireland's renewable energy transition and will continue to explore how best to integrate solar and other technologies into our energy poverty programmes.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** The Minister of State will be aware that in 2022, approximately 30% of households in Ireland were considered to be at risk of energy poverty. We are continuing to see the extraordinary stresses that are being put on homes because of the high cost of living, of which a huge component is energy costs. Over recent days and weeks, companies are again increasing their electricity charges, despite the fact that Ireland has the third highest electricity charges in Europe, which is approximately €350 extra on each home. Companies like Bord Gáis and Energia are increasing those prices further, to the extent that it could impose over €200 onto households. We need to look at having long-term and sustainable ways of making households resilient and particularly those who are at risk of energy poverty. Solar panels are an area that could offer this but they have largely been ignored by the Government for low-income homes because the priority has been on retrofitting.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I absolutely share the Deputy's concerns about the high energy bills. That is why we want to ensure that equity is at the heart of our energy transition. The warmer homes scheme is designed to deliver maximum bill savings per euro spent for those most in need. Many of these homes, it is often said, could be cold, damp and poorly insulated. Basic installation can cut energy costs by up to 30%. It is really important that the warmer homes scheme be continued. It has been a game-changer in energy reductions for many homes. On the other hand, solar PV itself without proper installation has only limited benefits because the

home continues to leak heat. From our perspective, it does not mean solar PV is off the table. We are piloting solar in some cases and it is really important that this informs future decisions and how we move forward with this initiative.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** I know that is the argument that has been put forward over the last number of years but the majority of electricity units in someone's home are used to heat water, so there will not be any leakage from that. That is where a lot of the expenses are. If we can actually heat someone's water, we are going to save them a lot of money on their electricity bills.

In relation to all those companies that are hiking their electricity charges, the Taoiseach said yesterday that there needs to be a focus on them and I absolutely agree. They are hiking their charges and saying it is because of the increase in the grid charges, yet that is not 100% correct. They are hiking the charges way beyond the cost the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, and the ESB are putting onto the extra grid charges. Will the Minister of State relay to the Minister that he needs to bring in those companies? There needs to be a very serious conversation with them to say that they cannot continue to hike prices and put pressure on families. They have done it enough and now it is time to give families a break on this.

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** I can confirm to the House that the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has written to the energy suppliers and is preparing to meet them over the coming weeks in regard to the challenges around costs. This Government is very much focused on responding through the warmer homes scheme. This year, we have increased the level of funding to €280 million to fully fund upgrades for those who are most at risk and we are also looking at deep retrofits for transforming homes, reducing bills and improving health outcomes. This is on top of the measures to address the immediate affordability challenges, whereby we have extended the 9% VAT rate on energy. We have established the national energy affordability task force, which will bring forward measures before the budget. We are very much cognisant of the need to ensure we have a balanced approach to protecting households but also future-proofing them.

## Wind Energy Generation

93. **Deputy Barry Ward** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the total capacity output available under existing wind generation schemes; the projected output if all wind farms currently at various stages of the planning system were to come to fruition; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [49042/25]

**Deputy Barry Ward:** A lot of wind programmes are currently in planning. Will the Minister of State indicate what the capacity would be if all of those planning permissions were to come good and deliver those wind projects? What would be the capacity at that stage?

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** Wind generation is supported mainly through the legacy renewable energy feed-in tariff, REFIT, schemes and the renewable electricity support scheme, RESS, and funded also through public service obligations, PSO. These supports are a critical enabler of the investment needed to underpin a renewables-led energy system.

Over the 2025-26 PSO year, the Commission for Regulation of Utilities reports that over 3.3 GW of wind capacity was supported by the PSO. Of this, more than 2.9 GW was supported under the REFIT and over 0.4 GW under the RESS, with over 1 GW of solar also supported under

the RESS. In addition to that capacity, some wind farms operate without PSO support, selling directly into the market or under private power-purchase agreements. Taking all of them into account, the total installed wind generation capacity has reached over 5 GW. Industry sources indicate that approximately 2.5 GW of onshore wind capacity has secured planning permission but is not yet built and that another approximate 1.5 GW of projects are seeking planning permission or are the subject of judicial review.

The Government remains committed to the development of 5 GW of offshore wind capacity with projects in construction by 2030 and energised as soon as feasible thereafter. Projects from the ORESS-1, accounting for 3 GW, are progressing through the planning process within An Comisiún Pleanála. Separately, the 900 MW Tonn Nua site within the south coast DMAP will go to auction this autumn.

Delivering on this capacity, combined with our 5 GW of existing installed wind capacity, will bring us closer to achieving our national ambition of 9 GW of onshore wind and 5 GW of offshore wind in the very near future.

**Deputy Barry Ward:** That is all welcome news. In my constituency, there are a number of plans relating to offshore wind. We do not really have the land space to be developing much in the way of onshore wind in Dún Laoghaire but there are two particular projects in the Dublin Array and the Codling Wind Park that will deliver a lot, not just in clean energy but also for the facilities onshore and the use of Dún Laoghaire Harbour to help deliver that. In the context of a windy island like Ireland, the importance of building our capacity, particularly in offshore wind, cannot be understated. We have a real opportunity here. Notwithstanding what the Minister of State has said, how can we speed up the process to ensure that even where things are controversial, we deliver offshore wind in a way that will benefit everybody in this country and on this island?

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** The Deputy will be aware that with the passage of the national marine planning legislation back in 2021, where we introduced the approach through the designated marine area plans, the approach to identifying those sites and the approach to engaging with stakeholders in a very open and transparent way, it has worked well. Our first DMAP was launched in this House in October of last year and was not judicially reviewed, which to me was a clear indication that the process and the legislative basis on which it was founded is working. It is about that kind of engagement and planning ahead. The approach we had taken up to this was about leaving it up to developers to identify sites. They were known as the phase 1 projects, such as the two the Deputy referred to. The Government moved from that to a plan-led approach whereby the State will identify the areas that are suitable and will work with communities and stakeholders to try to ensure that there is not that level of objection when it goes to the planning process. This is what we are doing now. We announced last Friday a full national DMAP, to follow on from the one in existence, to ensure a plan-led approach and a consultative approach with stakeholders, whether they be fishermen, other sea users or the communities where the infrastructure will have to be built in the first instance to serve the sites or where a grid will have to be built to bring it ashore. While we were slow getting started, we have an appropriate system in place now that I feel is certainly working but the important thing is to get it moving as quickly as possible.

**Deputy Barry Ward:** The Minister of State put his finger on it with regard to public consultation. Some of these projects can be very controversial and it is really important to bring people with them and show them the benefit of the project not only to us all but also to local

communities.

In the context of the two projects I mentioned to the Minister of State, I know from speaking to people in Dún Laoghaire that there are two major concerns. One is the loss of visual amenity. As you look out across places like Dalkey Island that have remained unchanged nearly since Viking times, there is a loss of visual amenity. I acknowledge that but in weighing the two up, the balance of correctness, if I could put it that way, lies in building the wind farms.

The other concerns people talk about are environmental impacts, particularly on the sea bed, with regard to plankton farms and sites for the growing of important micro-organisms within the sea. My understanding is the experience from Scotland and the North Sea is that these wind farms create small biospheres where, in fact, the biodiversity increases. Can we help communicate to people that while there may be downsides, the upsides grossly outweigh them in all of these projects?

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** The Deputy has raised an important point on the environmental aspect, and the construction of certain structures can have that ability to pull together those microsystems. Part of my role in the Department is about ensuring that we meet our commitments - Deputy Whitmore will be familiar with this - in regard to the marine protected areas, an important feature and commitment that we have given to designate 30% of our seas by 2030. In that context, under the same legislation, we hope to move relatively quickly on that. It will not preclude certain development on certain sites that are to be protected from a marine environmental protection perspective, and can give rise to assisting the growth and development of certain biodiversity that was under threat or has already been lost in a significant way. We are trying to advance the two pieces together, both identifying the areas suitable for development for the generation of electricity and protecting our marine environment in line with our international commitments.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I call on Deputy Malcolm Byrne.

**Deputy Malcolm Byrne:** Will the Minister of State provide an update on the private wires policy?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** That is Question No. 95.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** We have skipped ahead. I will have to get that for the Deputy.

I do not seem to have that.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Question No. 95.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** I will have to get that. Does the Leas-Cheann Comhairle want to go on to the next one and I will come back to that?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We can take Question No. 97 while we are waiting.

*Question No. 96 taken with Written Answers.*

*Dáil Éireann*  
**Nuclear Plants**

97. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment if his Department has assessed the potential role of nuclear energy in Ireland's future energy mix; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [49081/25]

**Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil:** We have seen an increase in electricity demand and rightly we are focusing on renewable energy. However, we have major challenges in meeting our 2030 and 2050 climate targets. Indeed, the climate action plan commits to 80% renewable energy by 2030 and net zero by 2050. Has the Minister of State's Department assessed the potential of nuclear energy in Ireland's future energy mix?

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** There seems to be an issue with my questions here.

**Deputy Malcolm Byrne:** The Minister of State can speak off the cuff.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** I may be required to do that. The Deputy has raised the important issue of----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** It is Question No. 97.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** Yes. Nuclear fission-powered electricity generation plants are prohibited in Ireland. The use of nuclear fission for the generation of electricity in Ireland is statutorily prohibited under section 18(6) of the Electricity Regulation Act 1999. It is also of note that no action on nuclear power was included as part of the programme for Government in 2025, Securing Ireland's Future. The programme for Government does not, however, set out the commitment of this Government to achieving 80% of Ireland's electricity generation from renewable sources by 2030.

Our climate action plans recognise that enabling such a transformation of our energy systems will also require a range of supporting measures. This will involve the development of a balanced portfolio of technologies, including storage, to complement other measures such as demand-side response, network development and interconnection to ensure a safe and secure electricity system with increased levels of renewables.

**Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil:** I appreciate that the Electricity Regulation Act 1999 prohibits nuclear power generation in this country and that the programme for Government focuses on renewable energy. I completely understand that, but the question relates to any type of consideration given to nuclear. We look at the likes of small modular reactors that create between 50 MW and 300 MW of energy. What I am saying here is that it is not a completely clean source of energy but it is a cleaner source of energy than fossil fuels. If we really want to achieve our climate targets, we need to look at all avenues available to the State. In particular, I look at the small modular reactors that can be built a lot more quickly. They are smaller and not as large in scale as some of the larger reactors we are aware of in the UK and the US. These SMRs are being developed in the UK, across Europe - in Poland, for example - and in the US and Canada, so we need to start modelling out what the benefits would be to the State if we were to go down the route of these potential SMRs.

**Deputy Malcolm Byrne:** In support of my colleague Deputy Ó Cearúil, I think we need to explore nuclear as a potential option. We are all very supportive, for instance, of the Celtic interconnector between Ireland and France, where there is the possibility that we will be obtain-

ing some of our energy from France. Last year, up to 68% of all of France's energy was generated by nuclear power. If we acquire energy from Scotland, similarly, some of that is going to be generated by nuclear.

The debate on nuclear has moved on. I totally understand that in the past we had safety concerns but as a cleaner energy source, while I accept there are issues around how we may dispose of some of the waste, it is something that needs to be considered. I back my colleague in that we really do need to have a debate on it.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** I thank both Deputies. I know of their personal interest because both of them, on many occasions, have spoken to me about the necessity to look at that. The Government has taken a decision, and it is a decision that is probably based on historical context, going back to the early seventies when there were proposals at Carnsore to build a nuclear facility and there was a very significant public outcry. I do not think it has ever been revisited since. I take the Deputy's point regarding the newer technologies and small-scale nuclear reactors, which are still somewhat commercially available but there are only a couple of examples, as I understand it, around the world where they are deployed. Other countries have a march on it and are ahead of us on that, and they have built a wealth of experience and knowledge in that area. It is a bit like recognising what you are good at, and we have become good at renewables. We have become good at wind, we are getting really good at solar and we are now starting to embrace, on a wave of investment, offshore. That is where we should focus our attention.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Minister of State.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** If you look at the capacity to generate so much electricity, particularly but not exclusively off our west coast, it far outweighs the issues around nuclear. I am also conscious-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Minister of State.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** -----of how difficult it is, and the Leas-Cheann Comhairle will appreciate this-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** This is buying you time, is it?

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** -----to get permission for a wind turbine. Failing to get permission for a wind turbine and introducing a small-scale nuclear reactor-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** You should conclude, Minister.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** -----might not be that much easier.

**Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil:** I recognise the expertise this State has garnered in offshore and onshore wind energy and indeed solar. I was at the launch of the Timahoe North Solar Farm in Kildare only three weeks ago, an excellent facility that will provide energy to a significant number of people in Kildare and across the country. However, my argument here is that if we look to Belgium, for example, they recently extended the operation of two nuclear reactors. These will supply 15% of national electricity demand and help reduce reliance on gas imports. France approved the construction of six new large reactors in 2022, which are expected to meet 10% of electricity demand. The UK, for example, under its 2022 energy security strategy, plans to build eight large reactors and develop small modular reactors, the SMRs that I mentioned. My argument here is not that we go full throttle into nuclear energy. All I am asking is that we

model out the cost benefits of actually looking at and analysing whether nuclear is even an option and whether it is worth looking at and investigating properly. We need to ensure we have energy security moving forward and look at all options.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** I have outlined the Government position but that is not to suggest that others who have an interest or some ideas on this should not interrogate the information and the ideas and look into the future as to what is available elsewhere. Of course, I am sure there are educational facilities and research projects that could be engaged by those who are like-minded. From the Government's perspective it is now about being really focused on what we need to do to deliver and not becoming distracted from that. Of course, debates will exist elsewhere. On a personal level, I am happy to look at and review any data that emerges there. I have the answer to the question. I was thrown a bit by Deputy Byrne appearing when the question said-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** We will deal with Question No. 95. I call Deputy Byrne.

### **Energy Policy**

95. **Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment to outline his plans for a new policy on private wires. [49010/25]

**Deputy Malcolm Byrne:** This relates to the question of energy demand and how we meet it and the importance of progressing as quickly as possible with the private wires policy and indeed the private wires Bill. I welcome the commitment in July by the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, that he is going to progress on this. However, it is now of the essence that we move quickly. He did say it would be priority legislation. I hope the Minister of State can indicate a timeframe to the House today because we know about the demands for energy and we need to have movement on it as quickly as possible.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** As the Deputy said, Cabinet approved the private wires policy on 15 July, details of which have been published on the Government website. The policy allows for private wires to be developed in four scenarios: to permit private wires linking a single generation asset to a demand site; to facilitate hybrid connections; where possible to facilitate EV charging; and to allow a customer that self-supplies to provide electricity to a separate customer in a contiguous premises. Work on drafting the necessary legislation to support the policy is now ongoing within our Department and the intention is to bring this legislation to Cabinet for approval in the near term.

As I said, the Department is working with the Office of the Attorney General to progress legislative reform to implement the recently published private wires policy. I expect that the general scheme of the private wires Bill will be submitted for Cabinet approval by quarter 4 of this year. I will keep the House updated on that matter.

**Deputy Malcolm Byrne:** The Minister of State knows how urgent this is. I am particularly thinking in terms of industrial demand and whether we can connect solar farms or wind farms into private industry or on the commercial side. In the development of our digital infrastructure, including data centres, it is critical that we move on this. I even suggest this in regard to housing because electricity supply is becoming a problem. A developer in my constituency who is ready to build homes came to me recently and said the only thing holding him up is the

fact that ESB Networks is telling him that there is not sufficient supply in the particular area.

We need to set out ground rules and for the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities to be properly resourced. However, as a piece of legislation for this country's long-term economic development, this is essential. We need to see it enacted before next summer.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** Following Cabinet approval the Department will work closely with the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel to commence drafting on the Bill in the new year before seeking Oireachtas approval. The legislation will be drafted to reflect the guiding principles of the policy statement and clarify the necessary regulations to build private wires in the policies for specified use cases. Plenty of examples have been brought to my attention, some of which are in my own constituency, where there are significant constraints on the capacity of the grid to meet the growing demand from industry, data centres and housing. There is an abundance of sites that are able to bring that electricity to the grid. It will be a useful tool in working our way around the constraints that are currently preventing significant development taking place. It is a priority of the Government. It was identified in the programme for Government as something that needs to be addressed and one on which no time will be lost. I thank the Deputy for his interest.

**Deputy Malcolm Byrne:** It is critical. When we have a number of companies that are ready to build that infrastructure, we need to facilitate them. We do not need them to be held up in the planning process for long periods. We need that private infrastructure to complement the State infrastructure as soon as possible.

**Deputy Timmy Dooley:** I am very conscious of that. When there are entities and corporations that are prepared to invest their own capital in such schemes, it is an appropriate way to progress and grow our economy. We see the same in housing. It is about bringing in private capital to support infrastructure. It allows us to move more quickly and ensures that the State is not left funding all of it. For that reason, the Government is in full agreement with the Deputy that this important legislation needs to progress without delay.

## Energy Conservation

94. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the percentage of grant applications to SEAI that are withdrawn. [49212/25]

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** Will the Minister of State provide an update on the percentage of grant applications to the SEAI schemes that are being withdrawn?

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** The Government is committed to continue delivery of the SEAI's residential and community energy upgrade scheme, which is central to achieving our national retrofit plan targets. This includes delivering more B2 home energy upgrades, revising and improving grants and financial models for homeowners, supporting group retrofits and area-based approach in enhancing energy efficiency to reduce the cost for households. In budget 2025 a record €550 million was allocated across the SEAI's home energy upgrade schemes, which was an increase on 2024 when €421 million supported 53,984 home upgrades. This includes both part-funded schemes and fully-funded upgrades at households at risk of energy poverty.

For homeowners seeking a whole home upgrade to achieve a BER of B2 or better, the na-

tional home energy upgrade scheme is the primary route. This scheme is delivered through the SEAI's registered one-stop-shop model which manages the entire process for the homeowner. In 2025, €51 million was allocated, up from €45 million in 2024. Delivery is strong. Some 1,474 upgrades were completed in 2024 and 1,062 homes had been retrofitted at the end of August 2025. That is a 21% increase on the same period last year.

At the start of the national homes energy upgrade scheme journey, homeowners undertook a home energy assessment which provides a detailed roadmap of the works and costs required for each to receive a rating of B2 or better. This empowers homeowners to make an informed decision on whether to proceed with a full upgrade or to choose individual measures under the SEAI schemes.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** I asked a simple question - what was the percentage of people who withdrew from the SEAI scheme - and I did not get the percentage. People are telling me that they are withdrawing from the scheme or not applying to the scheme because they do not have the money. It turns out that the people who most need the retrofitting and the upgrading works to their house to bring them to at least a B2 standard cannot afford the money that is needed. For example, heat pumps cost anywhere from €8,500 to €20,000 but the maximum grant available from the SEAI scheme is €6,500.

I know a family in Farranree, Fairhill in Cork who could not get the scheme done. They are pensioners. They are not that old but they are retired. They could not get the scheme done in their house because they did not have the additional money to do it, but their neighbours across the road in an identical house could get it because they had the money. What are we doing? Can we get the figures on how many people are withdrawing? What are we doing to get the support to the people who most need it?

*12 o'clock*

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** The SEAI has confirmed that it does not record applications that have been withdrawn. It only records them for homeowners who have agreed to proceed with the works through the one-stop shop. However, the SEAI has reported that over 3,500 homeowner efficiency assessments have been completed in 2025. That is the first step in the process. Approximately 44% of those have converted into grant applications under the SEAI. For homeowners who have received the home energy assessment, there are alternative upgrade pathways. I can provide the Deputy with information on the types of grants available. We have increased the amount of the grants from €3,500 to €6,500, with a €2,000 bonus. We have made significant investment in the scheme.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** The Minister of State urgently needs to instruct the SEAI to collect data on people who withdraw their applications to the scheme. It needs to find out why people withdraw. A survey by AIB showed that 62% of people who wanted to retrofit and upgrade their houses to become more energy efficient could not afford to do so. The figures are showing that the people who need their homes upgraded and retrofitted, those who need support, cannot get it but the people who have the money and, in many cases, do not need the grants can get them. There is something wrong with the system. We need to know the information as to why people are withdrawing from the scheme and not taking it up. We also need to know why people are not applying.

I do not believe that the increases the Minister of State is talking about keep up to date with

the construction inflation of the past three years. People are telling me they cannot afford to upgrade their homes. What are the Minister of State and the Government going to do to support people who need it?

**Deputy Alan Dillon:** There has been strong demand. There were almost 70,000 applications in 2024. There have been over 40,000 so far this year. Through the national retrofit programme, we are seeing further capital funding under the national development plan. We will see an additional €264 million through the European regional development fund. Local authorities will also have an opportunity through their energy efficiency retrofit programme, which will be funded through the Department of housing. In total, a huge amount of work is being done to support this. We are driving forward to try to reach our national targets. That is underpinned by record levels of investment. As I said earlier, demand is very strong. We are increasing the grant amount on a continuous basis.

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

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Tá praghsanna leictreachais le hardú arís agus tá sé seo chun níos mó ná 500,000 teaghlach a bhuaileadh. Is cinneadh uafásach é an cinneadh atá déanta ag Fine Gael agus ag Fianna Fáil na creidmheasa fuinnimh a tharraingt siar sa cháinaisnéis. Tá breis agus 300,000 teaghlach nach bhfuil ábalta a gcuid billí leictreachais a íoc ag an phointe seo agus caithfidh an tacaíocht seo a bheith ar fáil sa cháinaisnéis i mí Dheireadh Fómhair.

Workers and families are being absolutely hammered with soaring prices. While the Government acts as if everything is rosy in the garden, the cost-of-living crisis is out of control. Households are under considerable pressure to get by. They are being hit by rip-off prices at every turn. It is rent, food, insurance, petrol and diesel, student fees and local property tax. The cost of everything is sky high. There is no end to it. People cannot catch a breath at the moment. As if things were not bad enough, the big energy companies come along with another big hike in electricity prices just as we head into the darker months of the year.

Energia is going to jack up its electricity prices by 12%. Bord Gáis will increase its prices by over 13%. Pinergy is putting up its prices by over 9%. As we know, households are already paying some of the highest electricity prices in Europe. More than 500,000 customers are going to be hit by these latest increases in the next couple of weeks. Many are now going to be forced to fork out hundreds of additional euro, which is money they simply do not have. The real kicker is that the Government is choosing to make matters worse. At the very time these companies are fleecing people again, the Government has decided to withdraw energy credits in the budget. It is a terrible decision that the Government needs to reverse.

The job of the Government is to shield households from these hikes. That means ending the rip-off, getting prices under control and supporting workers and families in this budget. The Government is doing the exact opposite. It has sat on its hands and is sitting on its hands. All the while, energy companies are making massive profits.

We know that wholesale prices for electricity have fallen since the start of the year so there is absolutely no justification for these companies to be squeezing and gouging their customers as they are doing. It is bare-faced greed and rampant profiteering. Is it any wonder that as we speak 300,000 households cannot pay their electricity bills? The Government has allowed this energy rip-off to go unabated. It has allowed it to happen for many years. It has done nothing to put manners on the energy companies. Not only has it done nothing but it has pushed back against our proposals to get energy prices under control. We proposed giving the energy regulator powers to hold these companies to account but the Government ignored us. We proposed legislation to monitor and regulate standing charges and hedging practices but the Government ignored us. We proposed restructuring the public service obligation, PSO, levy so that large energy users, such as data centres, pay their fair share rather than placing that burden on domestic customers, households and small businesses, but the Government ignored us. It is up to its neck in this rip-off.

It is scandalous that the Government has now come along to tell people that they are on their own. It has allowed the energy companies free rein and now decides to cancel the energy credits on which hard-pressed households have been dependent. Where is the fairness in that? Is the Government not listening to the people? Across the State, people are just about hanging in there. They cannot take much more. Folks are going to come under huge pressure this winter. They are already under huge pressure but are going to come under more pressure. Prices are going up by double digits and the Government is withdrawing electricity credits. It needs to change course. This will be the final straw for many. The Tánaiste needs to wake up, listen to what people are saying and understand what people are facing in respect of this rip-off. Does he now accept, given the raft of energy companies announcing they will increase their prices the week of the budget, that withdrawing the energy credits is a step too far and a decision he will now reverse?

**The Tánaiste:** May I begin by expressing the shock and sadness that we, as a country, are feeling about the deeply tragic and upsetting scene unfolding in Donabate. As a country, we have been gripped for weeks by the search for this missing little boy. Until today, we did not know his name, but we know it now. His name was Daniel. Until today, we had not seen his face, but now the image of this beautiful little boy is seared into our consciousness. I know there is a Garda investigation ongoing into both the scene and the circumstances. That must be allowed to do its work. However, it is fair to say that this is a moment of significant public distress and concern. The State processes must be thorough and robust in establishing all the facts.

I thank Deputy Doherty for raising what is an important issue. I know the cost of energy is a real concern for families across the country. It is a real concern as the evenings get darker and colder. I assure people at home that this Government is taking action to help them with the cost of energy. It is from Monday next week that fuel season begins. From Monday, 22 September and for the next 28 weeks, fuel allowance payments will be paid to over 400,000 homes across the country. The payment is worth approximately €924 in the fuel season. It can be paid in a weekly amount of €33 or two lump-sum payments of just over €460. As a result of decisions we made in the previous budget, more people than ever before will qualify. The Deputy will remember that in the most recent budget, we took decisions that mean the means test exemption, which had applied to people over the age of 70, will now apply to people from the age of 66. I want people at home to know, particularly the most vulnerable and those in most need of assistance, that the fuel allowance season will kick off on Monday. It can be applied for very easily from *mywelfare.ie* and if you have received the payments in the past, you do not need to

reapply.

I also want people to know that we have already taken some other decisions to try to help people more broadly with the cost of energy. We took the decision when we came back into government to extend the 9% VAT rate for gas and electricity. This is providing a relief for both families and businesses. I am not sure whether it was a measure Deputy Doherty was supportive of or had proposed. It is a costly measure but it is absolutely right to lower the VAT rate on people's bills in the here and now. We did not need to wait for any budget or for the Deputy to stand up on Leaders' Questions and ask us to do it; we took the decision and have implemented it, and that makes a difference to people's bills.

Under the national development plan, only before the summer recess we allocated €3.5 billion to EirGrid because we have got to get better in terms of our energy supply in this country, which has a direct knock-on consequence in terms of cost. Crucially, we have established a cross-government energy-affordability task force. The Deputy is right that the cost of energy in this country is too high. The first item with which the task force was charged was to produce an interim report to consider what measures could be taken to support customers this winter, which measures are to be produced and given to the Minister in advance of budget 2026 so they can help inform decisions we take then.

The Deputy is right that we are moving back to an annual budget process this year, but that is not the same as saying we do not intend to take action to help families with the cost of living. However, we have got to take measures that are sustainable and permanent. We are moving away from one-off measures to permanent, sustainable ones. I have given the Deputy a number of examples of practical decisions we have taken. Yes, we are targeting money at those most in need through the fuel allowance – I am sure the Deputy will welcome its expansion and the fact that it will be available from Monday and for the next 28 weeks – and also, more broadly, the 9% VAT rate, which everybody's bills benefit from. Also, the task force on energy affordability, under the leadership of the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and chaired by him, brings a range of stakeholders, including the ESRI, together to look at proposals. It is due to report to the Minister very shortly. I want people at home to know that we hear them on the cost of energy and know about the cost of living. It is usually right that you wait for the budget before you criticise it.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** The Tánaiste has made it very clear, and this is why we do criticise his decision, that he is withdrawing energy supports in this year's budget. People have been depending or relying on these for the past three years.

Even with these and the other measures, including the fuel allowance, which has been in place for years and whose expansion I welcome, 300,000 households today still cannot pay their electricity bills and nearly 200,000 cannot pay their gas bills. The Government has decided, despite the fact that four companies have come out and said they are increasing their prices by double-digit figures on the week of the budget or slightly before it, to say energy credits are not going to make their way into the budget this year. This is the wrong decision.

I am sure the Tánaiste has been listening to the same people who talk to me – people who are pushed to the pin of their collar and know they are being ripped off. They know the big energy companies are ripping them off but the Government has done nothing about it. It has pushed back against the proposals we made to bring the prices under control. It is the same with insurance, rent and food. It is all talk and no action. The one action the Government can carry out

that will support people in the here and now is making sure energy credits play a central part in a cost-of-living package in the budget. We are very clear the measure should be in the form of €450 that will support people right here, right now, because the Government has failed to bring the companies under control regarding the prices they are charging. They are absolutely gouging people at this point in time.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** Hear, hear.

**The Tánaiste:** I do not want to be too argumentative the first week back but the Sinn Féin proposal to help people with their energy bills was to subsidise these massive energy companies. Its proposal was to give our taxpayers' money to the energy companies. That was bonkers, in fairness, but I believe Sinn Féin reflected on it and changed its policy. Sinn Féin was not a big fan of the energy credits and I do not believe it committed to them even in its manifesto. It is now jumping on every bandwagon going.

We are going to take action. Energy costs are real, and I do not disagree with the Deputy that the cost of energy in Ireland is too high and a real cause of worry for people. I am telling him and, more important, the people of this country today what we are doing to help those in need. The fuel allowance season will be kicking off on Monday for more people than ever before. That will make a real difference to the Deputy's constituents and mine, with more benefiting in his county and mine than ever before. I am also telling him about other practical measures we have taken in the here and now, including reducing the rate of VAT on people's energy bills. That was a practical measure. It was a costly measure but the right thing to do.

I do agree, however, on this: there is a structural issue in relation to our energy market that we need to get on top of. That is why one of the first steps the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, took was to establish the task force on energy affordability. The first thing it was asked to do was look specifically at measures that can be taken for this winter and measures that can inform the Government in advance of the budget. I expect the Minister to receive the report very shortly.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** Like the Tánaiste, I acknowledge the very sad news emerging from Donabate. We all think of the little boy concerned, Daniel Aruebose. Our councillor Corina Johnston expressed this morning on the radio the great sadness and distress of the community of Donabate at the sad find.

The genocide taking place in Gaza reached intolerable levels of cruelty and carnage over the summer. More than 65,000 people have been killed and a famine has been declared. The famine review committee says 100% of the population in Gaza is now experiencing a high level of acute food insecurity. Children are dying of starvation, being orphaned and shot in the head in the streets. There are literally no words to describe the destruction of human life and infrastructure we are witnessing daily. Words fail us all when we learn of the atrocities being committed by Israel.

The findings of the UN commission of inquiry this week should be a turning point for the world. Its conclusion, that genocide is being committed in Gaza, should change things, but the advisory opinion of the ICJ last year should have changed things too, as should the constant stream of deeply horrifying reports from UNRWA, UNICEF and individual medics and journalists working in Gaza. Instead, what we have seen are indifference and indeed encouragement by the likes of Germany and the US, which have egged on Netanyahu and his brutal regime. By arming Israel, those countries are being complicit in the committing of genocide. Israel must

be isolated by the international community in every global forum – culturally, in sport, in academia, and through trade in goods and services. We all agree no country is too small to make an impact. Ireland is making an impact. We have acknowledged that the Irish Government has been to the fore among European countries but we can do better. We can do more and no delay can be justified.

On Monday, I joined organisations, including the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, Oxfam and Christian Aid, at the gates of Leinster House with Senator Frances Black. We are calling for the urgent implementation of the occupied territories Bill in full because new research reveals the extent to which EU trade in both goods and services with illegal Israeli settlements is directly contributing to serious breaches of international law in Palestine. Companies implicated include eDreams, TUI travel, BNP Paribas, HSBC and Barclays.

At home, an investigation by *The Guardian* in August revealed that Palestinian phone calls are being illegally recorded by the Israeli military. These audio files are being stored on Microsoft servers here in Ireland, in Irish data centres. One whistleblower from Microsoft told *The Guardian*: “Suddenly the entire public [in Palestine] was our enemy.” The scale of the illegal interception is extraordinary. We cannot stand by while Netanyahu’s brutal project is being facilitated by Irish-based infrastructure. We cannot put an FDI-shaped price on human rights.

I welcome the new approach by the European Commission this week and the proposed suspension of the Israel–EU agreement but we cannot leave our response in the hands of obstructive states like Hungary. I realise the Government has taken issue with them but we need to set an example here. Will the Tánaiste legislate to ban the trade with occupied territories in goods and services this autumn? Will he take on board the Bill Duncan Smith has proposed for Labour to protect workers who refuse to handle goods coming from the illegal Israeli settlements?

**The Tánaiste:** I thank Deputy Bacik. I do not know her councillor, Corina Johnston, but I heard her on “Morning Ireland” this morning. I thought she spoke for so many people and for her community on the very tragic situation. I thank her for that.

I thank the Deputy and her party for their constructive engagement. Of course, we will give consideration to Deputy Smith’s Bill. From an Irish perspective, literally around now 15 young Palestinians have been safely evacuated from Gaza. Fourteen of them are students who will be coming to study in Ireland. One is coming here on a critical-skills Visa. They are safely in Jordan, where they will be medically screened. Obviously, they are coming from a famine zone and war zone, a place where genocide is happening. They are due to arrive in Ireland tomorrow. I thank everybody who has worked so hard on this. As the Deputy can imagine, it is very complex to get people evacuated from Gaza.

The Deputy is right that we in this House, or indeed Ireland, did not need anybody else to tell us a genocide was happening in Gaza. Ireland was one of the first countries in Europe, if not the first, to call it what it is. The UN independent inquiry has now found the same thing. We have also seen statements of fact around a man-made famine in Gaza. These views are no longer just Ireland’s, mine or Deputy Bacik’s; these are views that are factually based and evidence based and that the world cannot ignore. The European Commission decision yesterday is hugely significant. As the Deputy knows from her engagements at European level, and as I know from mine, Ireland’s voice has been in the minority for quite a long time. To have had the European Commission ratify proposals yesterday that are very far-reaching and quite appropriate – and very delayed, by the way – represents a not-insignificant moment; it is actu-

ally a very important moment. In practice, this would have a very significant impact on Israel economically and, I believe, has the potential to change Netanyahu's calculus in relation to the continuance of the genocide in Gaza. My priority in the here and now has to be, and the Deputy would expect it to be, to try to see if we can get a majority of member states to vote for these sanctions and to do so very quickly.

The next meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council, outside a UN meeting next week, is not due for approximately six weeks. It is the same with the European Council. A genocide is going on. We cannot wait a further six weeks, after all the inaction to date. I am leading a diplomatic effort to try to get a number of member states to seek an urgent meeting so that member states can vote. There is nowhere to hide here. You are either in favour or against these measures to try to help end a genocide. I hope that can happen.

At a domestic level, I spoke to Senator Black briefly the other day. I am due to meet her on my return from the UN High-level Week, which is taking place next week. We are still committed to legislating. Party leaders will shortly meet the Attorney General on how best to do that. I am happy to brief the Opposition as well. However, I have to be honest with the House and the people of Ireland about passing our own legislation. Again, I do not dismiss that and I committed to doing it, but if we want to make an impact here, acting at an EU level has always been the best way to do it because, while the political power may seem to be whatever goes on between President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu, the economic ability that Europe has in relation to Israel and making it change its course is highly significant.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** I thank the Tánaiste for that comprehensive response. I would welcome a briefing on the occupied territories Bill - anything to move things on there. I absolutely agree with him on the need for transnational and international action, but we can and should also act unilaterally because we have a strong voice of moral authority. There are like-minded states. I know this from my engagement at EU level. Spain and Belgium are with us on this. We can and should do more on the occupied territories Bill.

It is similar on the evacuees from Palestine. I welcome that and the Tánaiste's announcement that 15 will arrive tomorrow. There were due to be 30. I have been working with him and the Minister for justice to try to ensure we see family reunification for those who have already come here from Gaza on the medevac programme. Some of them are living in my constituency and are desperately distressed as they watch their family members under daily bombardment from Israel in Gaza. We are doing all we can to try to get them out. I would welcome more effort from the Government on getting family members out to join the people already here.

I welcome the Tánaiste's push for an urgent meeting at EU level. Will he also push at UN level? The Government supported a Labour Party motion in May looking for Ireland to push this at UN level, through the General Assembly of the United Nations, to take action towards us securing a lasting ceasefire in Gaza. Will he push on that too?

**The Tánaiste:** Yes, we can and will take action at national level. There is a political consensus on that. We all gave commitments during the election. I am happy to do that, but the Deputy will also remember the previous Government's position was always whether we could get to a point where Europe might act. That looked very remote when this genocide started. It now looks like a distinct prospect. We have got to try to see this through. One way or the other, in a democratic Europe, we have every right to be able to vote for these proposals and to show we are voting to take this action against Israel to try to stop what Netanyahu is doing.

That needs to happen and to happen quickly. The Deputy is right that we are not alone. There is a growing coalition, including Slovenia, Spain and Belgium, as she said, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. France has played a very constructive role. We may see our near neighbours in the UK take their own decision on recognition in the coming days, which would be a welcome step forward.

We remain committed to evacuations. The Minister for Health is doing very good work on this from a medical point of view. We are doing good work in terms of those looking to come here to study as well. We all know there is complexity around this, but anyone we can help in that context we are helping.

At a UN level, the Taoiseach, the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, and I will be in New York for UN High-level Week next week. This issue will be a major priority, as you would imagine.

**Deputy Cian O’Callaghan:** On behalf of the Social Democrats, I express our absolute revulsion at the threats made against the Tánaiste and his family. They have absolutely no place and are strongly condemned by us all. I want him to know that we will work with him to do everything we can to ensure these kind of threats against our democracy are not in any way tolerated.

I extend our deepest condolences to all those who knew, loved and cared for Daniel Aruebose. Yesterday, after a long search, the remains of Daniel were found in Donabate. Daniel had been missing for four years before the State noticed he was gone. He was much more than the tragic circumstances of his death and disappearance. I thank *TheJournal.ie* for publishing a very moving interview with his foster sister telling us more about him. She said:

He was the sweetest little baby ever, we were all absolutely beside ourselves ... He was so cute ...

He was so clever. I obviously might be a little biased, but he already had a strong personality, he loved dancing, he loved laughing, and he loved showing off that he understood you. Like we’d go ‘where’s the light?’ and he’d know from only a few months old, he’d point up at the light. He was just a very clever baby.

His foster sister said the picture released does not reflect the happy child she knew who brightened every room he entered. She wants people to know that Daniel was special and loved.

I will not get into the investigation into this tragedy. We do not yet know what happened, but we do know that something went very seriously wrong. A bright and bubbly child died and disappeared and no one noticed. Sadly, this is not the only time this has happened. Kyran Durnin disappeared in 2022 and is presumed dead. Nobody noticed he was missing until late last year. It is horrifying that children can simply disappear in this country.

Tusla is conducting a rapid review of its interactions with Daniel’s family and has referred the case to a national review panel, but that is not good enough. An independent statutory review should be triggered in every case of a child known to Tusla who disappears. This is the bare minimum these children deserve. This is not to apportion blame. It is to find out what went wrong, to make sure it never happens again and to prevent more children disappearing and dying.

Daniel was failed in life. Let us not fail him in death. Will the Government establish a statutory review into this tragedy? What is being done to support the community in Donabate who are grieving and in shock, as is the entire country?

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy for his kindness and solidarity. I very much appreciated the very kind letter I received, on behalf of his parliamentary party, from Deputy Jen Cummins. I look forward to all of us working on a cross-party basis, as suggested by the Ceann Comhairle, on safety in public life. I thank the Deputy very much for that.

The Deputy is entirely correct in the way he summed up the most horrific and tragic situation in relation to Daniel. He is right that we do not yet know what went wrong but that something went seriously wrong, captures exactly the situation we find ourselves in. I pay tribute to the gardaí and all those involved in the search for little Daniel. None of us can really imagine or comprehend how traumatic an experience that must be for all of those on the front line. We think of them and their families, and the trauma they must be enduring today as well, of course, as the incredible trauma being endured by everybody who knew Daniel. On the Deputy's comments about the sad photo not doing Daniel justice, I heard a lot of commentary about that this morning on the radio. I saw a happy photo released to RTÉ with his arms outstretched playing with his toys, with a beautiful smile, that I presume captured the essence of a beautiful young boy. Our hearts break for them now.

The Deputy asked a fair question. My honest to God answer is I do not think we can rule anything out at this stage. The responsible thing for us to do is to try to establish the facts, but we cannot rule anything out. What is the situation as of now? There is obviously the Garda investigation, which the Deputy and I rightly did not comment on. Tusla is conducting the rapid review process of its own engagement with Daniel's family and the Minister for children has asked that the national review panel prioritises the review of this case. Once the Tusla rapid review is completed, which I understand will be within days, that will then be forwarded to the national review panel. It will examine any engagement Daniel and his parents had with health, social, education or any other State services. The national review panel has an independent chair, along with its own independent legal advisers. It makes findings of fact and produces reports that are objective and independent of Tusla, but I do not rule anything out at this stage. This is a deeply distressing situation that is somewhat evolving in terms of what we are learning in real time.

In addition and separately to that, there will be an independently chaired well-being review of all child welfare cases that were closed during the Covid-19 pandemic and where there has been no further contact with the child since. This number stands at 42,000, when all periods of school closure during Covid are taken into account, which takes in the early part of 2022 as well as 2020 and 2021. There are also a number of commitments to change our legislation in relation to the Child Care Act, which would provide further protections in respect of child protection and welfare services in the State and strengthen the child protection legal framework, increase the powers of Tusla and ensure greater co-operation.

In direct answer to the Deputy's question, we keep an open mind on exactly what he asked. We have got to see where the facts bring us in the coming days.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** I thank the Tánaiste for his response. I join with him in his comments on the gardaí and front-line workers and the excellent work they have been doing. The Irish Association of Social Workers has called for a full statutory review. The Ombudsman

for Children, Dr. Niall Muldoon has expressed extreme concern over the State's response. Dr. Muldoon asked: "How could a child have been born, dealt with all the relevant agencies and services, and then apparently, just disappear?" He went on to say: "The National Review Panel was never established on a statutory basis and this fundamental flaw has greatly impacted its ability to undertake its work effectively." He is not the only one to criticise the national review panel. Since 2018, both Tusla and the Department of Children, Disability and Equality have said that it is not fit for purpose. The national review panel has no statutory power, no powers to access information and no independent authority to publish reports so it has long gone past needing to have reviews on a statutory basis with proper powers when a child goes missing. We have known this since 2018. The Ombudsman for Children has said it, the Department has said it and Tusla has said it so will the Tánaiste commit to what we have all known since 2018 which is there needs to be statutory reviews when this happens and children known to Tusla go missing?

**The Tánaiste:** The short answer is "Yes". There is a commitment in the programme for Government to do that and it needs to happen as quickly as possible. I heard the chair of the national review panel in recent days. She was very robust in her explanation of the work it does and her confidence that this work could be done in a manner that would be expeditious and thorough. It has independent legal advisers but the point about putting it on a statutory footing is entirely accepted by Government. It is a valid point. It would be extraordinarily foolish at this stage for the Government to rule out any action that may be required. This case shook our country to the core. What has happened is deeply distressing and it is even more distressing when we see the name and the face of the little boy Daniel. We are seeking to establish the facts. A Garda investigation is under way and Tusla will complete a rapid review in the coming days that will then be referred to the national review panel. The Minister for Children, Disability and Equality will then advise Government of any further steps or actions she believes are required.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** My question concerns the health implications of wind farms. My journey regarding the health implications of wind farms started in Coolcappa over two years ago. Recently we had meetings in Bruff, Dromin, Athlacca and Bruree about wind turbines and how local authorities have no input into wind turbines. They are now considered to be strategic infrastructure, which means they go straight to An Bord Pleanála.

There is an influx of applications for wind farms across the country. Wind energy guidelines were produced in 2006. In June 2013, Deputy Micheál Martin stood in front of Enda Kenny here and told him that the health implications of wind turbines are real. The guidelines were upgraded in 2019 but we are awaiting the guidelines around wind turbines. We are talking about health. Do the Members in this Chamber know that if a wind turbine goes into their area, and I have nothing against the landowners who are putting up wind turbines because they are entitled to do so and I ask people not to go after them, the contract states that they can place them wherever they like within their farms? This could be within 2 or 3 metres of someone's house where there is shadow flicker. They can also be placed near a school. The World Health Organization, WHO, said it should be 1 metre for every 10 but in Ireland, it is 1 metre for every 4. If an application for a wind turbine is successful and if someone wants to build a house within 3 km of a wind turbine, the wind turbine owners can object. What are their objections? They are that these wind turbines may cause shadow flicker. This is what they are telling people will happen within a 5 km radius and are using this to object to houses. A person building a house also has sign up to not objecting to anything on environmental grounds for ten years of the contract. On one hand, the developers are telling people that there will be shadow flicker if they build a

house but on the other hand, they are telling them there is no shadow flicker if they build them close to their houses. When will the guidelines eventually be published? The Tánaiste has met the people so now I need to know.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy for raising this issue on behalf of his constituents. It is an issue he raises regularly. I think the Deputy and I agree on this but it is certainly my position and that of the Government that wind energy is a good thing. Renewable energy is a good thing. The health consequences of not having good clean renewable energy far outweigh other issues in terms of health implications. Let us think of all the health implications of the climate emergency and the burning of fuels that pollute our atmosphere, including the lung and respiratory conditions and the impact of them in all our communities over many years and the good work of predecessors such as Mary Harney on smokeless fuel.

The point the Deputy makes frequently and well is about the need for planning guidelines for communities, local authorities and planning authorities to help them understand the rules under which planning can be granted. I met some of the Deputy's constituents on this matter during the term of the previous Government. The review of the guidelines has been ongoing for a very long time. I fully accept that point. The review has ongoing for several years. I spoke with the Minister of State with responsibility for planning, Deputy Cummins, today and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage previously and was informed that significant progress has been made towards concluding the review. The review is looking at all aspects such as setback distance, noise, shadow flicker, community obligation and community dividend, which is always important, and grid connection. The noise aspect of this review has been highly technical and took considerably longer than was perhaps originally expected but I understand that this is now substantially complete so there is a real effort by the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, and his officials to get this right and I thank him for his work on this. In addition to the noise aspect of the guidelines that added to the length, the evolving policy and technical context, including our new Planning and Development Act, which we passed last year, and the first revision of the national planning framework, which was approved by the Oireachtas at the end of April 2025, reinforced the need to get the finalised guidelines right and make sure they are fit for purpose and fit for that context as well.

We are trying to strike a balance between the planning views of local communities and the impact on their areas and the need for renewable and sustainable forms of energy. There is a specific commitment in the programme for Government to prioritise the publication of these guidelines. I know the Minister of State is prioritising this work. A strategic environmental assessment has been carried out and a public consultation on the draft updated guidelines will take place. This will provide the Deputy, his constituents and his party with an opportunity to submit observations on that draft. I will keep the Deputy informed.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** In the interim, there is an influx of wind turbines. In Europe, Eamon Ryan signed up to 16,000 wind turbines going inland. D maps were delayed for five years so we could not look at offshore and they are talking about renewable energy. We are talking about health implications. Do Members know that when wind turbines are turned off, the wind energy company gets more money than through funds from Government than it receives when the turbines are turned on per the contracts they have? When the turbines are off, the company earns more money. They are now applying for wind turbines in low wind areas and increasing the height of the wind turbines to try to make the statistics work. I met Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael councillors in Bruree recently and they asked us to nail our colours to the mast. They said they agreed with me that this needs to happen because of the health implica-

tions. They also mentioned that Deputy Niall Collins had nailed his colours to the mast and said he agreed with them as well. I need to know whether Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael agree with the WHO regarding the health implications of wind turbines and whether they will take full responsibility when the WHO has said that they have health implications? Will they take personal responsibility? They are doing it knowingly and in legal terms, if they are doing something knowingly, they are personally responsible? Can Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael nail their colours to the mast regarding the health implications of wind turbines that are in proximity to houses, schools and other necessities and say that they are okay with it? Delaying the guidelines for 19 or 20 years is not helping when it comes to the health implications. We are talking about health.

**The Tánaiste:** I am quite sure my Fine Gael councillors agree with me on wanting to get this right and this being about a balance in terms of planning. I am sitting beside the Minister for Health and I make the point more broadly that the health impact of climate change and the climate emergency is very real. We all know in our communities, and I think we agree on this across the House, that the health implications of people breathing in dirty air have been very real in the form of cancers and respiratory disease, so the move to renewables is a really good thing. The commitment we have is to get to 80% of our electricity from renewable sources by 2030.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** 63% are owned by China.

**The Tánaiste:** But the ownership is not-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** We are not getting it.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Address your remarks-----

**The Tánaiste:** I do not want to be argumentative because it is an important issue to the Deputy's constituents but-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** So it is not our energy.

**The Tánaiste:** -----the ownership issue is a different issue. I am talking about how we are going to power the country and how we are going to have clean air-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** Offshore.

**The Tánaiste:** Offshore is a very important part and my constituency will see a significant amount of that, but this is about getting the planning guidelines right. There are lots of different views about health and climate as well-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** With all due respect it has been 20 years, Tánaiste.

**The Tánaiste:** I must look at those points the Deputy makes. What I am saying to him, and more importantly to his constituents, as well as people I meet across the country looking for guidelines on this, is the publication of new revised guidelines is a priority for the Government-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** When?

**The Tánaiste:** -----and we will have an opportunity to have consultation on those guidelines-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** When?

**The Tánaiste:** -----so communities can directly have their say in the coming months. The Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, is leading on that for us.

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

**Deputy Noel McCarthy:** I appreciate that this issue has very much been in the media over the past month, but I wish to raise the very serious matter of the recent pollution incident on the River Blackwater. It passes through the town of Fermoy, which I live in and represent. As the Tánaiste will be aware, the Blackwater is one of the largest rivers in Ireland. It covers a major part of County Cork and five mountain ranges.

The River Blackwater is a designated special area of conservation under the EU habitats directive and for such a recognised and protected area, its pollution in mid-August has caused devastation to roughly 40 km of river. The pollution of the river has resulted in huge losses of fish stocks with estimates of over 50,000 fish killed. Some are estimating it could result in the loss of up to four generations of salmon. I understand there are also fears among those who fish the river this event may cause the end of a self-sustaining population of salmon in the river, particularly if urgent remedial action is not taken. In addition, the knock-on effects for local businesses and anglers have been severe and I have met local tackle shop owners and proprietors of bed and breakfasts along the river who fear for their livelihoods due to the tarnishing of the excellent reputation of the river both at home and abroad. These business owners and longtime anglers have raised serious, legitimate concerns at the lack of information since the event.

I acknowledge a committee has been formed with a membership including Inland Fisheries Ireland and Cork County Council. I understand it has met twice to date, with the Minister of State with responsibility for fisheries, Deputy Dooley, chairing one of the meetings. However, here we are over a month later and details remain to be given. While it is quite obvious to all that this incident is not a natural disaster, we are still none the wiser about the exact cause of the pollution and the full extent of the river affected. We also have no further information whatsoever about the environmental irritant used or the number of fish killed. Given the urgency of this situation, which in my eyes should be addressed as one of the worst pollution events in the history of the State, I ask the Tánaiste to intervene to see the investigation is progressed and the exact facts and figures are brought to light as soon as possible. Establishing the root cause of this event is key to ensuring similar incidents of this nature do not occur in future.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank my colleague Deputy McCarthy for raising this very important matter. It is one that is of huge importance to him and his constituents in Cork East. We have heard about it across the country due to its significance and the concern it has caused to people for the reasons he has outlined.

I am glad to tell him a thorough investigation has been carried out over the past month into the fish kill incident on the Blackwater by an interagency group. As he said, it was established under the direction of the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, who I thank for his work on this. This group is being co-ordinated by Inland Fisheries Ireland and includes the Environmental Protection Agency, the Marine Institute, Cork County Council, the local authorities water

programme, Uisce Éireann, the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Health Service Executive. That gives an indication of the seriousness we are rightly attaching to this. Agencies have used all available resources to examine and monitor the catchment area. Extensive investigations have been carried out and all potential pollution sources in the area have been examined. The investigation included water and fish sampling, laboratory testing, site inspections, electrofishing surveys and habitat inspections.

Despite this very comprehensive sampling, testing and lab work carried out by the agencies, a definitive cause still has not been identified. Technical teams have concluded that as indicated by the results of the pathology testing carried out by the Marine Institute, the most likely cause of the fish mortality was exposure to some form of environmental insult or waterborne irritant, but no definite compound has yet been identified in any of the test results. Results from the comprehensive sampling, testing and monitoring carried out by the various agencies confirm no water quality issues have been detected, which is important for the local community, and the river remains safe for use, including for angling. Monitoring results from the Mallow treatment plant to date have also shown the water is safe to drink and I want to people with that information and to let them know the river will continue to be monitored closely. All agencies will continue to carry out routine surveys and inspections to identify potential risks both in the Blackwater catchment but also more widely across other watercourses. A comprehensive inter-agency report on the investigation will now be prepared. This will review the actions taken by all agencies involved and will include full and comprehensive findings from all investigations. I expect it will also make recommendations on further actions that can be taken in relation to prevention, compliance and incident response actions by the agencies as well.

This is a peculiar one in one sense because there has been so much work, so much sampling and no definitive answers, but I hope the assurances people have been able to give about water quality and the like go some way to assist the local community and, more importantly, that the river and the catchment will continue to be very closely monitored as well.

**Deputy Noel McCarthy:** I thank the Tánaiste for his response. I appreciate efforts are being made to establish the exact details of this incident. However, I ask that all Government agencies and stakeholders he referred to work to the very best of their ability to ensure a full investigation is conducted. Appropriate action to remediate the current issues and measures to prevent further instances of pollution from occurring must be put in place. I also ask that a full review of the effects of the pollution on the wildlife and habitat on the river be undertaken. The pollution incident in August has caused untold damage from both environmental and economic perspectives to one of the most beautiful river basins in the country. We as public representatives must therefore ensure full details of this incident are made public. I also acknowledge the matter is to be discussed by the Oireachtas joint environment committee at the end of the month and I really appreciate that.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy for raising the matter because it provides an opportunity to put some of the information on the public record, which is important. His broader point is also important, that is, we need at the right moment when these reports are completed the publication of the information as well as the scrutiny of it at the environment committee. I am sure Cork County Council and councillors in the area will want to do likewise because this has caused significant concern and we do and must take all pollution events seriously. As the Deputy rightly said, this is at the upper end of that. It has also had a very significant impact on the stocks in the river and while I hear different figures and number, potentially tens of thousands of fish have died, based on visual observations, data provided by local stakeholders and

scientific estimates. I am assured though that there are some healthy stocks present and therefore we expect that while it will take time for stocks to recover, they will and the river remains open for fishing as well. Full details will go into the public domain. We will continue to keep a very close eye on this and I look forward to the Oireachtas environment committee scrutinising it as well.

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

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** To add to the sentiments expressed earlier, there is no doubt serious sadness, shock and disbelief at the discovery of the remains in Donabate yesterday of the young boy, Daniel Aruebose. I think we all send our deepest condolences to everybody who loved Daniel. The community is grieving and everybody right across the island is horrified at what happened, and heartbroken. It is a very sensitive matter, as the Tánaiste mentioned, but we cannot ignore the issues it raises in the form of serious questions about child protection, Tusla and the Minister. We still do not have an independent chair to oversee the checks of children involved in Tusla cases that were closed during the pandemic. That has to be done urgently. These 42,000 case reviews need to be done without any more delay. However, it simply does not go far enough and our spokesperson, Claire Kerrane, has been calling for this for quite a period of time now. She has asked that these checks should be a normal part of its work. We should not have a situation where in the space of a year, two children who had been in touch with Tusla have been missing, presumed dead, and gone for years. Beyond the 42,000 case reviews, which just relate to cases closed during the pandemic, does the Tánaiste now accept that as a matter of course there has to be a lookback and check for those children who have been in contact with Tusla? What action will the Government take to make sure that this never happens again?

**The Tánaiste:** Those are all very fair questions. My understanding is that the independent chair for the lookback on the cases that were closed during the Covid pandemic is due to be appointed very shortly. We will certainly keep everybody across the House updated on that. The Deputy is right that this case raises very significant issues. In the first case we need to try to establish as many facts as we possibly can. We then need to work collaboratively across this House to make sure that our legislative basis is right. There will be a couple of opportunities to do this: the commitment in relation to the Child Care Act to increase the powers of Tusla and provide for interagency co-operation; and also the commitment to put the national review panel on a statutory footing.

I do not want to overcommit until the facts are established. The point the Deputy made about the need for those checks to just become somewhat automatic is not unfair. We live in a world and a country that are much more transient. While I am not talking about this specific case, I am not sure we could just take the word of somebody that someone was just in one school and presume that they moved to another. How we close those loops is a legitimate policy question and we would be happy to work constructively with the Deputy on it.

**Deputy Ivana Bacik:** I again express my solidarity with the Tánaiste and his family in the face of the horrible threats made against him, which I have condemned. Indeed, they are profoundly anti-democratic. We know that the online space plays a huge role in fomenting this sort of hate. In that context we should all be concerned to see the exposé on RTÉ's "Prime Time" to-

night, which will show the serious national security threat arising from the sale of real-time bidding location data. “Prime Time” investigators were handed RTB data showing movements of individuals, including family members of prominent individuals around their homes and other spaces. The Tánaiste’s experience highlights just how serious and how appalling this could be.

It is no surprise tech companies are doing this but what is surprising is that the Data Protection Commission has been aware of this illegal behaviour since a whistleblower informed it in 2017. It is not about lack of legislation or lack of money. We understand the DPC has received €162.3 million since 2017. Given that the DPC has been aware of the use of RTB location data for eight years, how can we continue to have confidence in the DPC to protect people in the face of what could be a very serious threat to individual privacy and indeed could amount to a national security threat?

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy for her kind words. On this matter, very serious issues have been raised here. I am reluctant to overly comment on them because I am trying to establish all the facts of this case. I am concerned over what I have heard and read this morning. My understanding, based on a note provided to me, is that the DPC first became aware of the matter when contacted by “Prime Time” and is extremely concerned by it. That is what I have been told here. Location data can obviously reveal a very significant amount of information about individuals, including information about an individual’s habits and personality, information that is inherently sensitive. It can be more sensitive in relation to people carrying out particular jobs or duties in our State. Of course, any individual’s location information in that regard can pose a serious risk to the security and well-being of an individual.

The Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration is aware that the Data Protection Commissioner is looking into these matters. I have no doubt we will require further answers on this in the days ahead. It raises a broader issue, which I hope we can have time to discuss in this House, about online regulation. There are new things coming in about political regulation and regulation of online political content, which is grand, fine and no problem, but that is not really what is threatening our democracy, in my view. The problem is not with political parties taking out ads on Facebook; it is with those people who are not political parties often with anonymous accounts threatening to subvert our democracy and spew the place with misinformation. There is a need for a debate on this also.

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** As we have heard today and as will be on “Prime Time” this evening, it has been reported that the location data of tens of thousands of Irish people is being sold online. This data tells the buyer where people live and their place of work even if it is some sensitive location like a military base or a women’s refuge. It tells them when people went to the doctor, where the park is that they take their kids to play in and whom they met there. That buyer is anyone who can reasonably pose as a company that wants this data for analytics. That could be a vengeful ex-boyfriend, a disgruntled former colleague or anyone on the Internet who wants to know exactly where someone is.

The reason that these companies believe that it is okay to sell this information is that with every app we download and every website we visit, we accept terms and conditions. In the thousands of words of legal jargon that they do not want us to read, they give themselves the right to sell that location data to whomever they want. The Tánaiste just gave a response indicating that this is new but it is not a new issue. It is something the DPC has been aware of for many years and has failed to act on. Why is our regulator unable to regulate when it comes to our most personal information? How can the Tánaiste stand over the DPC as a credible organi-

sation? The Government's answer to any of these issues relating to online safety is to work with big tech companies and not to limit them. When will it enforce and properly police the behaviour of these platforms?

**The Tánaiste:** We should work collaboratively on this. When is anybody going to bring forward proposals or ideas? As this is a legislative Chamber, I am interested in the Deputy's ideas on this. I am interested in working constructively with people on this as well. This is information that I am trying to respond to in real time. The Data Protection Commission has advised that it is taking the assertions made in the programme very seriously and that it is investigating the operators concerned. Key issues will be whether these operators are complying with data protection law and whether the brokers concerned are based in the State, elsewhere in the EU or in third countries. This raises very significant issues. There is also the point that every time someone goes onto a weather app, they agree to give their location. There is a very significant issue here with the information that people are providing perhaps without full knowledge because of the jargon and the amount of material people have to read.

Based on the initial reports that I have read, although I reserve the right to see the full programme and have all the facts established, I am also concerned when I hear of particular references to this place and other institutions in the State and the potential issue that Deputy Bacik raised as well. I look forward to having more detailed briefings from the Minister for justice and the Data Protection Commissioner in due course.

**Deputy Roderic O'Gorman:** I welcome the focus the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach have placed on child poverty in their public comments in the run-up to the budget. However, will they take steps to address child poverty among that cohort of children who are most vulnerable, the 9,000 children in the international protection system? Children in the international protection system get €29.80 per week; that is it. This figure was last increased in 2018. The Tánaiste knows the child poverty unit in the Department of the Taoiseach drafted proposals to address this. He will have seen them, I saw them and the now Taoiseach would have seen them last year. Money was actually put aside last year to address this but we never got it over the line. Does the Tánaiste agree with me that €29.80 per week is not enough to give any child a decent standard of living? Will this year's budget contain financial measures to address child poverty among children living in the international protection system?

**The Tánaiste:** I thank Deputy O'Gorman. I appreciate his sincerity and his work on this, including in his previous role. The Taoiseach and I have both said there will be a particular focus on child poverty in this budget. The child poverty unit is doing good work for us on that. We have had a Cabinet committee meeting which had an initial discussion on the matter. We should be endeavouring to tackle child poverty regardless of who the child is, where the child is from or where the child is living, once the child is residing here in our State. I am certainly open to considering that proposal but the specific measures will be a matter for budget day.

**Deputy Peadar Kirby:** Daniel Aruebose's remains were found in Donabate yesterday. He had been in State care but he was returned to his family and it appears that there were no follow-up checks. It is absolutely heartbreaking to see such a young boy lose his life. Since 2014, 239 children in State care or known to State care have died. Ten of those were murdered and 51 died as a result of drug overdoses or suicide. Today 37 children who are in State care or are known to State care are missing. Judge Simms wrote to the Government about child protection issues before and the Government shredded those files for GDPR reasons.

*1 o'clock*

Judge Fottrell said it was shocking and appalling that Tusla had failed to inform the courts that 250 children were without the assigned social workers. The children's ombudsman has slammed the absence of a statutory power to investigate these deaths. Some national review panel reports are not being published and many of the recommendations are not being implemented. UCD has completed a study which shows that children in State care are being exposed to sex exploitation by gangs.

I have raised the Kyran Durnin case, as well as the cases of Hugh, Niamh, Eva and Luke. I also raised the case of the 14-year-old girl who, within an hour of being put into State care, went missing and was found locked in a brothel one year afterwards. I and so many other people have been raising these issues for the past six years. The reality is that the Government has not been listening to the experts on this. Will the Government ensure we have the power in this country to protect children?

**The Tánaiste:** I thank Deputy Tóibín. I acknowledge this is an issue he raises frequently in this House. I also acknowledge that we have taken a number of steps to try to improve child protection in this country, such as the referendum we had and the establishment of a dedicated Department and of the stand-alone State agency Tusla. There is a hell of a lot more that needs to be done, however. After the shocking developments of recent hours in relation to Daniel as well as the other cases the Deputy referenced, the Government will wish to engage constructively with the Opposition on what steps can be taken next. I have already outlined to the Deputy the Government's intention to bring forward legislation around the Child Care Act, which will be looking at the powers of Tusla and how it operates with other State agencies. I will be very eager to engage constructively, as will the Minister, with Opposition parties in that regard.

**Deputy Ryan O'Meara:** The new Nenagh community nursing unit was taken over by the HSE last year to be used as a step-down facility for UHL. A private company, Bartra Healthcare, was contracted to run this facility for one year. That is now due to end at the end of this month. Bartra wrote to its 74 employees on 3 July of this year informing them that their contracts of employment and status as employees would transfer over to the HSE under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment), TUPE, Regulations 2003. However, 41 of those employees wrote to me last Friday informing me that the HSE has still not confirmed whether this is the case. There are 74 employees in this facility who have done excellent work as healthcare workers. Most of them are international workers who came to this country on visas to do this exact work. They now do not know where they stand.

I wrote to the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, on this matter and her private secretary responded. I appreciate it is not the job of the Government to directly employ these people; it is the job of the HSE to do so. However, we need clarity on this urgently. Three things are needed. First, we need to know whether Bartra Healthcare and the HSE have an agreement on this. Second, we need to know whether the TUPE regulations stand in this case. Third, while this is happening and while we are finding these things out, we need confirmation, as a matter of urgency, that this will not delay the transfer of the community nursing unit back to the people of Nenagh.

**Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill):** I thank the Deputy. Yes, he wrote to me on this issue and we wrote back. A number of months ago, the Deputy sought confirmation that this was going to revert to a community nursing unit. Obviously, we are dis-

cussing that is now happening. There are a number of administrative arrangements that need to take place. Let me not comment on Bartra Healthcare and the transfer of undertakings, but what I can say is that there is active recruitment across the HSE in all cases to try to bring more people in. I responded to the Deputy privately on this matter. We are desperately seeking more and more people to apply for positions within the HSE. We want to employ all of those people, whether by transfer of undertakings or by means of a different recruitment process. We want all of those people to be facilitated and productively employed within the HSE.

**Deputy Johnny Guirke:** I wish to tell the Tánaiste how much it is costing students to go to college this year. I will tell him about a student in my constituency of Meath West who goes to college in Galway. Last year, she paid €8,632 to go to college. This year, it will cost her €10,380 for the same room, just moving across the hall. How is that happening? There is an additional €350 in rent. Last year, they were talking about charging in utility bills. This year, it is service charges. They just change it. Last year, the utility charges totalled €1,100, while this year they are €2,000. That is an increase of over 80%. In addition, the Government is putting up students fees by €500. That will cost this student €1,748 more than last year to go to college. How is that affordable? This is happening to thousands of students right across the country going to college in Galway and other places. I was talking to someone this morning who has two kids going to college. That is an additional €3,500 compared with what they paid last year. At the same time, the Government is imposing another €500 in student fees.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank Deputy Guirke. I do not doubt those challenges are real for families. We have taken a number of measures to try to help students and their families. We expanded the rent tax credit and ensured that students could qualify for it, as that was not originally the situation. We have reduced college fees for the past three years in a row. There is a clear commitment in the programme for Government on the direction of travel in which the Minister wants to go in the time ahead.

While I heard the Deputy and different people mention the €500 figure, there has been no budgetary decision made on any aspect yet. Let us see where the budget gets to on 7 October. We have also increased the students grants.

While I do not know the individual in question, many students who are entitled to student grants often do not realise or think such grants are for them. Many families qualify. Similarly, the Minister and I were just talking about how many people, including students, qualify for the GP access card, which can help with costs too. We are committed to helping students with the cost of living. The budget will show a way forward in that regard on 7 October.

**Deputy Emer Currie:** According to data from the Department of children, there has been a 25% reduction in the number of State-supported crèches taking babies under one year of age since 2022. Baby rooms in crèches outside of core funding are not subject to fee caps, meaning parents are likely paying over and above for services they are desperate to secure. These are damning figures and should be a wake-up call to those who constructed core funding and batted off questions last year, insisting supply of places was broadly meeting demand. These figures reflect the reality for parents. Mothers start to look for baby rooms in early pregnancy, delay their return to work and leave work as a result.

In Ireland in 2025, mothers are still penalised. They face a 27% earnings drop after their first baby is born, according to research from Maynooth University. Mothers should not be penalised. The Government must intervene to address the sharp decline in baby rooms in State-

backed crèches, which encompass 92% of crèches in the country.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank Deputy Currie very much for raising this issue and for the focus she rightly keeps on early learning and childcare. I thank her for her work in that regard. Certainly, we will discuss this with the Minister, Deputy Foley. The Government will be publishing an action plan on childcare, which endeavours to knit together the 21 programme for Government commitments on childcare. I expect that to happen in the coming weeks, either just before or, perhaps more likely, just after the budget.

I wish to make one broad point that is slightly linked. While I fully accept the point about baby rooms and the need for us to do more in that regard, I am also proud of a number of the steps we have taken to help parents have more time with their child in that first year. Obviously, we know babies benefit most from individual attention from loving and responding caregivers, enabling them to form strong bonds and foster that parent-child relationship. I am pleased that the combination of maternity, paternity and parent's leave and parent's benefit now equates to 46 weeks' paid leave for a two-parent family. This is supplemented by an entitlement to 16 weeks of unpaid maternity leave and 26 weeks of unpaid parental leave for a parent, as well as annual leave entitlements. I wish to provide that context of the importance of the child's first year of life.

**Deputy Albert Dolan:** The programme for Government sets out a clear commitment to bringing in an unsewered villages scheme. In 2022, a fantastic investment of €50 million was announced to bring some of these villages that do not have sewage facilities back into use, such as Craughwell and Clarinbridge in Galway. These were fantastic announcements. Three years on, however, we do not have plans, sites or, ultimately, execution. When is the Government going to bring forward the renewed sewerage investment scheme for unsewered villages?

It is important for me to say that right now, in counties like Galway, there is an artificial constrain on land supply. As a result, prices of homes in Athenry, Loughrea and Gort are going up. Our villages have not seen homes built in more than 15 years.

I would appreciate any commitment that can be given to investigate why Craughwell and Clarinbridge have seen no action to date, because we have had the money in place for three years. It is an opportunity to make it happen.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank Deputy Dolan. He is entirely right on this. I remember vividly the day the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, in his former role brought these proposals to Cabinet. It was seen as a reforming step to identify that there were a number of relatively small villages and townlands that would take forever and a day to get there through the traditional Irish Water way and to put ring-fenced funding in place. It is appalling that this has taken so long. It is an example of where bureaucracy, red tape and sometimes a lack of willingness from various stakeholders have led to this. I will ask the Minister to get back directly to the Deputy about Craughwell and Clarinbridge. I know this is a particular issue in east Galway because I read some data about a number of townlands and villages there where, as a result of this, no houses can be built in the middle of a housing crisis.

Directly in response to the other two points, as a result of the NDP investment plans will be published by all Ministers in the coming weeks, showing exactly what the additional money for water and sewerage will be able to do. As a condition of giving Irish Water a hell of a lot more public money, we have said it needs to get on and allow developer-led infrastructure schemes

as well. It is really important that it now deliver on that commitment.

**Deputy Joanna Byrne:** I want to raise the debacle that is the school transport scheme, in particular the scheme for children with special educational needs in Louth and east Meath. My constituency office is inundated with parents, some worried and some livid, as their children have not received a place on the school bus, even though they received their tickets some months ago. Very late notice was given to parents, in most cases on the Friday afternoon, with school due to start on the following Monday. This has caused major distress to both the children and the parents.

Young Kate in Drogheda, who has Down's syndrome and is trying to develop her independence, has still not received a school place. We need to implement the school transport review recommendations and just get the bloody buses on the road. It is absolutely scandalous for us to be told at this stage, this week, that a public procurement process is under way to find a solution. I am sorry to say it, but the Minister has failed to prepare. She has failed to act and, sadly, she has failed to deliver for these children.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank Deputy Byrne very much for raising this issue. I know this is a priority for both the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan. They tell me that 178,945 tickets have been issued to children and young people for this school year, including 23,300 children and young people with special educational needs. That is an increase of 3%. However, that is no use to the child Deputy Byrne references if she is still waiting for this service. I will ask the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and the Minister, Deputy McEntee, to directly engage with the Deputy on the matter to see if anything more can be done to assist the family. I will ask them to get back directly to the Deputy.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I join with my colleagues here today in condemning any threats to the Tánaiste and his family that he has had to put up with which, to say the least, were shocking and sickening. I hope the full rigours of the law will be applied. Independent Ireland will do anything it can on this side of the political divide to help to support him in that regard.

I presume the Tánaiste was at the very successful ploughing championships in recent days, as I was. We were in our tent with Ciaran Mullooly, MEP. A huge number of tillage farmers spoke of the severe stress they are going through as prices have dropped to 1985 levels, with costs rocketing. If immediate aid of up to €250 a hectare is not forthcoming, tillage farmers will have to walk away, which will result in a further crisis down the road. A public meeting last week in Naas with the Minister for agriculture did not yield any clear indication of whether a rescue package is being brought forward by the Government. What hope can the Tánaiste give today to tillage farmers of a much-needed compensation package for them?

**The Tánaiste:** First, I thank Deputy Collins for his kind words and solidarity. I appreciate it. Second, he is right; anybody at the ploughing who did not hear very clearly about the tillage issue probably needs their ears cleaned out because the IFA and farmers have been very clear about it. He is correct that my colleague the Minister for agriculture was at the crisis meeting called by the IFA in Naas last week, which around 1,100 farmers attended, or at least several hundred of them. There was a very clear message. We often have debates in this House about climate versus agriculture. To be honest, I think they are silly debates, as we should not put them against each other. This is an area where they work together. Helping tillage farming also helps our climate objectives and it helps on every level. There are clear commitments in the programme for Government on financial support for the tillage sector. Obviously, specific

measures are a matter for budget day. The Minister is working very hard on this. I met the IFA on this at the ploughing championships and in my own office a couple of weeks ago. We will endeavour to bring forward proposals as part of the budget.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** The annihilation of Gaza is apparently under way. We are seeing a ground attack, the blowing-up of high-rise buildings and the orphaning of children. I am in an Ireland-Palestine solidarity WhatsApp group in Dublin 15. The videos Gazan people are sharing are absolutely chilling. We are in a new phase of the genocide. There is a global day of action today. There will be a protest at the Dáil at 4.30 p.m.

This has been a shameful exposé of the EU. For 23 months, it has been willing to allow preferential trade treatment for Israel at a time when it is carrying out genocide and killing at least 60,000 people, although I am sure it is a lot more. Even now, all that is being spoken about is not ending the trade relationship with Israel but ending the preferential treatment it has been getting. It does not even look like that will pass, because big powers like Germany are likely to oppose it. This is the same Germany whose police state is beating the likes of Kitty O'Brien, an Irish citizen, and many other activists on a regular basis. We all agree it would be much better and more powerful if the EU acted in concert. I heard the Tánaiste speak a short while ago on that. Given that the EU has shown that it is going to put imperial interests ahead of human rights-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Deputy.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** -----will the Irish Government now act unilaterally? The UN has now come out and said that this is officially genocide. The Government is legally obliged. With this body coming out with that recommendation, no more excuses are available to any government. Will the Government, for example, pass the occupied territories Bill in full, undiluted, and not just tell us that it will report back? It should be clear what needs to be done.

**The Tánaiste:** I thank Deputy Coppinger. First, I was very angered to see how Kitty O'Brien was treated. My Department and our embassy have conveyed that to the German authorities. I say that on the record of this House.

I am not fully convinced. Deputy Coppinger may end up being right but I hope she is wrong. I know she will hope she is wrong that we cannot have a majority in Europe voting to implement the sanctions. The coming days will tell us whether that is the case or not. We are advocating very strongly to try and build a coalition. I believe there is a majority of member states. The question now is whether we reach the threshold of there being a qualified majority. It is certainly a possibility. We all need to try very hard on that.

Ireland will introduce its own occupied territories Bill. The detail of the Bill will be clear when we publish the legislation. I will meet Senator Black when I return from the UN high-level week, which is the week after next.

**Deputy Colm Burke:** I have a letter in my hand from Dr. Derville O'Shea, consultant haematologist, in respect of a constituent of mine, Aishling Thornhill, who, unfortunately, has relapsed refractory B-cell acute lymphoblastic leukaemia. It is a complicated condition. My understanding is that treatment would be available to her if she was under 25 but because she is over 25 it is not being made available. I understand some progress was made on it this morning. Could the issue be clarified? Where a consultant prescribes that the treatment would be of benefit to a patient over 25, why is a barrier put in place for them? Could the issue be examined

in the overall context?

**The Tánaiste:** I thank Deputy Burke very much. I know he has been in direct contact with the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, on this issue. She has looked into the matter. My understanding is that the treatment has now been confirmed, which I am very pleased is the case, and that she will confirm that directly to the Deputy. I wish his constituent, Aishling, the very best in her treatment. I know that the Deputy, everyone in Cork, and those of us here are thinking of her. The broader policy issue is something the Minister and the HSE will reflect on, based on the best clinical advice. I am pleased that the treatment has now been confirmed in this case.

**Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil:** I join with colleagues in expressing my horror and revulsion at the experiences of the Tánaiste and his family and the intimidation inflicted on them earlier this year. I think the solution to that particular problem rests in following the advice of the Ceann Comhairle yesterday and proceeding to build on the work of the committee on safe participation in public life, led by the former Commissioner Nóirín O'Sullivan.

Governments in this wonderful little country of ours have on occasions in the past got things wrong. We have made mistakes. We have proven that we can resolve those problems but, very often, the victims of the mistakes tell us that they have had to drag the Government and the public service screaming and crying to the table to find a solution. I am talking today about thalidomide victims. This was raised here on 10 July by our colleague Deputy Barry Ward. That was the anniversary of the appointment of Mr. Justice Gilligan to address the concerns of thalidomide victims, 60 years after their mothers took this drug and the State failed to act expeditiously to have it withdrawn. With the numbers of people who are victims steadily reducing, when oh when will both the Tánaiste, as a compassionate Tánaiste, and the highly compassionate Minister for Health move to ensure that the problems of thalidomide victims are once and for all resolved?

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy for his kind words and solidarity. I thank him for the work he did as Ceann Comhairle on the issue of public safety. He led on this with the appointment of former Commissioner O'Sullivan. I was grateful to the Ceann Comhairle for her leadership yesterday as this Dáil term resumed. I wrote to her last night about her suggestion of convening party leaders to look at this wider issue. I appreciate Deputy Ó Feargháil's comments in relation to myself and my family. As I said in my statement, it will be me today and someone else tomorrow. We need to act together on this in the interests of our democracy and the safety of everybody involved in public life.

I thank the Deputy for raising the issue of thalidomide. The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and I have discussed this. I discussed this with the Taoiseach as recently as one week ago. This an area we really want to see a resolution to. I accept it has gone on for far too long. Deputy Barry Ward has regularly raised this issue as well. We decided in September 2024 to appoint Mr. Justice Paul Gilligan to facilitate a thalidomide resolution process. I know the judge is continuing to engage with survivors and their representatives and is expected to revert to Government as soon as that process is completed. I can assure the Deputy this is an area that is receiving priority attention at the highest levels of Government. We all intend to pull together on this and try to get this resolved for once and for all.

**Deputy Barry Ward:** I, the Tánaiste and the Fine Gael Party campaigned in relation to the cost of childcare at the election last year. I was pleased that we made sure it was central to the

programme for Government that we would reduce the cost for parents to €200. We know that has not happened yet, but I understand that work is taking place in that regard. We also know that some childcare providers are leaving the sector in anticipation and because it has not happened yet. Can the Tánaiste provide us with an update on how progress is going on that? Is there a timeline for when it will be delivered?

**The Tánaiste:** I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. He is right that this was a big part of the general election. We all put forward our stalls on it. There was almost political unanimity around the figure of €200 per month per child. We certainly had it in our manifesto and our colleagues in government did too. It is also in the programme for Government. I always say to people at every opportunity that these are commitments in terms of projects we will get delivered over the lifetime of the Government. We all want to see progress made as quickly as possible. The Minister, Deputy Foley, is working her way through 21 commitments on childcare in the programme for Government. That gives the Deputy an indication of the priority - 21 specific commitments. She will produce an action plan that will go to the Government on childcare. We will have to decide the sequencing in a logical way in terms of capacity, fees and the impact of a reduction on one in terms of capacity and the likes. I expect around budget time that we will have greater clarity on the next steps. I know this is a hugely important issue for so many people.

**Deputy Mark Ward:** The EU studies have shown harm to reproductive health of people working in medical settings caused by nitrous oxide. These studies showed there is a decreased level of fertility in these workers. My fear is that people who are misusing nitrous oxide, also known as laughing gas, are taking much more concentrated doses than those who took part in these studies. There has also been a 175% increase in the number of young people who are presenting to the HSE with problems from nitrous oxide in the past year. It can have fatal consequences. I did a quick search online today and I can buy any amount of nitrous oxide. There are very few balances and checks. It comes in flavours, similar to vapes, such as strawberry and apple. It is targeted towards children. Is the Minister aware that the EU passed a delegated Act that classified nitrous oxide as harmful to reproductive health and it plans to prohibit the sale in 2027? Will the Government wait for the EU or will it act now in the best interests of our communities?

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** I am grateful to the Deputy for raising this matter. I will discuss it with the chief medical officer. Perhaps, the Deputy will share with me some of the correspondence that he referenced. We are very keen to ban all the inhalation products that we know are bad for people. We are trying to get ahead of that, never mind catching up with it. I would very much welcome a conversation with the Deputy and we will see what we can do to progress that.

**Deputy Barry Heneghan:** I wish to join in condemning any violence that the Tánaiste has faced. No one from any side of this House should experience that. I stand with anyone experiencing that. He has my complete solidarity.

Is mian liom labhairt faoi rud atá i mbéal an phobail faoi láthair, is é sin, an méid airgid atá ag dul don Ghaeilge. It is a shame that more than 100 years after the foundation of this State Irish speakers and members of the Gaeltacht will be protesting outside these Houses this Saturday for basic rights for our native language. During the formation of Government, the regional Independents showed our priority for more funding for the Irish language. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil an tAire ar an eolas faoi seo. Bhuaile mé leis ag an gcruinniú sin. The founding mothers

and fathers of this State would be turning in their graves if they knew only 0.01% of the budget was going to the Department with responsibility for the Gaeltacht. We need to put more money into that. It is something we need to get down. There will be more jobs and opportunities for people. I was a presenter for TG4 before I was a politician. Let us put more money into TG4. Let us put more money into the Irish language. Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí. It is important we nurture our native language because that is it. Tír gan teanga, tír gan anam.

**Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Dara Calleary):** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta Heneghan. Is mór an chaill é do TG4 go bhfuil sé anseo sa Dáil. Tá muid ag iarraidh go mbeidh airgead breise ann, ach caithfear a rá freisin go bhfuil an méid airgid is mó riamh i stair an Stáit á chaitheamh ar chúrsaí Gaeilge agus Gaeltachta. Tá muid ag iarraidh seasamh le daoine a bhfuil suim acu sa Ghaeltacht agus leo siúd a labhraíonn an Ghaeilge nó a bhfuil cónaí orthu sa Ghaeltacht le go mbeidh cúrsaí níos fearr. Níl an t-airgead atá á chaitheamh ar TG4 san áireamh sna figiúirí sin. Tá muid ag obair i gcomhthéacs an chéad cáinainéise eile.

We are working to increase the budget for the Gaeltacht and Gaeilge activities. I have the support of the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and our colleagues in government. We have serious ambitions in this Department over the course of the programme for Government. Beidh muid ag obair i gcomhthéacs an chéad cáinainéise eile agus clár an Rialtais, an Rialtas a bheidh againn le haghaidh an chéad ceithre bliana eile.

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** I wish to raise real concerns about Mayo University Hospital. The Minister for Health will know that last month the hospital was in a crisis situation, experiencing over 160 presentations daily despite the fact that just four or five nurses were rostered on a given day. This month we are way off peak in terms of the winter period but Mayo University Hospital has been forced to cancel elective procedures. That is how bad things have become. We are experiencing a significant and dangerous level of understaffing. In August, a patient was in the back of an ambulance for over 13 hours. That is a verified story that the Minister will be aware of because she attended the hospital on that week.

There has been an audit done in relation to safe staffing. I have researched this audit. My understanding from speaking to Saolta and the management group is that this could provide an additional 30 nurses who are desperately needed for the hospital in Mayo. It must be sanctioned. The audit is there; it is sitting in the HSE. I am asking and pleading with the Minister, on behalf of all of the doctors and nurses who are worked off their feet, working under incredibly difficult situations and experiencing burnout on a daily basis, to implement the safe staffing framework as quickly as possible. I want her to do it this week, if possible. It could take several weeks to get those people on the ground.

**Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill:** How? Let us discuss Mayo University Hospital. The first thing is in relation to staffing. Mayo hospital has had a 30% increase over the past five years. When I saw some of these figures I did an analysis of a sample of nine model 3 hospitals. Mayo hospital has the second highest rate of staffing of those model 3 hospitals. The difficulty with Mayo hospital is not the level of staffing. I have also included a maternity leave analysis and a sick leave analysis. Mayo hospital is not understaffed. However, Mayo hospital is imbalanced. I will give the Deputy two examples of that. I was there on an unscheduled visit when there were 47 patients in the emergency department. Of those patients, 20 had been admitted for beds, but there was no discharging going on up the hospital. Mayo University Hospital remained red all through August, which is completely unacceptable. Last weekend, there was not

sufficient work being done to discharge during the weekend. There were 16 discharges in the hospital on Saturday, there was one on Sunday and there were 47 on Monday. I ask the Deputy to explain that to me. There is not a single person in this room who can explain that except that there is an imbalance in staffing. I was there on a random Saturday in August and the emergency department was absolutely overwhelmed. There was a serious patient safety issue there. The rest of the hospital was completely empty. There were practically no diagnostics going on. There were not even people in the diagnostics area. The hospital is not understaffed but it has an understaffing area in the emergency department, specifically because it is not being correctly staffed on the other side. I asked Bernard Gloster for an analysis of this and I have the data back. It is my intention this week to write to every TD and councillor in Mayo to specifically outline exactly what the staffing issues are, exactly what the patient flow issues are - which are a whole-of-hospital responsibility - and what we need to do within Mayo to make this better. Let us not confuse ourselves; this is not a staffing issue in Mayo hospital. It has one of the best staffing ratios of all of the model 3 hospitals. What is not happening is that this is not translating from a patient flow perspective into making sure the patients are safe and the staff in the emergency department are appropriately supported to make sure they can do their jobs in the way they need to do them. We will stick with the facts here. It is not understaffed; it needs to be balanced.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I thank the Minister. That concludes questions on policy and legislation. I join with other speakers in condemning the threats to the Tánaiste and his family and indeed the threats to other politicians. I join with the Ceann Comhairle in supporting her remarks.

*Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.31 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.14 p.m.*

*Sitting suspended at 1.31 p.m. and resumed at 2.14 p.m.*

### **Migration: Statements**

**Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O’Callaghan):** The Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, and I very much welcome that we will have statements on migration this afternoon. With the permission of the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, will jointly open this debate with me. It is particularly welcome that we are discussing in this House the issue of migration. It is an extremely important national and international issue that requires policy decisions and the expression of values by political leaders such as ourselves in this House.

When we are discussing migration it is important to note that we are not simply discussing emigration or immigration; we are talking about both. If it was the case that we were here 60 years ago and the topic of migration was on the agenda of Dáil Éireann, I suspect we would have been talking about the terrible emigration that took place in Ireland for many years. Today, we are also talking about emigration as statistics for last year reveal that approximately 70,000 people emigrated - left Ireland - last year. The more predominant type of migration now is immigration. Last year, approximately 150,000 people immigrated into Ireland. That is an indication of the transformation in the success of Ireland as a country. For far too many years, we lived on an island where people were forced to leave because of economic circumstances in

order to get a sustainable life. The fact that now has been transformed, and more people want to come into Ireland than leave it, is a reflection of the success of Ireland as a country. The reason people want to come here is that there are opportunities for them in Ireland and it is recognised as a safe, peaceful and successful country with a very strong economy.

I will also reflect that when we are talking about migration we need to put it in context. The context has to be the demographic context of our population. As I said a few moments ago, if we were back in Ireland in 1841 and filled out the census, we would find out after filling it in that the population of the island of Ireland back then was 8.2 million people. Tragically, we went through the seminal event in Irish history in the 1840s with the Irish Famine, and in the aftermath of the Famine more than 1 million people had died and many millions and future generations had emigrated from Ireland and gone abroad. That resulted in our population still being in decline in the 1960s. The population of Ireland back in 1960 was 2.8 million. When Northern Ireland, which was partitioned a number of years earlier, is included, the population was 4.3 million. Even today the population of the Republic is approximately 5.4 million and when Northern Ireland is included the population is up to approximately 7.3 million. Today, when so many people want to come to the country and are in the country, Ireland, as an island, is still not as populated as it was back in 1841. That is something we need to reflect on. We need to recognise that the drop in our population was a reflection of very negative times in Ireland and the rise in our population is, to a large extent, a reflection of the success of Ireland.

Part of the reason the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, and I wanted this topic to be on the agenda for the first week of the Dáil's return was because both the Minister of State and I were very concerned and appalled at a number of incidents during the summer months when members of our migrant community were attacked. I had the opportunity, as did the Minister of State, to meet representatives of the Indian community and it is fair to say they were very shook by the incidents that occurred. They were very offended by it and when they met me they wondered what they or any migrant had done to merit such a criminal and appalling attack. I emphasised to them that, in my assessment, the Irish people are very welcoming of the people who have come into this country. Along with the Minister of State, I want to emphasise that migrants who are in this country lawfully are extremely welcome in this country. It is very important that message gets out there.

Similarly, another important message both of us want to communicate, however, is that when it comes to immigration we have a rules-based system. In order to come into Ireland, people have to comply with the rules and if they comply with the rules, they are extremely welcome here. However, if they do not comply with the rules, we will just have to enforce the rules to ensure we keep control over our migration system.

I reflect on the fact that approximately 15% of all nurses and midwives working in Irish hospitals at present come from India. We have a very significant number of people working in our health service who play a significant role. It is worth pointing out that in 2023 more than 23% of all nurses and midwives directly employed by the HSE were migrants, with nearly 15% of them coming from India. In 2023, nearly four in every ten doctors registered with the Irish Medical Council were trained outside Ireland, and one in four were trained outside the UK and the EU. These numbers illustrate that the health service is very much dependent on the excellent work provided by migrants who have come to Ireland to work. It is not just our health system, however, that is dependent on migrants who have come here to work. If we look at our construction sector, statistics produced in 2023 showed that in that year, there were 27,500 migrant workers in Ireland's construction sector and that is a significant increase on what it was a

number of years before this. On many occasions, I am in this House answering questions about when prisons, Garda stations or houses are going to be constructed. We cannot construct that level of infrastructure unless we have workers here and that is why it is important to acknowledge that many of the workers involved in the construction business in Ireland are migrants who have come here to work.

Of course, that leaves aside the many people who have come here from other countries to work in our booming technology sector and in the multinational sector that is so happily based here throughout the country.

In terms of the contribution that migrants have made to Irish society, it is important to emphasise that people who are here lawfully make an extremely strong contribution and they are welcome by the vast majority of Irish people.

Obviously, migration can give rise to challenges as well. One of the big challenges that a government, political leaders and all of us in the House face is to try to ensure that migrants who come in to the country are fully and adequately integrated. Regrettably, we have seen in other countries what happens when migrants who come into the country are not integrated and feel as though they are a separate group within the country. That is not good for society or for migrants and it would not be good for the Irish population as a whole. For that reason, it is important to emphasise that the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, and myself are currently working on a national migration and integration strategy. It will set out how this Government intends to meet the opportunities and demands facing our society and economy over the next decade. It is important to point out that this is the first time such a strategy has been undertaken and we are determined that our approach to migration is rules based, planned and coherent. I emphasise the reason it is so important that we have and apply a rules-based system. If you do not have a rules-based system, you have a discretionary system that is based upon ministerial viewpoint or executive decision and that will necessarily end up being a system that the public cannot properly understand, supervise and see how it operates. It is extremely important, therefore, that we have a system of rules in place in Ireland that indicates when a person is entitled to come into Ireland, how long they are entitled to stay and what the consequences are if they overstay their welcome. I am not aware of any country in the world which does not have a rules-based system that needs to be applied when it comes to migration. It is also extremely important that we let the word get out that we have a rules-based system. As people in this House will know - nobody knows this better than constituency TDs - there are people in this country who want to exploit the position of immigration for their own political purposes. We need to stand up to that. My own view is that the best way to stand up to it is through facts and by being able to state we have a rules-based system. If people comply with those rules, they gain entry. If they do not comply with the rules, they have to leave. Once we have those rules in place it is much easier to defend the system and the public are very concerned to know that the Government and the Ministers, namely myself and the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, are in charge and have a recognition that the system is being applied effectively.

As I mentioned at the outset, the challenges derive to a large extent from population. The numbers immigrating into Ireland are small in the context of, say, a country such as Germany or France but we are a small country which has a population of approximately 5.4 million at present. We also have a tendency sometimes to reflect on a certain element when it comes to immigration, ignoring the fact that most migration into Ireland derives from those who have been granted a visa to come here lawfully. At the outset, I will give some statistics in respect of where we are at present with Ireland's population. As I said, our population has recovered

significantly and has been growing since 1960. Notwithstanding that, this is giving rise to challenges because in the last number of years our population has been growing at an extremely fast rate. In fact, our population at present is growing at seven times the EU average, which is very significant. The effect of it is that in the year up to April 2024 the population of Ireland increased by approximately 98,700 people in a period of 12 months. That is very significant population growth and it derives from the following. We had a birth rate of 54,200 and a death rate of 34,800 in the year up to the end of April 2024. We also had immigration into Ireland of 149,000 people. I will break down that figure as it is important we have the context in terms of the demographics for the discussion we are having this afternoon. Some 30,000 of the 149,000 people who immigrated into Ireland were Irish citizens who were returning; 27,000 were EU citizens; 5,400 were UK citizens; and 86,800 people were from other countries. Those are the 149,000 people who immigrated into Ireland in the year ending April 2024.

Similarly, we also had 69,000 people who left the country during that 12-month period. Of those, 34,700 were Irish citizens; 27,000 were EU citizens; 5,400 were UK citizens; and 21,500 were citizens from other countries. It is important we get that demographic context out there for the purpose of discussing migration. As I say, it is a positive news story that in Ireland we have changed the narrative from people leaving the country and having to go elsewhere to get their successful life to people who now want to come in to Ireland. The reason they want to come in is because we are a very successful country and a very successful economy.

The majority of the people who come into Ireland come in on the basis of visas that have been granted by my Department. In 2024, there were approximately 201,000 applications of all types that were received by the Department of justice. Of those 201,000 applications, 150,000 visas were granted. Many of those visas are short-term visas - some are nine-month visas - but there is also a significant number which are student visas. Approximately 61,000 student permissions, as I call them, were issued in 2024. To date, in 2025, there are more applications that are coming in for visa-sought migration. The Department of justice has got much more efficient in considering and processing visa applications and I am pleased to say it is much faster than it was. Nonetheless, each visa application has to be considered carefully. I know sometimes this can create annoyance in the House and Deputies frequently come to me asking me to speed up a visa application. I have no objection to people doing that, by the way, as it is part of my function. However, those people need to recognise that there is a process in place. It is a rules-based system and those rules need to be applied.

Therefore, the main type of migration into Ireland is visa-granted migration and I have provided the statistics. There are two other types of migration into Ireland which have got significant attention in recent times. The first is temporary protection. As Deputies will be aware, for the first time, when Russia invaded Ukraine back in 2022, the European Union triggered the temporary protection directive. The effect of that was that individuals who left Ukraine after the date of that war and went to another EU country could apply for temporary protection. If they received temporary protection it would entitle them to apply for access to accommodation and give them access to the work force as well. We have seen that since the war in Ukraine, approximately 114,000 beneficiaries of temporary protection have arrived in Ireland. They have been granted temporary protection here. The number has declined noticeably since those people arrived and at present 80,000 PPS numbers remain active for beneficiaries of temporary protection as of March 2025. That is one type of migration into Ireland, which is temporary protection. Then there are international protection applications. That is probably the type of migration that gets most of the coverage even though accounts only for a not small but limited

percentage of the numbers of people arriving in Ireland. It is true that in recent years the number of people applying for international protection has increased significantly. I will give some of the statistics because it is important for the context of this debate. In 2019, a total of 4,700 people arrived seeking international protection in Ireland. Obviously, during the Covid years of 2020 and 2021, the numbers were small at 1,500 and 2,600 but then in 2022 and 2023 we had 13,500 people applying for international protection in each of those years. Last year 18,500 people applied. The numbers have reduced this year but the consequence of high numbers of people coming in seeking international protection is that there is an obligation on the State, as there is on other EU countries, to provide accommodation for persons who are coming in here. That has been a politically contentious issue and has given rise to concern in communities. The Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, will speak in detail about that issue of accommodation. There is a policy in the Department at present to try to reduce the costs of international protection accommodation. The main way of doing this, and we cannot sugar-coat it any other way, is through the numbers of people arriving into Ireland claiming asylum. We need to get those numbers down. I say this in the knowledge that of the people who arrived in 2025 and claimed asylum over 80% have been rejected in the first instance. We need to recognise that fact.

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration(Deputy Colm Brophy):** As the Minister of State with responsibility for migration, I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak this afternoon on what I believe is one of the most important issues facing our country, which is migration. As a Government we need to address this. We need address it with the spirit of integrity and of compassion, and with a rules-based approach, as the Minister said.

One of the things that we here in Ireland have learned really clearly is that whether it is emigration or immigration, migration shapes a nation. It has a huge impact on it. I am sure that all of us here recognise, and certainly the Minister and I do, the incredible contribution that migrants make to our country. Every day they are contributing right across our economy and our neighbourhoods. We also understand that migration encompasses a range of legal, social, economic and humanitarian challenges. In dealing with that we have to have a firm, fair and effective system. This is imperative to maintaining public confidence in our immigration system. This, however, must also stay true to the values that we hold of openness, human rights and international solidarity.

In the face of these pressures, I acknowledge the great work being done across government and especially within the Department the Minister and I are leading. We have introduced new work permit schemes and we have streamlined residency paths to ensure we can attract the best talent. This also continues to ensure our country's economic growth. We have expanded into the international protection system to increase the speed with which asylum and decision-making takes place. We have invested in services for newly arrived migrants and refugees to support integration.

One area I want to acknowledge in particular is accommodation. Providing accommodation for people applying for international protection is an obligation for us under Irish and EU law. As the Minister said, Ireland saw unprecedented surges around 2022 in the number of international applicants. This does not happen just here in Ireland: it happened across all EU member states and internationally directly after the pandemic. The Russian invasion of Ukraine saw a massive humanitarian response right across Europe. This resulted in 110,000 people coming to Ireland fleeing that conflict. Ireland responded, as one would expect, in a comprehensive manner and it supported tens of thousands of people, either directly or indirectly, with accom-

modation and other supports.

These parallel events placed pressure on accommodation capacity over the past three years and we acknowledge that this has been felt right across the country. Among those wider changes in migration patterns into Ireland were those events of the invasion and the inward migration after the pandemic. These contributed to a change in public discourse and attitudes. They have had a real impact, which we have seen right across our local communities and throughout Ireland. Specifically on accommodation, 90% of our current accommodation needs in this regard are commercially provided through contracted service providers in the range of settings we are all familiar with such as hotels, guest houses, self-catering accommodation and former commercial properties. Most of that capacity was added to the system post-2022. The demand for accommodation for Ukrainians has actually reduced significantly over the past year to the extent that many former accommodation contracts have ended, including almost the entirety of the student accommodation centres that were originally involved. This is freeing up much-needed accommodation this September for college students. There are still 23,000 people from Ukraine in State-supported accommodation and many more are receiving payment under the accommodation recognition payment, ARC system. While the demand for IPAS accommodation remains high the rate of increase in new applications for international protection has reduced since October 24, as the Minister outlined. The State is currently accommodating 33,000 people in over 320 IPAS centres around the country, 9,000 of whom are children and families.

The Government's current focus for international protection is to develop more State-owned accommodation in a range of sources. We are committed to building sustainable systems to reduce our reliance on commercial providers. In an important step in implementing this strategy the State recently purchased the Citywest hotel and conference centre for €148 million. That purchase, over 25 years and with an operating cost model, will offer savings of over €1 billion while delivering a permanent State asset. Now we have approximately 4,000 beds being directly provided on State-owned lands. This is an increase from a figure of just 700 in 2024. We have further potential purchases we are considering, and alongside that we have the possibility of identifying State-owned sites for viability for modular and prefabricated accommodation.

The Minister mentioned the facts around IPAS centres and it is important to have that exact figure: while 3% to 4% of non-Irish citizens who are living here in this State are in IPAS centres, the vast majority are here working and contributing. They have come to make their lives here. They have come here because we have asked them to come to provide essential public services in our hospitals, tech companies, construction industry and so many other areas. They are contributing on a daily basis. We must constantly be aware of and recognise that.

With regard to IPAS centres, I will be looking at developing a contribution model for the cost of accommodation. After five months people can apply to work, and if they are still in an IPAS centre after six months they can work. If people are earning and paying income tax they can make a contribution to the cost of their accommodation. I will bring forward proposals in this area to the Government.

Before I finish I want to speak on one issue, which is the troubling rise in far-right agitation and racism we have seen in recent times. There are people who seek to instill fear and division and to exploit what are the legitimate concerns of communities. They do that for very dangerous reasons. This is something that all of us here must firmly reject. We must support the proper use of our national flag. One must respect the flag. Our flag is a flag of inclusivity not division. We should recognise this and always make that point.

I believe fundamentally that our response to migration should always be rooted in truth, in empathy and in the significant area of unity. We need to encourage local communities to play a central role through education, leadership and shared experiences. When people meet and talk, when people have an opportunity to work together and to be educated together then there are no grounds for conflict. I urge Members in the House to take a moment to reflect on whether we are doing enough here to foster that respectful dialogue in this space. I encourage everyone, as part of that conversation here today, to be inclusive, to be respectful and to help shape an Ireland that we can all be truly proud of and that reflects the best traditions of our hospitality, our fairness and our hope.

**Deputy Matt Carthy:** I join with the Minister in unreservedly condemning the deplorable and disgusting racist attacks that we have seen over the past weeks and months. I welcome this debate, first as an opportunity to make that point but also because it provides an opportunity to address the reality that immigration needs to be managed, and to recognise that the Government has largely failed to do that. When it comes to migration, what we have seen from Government is an absolute failure on every front. Níl aon phleanáil déanta ag an Rialtas maidir leis an imirce ach tá Sinn Féin soiléir go gcaithfear í a bhainistiú. As with so many areas of public policy, successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments have stumbled from one crisis to another, and likewise with immigration. There has been no planning and no recognition of the challenges. There has been a failure to listen to communities and far too little support for integration. The Government's handling of this issue has badly undermined public confidence, particularly in our international protection system and in the immigration system overall. It has allowed communities to be targeted by those who are seeking to sow division.

The context in which we discuss migration is the overall failures of this Government and successive Governments, particularly in areas like housing, economic inequality, tackling deprivation and addressing wage inadequacy. We cannot look at migration in isolation. The Minister talked about the long history of emigration from Ireland. That was largely due to the failures of successive Governments. How immigration is managed has to take into account our needs in terms of workers for key sectors such as health but also challenges including the housing crisis and the capacity of public services, as well as a humanitarian response to those who are fleeing war and persecution.

The international protection system has been in crisis mode for years. The time taken for decisions to be made is still far too long. Decisions, including deportations, are not being enforced and there has been massive profiteering from the provision of inappropriate IPAS accommodation. The Government has stripped many communities of having any real sense of agency or being part of the decisions that shape their own areas, particularly when it comes to the location of IPAS accommodation centres. Sinn Féin is very clear and unapologetic in saying that IPAS centres should only be placed in areas that have the resources to accommodate them. That means not in areas that are already struggling. There should be an end to the planning exemptions for IPAS and Ukrainian accommodation centres. That was a temporary emergency measure. Above all, there has to be transparency and accountability with regard to IPAS contracts. Profiteering has to be stamped out.

This year, an estimated €1.2 billion will be spent on IPAS accommodation. Hundreds of millions of euro more will be spent on accommodation for Ukrainians. A small number of private operators have made millions of euro because of the Government's dysfunctional approach. On top of that, there is no transparency, including around what qualifies some of these operators to provide these services. Figures revealed to me in a reply to a parliamentary ques-

tion show that the average rate paid per bed per night rose by 68% between 2022 and 2024. The level of profiteering is scandalous. We saw, in 2024 for example, two directors of a company called Igo Café Limited. That was a café that turned into IPAS accommodation providers, one of the largest beneficiaries of State contracts. The two owners paid themselves €4.6 million.

Other notorious examples that illustrate why a full examination is needed include the case of where millions of euro in taxpayers money were paid for IPAS accommodation to a company that was owned by a man named by the Criminal Assets Bureau as being linked to gangland crime. Meanwhile, we know that the Department of justice continued to lease accommodation from a company called GoodPeople Homecare Limited, which was found to have supplied fake Garda vetting clearances to Tusla. Now it has emerged, in another response I received to a parliamentary question from the Department, that the Department continues to use this company for vulnerability assessments of applicants for international protection, and that this is due to remain in place until next year. How can the Minister stand over that? There is an urgent need at this stage for a review of all IPAS and related contracts that have been granted. This involves a lot of public money. The least the public deserves is maximum transparency and accountability.

The Minister referenced that earlier this year the Government supported the extension of the temporary protection directive to 2027. In our view, it is well past time that emergency measures were ended. There has to be certainty for everyone involved. The Government has also allowed the Ukrainian accommodation recognition payment to remain in place despite the fact that it is clear that there is an impact on the private rental sector and it is unfair because it is not means-tested like any other housing support. It has allowed landlords to receive large tax-free payments while freeing them from any of the usual obligations they have with any other tenancy. During the summer recess there was at last some recognition from the Government that, as I and Sinn Féin have long argued, the scheme is having an adverse impact on the private rental sector. If the Minister finally accepts this is the case, then surely he will also accept that the scheme has to be limited to those currently availing of it who actually satisfy a means test; that it is limited to those who are housing Ukrainians in their homes, very laudably, but not using houses that should be on the private rental market; and that the practice of top-up payments to hosts should also be banned.

The Minister referenced international students, and again, the approach to stamp 2 student visas is symptomatic of the Government's hands-off approach to the management of immigration. The fact is that to date, there has been no Government analysis of the impact of any form of economic migration on accommodation or services, and that includes student permits. Universities, which are starved of funding, have become increasingly over-reliant on overseas students because they are paying much higher student fees. Other private colleges, we know, have been created solely for the purposes of making profits from international students.

Some other businesses facing ever-increasing costs themselves have become dependent on low-paid, non-unionised workers, including those here on student visas who can work part time. Managing immigration means that careful consideration must be given to a balance of factors with respect to the numbers of work permits and student permits that are issued. It is grossly irresponsible to encourage increased numbers of international students, including English language students, to come here at a time the Government has created a crisis in student accommodation provision. What results from this is the exploitation of those students who come here, who then often find themselves jammed into overcrowded and inappropriate accommodation while working in low-paid, precarious jobs. We have to examine the number of international students coming to Ireland as part of the overall management of migration. We also have to

address the situation where more student places are being put aside for international students simply because of the underfunding of universities. This is having consequences in a number of areas. The Irish Dental Association has called on the Government to limit the number of non-EEA students because it is having an impact in terms of the shortage of dentists across society.

Immigration must be managed and that should not be a controversial thing to say. States all over the world, including those with left-wing governments, unapologetically set the rules for entry into their countries and then enforce those rules. The truth is that in Ireland, economic migration has been guided only by the needs of corporations without consideration of other important social goals. It is absolutely logical and sensible - in fact, it is crucial - that issues related to low pay, downward pressure on jobs and the availability of housing is considered when deciding the number of employment and student residency permits issued each year.

The Government's handling of migration has been an inexcusable disaster. Through its failures, it has let down those who have come here and it has let down existing communities, many of whom have been left feeling voiceless. At the heart of Sinn Féin's approach to migration is our belief that the State has an obligation to manage immigration, not just to allow it to be set by market forces. We believe that at every level, the system has to be clear, fair and transparent with rules that are enforced. The gross profiteering and enrichment of individuals who have become millionaires due to Government incompetence must be stamped out. In the provision of IPAS and Ukrainian accommodation, communities must have a say in what is happening in their areas. There must be proper support for integration and to tackle racism. Policies that lead to resentment and unfairness must stop and that includes the accommodation recognition payment, which provides a non-means-tested housing support to one set of people that is not available to others equally in need of housing.

As this State grapples with the ongoing crisis in housing and with public services under pressure, the need for better planning across all aspects of housing policy, including ensuring that immigration is managed, has never been more urgent. Sinn Féin will continue to set out our proposals in this regard, guided by our anti-racist principles and determined to ensure migration to Ireland is managed in a way that enriches our country and those who come to our country. That is where we need to go.

**Deputy Pearse Doherty:** Déarfadh mé cúpla focal san am atá agam. There is no doubt that the Government has mishandled migration, particularly international protection. In doing so, it has ignored and indeed antagonised communities and driven a wedge between people. Real damage has been done on the ground and it is going to take a long time to repair. It will not be the Government picking up the pieces; it will be community workers, activists and ordinary people who do this day in day out. People on the ground will have to deal with the damage and the level of mistrust in this Government that has been caused over the while. There is no doubt that there are bad actors exploiting all of that.

However, the Government's role in this is not a good one. We have seen unsustainable numbers of people applying for asylum over the past three years. The Minister's figures showing that 80% are rejected in the first instance is an example of that. However, this has been obvious to everyone for the past number of years. Hotels have been taken over, town planning systems have been cast aside and instead of the Government in the past saying that this was unsustainable and instead of actually fixing the system by speeding up the processes and ensuring that deportations were enforced where they were required, what we had was commentary saying that this was the new normal.

We need to have a serious conversation about the actual causes that led to these levels of migration. There is no appetite for that conversation within this Government or indeed across Europe. We saw that with the disastrous migration pact to which the Government has signed us up. It totally ignored the root causes. If European states were serious about reducing the number of arrivals, they would stop selling arms to dictators and oppressive regimes. They would review all EU trade deals and practices that disadvantage poor countries and keep them poor and they would tackle the illicit financial flows to stop hundreds of billions of euro flowing out of poor countries and into European banks. However, that is not the conversation they want to have. For our part, we opposed the migration pact because we knew it undermined sovereignty. It allows European governments and this Government to pretend that they are doing something.

I said at the start that the Government has mishandled the issue of migration. My own county of Donegal is a good example of that. Donegal captures the failures of this Government on this issue probably better than any other. It is the most deprived county on the island of Ireland. It has the highest unemployment rate, the highest levels of deprivation and the least disposable income in the State yet it has the highest levels of IPAs and of those seeking temporary protection for Ukrainian international applicants than anywhere else in the State. It has the highest number of people benefiting from the accommodation recognition payment, ARP, system. How does a system like this come to pass? How does one of the poorest and most neglected counties in the State end up with the highest concentration of people who themselves are under serious pressure? It is because the Government does not have a plan. This Government and the past Government in which Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil were involved, allowed for speculation and profit to be the main driver in this. Sinn Féin made it clear that the location of these centres should not be in disadvantaged areas that do not have adequate resources. That applies equally for Coolock and Cloughaneely. We have had a developer-led approach looking for higher profits by getting sites in disadvantaged and rural areas.

It is a year and a half ago since I stood here and proposed amendments to the Government in relation to the ARP scheme. At the time, I told the Government it was putting pressure on the rental sector. I said it was completely unfair for the State to pay the rent of somebody who was working in the factory while the person who was working beside them in the same factory, earning the same wages, had to pay their own rent. It is completely unfair. Yet, the Government not only renewed it that time but renewed it again since. That system is unfair. Since that time, 16 months ago, there has been an explosion of ARP accommodation in my own county of Donegal. It has gone up by three times. It went from 600 units to more than 2,000 today. It is no wonder that people come knocking at my door or go to other TDs saying they cannot find rental accommodation. Yet, 2,000 properties have been found for Ukrainians who need accommodation and they are being paid for by the State. There is a resentment in relation to that. That is not a situation that was fostered by Ukrainians. It is the Government who designed this scheme, which is wrong.

There has been no considered management of migration that takes into account the ability or the capacity of communities to integrate those who make their homes here. Migration must be managed in the best interests of the people of Ireland. It needs to take into account the needs of workers in key sectors such as health and the challenges in capacity, housing and other public services and the humanitarian response to those fleeing war and persecution.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** I join the Minister in condemning the spate of racist attacks that we have seen in recent weeks and months. I am concerned across the political spectrum in many ways with respect to the approach to migration and immigration particularly and about

some of the language being used. It sounds to me that we are almost in an arms race to the right in this regard. By legitimising the language and the *modus operandi* of the political right we are never meaningfully going to address any of the issues or concerns that people might have in respect of migration or immigration.

My party was one of the first political parties to bring forward a policy paper on migration in 2023. Migration has always existed and always will. The question we face as policymakers is how best to manage it to ensure a well-functioning, regulated system. I agree with the Minister on the need for a proper and transparent rules-based system. However, the reality is that people move. They move for a variety of reasons: some for work, some for love and some for safety. They move to make a better life for themselves and for their families. All of us as human beings want the same things: a good job, a secure home and most importantly, a safe life.

Global forced displacement is at a record high. Almost half of the people who flee globally are actually children. Most of those who are forced to move are not in or anywhere near Ireland. They are in poor and developing countries, which have shouldered the majority of the brunt of forced displacement. Global instability has contributed to a substantial increase in the numbers seeking international protection in Ireland. The numbers have risen from just under 5,000 in 2019 to more than 13,000 now, yet the direct provision system remains in place despite a commitment by the previous Government to abolish it.

Many communities throughout Ireland have been strong in the welcome and support they have provided for refugees but many of these communities, including communities I represent in Limerick, have been targeted with misinformation or disinformation. This has been worsened by a failure of both Government and State agencies to communicate properly with communities. Let me state first that nobody has a veto over where anybody can live, but we need to see local authorities, elected representatives and community representatives included early on in the information-sharing process. Local communities should be clearly informed of the additional resources, funding and services that will be put in place to support refugees and international protection applicants. We also need a robust campaign to combat fears, stereotypes, tropes and racism amongst the public in general. We need to see a national counter-disinformation strategy, which is in the programme for Government.

We need action in regulating social media and digital platforms. They are breeding grounds for hate. Minority communities are relentlessly targeted online and there are no consequences for those responsible. TikTok and X are consequence-free sewers for those who want to perpetuate racism and hate. We have also had at least 31 buildings burnt down with little or no consequences.

I was only elected in December of last year. On no less than four occasions since last December we have had a literal ring of steel around this place due to far-right, anti-immigrant protests, with people looking for us literally to be hung outside this very door. It has been terrifying at times. The fact of the matter is that these protests are organised on X and TikTok. There is a call to action and they are often live-streamed for hours. Yet, there are no consequences. Until we take on these social media conglomerates, we are at absolutely nothing. We need the EU Commission and Commissioner Michael McGrath to use the forthcoming democracy shield legislation to force social media companies to dismantle the recommender system that promotes hate and disinformation. They are actively pushing this at people.

I am sick and tired of seeing a minority of people take our national flag and seek to bas-

tardise it.

*3 o'clock*

They cannot be allowed to do that in our name. Our flag is a symbol of unity and peace and should not be used to sow hate and division. I urge everybody and all of us to take back the flag because the immigrant community in this country are afraid. There was a well-documented case in Dublin, in the Minister's constituency. I know of a concerning recent case where a Pakistani doctor working at University Hospital Limerick was subjected to a racially motivated physical assault. Our hospital is built on the backs of these people. If they decide to leave, we will be in serious trouble. The doctor was left feeling very vulnerable and abandoned after the attack.

Since the nineties, immigration has transformed this country into one in which one fifth of the population were born overseas. Is that not miraculous when compared with a country that, 40 years ago, was the sick man of Europe? Unfortunately, the housing crisis, which the Government has perpetuated, is fuelling misdirected resentment towards immigrants and asylum seekers. We need to be better at tackling this. We need proper anti-racism education. We also need proper hate crime legislation, which the Government has parked. People need protection from verbal and physical abuse based on ethnic, religious and cultural background. It is for us, as politicians, to show leadership on this. Every individual elected to the House has a responsibility to not perpetuate the spread of hate. Particularly in a position as privileged as the one we are in, we should not be stoking anti-migrant rhetoric. Repeatedly questioning the rights of people who have come to Ireland to seek international protection or for other reasons has real and harmful consequences for real people who live among us. People should not feel emboldened to harass or attack others based on their perceived race or ethnicity. I am calling on the Minister to fully enforce the hate offences Act of 2024, which provides for increased sentences for offences aggravated by hatred, based on characteristics such as race, religion, sexual orientation and other protected characteristics. As I said, we must update the Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred Act to reflect the realities of online hate speech. We need full implementation of the national action plan against racism.

There are some welcome commitments in respect of integration in the programme for Government. They include references to the need for more investment in State-owned centres for staffing and providing emergency accommodation to everyone. However, the majority of commitments in respect of immigration and migration in the programme for Government are restrictive. A focus on restrictive measures will not solve the long-standing issues we have.

The fact of the matter is that this county is at boiling point. I do clinics every week, as do many of my colleagues. I deal with housing in the vast majority of cases. The amount of misinformation and disinformation I have to tackle, day in and day out, is frightening. It is frightening because so many buildings around this country have been burned down with little or no consequence for those who did it. We need a well-managed migration system - that is a fact - but we also need to ensure, as politicians in positions of leadership, that we are careful, measured and responsible with the language we use. I have been in this Chamber a number of times since last December and I have heard people say things and make statements. I have heard them use Leaders' Questions as a forum to stoke anti-immigrant sentiment. It is not acceptable and people, if they do not, should know a hell of a lot better. All across the world, the right is on the rise. Anti-immigrant sentiment is on the rise. We need to ensure that whatever we do in this House and this country, we do not make the situation worse.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** I share the concerns about, and condemnation of, the attacks about which we have heard in recent months.

In response to the Minister's opening statement, I welcome this debate. It is good that we are having it. I commend the Minister on the focus and urgency he has brought since his appointment in January. His approach has been, frankly, a breath of fresh air: practical, evidenced and rooted in fairness to applicants and to communities alike. I echo his sentiments in respect of the rules-based system, which is essential.

Let us be honest about how we got here. After the Covid pandemic, international travel resumed, war returned to Europe and secondary movements across the EU accelerated. Ireland experienced a sharp surge in applications for international protection. To put the numbers on the record, there were 2,649 applications in 2021, 13,651 in 2022, 13,277 in 2023 and 18,561 in 2024, the highest on record. This year, to the end of August, there were 8,258 applications, which is down approximately 41% to 43% on the same period last year.

The causes are well-known and include the reopening of borders after the pandemic, conflict-driven displacement and the interplay of policies within the common travel area and across the EU. As the Minister noted, Ireland's economic success has also acted as a magnet for skills and opportunity. This rapid growth put real pressure on the State. Accommodation costs in the international protection accommodation service have risen from €129.4 million in 2019 to a projected €1.3 billion in 2025. Nearly 33,000 people are accommodated across 320-odd sites across the country. That is a steep fiscal curve by any measure.

The decision to purchase Citywest Hotel, with a capacity of approximately 2,300, moves us from high-cost leasing to a State asset with an estimated payback of approximately four years and savings of €1 billion across 25 years, while enabling a 13-week end-to-end processing model on site. This is the right strategy. We need to move away from the private model.

We must also acknowledge the social impact. Trust in the system was damaged in parts of the country. Irish people are very generous, but we like to see things handled properly. I want to put on record my appreciation for officials working in extremely difficult circumstances. At the same time, there were cases where communications with communities and public representatives were poorly handled. We need to rebuild confidence by engaging earlier, sharing clear information and ensuring infrastructure and services are planned alongside accommodation decisions.

Since January, the Minister has set a different tone and delivered measurable change. Staffing at the International Protection Office has been scaled up from approximately 212 in 2022 to over 600 full-time equivalents this summer, driving more decisions and helping to reduce the backlog, as the Minister outlined earlier. A new immigration customer service portal has 145,000 registered users, 111,000 queries resolved and 60,000 registration appointments made, bringing transparency and basic customer service into a complex system. First-instance outcomes to 31 August 2025 resulted in 81.5% refusals and 18.5% grants, reflecting the mix of cases now being decided more quickly.

Crucially, enforcement credibility has been restored. Signed deportation orders are up this year to date and voluntary returns have increased with enhanced packages. There is stronger border control at Dublin Airport, with 4,154 doorstops to the end of August. The result is that applications are down over 40% in the year to date. That is cause and effect that people can see.

The public understand that no Government can turn on a dime, but they want proof that the wheel has been gripped and that the Government is in control. The figures I have cited demonstrate progress. We have further to go, and we will go further. On Europe, ultimately, Ireland cannot stand alone. A rules-based, shared system is the only sustainable path, as we have discussed in this Chamber over many months.

I travelled to Brussels earlier this year to raise and discuss these issues with Commissioner Michael McGrath. I welcome the practical turn now under way via the EU migration and asylum pact and Ireland's national implementation plan, approved on 25 March 2025.

The pact provides faster, fairer, more coherent processes across the EU, accelerated border procedures with three-month decision timelines, increased co-operation on returns, the use of safe-country and safe-third-country concepts, and better data-sharing to tackle abuse. Ireland will transpose this through the International Protection Bill 2025, which, among other changes, will reduce oral hearings at appeal while preserving the rights to be heard and to an effective remedy. The pact comes into effect in 2026, and our job is to be ready.

It is important also to note what the UN is saying. Just this morning, the UNHCR Assistant High Commissioner for Protection stated deportations are a "critical element" of a functioning asylum system. It is about a fair, efficient system people can trust.

Alongside protection, Ireland runs significant legal routes for those who come here to study, work and join family, as outlined earlier. In 2024, there were 60,901 student permissions. Visa and permission decisions exceeded 150,000. These routes are essential to our economy but we also need to be honest about capacity. Housing, schools, GP numbers and transport cannot expand by magic. As a small, open economy, we should prioritise sectors that are mission-critical to both competitiveness and community well-being, healthcare, elder care, and house building, in particular, so that migration actively helps us clear the most pressing bottlenecks.

The programme for Government commitments remain clear: reduce reliance on hotels; develop State-owned capacity; require contributions from applicants where appropriate, in respect of which I welcome the Minister's commitment today; and where there is an unsuccessful application, the person must leave, as the Minister has outlined. That is the architecture of a system that is not just fair but also seen to be fair.

I will finish where I began. The Minister has set a clear direction and the early results are visible: more decisions, firmer enforcement, fewer unfounded applications and a pipeline of EU-level reforms that will standardise good practice across the EU. There is more to do – on appeals timelines, on integration pathways and on honest, two-way communication with host communities – but the ship is turning. In Ireland, people are very generous but we just like to see things handled properly. With this approach – faster, fairer, firmer – we can protect the integrity of the system, support those fleeing danger and give our communities confidence that migration is managed, not accidental.

I support the Minister's programme and look forward to working with him and his colleagues across the House to deliver the reforms, capacity and clarity the public rightly expects.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I am really glad to have the opportunity to speak on these statements this evening and that the Minister is in the House to listen. My home town is Ballaghaderreen, west Roscommon. This is an issue I have raised repeatedly since my being elected in 2020 because our town was one of very few in the entire State to take in Syrian refugees back

in 2017. It welcomed and gave céad míle fáilte to the refugees, who arrived in their hundreds. Indeed, hundreds have gone through the town's reception centre, which remains open to this day. I could never understand why we were allowing and actually ensuring tension and anger in the community by not simply putting in, Department by Department, the resources needed for both the existing community and the new one. By not doing that, both suffer. That is the reality.

In Ballaghaderreen in 2017, funding came from the Department of justice for a new childcare facility. That was later pulled. A primary care centre was first promised way back in 2012, but because of the severe capacity issues affecting both GP practices in the town, both of which have had a waiting list for a long time, we are now back to square one. It has not been delivered and is once again going to tender. What happened was of great frustration to me in that it was not rocket science for each Department to say, if putting X number of people into a rural town, the town in County Roscommon with the highest level of deprivation and unemployment, that it would support that town, the new community and the existing residents. It could have been a blueprint, for the rest of the State, for what could and should have been done but was not done. Not doing it and not putting in place the required resources and services is what causes the tension and anger. These are totally avoidable, regardless of where the town is and what its situation is. Unfortunately, the resources were never put in. Luckily, funding for childcare was got elsewhere, and the project will proceed. It is desperately needed.

The circumstances of the primary school in Ballaghaderreen are similar. There are almost 30 different nationalities in it. It waited and waited and eventually got planning permission in July for 12 new classrooms. The works need to be progressed very quickly. I hope the lesson will be learned that towns that welcome and do right by people should be supported. That was not the case in Ballaghaderreen. The reception centre is now seeking an extension, and the planning application is with the council. Again, mistakes have been made by letting down good towns, towns with good communities that struggle as it is. They were really let down by the Government.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** I stand to speak on the statements on migration. There are many wonderful aspects to it. I would like to talk about the experience and enhancement of communities the length and breadth of the country, but there is also something we just cannot step away from at the moment. Things feel different. It feels like the racism has increased and like the fear in the communities who contact my office has started to become a lot more palpable. We are witnessing attacks on the street and the targeting of people because of the colour of their skin and the sound of their voices. As we talk about migration, we cannot step away from the fact that we are actually talking about people who have come here in search of safety and are living in genuine fear.

We barely had a far-right movement in this country only a few years ago; however, through the action or inaction of this Government and the one before it, it has been allowed to soar. I appreciate that this is not reflected at the ballot box or anything like that, but it is reflected in the movement we are seeing on the streets and in how it is mobilising and becoming better organised and how its actions have become a little more insidious. We cannot say we did not warn that this was happening. Community groups said it and activists came to our offices. We in opposition brought it to the Chamber and talked about it consistently. It seems different now, does it not? It seems like there is a foothold. The Minister was warned. When the Tánaiste decided last year to punch down and scapegoat migrants for the housing crisis, we warned the Government. Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, as the then Minister for Justice, spoke on national radio about the deportation of children and adults. We said to him even then that the manner in which it

was done and the championing of it in the manner of a general coming back from war, as it was described at the time, reverberated beyond the message he was trying to send. It emboldens. It tells those same people who are trying to spread fear that they are winning, which makes them become more emboldened and more vigorous in their efforts.

When the Minister watered down the hate speech legislation, stripping it of its core protections, we warned that it would embolden those spreading hatred. We are now living with the consequences.

More than one in three hate attacks reported to the Garda last year was racially motivated. There were 264 racist incidents in a single year, up 24% since 2021. These are only the incidents that were reported. We know there is under-reporting. Those affected are people who are beaten in our streets and parents who watch their children being assaulted and told to go back to where they came from. Workers are abused on buses, and nurses finishing night shift are terrified of walking home. Experts have said plainly that racism is becoming more aggressive, more obvious and more brazen because people feel emboldened to engage in it. Who has emboldened them? It is a result of the choices made at every level. I am referring to a Government that has put political expediency over leadership, used the language of division instead of solidarity and decided that telling migrants to be gone is to be championed rather than tackling its own failures. These failures include the failure to implement the recommendations of the Catherine Day report. So often we talk about the IPAS centres, but where are the State-run reception centres? How often have we come into this Chamber over the past five years and called for these failures to be addressed?

The far right did not appear out of nowhere; it was given space to grow because of how others were scapegoated and how vulnerable and neglected communities have been left in the lurch for decades. Instead of resourcing housing, healthcare and public services, a narrative was allowed to take hold that it is the migrant who is to blame, not the State. In many ways, that suited a State that was, for too long, indifferent to the fear of those same communities.

We need to get on top of what is becoming an increasing problem. People have already been attacked. That will only become increasingly worse.

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** I listened to the Minister's opening comments. I lost track of the number of times he said the phrase "rules-based system". In talking about international protection, some of the words I did not hear in his comments, or when the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, provided more focus in his comments, were "compassion", "trauma-informed", "gender-specific accommodation" or any of the actual compassionate, humanitarian, dignified elements of an international protection system towards which we should be striving. None of those words appeared. All we have heard about from this Government since it came into power are the restrictive measures it has brought into the international protection system. That seems to be its entire and sole focus in terms of international protection. As we have heard from a range of speakers today, all that does is feed into the far-right rhetoric that is growing in society, which brings anti-migrant sentiments right into our mainstream population. That is what it does.

The other thing the Minister failed to mention about this rules-based system he talked about is that those rules are rules the Government has set. They do not even meet the obligations we have under international law, never mind domestic law. When will we get to a point where we are actually speaking in reality about the experience of people who come to this country, in their

most vulnerable situation, seeking our humanity and help? What we are seeing is a direction of travel, and the EU migration and asylum pact will only bring us there more quickly, that denies the right to asylum and brings people into detention and de facto detention. All along, all we are seeing with all of this is bringing us into a situation where the Government is emboldening and fomenting this incredible anti-immigrant sentiment in our society. Tá dualgas orainn mar ionadaithe poiblí seasamh in aghaidh an chiníochais agus in aghaidh scéalta chailleach an uafáis.

**Deputy Jen Cummins:** I will use my time to show appreciation and give thanks to two groups in my constituency in Dublin South-Central, Inchicore For All and Dublin 8 for All. These two groups have been working to ensure that people coming to this country seeking protection are welcomed, supported and feel part of the community.

Inchicore For All was set up to support several people and families who arrived in Ireland and are temporarily housed in the area. Since its establishment, there have been picnics, summer trips, international food events, parties, training and a freecycle so that things can be donated and shared. Young people and children have made friends and have all become involved in sporting groups and other activities. Dublin 8 for All has held parties, events and gatherings since it was founded. However, it had a very tough number of months, with the erection of an encampment in Dublin 8 beside several schools to protest against an IPAS centre. Dublin 8 for All worked with people from the encampment, councillors, TDs, gardaí and Dublin City Council to try to create calm and ease tensions.

Both these groups are run by volunteers. They are people with big hearts and kindness. They have so many ideas and such a great amount of energy. They provide safety, support, laughter and fun in our community. Friendships have been formed and strength has been built. I thank them and say “Well done” to them for that work. They have made Dublin South-Central very proud. These groups exist out of kindness, but on the other side of that they are there to create protection from a small but loud group of people who are hell-bent on creating hate and division in our community. Let us not forget how many Irish people are currently living, to provide themselves with a better lifestyle, in Dubai, Australia and lots of places. We have to remember that.

Climate change will challenge us with migration in a way we have not seen. We must plan for that.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** Sometimes, politics is not just about what you say and how you say it. It is also about what you do not say. What I have not heard today from the Minister, or anyone in the Chamber, is that compared with most other European countries Ireland has a relatively normal level, or even low level, of migration, particularly on the international protection side of things, at 1.2% of all applicants across the EU. The reason it does not feel like that to many people out there is that the Government has completely failed to put in the services and resources to ensure there is sufficient, proper and inclusive integration of people when they come to this country. That is why it feels so significant to so many communities out there. The Government was not prepared.

The reality is Ireland is a very wealthy country and migration will continue to be a feature of our lives, but the Government has failed to forward plan and make sure we are in a position to do that. What that failure means now is that in the country we love, and where we are so proud of the welcomes we provide, we are changing. An element of change is coming into our country. We are seeing people being attacked because of the colour of their skin, their accent,

what they are wearing, or if they have dark hair or dark eyes. That is not the type of country we want to be. We want to be an inclusive, welcoming and fair country but what we are turning into, because of the Government's policies and those of previous Governments, is a country living in fear. We will be very divided. This will not get better and the Minister shaking his head will not help.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** I am disagreeing with you.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** He needs to wake up, take responsibility and make sure that he provides the leadership we need to see so that we can deal with this issue properly and fairly.

**Deputy Barry Ward:** I will start by distinguishing something that is not distinguished enough in public discourse, namely, the difference between immigration and migration. Very often, when I deal with people on these issues, they do not necessarily make that distinction. Immigration, or people who come here to work, live and contribute to our society at lots of different levels, includes people we absolutely need. They keep our hospitals running and our hotels, restaurants and communities busy. At a time when we have full employment in this country, thank God, we are very lucky to have communities that are willing to come and work here as part of an immigration process complete with visas, permissions, etc. Some of them are European Union citizens. Many of them are from outside the European Union but wherever they come from, when they come here to work in our bars, restaurants and, particularly, hospitals, in home healthcare services, in assistance services at all kinds of different levels and in our schools, we are so lucky to have those people. That is the immigration system.

Parallel with that is the migration system. This includes people who probably have not come here by choice necessarily. They have come here because of some upheaval in their own countries or some situation that makes it dangerous, unpalatable or even impossible for them to live where they have come from. They very often come from war-torn areas, or from communities where there is massive discrimination against them because of their ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation or gender. As part of that migration system, they come here seeking international protection. They are the people who most people see as immigrants, when in fact the category is much wider than that. They are people who come here seeking the protection of Ireland.

The irony is that we as Irish people have benefited from similar protection across the world for centuries. Everybody in this Chamber will have family members who live in other countries, be it the United States, or the far side of the world in places such as New Zealand and Australia, European countries and across the world. They live there because they went there seeking a better life or, in some instances, they went there seeking protection because situations in this country were unpalatable, for a variety of reasons, over the past 150 to 200 years. They were brought into those communities as guests and given the protection of those communities. It is a consequence of our success as a country that the duty now falls to us to give that temporary, and maybe sometimes longer term or even permanent, protection to people who are in exactly the same place our forefathers were at the time of the Famine and persecution in this country when they went abroad. The role now falls to us to look after those people who come here.

The difference now is that we benefit from a very substantial and complex, but also comprehensive, international rules-based system for how we deal with people who come here. That is the international protection system that manages those people who come here seeking what we used to call asylum and is now known as international protection. They come here and there are criteria they must meet to be allowed to stay here. If they stay here, it is technically,

certainly initially, on a temporary basis until such time as they are in a position to return to their countries. Equally, we all recognise that for somebody who comes here, receives international protection, lives and works in this country or who might be born in this country if their parents were in that situation and has gone through school in this country, it does not always make sense for them to return to the country from which their family came.

What is most important is that we use that international rules-based system to process those applicants and, most importantly, do so in a swift way. This has not been the case for a long number of years. I am sure the Minister will acknowledge that he benefits from the foresight of his predecessor as Minister, Deputy McEntee, who massively increased the number of staff available in the international protection office such that those applications that were taking years to process a few short years ago are now being reduced to terms of months. This is exactly as it should be. That is fair not just to the people who live in this country and are entitled to have certainty for those coming in seeking international protection but, perhaps more importantly, to those seeking international protection. It is not fair for people to come here from a war-torn country or a place where they were being persecuted only to be told they must wait years for a decision about whether they can stay, leaving them in a limbo where, for a long time, they could not work, though now they can after six months. It leaves them in a situation where their future is totally uncertain. That is not fair. That is why we need to accelerate the processing of international protection applications and give people clarity on the decisions regarding whether or not they can stay here for the duration of that persecution or the instability in their home country.

While they are waiting for that process, we have obligations not to ignore or abandon them but instead to ensure they have safe places to live. That is what the international protection accommodation service is for. That is probably the system that has created most controversy with people. I say this with respect to all those working in this area. It is a programme that has been mismanaged. It has been particularly mismanaged from a public information perspective. We have been far too afraid to be honest with communities around this country and to be up front with them in saying, "Here is what we are planning to do. Tell us what you think. Tell us what you think the downsides are. Tell us what you think the pitfalls are. Tell us why you think it's a good idea or a bad idea or whatever it is." The reality is that those sitting in a Department in Dublin cannot know every corner of the country and every community. They cannot know if the Department purchased a hotel in an area where that is the only place where tourists can stay. They cannot know the effect that will have on the local community. There has been far too much centralised paternalism in Dublin in terms of being honest with communities, asking them and talking to them about what is proposed. Fundamentally, Irish people are genuine, generous and welcoming people. That is our history and there is ample evidence to support the fact that Irish people are happy to open their doors to communities who come here with genuine issues in their home countries, to accommodate and look after them and let them form part of our communities for however long it is they must be here. What has happened, however, is that those communities have been left in the dark. They hear rumours that an IPAS centre is going in here, there are X number of people coming in here and they are coming from a totally different background - they might be from a different religion or whatever it is. This breeds mistrust - mistrust between them and the Government but also mistrust between them and the innocent people who are fleeing persecution who come to live in their communities. Let us be honest with the Irish people and talk to them about what is actually happening.

Every Member of this House will have had a situation in their constituency where a rumour

goes around, be it founded or unfounded, that some centre is going in here. In that context, we as representatives need to be honest with people in our communities and constituencies. We need to be honest about what the actual effect of a community like that coming into our constituency is. The complaints that are often made to me are that people are in fear. They fear that if a community of single men is moved into an area, they would not be able to let their daughters out. I do not think those people are racist, but I do think they are ill-informed. Every statistic will show that the vast majority of people charged with sexual crimes in this country are Irish - even in terms of the proportion of the population that are Irish. The incidence of crimes involving international protection applicants is minimal compared with those involving Irish people. Let us be clear about that. It is the gap of information that allows it to be filled by people with nefarious intent with lies just like that.

The other concerns mentioned to me relate to healthcare. It is a case of, “We cannot get a date with our GP. We cannot get into a GP’s surgery in the local area so when these extra 50 or 100 people come into our community, where are they going to get healthcare?” That is a legitimate concern. The Minister and I have an IPAS centre between our constituencies or in his constituency and at the edge of mine. The number of people who will fit into that will need healthcare. One of the things I have said repeatedly to the Department is that we need to provide on-site healthcare for those people. We cannot expect local GP services to absorb them. They do not do so in any event because they do not have the capacity. Let us deal with legitimate concerns like that and actually address them with practical solutions.

The other issue people raise is education. When children are coming into IPAS centres, where are they going to continue their education? We cannot abandon them. They must continue to have education, if only to equip them for the temporary situation they might be in. That duty falls on local schools. Teachers tell me, “I am already up to my gills dealing with the 20 or 30 students I have in my class. I cannot take in six students who might not have English. I cannot deal with the extra resource implications of that.” I understand what those teachers are saying and I understand what the parents of the children in those classes are saying. Let us provide a practical solution for those legitimate concerns about the accommodation of international protection applicants. Let us say we will provide dedicated educational opportunity for those people on site if they have no English or, where they go into the local school, let us provide that school with the additional resources that are needed.

It is not okay to abandon this. It is not okay to leave an information vacuum. It is not okay to not be honest with the communities we represent. Let us trust them to acknowledge the duty we have as a wealthy First World country. Let us trust them, with the generosity we know they have, with the real information about what is happening and the consequent resource applications that are required.

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** Migration has become a touchstone issue in Irish public discourse. Too often, it is used as a wedge issue - a tool to divide communities, to stoke fear, to sow hate and to distract from the Government’s failures. In my experience, people who come to Ireland from abroad make an enormous contribution to our society. They work alongside us in hospitals and care homes, in our schools, in construction, technology and hospitality. They are neighbours, friends, team mates, fellow parishioners, partners, colleagues and carers. All of us, if we think for a moment, can name people from other countries who have given outstanding service to our families, our communities and Ireland as a whole. We are a nation of welcomes and we value them as part of our society. Is tír na chéad míle fáilte sinne. Cuirimid luach orthu siúd atá ina gcónaí inár measc agus ag cur lenár bpobail.

Sinn Féin is crystal clear that there can be no tolerance of racism or xenophobia. There is no space in our society for violence or hate. We have experienced xenophobia abroad and sectarianism at home. We must be able to talk to one another about migration in a way that is honest, respectful and productive. We must support communities and support integration. We need a proper and adequately resourced strategy that begins at community level and provides resources for schools, clubs and community groups and much-needed investment in community infrastructure across rural and urban Ireland.

The Minister must acknowledge that Government failure has created fertile ground for division. Decades of underinvestment in housing, health and education have left our public services under severe pressure. Communities that already struggle for GPs, school places and affordable rents are asked to carry the can for the lack of planning at national level. That is unfair to those communities and to those who are seeking a new home here. Government has failed and is continuing to fail and our communities are the ones paying the price.

The international protection system is not working. Decisions and appeals take far too long and profiteering by unscrupulous IPAS accommodation providers has been allowed to run unchecked. Billions of euro are being spent on contracts with very little transparency while some private operators enrich themselves. This undermines public confidence and it undermines fairness.

Sinn Féin is calling for a full review of IPAS contracts, an end to profiteering, and proper planning in the siting of accommodation guided by need, capacity and the availability of services. We need to end the policy of handing over more powers on migration to the EU and instead make decisions that reflect Ireland's unique circumstances, including the outworkings of Brexit and the common travel area. Above all, we need leadership - leadership that is fair, transparent and rooted in the best of our values. That means standing up to racism, tackling profiteering, resourcing integration and managing migration in a way that protects for all our people regardless of their background. That is Sinn Féin's vision and mine. It is a fair, managed and humane migration system, one that strengthens communities rather than dividing them.

**Deputy Roderic O'Gorman:** It is important we are addressing this issue on the first week back, especially after the summer we have had, which saw communities, particularly the Indian and southeast Asian communities, targeted for both verbal and physical assaults in a number of locations across the country. I represent Dublin West, which is an extremely vibrant, extremely diverse part of Dublin and one where we have communities from many different countries. Over the course of the summer I had the opportunity through canvassing and local events to talk to people specifically from the Indian and south Asian communities and hear of their experiences. While they remain committed to Ireland, feel welcome and feel part of this society, everyone I spoke to reported increased levels of verbal abuse in terms of what they experienced themselves and what their children and family members experienced as they travel around. An email I received from a constituent particularly struck me. It was from a woman here from Pakistan. Her partner is Irish and the pair of them were walking to Coolmine train station one day, hand in hand, when a gang of young lads spotted them and started to use various racial slurs. She is from Pakistan and we can all guess what exactly was said. What struck me most about her email was she was not surprised. This has become normalised for her. She had baked this sort of experience in. Overt racism is now a regular experience for this woman.

That represents a change in Irish society. There has always been racism in Ireland but I do not think 15 years ago people would have been as blatant as to just corner someone walking

in the street and start this sort of racist abuse. There has been a change and the online space is a major driver of that change. The hateful rhetoric we see people being bombarded with is a key part of driving this change. A Cheann Comhairle, you opened the Dáil yesterday talking about what we need to do there and I welcome your initiative. We need to look strongly at the recommender systems these online platforms use. This is not about restricting free speech as this material will still be available online. People can still search for it and decide if they want to turn the algorithm on so they receive this material. It is not, therefore, about limiting free speech but about giving people freedom of choice in the content that arrives in their feed. I would hope that when we talk about this issue we can look at these recommender systems and at turning them off.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** Over the summer there was a series of attacks, apparently particularly directed against the Indian community. We had the case of an Indian man in Tallaght who was attacked, beaten and humiliated. He had clothing removed from him and there was the age-old racist trope of accusing somebody of colour of being violent. They were trying to accuse him of being a paedophile and there was absolutely no evidence of this, as the Garda said. We also had a six-year-old girl pushed off her bike. Her mother is an Indian nurse here. There are countless reports of similar incidents. Even the other day I had a report of an attack in a playground in Tyrellstown on somebody of colour and obviously I am going to look into that even more. The worrying trend is children and teenagers are involved in some of these attacks. That speaks to how they are imbibing racist ideas from older people, social media and the world around them.

It is not a new phenomenon. The Indian community I have spoken to would say it is completely underreported. In the last number of years people just have not bothered. The Minister must take note of what is said in every forum I have been in, which is that gardaí are very dismissive when these incidents are reported to them. They just want to whoosh them out of the station. There is no record, seemingly, kept in many cases and that was a widespread complaint. I am asking the Minister to meet representatives, to hear that and then to take it up with the Garda. There should be a record kept of racially motivated incidents.

I am running out of time but I want to say a couple of quick things. People who are in this country and working here are living in fear, including taxi drivers and nurses. Obviously this is strongly coming from the far right, but it is coming from within the system as well. “Stop the boats” came from the Tories. There are actions this Government has taken or failed to take, like allowing our housing crisis to not be dealt with for so long. Growing inequality just allows fertile ground for the far right.

I will mention some TDs in this House who were using the exact same language as the far right. I noticed “The myth of multiculturalism ... [and the] spiral of violence”, “... a semi-utopian belief that Irish and European societies can ... integrate irreconcilable and overtly hostile value systems” and “One culture enshrines equality ... the rights of LGBTQ people [and the other does not]”. This was said on the Independent Ireland website by Deputy O’Flynn.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy’s time is up. I call Deputy Stanley.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** It is very important we call that out----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** You are sharing with your colleague. You are running down his clock.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** -----that they are also echoing the far right as well.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you. I call Deputy Stanley.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** It is five seconds. I am about to stop.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I thank the Ceann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important issue. On the attacks on the Indian community, I have many Indian neighbours in the housing estate I live in. Most of them are working in the health services and they are doing great work and are very good people. We need to counter these racist attacks on them. We need a fair, efficient and rules-based immigration system. The current system is chaotic and inadequate. Those who are genuinely fleeing war, persecution or famine must be granted protection. Racism directed against them must be rejected. Those who do not meet the criteria for international protection, as the Minister said, have to leave. According to figures he gave, four out of five applicants in the first part of this year were failing their first assessment. That means changes are required to the system. It also means the 20% who pass the first assessment are not getting the assistance they need because the resources are not there for that. It is clear the list of so-called safe countries needs to be expanded. I mean this is in a fair way because there are more than 11 safe countries in the world. Those who are coming from safe countries are, as we know, less likely to be granted international protection. Assessments need to be quicker to be fairer to the applicants. They need to be done in three or four months, not three or four years, and appeals in cases that fail need to be done in a shorter timeframe.

In any case, there needs to be a shorter timeframe. People should not languish for years in direct provision centres. When I was Chair of the public accounts committee I was told by the Secretary General that a person was in it for 15 years. What is that about? If a person's application and appeals fail, they have to leave the State. Their departure must be verified, but that is not happening. When I asked the question at the public accounts committee the Secretary General told me the person gets a letter to their last known address. That is it. He told me that last year. It is on the record of the public accounts committee. If that is the system, it is not a system that is working. Those who are granted international protection must be assisted in every way possible. This is key. We have to help these people integrate and live here with training, work and other supports to ensure those who are genuinely fleeing war, persecution or famine are assisted in every way possible. Racism must be countered and that has to start in the schools. Parents have an obligation here as well. The Day report recommendations need to be implemented so we have a smaller number of large reception centres and people are transitioned quickly. Instead, we have applicants living in old pubs, converted shops and substandard accommodation. This is becoming big business and we must move away from it.

**Deputy Albert Dolan:** Migration has always been part of Ireland's story. For generations our people went abroad seeking work and opportunity. Today people come here for the same reasons, namely, safety, jobs and a chance to build a life. It is important to say migration is not new for this country and given the current climate of the globe I do not believe it is going away. It is important that we distinguish between what we might call normal immigration - people who come in, apply for a work permit and work and contribute to this country - and those who are fleeing persecution and seeking asylum for various reasons. The real issue here is how we manage it. Managed well, migration is positive, and strengthens our economy, our health service and our communities. Managed badly, it creates division, waste and a loss of confidence.

I want to be really clear about something I have watched over the last few years and I know

the Minister is acutely aware of. It is the rapid increase in spending on IPAS accommodation, going from €130 million in 2020 to over €480 million in 2022 and in excess of €1.2 billion last year. We all know this rate of increase is not sustainable but I understand that it was in response to a crisis. The numbers had risen very quickly and had to be managed. My problem with how quickly the money was spent is that the financial procedures appear to have gone out the window. There was no public procurement and every IPAS centre was set up on an expression-of-interest basis. Essentially, whoever could provide the beds quickly enough got the contract, which was wrong because such big money is at stake here. It was wrong that that scale of money was paid out with no proper financial procedures in place. As a member of the public accounts committee I am looking forward to officials from the Department of justice coming before the public accounts committee to discuss how they are rectifying it now. That was a couple of billion euro in just a few short years. It has just left frustration in communities and we still do not have a sustainable system in place. There is a lot of work to be done there.

It is important to say that migration as a whole is not the problem. The problem is the lack of a rules-based system and the absence of forward planning, clear procedures and accountability. A fair system must mean two things: efficiency and humanity for applicants but also fairness for communities being asked to absorb the pressure. The community recognition fund has been widely welcomed across the country and has played a really important role in recognising the efforts of communities to integrate asylum applicants while they are with them in their community.

I know the Minister is working to accelerate the speed at which applicants are dealt with. Ultimately, nobody deserves to be left in a hotel unable to work and not receiving very much support. The reality is they need to be dealt with swiftly and a determination made. If somebody is permitted to stay, work and contribute, they get to do that, but if they are required to leave because they are not entitled to seek asylum in this country or they have not come through the proper channels, they must ultimately leave.

What failed was not foresight. We knew there would be pressure from the war in Ukraine and from international protection, but instead of structured planning the State went from one emergency to another and was essentially firefighting. I know I am hammering on that point, but it is important that we put in place the structures. There has definitely been a marked improvement in the last few months.

I want to turn to a local example in east Galway. The Merriman Hotel is the sole hotel in the village of Kinvara in south Galway. It is a beautiful village with great people and has always been incredibly welcoming of asylum seekers. From 2019 and for many years the Merriman Hotel was an IPAS centre. However, its contract has been renewed for another two-year period which has really hurt the community. There was an expectation that this hotel would be brought back into use, providing a venue for tourists to stay as well as a venue for weddings, confirmations and christenings - everything that goes with a small village. We now have IPAS applicants staying in a hotel and tourists staying in homes and Airbnb accommodation, resulting in a mismatch. I know that the State is moving to acquire more State accommodation centres with the State as the provider so that we are not negatively impacting small villages and towns disproportionately. People in Kinvara are hopeful that the hotel will be returned to the community in the future and it will serve its function again. I hope to work with the Minister on that.

I want to talk about the positive contributions of migration and particularly migrants who are living in our communities and contributing day in, day out. They play a huge role in Ire-

land and are a huge strength to Ireland. Our hospitals simply could not function without them. Work permits in health and social care have more than doubled since 2020, which is welcome because people in Ireland need care and I am grateful for all of the people who do that. In my community in Athenry, people from all over the world contribute immensely to our town and make it a fantastic place. Migrants staff our building sites, the food sector and tech firms. They start businesses, they pay taxes and contribute every single day. In Galway alone, work permits have quadrupled since 2009.

Migration drives growth but growth without planning causes strain. Our housing, schools, transport and water systems have not kept pace. That is not inevitable; it is the result of poor planning. It is our responsibility to go forward and make sure that where we have seen increased population growth, we react. We need to put in place the investment in the national development plan and encourage the growth to continue. I believe Ireland as a country will be a great success into the future but only if we manage the growth correctly.

Where do we go from here? The choice is simple. We can continue with emergency responses, spending billions on hotels with no transparency and communities left behind or we can build a firm and fair system that is rules based, accountable and sustainable. That means investing in housing, schools, transport and services. It means proper procedures on spending and it means treating applicants with humanity while also ensuring communities are not overburdened. Migration will remain a part of Ireland's future and I am proud of that. The challenge is whether we face it with planning and fairness or keep repeating the same costly mistakes.

The Minister has taken steps in the right direction, which I really welcome, but delivery will be crucial. A rules-based system can restore trust, protect communities and allow migration to be the positive force we know it is, we know it can be and we know it will be in the future.

**Deputy Darren O'Rourke:** For too long Government policy on migration has been a story of reaction, crisis and abdication of duty. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have allowed our system to be dictated by profiteers and unchecked market forces, utterly failing communities and those seeking protection alike. Our international protection system, for example, is not fit for purpose. Decisions and appeals still take far too long, enforcement is weak or non-existent and a small number of private operators are making many millions from inappropriate accommodation. There is a complete lack of transparency and Sinn Féin demands a full review of all IPAS contracts to end this disgusting profiteering.

The Government's decision to sign up in full to the EU migration pact was a mistake. We said it at the time and we maintain that position. It handed over power on migration and undermines our sovereignty to make decisions based on our unique circumstances. Similarly, the extension of the temporary protection directive without discussion is not sustainable. We need a planned approach that provides certainty and a return to ordinary rules.

The Government's failure to plan has stripped communities of agency, stripped them of their voice and created a hostile environment which is exploited by those intent on sowing division. That said, there can be no tolerance for racism. There can be no place for racism in Ireland. Sinn Féin believes in a better way. Migration must be managed in the best interests of all who live here. That means ending section 5 and other planning exemptions for accommodation, linking accommodation location to services and capacity, and proper community engagement. It means a real integration strategy built from the ground up. It means tying work and student

permits to the realities of our housing crisis and wage pressures. We need a system that is fair efficient and enforced, and based on the capacity of our communities.

*4 o'clock*

It is in the best interests of everyone to have a system we can all have confidence in that protects us all. It is the only way.

I heard some commentary and criticism of a rules-based system. We need a rules-based system. It needs to be such that people have confidence in it because people have a lack of faith in the system. They see it being used by a small number of people to make a huge amount of money. They do not have confidence in it. We need a system that people have confidence in and that assures them that those who coming here to contribute to the economy or are entitled to protection that the system can provide them with that. We need people to have confidence in the system.

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** The population is now more than 5.4 million. Last year, over 25,000 immigrants arrived into this country. That is a net figure of more than 60,000 people. In one year, that is equates to the population of Sligo, Ennis and Castlebar. Yet, this Government has failed to deliver the necessary infrastructure to sustain that level of development. Over the past five years, just over 100,000 houses were built, with a net migration figure of almost 400,000. This is basic arithmetic that the Government fails to understand. It is very frustrating for people right across the country.

In the past number of weeks, students across Ireland have found it incredibly difficult to find accommodation. When we drill into the numbers, we see that the universities are engaging in a very expansionist approach to the international student cohort. Over 40,000 international student visas issued, representing an increase of more than 30% in the past four years. Almost 40,000 working visas were issued last year. Ten years ago, that figure was about 10,000 per year. We all are aware of the massive acceleration and surge in IPAS numbers. It is very simple: the capacity of the economy is simply unable to cope with this huge increase. A Savills report recently outlined that the ratio of housing delivery to population growth was 1:4, which represents one of the worst ratios in the western world. Yet, the Government and many in this House fail to recognise some of the issues before us.

If you fail to prepare, you prepare to fail. On the issue of migration, that is what successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments have done. The Government has no plan. It has created chaos in housing and services and for the wonderful families and young people across Ireland. It is unacceptable. Essentially, its policy amounts to pouring a gallon into a pint and it is unsustainable.

**Deputy Ken O'Flynn:** I welcome all my colleagues back after the recess. I wish them success from now until the end of the term. I was listening to the debate in my office while doing my constituency work. I have listened to the Minister's speech. I noticed when I was entering the Chamber that my name was taken and used by another colleague, Deputy Coppinger, along with some lines. I do live rent free when she is not playing the victim of someone else. I must remind the Deputy, when she talks about people in Independent Ireland being racist that one of her party's candidates spat in the face of a Jewish gentleman, which is currently being investigated by An Garda Síochána not so long ago

**An Ceann Comhairle:** In that case, Deputy, it might be better not to discuss it.

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**Deputy Ken O’Flynn:** I am not mentioning the person but it was a candidate from her party who participated in that.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy, please.

**Deputy Ken O’Flynn:** No Independent Ireland candidate ever spat in anyone’s face or made racist remarks to anyone. We only hear such stories from the far left.

In a manner reminiscent of those who were warned of consequences of unbridling immigration in decades past, let us be frank: a nation that does not control its borders loses control of its future. We have witnessed in this situation the inflow of people not matching the outflow of facts.

Today, the Minister spoke about the Irish people who travelled abroad and our proud history in that regard. We do have a proud history in that respect. Irish people travelled abroad with their passport in their hand, however. Irish people travelled abroad to America, Canada and Australia not with the hand out, but looking for the hand up. They worked hard and diligently and never asked for anything. There is a big difference between that and a lot of the people coming into this country and what is being provided to them. The argument the Minister makes about our proud history of emigration and migration is a little bit different from the facts of what is happening today in this country.

The Minister and many Members talk about all the good things, and I appreciate there are good things. Some 95 languages are spoken in Cork city in Apple in my constituency. I am married to an immigrant, a Spanish gentleman, who lives in Ireland and has actually become an Irish citizen since. I understand and enjoy multiculturalism. What I do not enjoy, however, is people entering our country without a passport, presenting themselves with no information or us requiring no information about that.

Is the Minister aware that someone entered this country and when questioned at Dublin Airport and asked how they entered the country, which is a simple question of a set of standard questions set out by the his Department, replied, “Hot air balloon”? Is it acceptable for anyone who is respectfully entering a country without a passport or any identification to be so flippant and blasé about entering a nation, while requiring accommodation, food and sustenance from that nation? It is unacceptable for a person to be so flippant to use the phrase, “I entered by hot air balloon. That is how I came into Ireland.” That person should have been turned around and put on the plane back. That is the reality of it.

Members have spoken about how everything is rosy and marvellous in the garden-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy’s time is up.

**Deputy Ken O’Flynn:** ----- but it is not true.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice.

**Deputy Ken O’Flynn:** If the Minister goes down to Mallow to see what is after happening in my constituency-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Your time is up, Deputy.

**Deputy Ken O’Flynn:** I apologise.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this matter. First, I wish the Minister the best of luck.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** Thank you.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I do not think I was in front of you before this so the best of luck. The reality of immigration is that, at the moment in Ireland, we are building 30,000 houses. There is a huge shortage of houses. Look at the numbers of people who are coming in both through legal and illegal immigration. We are scratching our heads when people want to come to work. Let us bear in mind, we need people working. We need them in hospitals, hospitality and in all the different sectors. When employers go through that process, it is so cumbersome. It is basically stalling people from being able to produce the goods in different places because they do not have enough staff. At least they know who they are and where they came from. People have to make sure they give them a proper wage and that everything is above board.

The sad reality at the moment is that a person coming to this country is better off coming in through the illegal system. If a person comes to Ireland illegally, he or she can work after six months, whereas another person could be trying to come in for a year and still not get through the process.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy's time is up. I call Deputy Michael Collins.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** We need to make sure that we tighten this. The court system needs to be sped up to make decisions-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Your time is up, Deputy.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** -----and not hold things up for four or five years on people who are coming here about whom we know nothing.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Communities are concerned. These are not racist people but people who have legitimate concerns in their communities. The European Union cannot dictate how many people can come to this small island. Independent Ireland Councillor Linda de Courcy pleaded for answers from this Government, through me, about Citywest a number of months ago. No matter what I asked, I never got an answer until the deal was signed. The concerns people had were legitimate. These facilities in Citywest have been central to Ireland's response, but questions remain unanswered. I am calling on the Minister to clarify who consulted the community groups, elected representatives and NGOs, and when those engagements took place. We need transparency on occupancy levels, the categories of residents housed, the services provided, staffing numbers and the total cost to the State over the past four years.

I also ask for details on the recent expression of interest process, how many responses were received and whether these sites were referenced and what areas were proposed. Contracts governing these facilities must be published, including clauses ensuring compliance with planning, fire safety and building control laws. Has the Department verified these requirements? If the use of Citywest is to become permanent, we need to know the intended use of the surrounding land and whether further development is planned. These are legitimate questions that should have been resolved in the local community before anything ever started, but they were not.

**Deputy Mark Ward:** Migration must be managed in the context of Ireland. We should not simply allow it to be determined by global and domestic market forces. The Government

must manage migration in a fair, efficient and enforced manner that has the best interests of the people of Ireland front and centre. The Government must consider Ireland's needs in terms of workers for key sectors such as health. I visited Galway hospital last year. I did not see one Irish person working there and I could not have been looked after better. The healthcare that was provided to me was very good.

We must also put this into the context of the housing capacity and the capacity of public services. The reason we have capacity problems in housing, health and public services falls squarely on the shoulders of successive Governments, not on those who are coming to this country to make a better life for themselves. It suits governments if certain sectors of society point to migration as the cause of our problems, because it lets them off the hook. Let me be clear: it is not migrants who cause the problems that we face today in housing, health and in other services; it is successive Governments. While the problems remain in housing and public services, migration must be managed in that context. People who arrive on these shores seeking international protection, and who have a right to be here, should be given every opportunity the State can afford so they can make a positive contribution to society. However, if people arrive at these shores seeking international protection but they do not have the right to remain, they should be returned to where they came from as safely and quickly as possible. This is where the Government has failed. It takes too long to make decisions. It does not enforce deportation orders.

When the Government is considering IPAS centre locations, it must consider the current pressures on services in the area. The Government must communicate directly with communities, which should not find out about proposed IPAS centres from national newspapers. Likewise, TDs like me should not find out from national newspapers. As the Minister will be aware, that is exactly what happened with Citywest. I doubt Citywest will be the last public IPAS centre in the State. The Government must learn from this mistake so that communities know in advance.

I have spoken to the Minister about this privately. The Government must also keep its promises to the people of Saggart. That means no increase in the number of people seeking international protection being based in Citywest; a quicker decision-making process; no plans to develop the cemetery; the gym and the restaurant must remain open for the people of Saggart and; there should be better services for Saggart and ongoing communication with residents. If the Government fails the people of Saggart and it fails to keep its promises, the Minister will find it even more difficult to open any more public IPAS centres in other communities across the State.

**Deputy Gillian Toole:** This is probably the most divisive issue in politics. It definitely deserves more frequent discussion. I have been requesting this discussion for the past six months, so I am grateful for my two minutes now.

What will be Ireland's migration management plan for the positive net migration of 79,000 people to our country? How is Ireland's ability to cope in the following areas being measured and planned for: education, healthcare, housing, transport, policing and community safety? Forward planning and robust policies are critical for cohesion and the prosperity of everyone here. Currently, the only means of community engagement is the planning system, and even that is likely to be bypassed by the section 5 loophole. Examples of that are Kells, Ashbourne and Trim.

We now find ourselves with what I would coin as a “quadrilemma” on our hands. The first is the political will to manage migration. The second is the economic interest in having more migration. We must restore the dignity of manual labour, in particular in the care sector and in other services and industries that cannot be automated or outsourced and that we are going to need more than ever in the future. The third is meeting fundamental human rights obligations towards migrants, refugees and citizens alike. We are probably coming to the stage now where we are going to need a national conversation, about ultimately what type of society we want to live in. I hope that the opportunity to regularly visit this topic comes up. I am not sure what the timeframe is before it can be raised again, but five minutes between a group of six is very limited.

**Deputy Barry Heneghan:** I have had engagement on this matter with the Minister previously. When I stood for election as an Independent in Dublin Bay North, the constituency where the former Crown Paints site is located, this issue came up on the doorsteps. The public want to know. I was one of the only candidates who had immigration on my election literature. The platform I was elected on was based on a more dignified, proactive approach to immigration focusing on dialogue between communities and the Government. We know this was not the case with the Crown Paints site. That is why what happened at the site was so disappointing. I know this did not happen during the Minister’s term in office but during the term of his predecessor. I call for a full inquiry to understand how the situation was so grossly mishandled so that the mistakes that occurred are never repeated.

Previous speakers talked about solidarity with the Indian community. When I was in Beaumont Hospital recently, I heard of the exact same experience with nurses and doctors being attacked leaving the hospital. Another Deputy mentioned it too. I stand with that community and show solidarity with them. I believe in a country where immigration in Dublin and elsewhere is managed with respect and where communities are included.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** There are countries in the world where if you voice your opposition to massively destabilising levels of illegal immigration, you can and will be shot and killed. It does not appear to matter how respectfully or constructively you may seek to argue for stronger borders, national sovereignty, or just a decision to put your own people first.

Then there are countries in the world, such as our own, that have mercifully not reached this point yet, but that does not mean you will not be silenced in other less obvious or dramatic ways. Your image and reputation will be dragged through the mud. You may be called a threat to social cohesion. You will be portrayed as a villain out to undermine democracy and the unlimited so-called right of the entire world to arrive here on our doorstep, whether or not they have a passport – often they do not.

The facts are clear: the western world is being engulfed by unprecedented levels of public rage regarding the harms being caused by reckless immigration and migration policies. Time and time again the majority of our own people, when asked, express a clear desire to dramatically reduce the flood of people arriving here in the middle of a housing crisis. They are often ignored and vilified, treated as working-class scum. This untrue and unfair view that is often expressed is rampant in society. The view appears to be: how dare they upset any cosy consensus of the establishment and the establishment politicians who masquerade as friends of the ordinary working man and woman. There is a sickness within any political system that treats its own people with such unrelenting disdain.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Deputy's time is up.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** We want our country back from the grip of rampant illegality. We want order and stability.

**Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan):** I thought that was a very worthwhile debate. I stayed for the whole debate and I listened to the 21 TDs who contributed. I took notes of what everyone said. In the limited time, I will not be able to go through what each Deputy said, but I listened very carefully.

It is apparent that there are a couple of things that everyone in this House agrees on. It is worth emphasising that. There is a benefit in having this debate. If this Chamber does not debate contentious and divisive issues such as migration, then the word will go out that they will not even talk about it in the Dáil. I welcome the fact that we had a respectful debate here this afternoon. Everyone felt they were able to contribute and I listened carefully to the views that were expressed here.

One of the aspects of the debate that is agreed across the House is that racism is unacceptable. We saw it in the attacks that were perpetrated on members of the Indian community. As I said to the Indian community, I do not think they were targeted because they are members of the Indian community; regrettably they were targeted in many instances simply because they were migrants. Everyone in this House condemns those attacks. It is worthwhile that the message goes out to the public at large that we stand together in our condemnation of them.

It is also apparent in listening to the various contributions that people come to this debate about migration with different political viewpoints. Many Members raised a number of issues that I will deal with briefly. Deputy Carthy mentioned and emphasised the issue about the IPAS centres, and indeed, many Sinn Féin Members in their speeches referred to "profiteering" and too much money being spent on IPAS centres. As Deputy Dolan said, I am extremely concerned about that is being spent on IPAS centres, but I ask Members to reflect on the fact that we were dealing with a crisis situation in 2022, 2023 and 2024. In those years, 45,000 people arrived seeking asylum, but on top of that 100,000 people arrived from Ukraine who were granted temporary protection. That is a figure of around 145,000 people who came in and we had to accommodate. Necessarily, that put huge pressure on the system. I will be before Deputy Carthy's committee next week when it comes to discussing IPAS in more detail, but it is important that we have a context as to the reason for contracts being entered into. I am conscious that Deputy O'Gorman must have had a challenging job when in office between 2022 and 2024 in trying to provide accommodation. It is certainly the case, and I will not elaborate on them now, that I introduced changes to system that will ensure that we are going to get better value for money.

A number of individuals spoke about the issue of international protection and asylum applicants. As I said at the outset, it is important to recognise that the number of people coming here seeking asylum, although it has grown significantly in the past three years, is a smallish percentage of the number of people coming to Ireland as migrants. The vast majority of people coming here are on visas, to work and as students. It is also lawful for a person to come here to claim asylum. As Deputy Gibney referenced, people do not have a right to asylum, but they do have a right to claim asylum. I am conscious that when I opened this debate, one thing I wanted to emphasise is that the system I want to see applied is a rules-based system. I want to re-echo that message.

Members of the Social Democrats were critical and thought I did not display a compassionate enough response in dealing with persons who were seeking asylum. I do not purport to claim that I have more compassion or less compassion than anyone else in the House. When it comes to applying an international protection system, or indeed a migration system, we have to have rules. If we do not have rules, it is going to be arbitrary. People will be coming to me saying: “Will you let this person in? This is a fine person; could you allow them to have asylum?” That is not a system that is going to operate effectively. I think I am, and Ireland is, a compassionate country. If we look in comparison to how some other European Union countries treat asylum applicants, we are very compassionate. The word has to get out that in Ireland we have a system, it is based on rules and as Minister I am going to apply those rules. If Members of this House, and they are entitled to, want to change the rules, reduce the rules or make them more amenable to people getting around them, there is a method of doing that. The way they do that is by bringing in legislation to amend the International Protection Act 2015 that is already in place.

A number of Deputies also criticised the European migration pact and said it is an interference with Irish sovereignty. When it comes to refugees, we have signed up to the 1951 Refugee Convention. It will not come as a surprise, but that is under pressure internationally. Ireland has complied with it and continues to comply with it. We comply with our international obligations when it comes to refugee applications. However, when looking at trying to deal with the movement of people internationally, it is apparent that the majority of people coming to Ireland to claim asylum are coming through other European countries, and indeed, ultimately, the vast majority are coming through the UK. We need to have an agreed position and co-operation between ourselves and other European Union countries. If we do not, we are going to find ourselves in the same way that Britain finds itself in at present. It finds itself in a situation where it thought that by leaving the European Union it was going to be able to resolve the issue it had in respect of migration. In fact, the issues that were a concern to it have got considerably worse since it left the European Union. It has no mechanism to engage with other European Union countries in trying to ensure that there are arrangements in place to deal with people.

It is regrettable that I am spending time on the issue of international protection because it is a small part of our migration. However, it is worth emphasising that the people who come here predominantly are coming here on work visas. They are wanted in the multinational sector to work. They are wanted in our hospitals. They are wanted in our construction sector. It is creating challenges because of the rise in the population. As I said at the outset, the population is increasing seven times faster than the EU average. The population increased by approximately 100,000 last year. As Deputy Fitzmaurice said, it is obviously putting pressures on the system, but if we are going to reduce the numbers, there are ways I can do it. I was interested that Deputy Carthy said we should reduce student numbers. That is something I will look at with regard to students coming in. However, there will be consequences to that. People will say that we are damaging the education sector by reducing numbers. Every action has a reaction, but we are in an unusual position.

We have handled migration pretty well in Ireland. We are only used to it for 27 or 28 years. When I was growing up, people were emigrating. I wish to pick Deputy Carthy up on one point. He said emigration from Ireland was due to the policies of Irish Governments. From 1841 onwards when the population started to declining, I think the British Government has a bit of responsibility for that as well, certainly prior to independence.

On the numbers coming in, there is a significant number with international protection. The

predominant route is that people are coming from the UK into Northern Ireland and claiming their asylum this way. Deputy O’Flynn referred to people arriving at the airport. Very few applicants are made for international protection in Dublin Airport at present. Most of the applications are made directly at the IPO office. It is a real challenge to us in terms of the asylum sphere. We are hugely impacted by what happens in the UK.

We have done migration pretty well in Ireland. Anybody who goes to sports matches they will see young kids playing. We can see the diversity of groups of people who are playing sports as youngsters now. We see it throughout our community. We have done it well. Sometimes we need to give ourselves a bit of credit for it. Notwithstanding that, one of the messages that has hit me from this debate is that there is a general recognition by TDs, and this regrettably is something I have come to the view of as well, that there is a rise in racist, abusive people in Ireland. That is a matter of concern to me and I know it is a matter of concern to everybody in this House. The response to that is difficult because predominantly it is coming from youths who are under 18 years of age. We need to think we have an education obligation in respect of it. It is a societal response. We need to recognise and emphasise to people that in a republic, it is abhorrent that we would seek to criticise or discriminate against somebody because of their inherent characteristics, such as race. It has been a good debate.

### **Antisocial Behaviour: Motion [Private Members]**

**Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty:** I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

- recognises that anti-social behaviour continues to be a major problem in Ireland for people of all ages;

- noting that the factors leading to this behaviour are multi-faceted and that some work has been done to date to identify and resource solutions;

- accepting that Garda numbers per head of population remain far short of optimal levels;

- acknowledges that many people feel a sense of powerlessness to deal with this persistent problem, especially when those involved are aged under 18 years of age and can commit multiple offences before being dealt with by the current system;

- undertakes to provide additional resources to tackle the root causes of underage anti-social behaviour, with an additional strong emphasis on immediate consequences for actions; and

- commits to providing a full list of implementable legislative and resourcing reforms to lay before the Houses of the Oireachtas within six months of this motion being passed, based on contributions made during this debate, best practice in Ireland and internationally, and specifically assessing the following measures:

- the introduction of curfews for repeat offenders;

— community courts for rapid adjudication on anti-social behaviour offences, including the sanctioning of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs);

— ASBOs to be sanctioned without requiring Gardaí to turn up in court;

— immediate seizure on a permanent basis of high-value items such as scooters, quads, scramblers involved in anti-social activities or breaking the law;

— temporary removal of personal items such as Playstations, Xboxes, smart-phones, for consistent reported anti-social behaviour;

— seizure of any items suspected to be obtained as a result of theft, i.e. a “mini-Criminal Assets Bureau”;

— fines for parents where appropriate, or similar, proportionate measures that encourage co-operation and act as a deterrent;

— enhance the ability of shops to search and detain shoplifters pending the arrival of the Gardaí;

— meaningful restorative justice to pay back any damages;

— community service such as clean-ups with Garda vetted bodies such as Tidy Towns Groups or other organisations as may be appropriate;

— increased Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV) investment programme for playgrounds and high-value, high-amenity areas targeted regularly by anti-social behaviour;

— a clearer legal definition of what constitutes reasonable self-defence when being threatened, or assaulted by underage perpetrators, including having items such as sticks, rocks, glass and other implements being thrown at individuals;

— zero tolerance for littering and increased fines as part of a wider social contract;

— further consideration for a ban on social media for under 16s as raised by Deputy Gogarty several months ago;

— better school attendance monitoring;

— a penalty points system for stronger action with repeat offenders;

— enrolment in education programmes where abuse is found to be motivated by the race, gender, sexual orientation or religious/cultural background;

— a faster, ticket-based reporting system for victims of anti-social behaviour to log and view progress on incidents, including an easier way to upload video and photo evidence to An Garda Síochána;

— a streamlined process for making statements and statutory declarations that frees up Garda time;

— additional educational and youth diversion resourcing;

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- stronger focus on community policing to identify and deter potential anti-social behaviour;
- orders prohibiting anti-social groups from contacting one another for fixed periods; and
- recognition for positive social behaviour through a credits-based pathway system for valued community service or learning outcomes.

As an Independent Opposition TD, I get to table Private Members' business twice per year, if that. My first Private Members' business motion during this term is devoted to the issue of antisocial behaviour because so many people in my constituency have expressed a sense of fear and powerlessness about what is happening, especially when the culprits are under the age of 18. I raised this matter with the Taoiseach before the summer for a lesser time period. I did get some sympathetic responses, but collectively we need to have a sense of urgency to deal with the situation. I am not one just to play petty politics and cast aspersions. I will give credit where credit is due. We have a task force on antisocial behaviour. The previous Government published the Youth Justice Strategy 2021-2027. However, as far as I know, that task force has not sat since before the election. We are still awaiting on youth justice strategy interim report. There have been efforts to increase the number of gardaí. There has been a significant increase between 2008 and now. When I work it out, we have almost 20% fewer gardaí per head of population than we did in 2008, before the downturn led to a loss of numbers. Just at the end of the Celtic tiger era, we had a lot more gardaí per head of population.

People are giving out that when they do ring for gardaí, they cannot get a response. Last week, at a school in my constituency, a bunch of youths, some of whom were of primary school age, broke into a school and started stealing bikes. They were told by the staff to leave. They did not and instead started to throw stones at the staff. Gardaí were called but did not have a car available. They said their car was at the courts at the time. That is not an isolated case. I am not one for Garda-bashing, because I know the Garda is under-resourced. Members of the force do an absolutely fantastic job, given the constraints they face. We need to increase Garda numbers, which is partially mentioned in this motion, but we also need to make their work more effective.

The Minister himself has said we need to take gardaí away from the courts. At the moment, senior gardaí have to attend court if they want to apply for an ASBO, while other gardaí have to turn up at courts very regularly, which takes away from Garda time on the ground. In the context of this debate, I would like to see a commitment to a timescale for meaningful action in that regard.

I will bring the Minister's attention to some of the instances that are happening in my area and that I know are happening across the country, including in his constituency. For example, a 13-year-old boy was subject to a random attack and his eye socket was damaged. A pregnant lady was walking in one of the local parks and someone on a scooter circled her several times and brushed off her. In the same park, there are regularly gangs of youths hanging around in the playground, smoking and intimidating other people, again with no Garda or park ranger response because there are not enough park rangers or available gardaí. Another playground, which, as a councillor, I pushed for three years to be refurbished, was set on fire the week before last. Again, that was done by a couple of people. In my area, there are only four or five groups but they are committing regular instances of antisocial behaviour, sometimes with impunity, so they are becoming more emboldened over a period of time. It is happening everywhere, in

Clondalkin, Newcastle, Saggart, Rathcoole, Lucan, Palmerstown - you name it, there are incidents there.

Sometimes, as was mentioned in the previous debate, if these perpetrators come across a newcomer to Ireland, then the racial tropes are thrown in as well. A lot of people do not know how they are supposed to react when a gang of youths are coming at them throwing sticks or stones. A mentor of a local football club, who was with his seven-year-old daughter, did not let a bunch of lads into a locker and was told that they knew where his car was, that they would find out where he lives and that he would be strung up higher than Jesus on the cross. That sort of intimidation is not acceptable.

I tabled a parliamentary question asking what case studies or case law shows what reasonable self-defence is when someone is being attacked. The question was ruled out of order, which leads me to suggest it very much depends on the case in question. People are quite afraid. For example, if people are coming at you with sticks, are you allowed to grab the stick out of their hands? Are you allowed to hit them to stop them hitting you? These are situations in which people want to know how they can defend themselves. Equally, we have to ensure vigilante gangs are not beating up kids, because there are hangers-on. That is what the motion is about, the hangers-on. It is not about the ringleaders, because the ringleaders will go through the system, but the hangers-on need deterrents.

I have proposed a number of things and I ask for support from the Opposition on them, as well as for suggestions from the Opposition and backbenchers for what we can do to try to deal with the root causes of antisocial behaviour. I am not saying there are not problems on that side but there are also no consequences or short, sharp shocks for people who are doing stuff right now. I have thrown out a couple of suggestions that have been called for by other groups. For example, in 2010, there was a call for community courts. This has also recently been reflected by RGDATA, which is calling for night courts for shoplifting. There was a situation in my constituency where people came in, stole bottles, came back in and threw the bottles over the staff. Another guy came in doing the whole shoulder exercise and walked out with a load of stuff from another convenience store. Retailers are fearful for their staff. They have absolute fear they will either end up being sued for defamation or else will have to let people walk out and take stuff willy-nilly, and that puts costs on consumers everywhere in the country.

I am looking for the following measures to further reform defamation and to allow for detention where it can be shown on camera that people are involved in shoplifting. Maybe we should also have on-the-spot fines for shoplifting. I am also looking for ASBOs to be sanctioned without requiring gardaí to turn up in court; for the immediate seizure of high-value items such as scooters, quads and scramblers where they are involved in antisocial behaviour; and the temporary removal of personal items such as PlayStations, Xboxes and smartphones from those reported to consistently engage in antisocial behaviour, that is, if it is feasible and I want responses in that regard. It may have to be a voluntary measure whereby the parents have to agree to give up these items. I know a commitment can be gained from parents that comes before the antisocial behaviour order, but that process takes too long so if parents are not playing ball, we should consider other sanctions such as fines where appropriate. We should have meaningful restorative justice to pay back damages. There are Tidy Towns groups and other organisations around the country, or it could be mirrored whereby Garda-vetted groups could facilitate the less serious offenders getting out and doing community clean-ups and community service. I would like to see curfews, for example, for the ones who are causing more trouble and restrictions on them contacting their friends for a period.

We also need to have CCTV. For too long, where the likes of playgrounds have been burned to a crisp or where special sculptures have been targeted, we cannot identify the culprits. The gardaí say they might be wearing masks, etc., but the communities I represent want CCTV and want more funding for CCTV.

I mentioned the need for a potential ban on social media, which was discussed at committee yesterday, so I will not go into too many details here. We also need a faster ticket-based reporting system so that victims of antisocial behaviour can log an incident and view the progress being made because due to the nature of how the system operates at present, victims do not know if their case is being followed up in any way. In the same vein, a streamlined process is required for gardaí so that if they are making a statement or some form of statutory declaration for a court, they could do it, in the same way as happened to a small degree during Covid, without having to go into court. We need community courts, fewer gardaí in courts and a stronger focus on community policing.

Equally, we need recognition for positive social behaviour. Even if people have been brought in through juvenile liaison or are told they have to do some community service, they should be recognised for the community service they actually do. These are just a couple of suggestions. At the moment, there are groups going around and my constituents are scared because they see them going about with no consequences. These groups are getting bolder and bolder and as they go through the system, they are more likely to end up with full criminal justice ramifications. We are trying to stop people before they get to that stage. Yes, we need to look at the carrots and I fully support that, but there are no sticks. If there are sticks that work, we need to try them as soon as possible.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I welcome this debate and thank Deputy Gogarty and his staff for bringing it forward. It is a conversation that is long overdue. Antisocial behaviour is not some abstract issue or statistic on the pages of reports. It is happening in our towns and villages every day of the week. It is happening to shopkeepers who have to watch their shelves while being threatened, elderly people who feel unsafe while walking to the shop and families who see their local parks or playgrounds wrecked. It is even happening to teenagers themselves, many of whom are just trying to go about their business and get caught up in a culture of intimidation and fear.

Let me be clear. I support this motion because but is better to have this debate than to let things slide and continue as they are. We all know the shortcomings in policing in this country and we are serious about resolving them. We need to be honest. First, the motion rightly points to the root causes of antisocial behaviour. If we do not put real investment into prevention, youth diversion and giving young people better outlets, then we are just talking to ourselves. I look at those in west Cork who set up the Garda youth awards and what a huge success it has been to show this country what so many young people can do, and so well. The things they do are absolutely brilliant. So many of them receive awards on the night but it sets something in place for their CVs going forward. It is an incredible event and it needs to be commended and copied throughout the country. Independent Ireland has said it plainly: early intervention is the only way forward. We need to put the money into schools, youth clubs, sports facilities and half of this problem will be prevented before it even begins. That is very often what is missing in the thinking.

Second, there is community policing. Time and time again, I have stood here and stated that the strength of policing is gardaí on the ground, not behind a desk. A garda who knows the

name of a young fella can nip something in the bud before it escalates. That is the model that works. The motion should put that at the core, where it belongs. I look at the recent allocation of gardaí announced recently. Only one was announced for west Cork. That is an astonishing situation in which we find ourselves. There was one new garda for the whole of west Cork. That is scandalous. What message is that sending to existing Garda authority in west Cork? It shows anyone that their concerns and those of others are not being listened to. What do I tell the people of Drimoleague, whose Garda station is closed due to a lack of gardaí? Is it just “Sorry, hard luck”? That will not work and it will not be the answer for them when I go back there. The fact that we can now see clearly that this Government will not appoint gardaí to west Cork shows we will have to defend ourselves more and more with CCTV, though again we come unstuck there. I told the Minister already that the towns of Clonakilty, Skibbereen and Dunmanway have had their CCTV switched off for no good apparent reason. No matter who I write to, no one is taking responsibility. It is surely under the Department of justice to see that CCTV works in every town in the country where it exists. Some communities in west Cork are lucky to have it and they feel safe with it, but it is scandalous to think that it is switched off in those areas and no answer has been given to me after three or four months asking the same question, namely, why it was switched off and who has the controls to put it back on again.

Let us talk about Garda numbers. The motion says what we all know. The numbers are far too low, but saying it is not enough. Independent Ireland has hammered home this point. You cannot police on the cheap. Recruitment matters, but retention is just as critical. We are losing good gardaí because morale is on the floor. Paperwork is crushing them and they do not feel supported. They feel that changes will keep bleeding numbers. A motion in this House will not fix it. On paperwork, I do like the proposals to streamline statements and declarations. This is exactly the sort of thing we have been calling for. Let gardaí police. Let them do their jobs, not spend half the day filling in forms that could be simplified or digitalised. The seizure on a permanent basis of high-value items such as scooters, squads and scramblers involved in antisocial activities and the paying-back of any damages is meaningful justice for victims of crime and a stance that Independent Ireland would like to see actioned.

The motion also touches on protecting shopkeepers. Our party has raised this issue again and again. Shoplifting is rampant. Small businesses are being hammered and in rural Ireland farmers are seeing livestock stolen. Yes, we must give shopkeepers backup with the proper Garda support. They cannot be left carrying the can, dealing with these types of crime. I also welcome the call for clearer laws on self-defence. Ordinary people must know where they stand. If someone threatens them, their family or their property, they should not be left wondering if they will be dragged through the courts for defending themselves. That needs to be clarified once and for all. Again, I support restorative justice but not instead of people facing penalties for crimes. It has to be in tandem, especially for repeat offenders. That is prevention in action. When a young person has to look at a victim in the eye and give something back to the community they have damaged, they will stop what they are doing.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion and commend Deputy Gogarty and his staff on putting it together.

It often baffles me that when we had 9,000 and 10,000 gardaí on the streets or in the total force, there were local Garda stations. If anyone said they were not doing much, they knew everything that was going on in the area. They did not have to be taking out the book doing this one, that one and the other one. They were able to keep manners on the area in their own way. Sadly, it is gone now with the phone straight into the face if there is a garda anywhere the

minute they do anything. That is not acceptable, to be quite frank about it. One time, if there was a robbery in a local rural area and if something was stolen or anything went wrong or if there was a bit of a scrap, the local garda sorted it out. They did not have to be going to the DPP many times; they would have it sorted out in a matter of hours. We have lost that. The change was done over the last seven or eight years. It was not in the Minister's time, in fairness. It was done before this. The way it went was they decided to start closing local Garda stations. As I always say, the local garda was always able to find out what was going on. When a robbery or something happened, what we call a crow on the wire gave the information and the local garda would know who was giving the information. We have lost all that.

Right around this country, there are youngsters flying around on these e-scooters with no insurance or anything. They can drive into anyone and there is no regulation. Where are we going with this? If we go out in a car or a tractor, we have to have insurance. These can just fly along out past you, go in through traffic and there is no regulation. I remember in the previous Dáil, there were supposed to be tags going onto repeat offenders so that it would be known where they were. Where has that gone? It seems to have disappeared. The prisons are full. There is no point in saying it. The Minister is not going to build a heap of them overnight. We understand that. Why have we not tagged these offenders with a tracker to know where they all are? It is a fairly simple thing to do. The sad part about it is that if a garda uses a baton now, he is called a criminal nearly, whereas at one time they used it and they kept manners on many a gougher who was getting out of hand and got them into line. On top of that, we need to start getting youngsters to show respect for the things we were brought up to show respect for. At the moment, as Deputy Gogarty said, there are gangs going around. Yes, we try to put in sports or youth club facilities or whatever facilities we can, but once we do that people still have to show respect. They cannot be going around in a mob around people such as the pregnant woman Deputy Gogarty mentioned or around other people. We cannot have that going on in a country.

Gardaí will not be everywhere around the place - there is no point in saying we will have them everywhere - but I remember the local garda or sergeant once being able to control the area. I know things have got more sophisticated and that there are different crimes that go on that were not investigated at one time. I understand all that but we have lost the touch of the common local knowledge. Local knowledge is what will tell you everything, from a local garda living in an area. At the moment, in my area between Headford and where I live, about 40 miles away, there will be one Garda car on at night. It does not have that resource. With the best will in the world, they cannot police an area or look after it. It is like Nanci Griffith's song "From a Distance". We knew all our gardaí one time in the area. Now, you would not have a bull's clue who is coming to you because they are coming from a different area. For the sake of the Minister's Department, we have to look outside the box. If a gang is going around, why not take the phones off them? Why not have that facility to know what is going on? Why not start laying down the law or putting tags on? It is becoming a revolving door. It is wasting serious amounts of Garda time and, as has been pointed out, gardaí are in the courts nearly all day. That is not solving anything. We need to look at that area as well. First, we need to give them whatever facilities we can to try to bring them with us, but if there are ones who are not listening or are not toeing the line, then it has to get sharper.

**Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan):** I thank Deputy Gogarty and members of the Independent Technical Group for tabling this motion on antisocial behaviour. I am very aware of the impact that antisocial behaviour - many times it is criminal behaviour - has on individuals living in local communities. Regrettably, it appears

to be the case that significant numbers of people who are engaged in antisocial behaviour, or the criminal behaviour I was talking about, are under the age of 18, which we refer to as children in our law. Notwithstanding that, the effects of antisocial behaviour are significant and the effects of criminal activity by children can be very specific and significant. It can result in people suffering from physical violence, theft of personal property, destruction of shared amenities or spaces and more hidden harms including individual or collective trauma, reluctance to report future incidents to the authorities for fear of retaliation and diminished feelings of pride or acceptance in one's local community. That was very apparent to me from what Deputy Gogarty described as the instance he encountered in his community. It is important to emphasise, however, that the people involved in this type of behaviour are a small minority of people. I accept that their impact can be significant but in general most people in Ireland, and indeed most people under 18 years of age, are respectful and they recognise that Ireland should be, and remains, a safe community. We have a situation in Ireland where it is a pretty peaceful country. People might ask, "Where do you get that statistic from?" I get it from a global index of peacefulness throughout the world. The index that came out for 2025 indicated that Ireland was second in terms of peacefulness after Iceland. Notwithstanding this, I am conscious that this is no comfort to people who are subjected to consistent antisocial behaviour or criminal activity. It is for that reason the Government is very determined to tackle antisocial behaviour. The reason we are not opposing this motion is that very many of the proposals set forward by Deputy Gogarty in his motion are proposals we agree with and which we will seek to implement through the programme for Government.

It is important to point out that many things are being done to ensure that we can get on top of this issue of antisocial behaviour and criminal activity by people under 18 years of age or slightly over that age. As mentioned by Deputy Fitzmaurice, the most effective way of ensuring we have safe communities is to have a highly visible Garda presence in our communities. I am pleased to say that recruitment of members into the force is going in the right direction. I was at a passing-out ceremony in Templemore in August where 154 new recruits passed out. When we go up there in November, we are going to get to 200 recruits passing out then. Twice already this year, the intake into Templemore has been around the figure of 200. If I can get 200 as an intake into Templemore four or even five times a year, we will find ourselves getting the numbers up significantly in An Garda Síochána. At present we have 14,250 in the force. I want to see us get to 15,000. If we can get the good recruitment up and we get around 200 coming in from each intake, that will be very significant. I heard what Deputy Collins said about west Cork. In many instances he can blame his colleague behind him, Deputy O'Flynn, because 20 gardaí went to Cork city from the recruits who came out in August.

**Deputy Ken O'Flynn:** What about the ones who retired?

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** I do not get involved in allocating gardaí around the country-----

**Deputy Ken O'Flynn:** You will take the credit for it though.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** -----and it would be inappropriate for a Minister for justice to do so. The Garda Commissioner does take into account what the operational needs are in certain areas, and that is why he decides where the new recruits should be allocated. We will all work together to ensure we can get more gardaí into our communities.

It is also important to point out that the 2025 budget provided an unprecedented allocation of over €2.48 billion to An Garda Síochána. This is a 27% increase since 2020. The funding

allows for the continued recruitment of gardaí. As I said, at present we have approximately 14,276 gardaí. The Deputy is right that we need to get them out into the community. Part of the way we can achieve that is by recruiting more civilian staff into the force to do the work that can be done by civilians. At present there are 3,675 civilian staff in An Garda Síochána. We have also made changes by increasing the age at which people can be recruited into An Garda Síochána. It used to be the case that a person had to be under 35. Now a person can apply for the job up to the age of 50 and we have extended mandatory retirement to 62. A new Garda recruitment campaign was launched at the Ploughing Championships by the Garda Commissioner and me on Tuesday. I would ask people to consider a career in the force. It is a very worthwhile career. It is a job in the public service and when people join the force, they very much enjoy it.

Other things that are being done include the establishment of community safety partnerships and increasing the community safety innovation fund to support that roll-out. People will be aware that under the Policing, Security and Community Safety Act 2024, there will be 36 local community safety partnerships. These will play a central role in ensuring that local communities and the Garda are informed about where resources need to be targeted in order to confront antisocial behaviour. Members here will be aware of the community safety fund. It is a very significant asset. In 2024, over €3 million was allocated to projects nationwide. Themes from the 2024 successful applicants included projects aimed at addressing antisocial behaviour, domestic violence, drug-related intimidation and social inclusion.

I believe it was Deputy Fitzmaurice who mentioned that we need youth diversion programmes. One of the things I have noticed since I became the Minister for justice is all the excellent work being done in youth diversion programmes, and there is a lot of excellent work being done by the Probation Service. They probably do not publicise it enough - we do not get to hear about it enough - but a huge number of young people who get involved in the pathway of antisocial behaviour or criminal activity are diverted from it by the youth diversion initiatives. The Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, is beside me here and he plays a very central role in respect of that. A suite of interventions is available within the system, ranging from engagement with the diversion projects to the bail supervision scheme, the young person's probation and community sanctions. The Government has committed to a review of the Children Act. One of the many things mentioned here related to imposing responsibilities on the parents to a greater extent. Section 98 of the Children Act 2001 provides for a whole variety of sanctions that can be imposed by a court on children who are offenders and on the parents of those children as well. I am asking my Department to look at this again to ensure that the courts are aware and do in fact have a range of options available to them.

It is important to note that the Department funds 93 youth diversion projects that are community-based multi-agency youth crime prevention initiatives designed to divert young people who have been, or are at risk of becoming, involved in antisocial behaviour. By the end of this year, once we introduce the youth diversion projects in north Tipperary and east Clare, there will be full coverage of youth diversion projects across the country. This will be a significant achievement. I am aware that Members rightly want to focus on the antisocial behaviour and criminal activity of a small group, but there is availability there to resolve it by trying to get those kids into youth diversion programmes.

Deputy Fitzmaurice is right about local gardaí, and I think Deputy Collins said this as well, who play a central role. Having been in the job for nearly eight months now, my assessment of An Garda Síochána is that they do have this local knowledge. In places I go around the country, to Garda stations in Ballylinan, Carlow or Gorey, the gardaí have a good local knowledge.

Community gardaí are a bit like a very successful local politician; they know their community and do their work on the ground. The youth diversion projects also work with schools and local communities. My Department liaises with the Department of Education and Youth to promote initiatives that encourage pro-social behaviour among our young people.

Almost €48 million was allocated under the UBU Your Place Your Space scheme in 2024. Budget 2025 secured an increase of 7%, so the funding is now €50.7 million. Money and resources are being allocated to deal with these children who are involved in antisocial behaviour.

I also take into account what Deputy Gogarty said about further legislation. There is a lot of legislation on the book at present to deal with this type of antisocial behaviour, whether it is the Criminal Damage Act 1991, the public order Act 1994, the Non-Fatal Offences Against the Person Act 1997 or the theft and fraud Act. There are mechanisms available. If further legislative intervention is required, we will consider it. We do have to recognise, however, that this is a complex issue to respond to. I welcome the fact we are debating it here but we need that broader approach of education, policing and trying to get parents involved to ensure that we do not get young people on the path to criminality. The Minister of State, Deputy Collins, will stay here to deal with any responses.

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** I very much welcome the motion brought forward by my colleague Deputy Paul Gogarty. In recent weeks, the new Commissioner has taken office. It is really important to say that the previous Commissioner left the morale of the force in tatters. This is why the Minister for justice, Deputy O’Callaghan, now has a major job at hand in recruitment and retention in the force. I believe the first thing that needs to be reviewed is the new policing model, particularly in relation to the geographical areas. Mayo is in a district of the north west, with Roscommon and Longford.

*5 o’clock*

That is a span, from Blacksod Bay in the barony of Erris to the eastern side and the boundary with Longford, of over 200 km. It is a geographical region from one end to the other of more than three hours. It is no wonder, as Deputy Fitzmaurice mentioned, that gardaí do not feel supported with regard to their management and so on.

The subdistricts need to be reviewed as well. In my own area, if you look at east Mayo, Ballyhaunis is in the subdistrict of Ballina. If they have to detain a suspected criminal, they have to travel nearly an hour to bring that person into custody. That is unacceptable and it is causing a significant barrier to a proactive policing model that I think we all need.

The other issue here regards manpower. We have seen a significant reduction in the number of gardaí. I have been speaking to hundreds of gardaí over the last number of years, and right across every area and station of Mayo, the units have reduced by half. The regular units and stations in Mayo have reduced by half. Ten years ago, it was seven, eight, nine, ten gardaí per unit; now we are down to three or four. One of the big problems here relates to the new policing model. What the Minister has done is create specialised units. It has pulled from regular units and moved those gardaí away from the front line and away from community policing. What the Minister has done is unsustainable. If a shopkeeper wanted to expand his offering and offer coffee, for example, that shopkeeper would have to do an analysis around the capacity and perhaps recruit new staff to make that offering, but the Minister has not done that. As a result, he has left the remaining few to pick up the pieces because he has not planned for this. That

must be addressed by the new Commissioner. It is really important that the Minister starts to listen to the rank-and-file gardaí because it is really unacceptable and disrespectful that the previous Minister and Commissioner disregarded one of the most emphatic votes of no confidence in the history of An Garda Síochána. In fact, it was the most emphatic: over 98% of the Garda rank and file voted a motion of no confidence, and the Minister of the day and the Commissioner shrugged their shoulders.

I ask the Minister to engage with the Commissioner and to review the geographical boundaries, both subdistricts and larger districts. The bureaucracy also needs to be reviewed. The IMS system needs to be analysed. I wonder why it has not been introduced into Dublin. Is it because that system would actually crash the force in Dublin? That is what is happening across rural Ireland as well.

It is also important that the force, in terms of the regular units, is beefed up to ensure the last remaining few - the three or four members of the units - are supported as well. Again, I thank Deputy Paul Gogarty for bringing this motion forward.

**Deputy Mark Ward:** I thank Deputy Paul Gogarty for bringing forward this motion and giving us an opportunity to discuss antisocial behaviour. I may not agree with everything in the motion but I do agree with its sentiments. Basically, something needs to be done to address antisocial behaviour.

I agree with the Minister when he said that a lot of the stuff Deputy Gogarty spoke about was not antisocial behaviour but actually criminal activity. The phrase “antisocial behaviour” is often used to describe a myriad of low- to mid-level criminal activity. I want to be clear: low- to mid-level criminal activity is not antisocial behaviour. Drug dealing is not antisocial behaviour; it is criminal activity. Intimidation is not antisocial behaviour; it is a crime. Driving scramblers without tax and insurance on public roads is not antisocial behaviour; it is a crime. Shoplifting is not antisocial behaviour; it is a crime. Destruction of public playgrounds is not antisocial behaviour; it is a crime. Until we start treating these offences as crimes with real consequences, I am afraid there will just be an endless cycle of lawlessness in our communities.

We can deal with the cause of this criminal activity later but right now we must deal with the effect. We have too few gardaí in our communities. We have too few gardaí to prevent crime and to prevent young people from becoming involved in crime. We have too few gardaí in community policing and in roads policing. I listened to the Minister talking about recruitment and what he has done over the last while but the figures I have do not match up. For example, the figures I received in May of this year tell me there are 140 fewer gardaí in the Dublin metropolitan region than there were in 2020. The numbers are going down.

There was a lot of fanfare, when the Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan, came into office, about his recruitment drive. I saw him at the National Ploughing Championships at the weekend doing it again. It is all welcome but we are not seeing the results. Nothing has been done too in terms of increasing the number of gardaí available to police the streets of Dublin. In fact, since the Minister came into office in December, there has only been three additional gardaí in Dublin. The Minister promised 5,000 new gardaí over the lifetime of the Government and in year one he is already behind. Of the 1,000 gardaí he promised this year, even optimistic estimates will say he will be lucky to get 650, so we are already behind. This is simply not good enough. It is putting our communities at risk, and the failure to recruit new officers will inevitably lead to more overworked and overstretched gardaí leaving the force.

I was at a meeting during the week with a residents' association in Lucan who told me their concerns regarding criminal activity in their area. What I found out at that meeting was that there are now only four community gardaí in Ronanstown police station. This police station covers a vast area, including some of the areas with the highest disadvantage. The community gardaí in my area, who I know because there are only four of them, so it is very hard not to know them, do Trojan work but there are simply not enough of them. Radical overhaul of Garda recruitment is needed, including opening a second training centre, which will increase the recruitment to 1,500 gardaí a year. Is this something the Government will commit to?

Currently, the only detention centre in the State for young people is Oberstown Children Detention Campus. It is constantly at capacity. It is that much at capacity that it is like a tinderbox. We have seen and I have heard reports this year of violence against staff members. It only has the capacity to hold 46 young offenders. The consequence of it being at capacity is that young people who have committed serious crimes are being turned away and released back into our communities without the wraparound supports and the rehabilitation they need. Young people who probably should have been remanded in custody because of the serious nature of their crimes are given bail because of the capacity issue. Information I got very recently says that over the past three years, almost 3,000 crimes have been committed where the suspect was a young person already on bail. This figure is far too high. Our justice system needs to work better for our young people but also for our communities so everybody can feel safe.

A breakdown of some of those crimes committed by young people who were on bail is very stark. There were 61 incidents of attempts or threats to murder, assaults, harassment or related offences. This is when the suspect is a young person who was out on bail. I have always said that detention should be the last resort when it comes to young people, but when it comes to serious crime, what we are doing at the moment is simply not working.

One solution, which the Minister touched on, is enhancing the bail supervision scheme. I have seen first hand in my own area how this works and it just needs to be properly funded. There is also an argument to be made, and I would like the Minister to take this on board as well, that it should not be led by An Garda Síochána because the gardaí should be out on the streets policing our communities. However, it could be led by either probation services or youth justice services to free up gardaí. Then again, they have to be properly resourced to do that job. If proper investment is made now in youth justice, probation, the bail supervision scheme and restorative justice services, it could stop the next generation from progressing from antisocial behaviour into being hardened criminals. However, we need to invest in the here and now. What our communities need here and now is more investment in gardaí and more gardaí on the streets so that we can keep our communities safe.

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** Too often when we talk about antisocial behaviour it is framed as an urban problem. However, the reality is that this is not just an issue for cities or large towns. Rural communities, small villages and settlements throughout the country are also experiencing the impact. Communities in every county want to feel safe. They want their young people supported and they want to know that the Government takes their concerns seriously. In my role as Sinn Féin spokesperson on rural affairs and community development I have heard these concerns echoed in every part of the State. In my own constituency of Waterford, both rural and urban communities tell me the same thing, which is that there is real frustration about the lack of a Garda presence and lack of support for community-based responses. At the heart of this there is a crisis in An Garda Síochána. People in communities tell me that they cannot see gardaí on the beat. We see this in the empirical evidence and the facts as presented to us

in response to parliamentary questions. We see it on the ground too and anecdotally we know it to be true. In particular people do not see community gardaí, that is, the front-line presence that prevents crime, builds relationships and reassures people, that reaches out to young people and that can solve issues and identify them before they become larger issues and have negative impacts on communities.

The figures speak for themselves. At the end of December 2024 there were 14,191 serving members of An Garda Síochána. By the end of July this year the number stood at 14,254. That is a net increase of just 63 members in seven months. The Government's target of 1,000 new gardaí a year is simply not going to be met. Recruitment and retention remains the key crisis and the front-line deficit in gardaí is leaving our communities actually exposed and feeling exposed.

We cannot pretend this is just about Garda numbers. Antisocial behaviour has roots in deeper issues. Government after Government failed to tackle the causes, namely poverty, deprivation, chronic lack of investment in community development and youth services. Rural Ireland knows this as much as any city. For many young people there is nowhere to go, nothing to do and no structural support. That is not to excuse antisocial behaviour and it is certainly not to excuse criminality but it is not an accident either. It is a result of political choices to underfund youth work and community infrastructure, year on year. There are solutions such as gardaí youth diversion projects as mentioned already. They are proven to work but they remain underfunded and patchy in their availability. Outreach programmes that meet young people where they are should be expanded. Restorative justice referrals are back to pre-Covid levels, which is welcome, but we need to see more consistent use of these by the courts. The bail supervision programme should be properly resourced and led by the probation service, not the Garda. This would free up Garda time to be in communities, to be visible and accessible. Crucially, we must empower and resource local authorities to take a more active role in responding to antisocial behaviour where it presents.

Tackling antisocial behaviour requires more than headlines or short-term crackdowns. It requires gardaí in our communities, proper long-term, consistent investment in youth work, real support for families and local authorities with the capacity to intervene effectively. The Government has not delivered on any of this but it is time it did.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** I welcome the opportunity to discuss the issue of antisocial and criminal behaviour in our communities. The reality is that every community experiences antisocial behaviour and criminal activity, some far more than others. Some of it is quite low level with noise and boisterous behaviour but in other cases, it is really serious criminal behaviour. Not a single TD on either side of this Chamber would disagree that we need more gardaí. We hear it constantly in this Chamber. We need them on the streets, working in communities to deal with this type of behaviour.

I have raised this point on many occasions and I will raise it again. It is about a specialised anti-scrambler unit to tackle the scourge of dangerous driving that has led to dozens of deaths and hundreds of life-changing injuries over the years. These units exist in Britain and in the European Union and they should exist here in Ireland. I cannot understand why, in 2025, we do not have any attempt to deal with this scourge. Every day we see in our streets young people putting our own lives and other people's lives in danger. Senior gardaí and gardaí on the streets tell us consistently that they are not allowed to deal with this. They are not allowed to chase them or engage with them in any form. Young people who are doing this therefore feel com-

pletely empowered to do whatever they want. Yet, the Government and senior gardaí sit on their hands.

Another issue relates to electric bikes. We see them all over the place, they can be rented but yet, gardaí are still cycling on pedal cycles. I live in a very large constituency in Dublin West and we still have gardaí peddling around on bikes when young people are on electric bikes taunting them. They absolutely taunt them every day. When are we going to catch up with the technology that is around?

Another example is drones. In Dublin 15, as I am sure Deputies are aware, we can order lunch or order a coffee and have it delivered to our house. The technology is absolutely incredible. Leaving aside the issue of noise and other concerns that we might have, the technology is there. For two years, I have questioned gardaí in relation to the Garda's capacity around drones. Eventually I was told 12 drones were bought and that some gardaí were trained on them. However, this is a reply I got from An Garda Síochána:

I am informed by Garda management that members of Garda air support unit were previously trained in the use of drones as part of the drone evaluation project. The evaluation concluded in 2023 and the drones are not currently in operational use pending legislative clarity.

So I can get my coffee and my lunch but gardaí cannot use drones because there is no legislative clarity. What a ridiculous answer. The Civil Defence uses them, as do the Army and the Navy. In fact, I can ring a specialist company to check out my roof to see whether it is leaking and where it is leaking. Yet, gardaí are blocked from using them or claim that there is no legislative clarity. This is another excuse from Garda management rather than helping and supporting the officers on the ground to do their job using technology. Any strategy to tackle antisocial behaviour is doomed to fail if it is not co-ordinated, if it is not multi-agency and if it has not got the backing of the community. If we are serious about tackling antisocial behaviour we should be talking about a massive investment in youth facilities, purpose-built dedicated spaces with highly qualified and trained youth workers. We need dedicated outreach youth teams to go to where the people are, to talk to them, to work with them and to engage with them in relation to any antisocial or criminal behaviour. Gardaí are not youth workers. They are not trained and they should not be doing that job. Let us free them up to do the job they are trained to do and that is to deal with serious criminal behaviour.

We need much more funding for early intervention with families who are experiencing difficulties or where children have experienced trauma. Young people are amazing. Every one of them should be and must be given the opportunity to reach their potential. If they do not, and unfortunately engage in criminal or antisocial behaviour, they must face the consequences. However, nothing I have seen in the 30 years of my community work, of professional work with young people and families, with those in addiction and with young people engaged in criminality convinces me that this Government or any Government I have seen in those 30 years, is or has been really serious about tackling criminal or antisocial behaviour. To explain why this is so, when the crash happened in 2007, 2008 and 2009 what were the first things that were absolutely decimated? Every single community, voluntary, charity organisation that deals with young people or addiction, that deals with early school leaving, were crushed. Yet, the bankers, developers and bondholders did not suffer. We know where the priorities are. We know where they lie. It is now time to deal with it. There are solutions out there. People out there are highly trained, highly professional people. Give them money, funding and the facilities to do that job

and let us deal with those issues and help and support young people at the same time.

**Deputy Conor Sheehan:** I thank Deputy Gogarty for bringing forward this motion and for bringing much-needed attention to this issue. Antisocial behaviour is a real and growing concern in all communities across this country. Far too many families, residents and businesses are living in fear of some of the behaviour that they see on their doorsteps. I want to talk not so much about antisocial behaviour as a nuisance; I want to talk about crime. I recently met a group of shopkeepers from right across the city of Limerick who are concerned about a spate of shoplifting that has become endemic. There was a 180% increase in shoplifting in Limerick between 2003 and 2024, with a particular issue with repeat offenders. Some shopkeepers have said to me that shoplifting happens every 30 to an 60 minutes each day. It extends beyond mere theft. The shoplifters are often aggressive and extremely abusive. There was a recent incident in a local shop whereby a prolific shoplifter who is well known ran at a retail worker, screaming, “I will belt you with a Stanley blade.”

In March 2024 in Limerick, there were 22 community gardaí, which is a whopping decrease from the 92 we had in 2008. Hallowe'en is of particular concern in that regard. It is clear that something has gone wrong and that the current systems are not working to keep our communities safe. If we are to tackle this issue, we must be clear about what is driving the crisis. Years of Government inaction has left us with hollowed out community policing, an overstretched court system and persistently underfunded youth work organisations. While additional gardaí were recently allocated to Limerick, we still have fewer gardaí than we had 17 years ago, despite a population growth of 23% in the intervening period. We need to invest and recommit ourselves to community policing. People want to see gardaí on the streets. They want to know their local community garda. They want to feel safe in their communities.

We also have issues in the context of youth work. We need a commitment from the Government in the budget to invest in and value youth work. We need targeted investment and better support to hold onto the talented staff who work each day to support the young people in our communities.

This motion also touches on the influence of social media in driving antisocial behaviour. I referenced this point during the debate on migration. We in the Labour Party are clear that it is absolutely vital we protect our children and young people with effective regulation to keep them safe online. Of course, there is no silver bullet to the problem of antisocial behaviour, but Deputy Gogarty is correct to point out the role that social media and harmful algorithms are playing in driving the disruption we see in our communities. I see, for example, young people who are going on TikTok and having things pushed on them that are inherently harmful. They are having things pushed on them that I, as somebody in his early 30s and not that old, struggle to understand. That is important. We need the Government to drive investment in digital literacy to ensure that young people and their parents become fully digitally literate. All of us, me included, were shocked when we saw the Netflix film “Adolescence”, which was clever in drawing attention to this issue.

Antisocial behaviour is leaving many communities living in fear. We must be clear about what we need to do to remedy the situation. We need to invest more in youth diversion and community policing. We also must ensure, as the commitment in the programme for Government states, that we see the establishment of the public transportation police. I know the Minister of State is working on it. We in Limerick have had a spate of issues in recent months, particularly with the 303 bus in the city. Windows have been smashed. Drivers have been sub-

jected to verbal abuse and threats. One driver was even shot at with a pellet gun. SIPTU has threatened to pull its drivers from this route a number of times. This route at one stage had a security van following the bus through a local estate. This is extremely concerning. We know that instances of attacks on transport workers have gone through the roof in recent years. I want greater urgency from the Government on this issue. People should have an assurance that their morning commute will be safe and peaceful, just as drivers and staff should be able to go to work in dignity and safety.

**Deputy George Lawlor:** I thank Deputy Gogarty for introducing this motion. The scourge of antisocial behaviour, as people who have served in politics at local and national levels know, has resulted in the ruination of communities, housing estates and neighbourhoods. That is the result of a small minority of people who are intent on creating havoc. This is a time when housing, for instance, is at a premium. This particular motion refers to young people. When they see the older generation being able to get away with what they are often getting away with, it sends out a hopelessly wrong signal. Distress is caused to neighbours and neighbourhoods. People act with impunity because the Garda appears powerless and without the resources to deal with the behaviour, particularly when it is carried out by young people. Despite the best efforts of housing officers, tenant liaison officers and other officials, local authorities are almost afraid to tackle the issue given the hoops to which they must jump to get people who are causing antisocial behaviour out of an area.

I am not talking about harmless messing, as has been alluded to. I am talking about threats, drug dens, drug parties, fighting and people who abuse those who live around them. There is also abuse of gardaí and the emergency services. This has gone on for years. I have seen cases whereby housing authorities, including approved housing bodies, eventually get to a stage where they evict someone, after many years, only for the person to appeal the eviction. They have gone to court for cases where the housing authority or approved housing body has the backing and support of the Garda. I have seen judges rule in favour of the people who have been evicted on the basis that there was no evidence despite the fact that years' worth of evidence had been stockpiled and the gardaí were there to support the people who were complaining and the authorities.

I have also seen agencies that deal with homelessness put people into very nice estates and abandon them. People who suffer from addiction are put into places with no wraparound services and are offered no follow-up. They are left there to create havoc as the result of their addiction or mental health issues. There are no wraparound services or supports and the antisocial behaviour that follows is chronic and criminal.

We need to enhance greatly the powers available to local authorities. We need to support them. We need to ensure that local authorities go after people who are engaged in antisocial behaviour, especially in local authority housing estates. The private sector also has issues that we need to tackle but we need to support our local authorities and the agencies that provide housing for people and go after people who are destroying their communities.

In Wexford recently, we managed to get rid of a drug den that was the cause of antisocial behaviour on a daily basis. The parents of the children who lived in the area said that for the first time ever, those children were able to play and felt safe playing on the local green. That was the level of devastation brought to that area by a handful of people intent on ruining the lives of others. The perpetrators are often laughing at the authorities because they know it takes years and a massive build-up of evidence before they can tackle an issue. We need that to stop.

With regard to CCTV, you nearly have to give away your first-born child to get it enhanced or improved. There are something like 48 steps if you want to do so. I saw this in Wexford. This really must be tackled and we must give the powers to the people who need them.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** I acknowledge the speakers who brought the motion to the Dáil but I will not be supporting it. I will not say it contains no good ideas but it loses all reason where it refers to the temporary removal of personal items such as PlayStations, Xboxes and smartphones. Are we serious here? Am I right to believe the Government is not opposing a motion that calls for someone to go into somebody's house and take away their PlayStation? Who exactly? A garda? Is the Government messing? Are we not serious people here? I hear progressive parties across the Chamber say they welcome the motion. Let us get a grip on ourselves here. This is a serious issue and it is worthy of debate, but as we debate it let us actually bring some substance and evidence because it currently makes us all look ridiculous.

The motion is similar to ones that we have spoken about consistently in this Chamber. The cause of antisocial behaviour is the symptom of something much deeper and greater, or what is essentially a perpetual cycle of failure by the State to apply some sort of reason or evidence base and step away to ask what it can actually do to solve the issue. We will not be supporting the motion because it is not grounded in evidence and is ridiculous. It ignores the real results that come when we invest in young people.

Instead of supporting the motion, I want to take the time to talk about deeper, systemic failures. If these were addressed, it could end so-called antisocial behaviour or turn the tide on it. Essentially, our prisons are overcrowded. Someone referred to Oberstown being full and the conditions there in which young people are expected to live and, hopefully, be rehabilitated. Staff are supposed to actually go about their day there. It costs half a million euro per year to keep just one young person in Oberstown. Would that money not be better reinvested to address what causes a young person to be in a situation like that? This would be a better use of public money and a better means of realising the outcome we all have in mind here, which is making our streets safer and breaking the perpetual cycle.

The evidence is right in front of us. In our communities, mine being no exception, great projects are doing amazing work to counter the tide of antisocial behaviour, the violence that goes with it and the fear among residents who are asked to live where it occurs. There are genuine projects working on a fraction of half a million euro per year and doing really great work. I want to talk to the Minister of State about a couple of them.

Belvedere Youth Club, in my constituency, has a programme called Diamond, a youth justice initiative guided by restorative practice and strengths-based and collaborative approaches for young people in the criminal justice system. The project can deal with about 15 young people. If it were resourced to the extent of half a million euro per year, it could probably turn the number into 30; however, the approach is to keep doing the same old thing.

At Bradóg Youth Service, the youth workers have created the most innovative ways of engaging with kids regarding their behaviour, showing them the consequences of drug running and dealing in a way that is not just about sitting them down to give a lecture. We know from Nancy Reagan that does not work. What they actually do is talk to young people and engage with them on their terms. This actually interrupts the cycle of violence. Bradóg is struggling to survive because of extortionate rent and is at constant risk of closing. For half of the half a million euro we spend to keep just one young person in Oberstown, we could probably keep

many out of it. Not only that, but there is such a pittance of a maintenance budget that the most at-risk young people are walking to a service down a dingy lane past drug paraphernalia.

My time is up. I could go on all day.

**Deputy Aidan Farrelly:** I will pick up where Deputy Gannon has left off. For nearly 20 years, I was a professional youth worker and a hoodie was my uniform. I thought today would be a very important day to don that uniform again. In the same way that I have tried to defend and advocate on behalf of young people who are all too often on the receiving end of negative stereotyping and rhetoric, it feels right that I wear this hoodie.

If Deputy Gogarty had spent with children and young people throughout this country a fraction of the time I have spent with them in the last 20 years, he would never have considered putting pen to paper to produce the biggest heap of nonsense I have seen. I am beyond disappointed to see the Government and some in opposition supporting the idea of curfews, fines for parents and seizing PlayStations and Xboxes, as if that would achieve something. Frankly, it is utter nonsense. Who is Deputy Gogarty trying to represent when he comes up with this? He does not know what he is talking about. He has, on purpose, chosen to conflate antisocial behaviour and crime. If someone commits a crime, there is a clear statutory process; however, if passed, the Deputy's motion would simply reduce young people's rights and freedoms. I dare him to volunteer in his local youth club or youth service and to spend some time with children and young people rather than talk about them like he knows what he is talking about. They will tell him they are sick and tired of being stereotyped, sick and tired of this rhetoric.

They are paid a sub-minimum wage and cannot access mental health services. These are the issues that matter. I cannot believe the Government is not amending the motion. I am shocked.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** I wish to speak broadly about the issues concerning antisocial behaviour. I represent the communities of Finglas, Ballymun, Beaumont and Dublin North-West. The problems of antisocial behaviour are caused fundamentally by deep inequalities in our society, poverty, and the neglect of communities. There is a lack of investment in communities, youth services, drug services, community employment and public safety. Communities need investment. They have been abandoned and have been left to deal with intergenerational trauma. What we need to see in places like Ballymun and Finglas is real investment in diversion and supports for young people, giving them hope and involving them, and in services, schools and, in particular, the communities.

I was at community safety meetings in Finglas and Ballymun this week. People are looking for community gardaí, visible gardaí. The number of gardaí available in north Dublin is way behind that in other parts of the city and country. Fundamentally, we need an approach that values these communities and gives the children who grow up in them an equal right to a safe community and a future that includes and involves them and gives them support so they can live a life equal to that of anybody else in this country.

**Deputy Jen Cummins:** When I read this Private Members' motion, I was genuinely taken aback by elements of it. I am flabbergasted that it was put forward in its current format and even more flabbergasted that the Government is going to support it. It looks like a group of people who hate young people got together to blame them for all the antisocial behaviour and crime that happens in this country. I have worked with children and young people since 1998 in many different roles. I was a youth worker and was also a researcher in this area, and I have to

say my expertise is high. I just wish that the people who drafted this motion had actually consulted experts – not me but others – who had talked to youth workers and indeed young people, or even visited a youth service or Garda youth diversion project.

The temporary removal of personal items such as PlayStations, Xboxes and smartphones for consistent reported antisocial behaviour is proposed. Is it a nanny state that is wanted? In what country has this been suggested? In what country has this worked? It is ignorant and patronising, and it is also paternalistic.

With regard to restorative justice, the associated line in the motion makes me think its supporters have no idea what it actually means. If you want to pay back any damages, that is not how you start with restorative justice. It is about the victim, the offender and the community. Research has just come out stating a ban on social media for under-16s is not the way forward. Other Deputies have talked about algorithms and making social media companies accountable. I am not saying that parents, young people and all those things do not have to be taken into consideration. I am not saying there is not antisocial behaviour. I am saying this Private Members' motion does not address it fully.

It is great to see that better school attendance monitoring is referenced in the motion but a sentence is not a solution. I have worked in this area for a long time and would love to know what the solution is. I am happy to see that an increase in Garda youth diversion funding is mentioned. I would welcome that.

**Deputy Seamus Healy:** The prevention of antisocial behaviour requires a wide range of social, economic and community actions. These include education, training, employment, income, social inclusion, community activities and policing.

Garda policing is one of the most essential elements in tackling antisocial behaviour. For a start, we must be open, upfront and honest about the number of gardaí available to police our streets and communities. We had a bizarre situation recently in south Tipperary, where two Government Oireachtas Members announced four additional gardaí for Clonmel Garda station. It turns out that is not true. Why? The station had lost five gardaí to transfers and a retirement, so the net effect was the loss of two gardaí and two fewer gardaí to serve the people of Clonmel. Misleading announcements such as this are unacceptable and the individuals concerned should be ashamed of themselves.

I asked the Minister, by way of a parliamentary question, the number and rank of gardaí serving at Clonmel Garda station on 1 July and 1 September of this year. This morning, I got a rambling non-answer telling me to go to a website, click on a link and push a button, but that also indicated, "Sorry, we do not have the details for that date and, by the way, the Minister has no responsibility." I regard that answer as mischievous. Why can the Minister not be upfront about Garda numbers? Clonmel is a large town - a small city in fact - with an extensive hinterland, including the towns of Fethard, Kilsheelan, Clerihan and Lisronagh, and parts of County Waterford. It also has responsibility for the Carrick-on-Suir area. There are approximately 10,000 people in that town and district. This is a town that had a full-time Garda station and 16 gardaí up to recent years. It now has a part-time station with four gardaí. The Clonmel station does not have enough gardaí to put gardaí on the beat. I will repeat that - the Clonmel station does not have enough gardaí to put gardaí on the beat. It operates on a unit of six. The station needs to be staffed by enough gardaí to operate on a unit of ten. Will the Minister of State make sure that the numbers are allocated to Clonmel to ensure it has enough gardaí to operate on units

of ten and put gardaí on the beat?

Community gardaí are another essential element in tackling and preventing antisocial behaviour but, over the past few years, community policing has been effectively dismantled, particularly since the introduction of the new Garda districts. I attended a briefing on the new Garda districts by the now retired Garda Commissioner. It was immediately clear to me that community policing was going to take a huge hit. It was not a priority for the Commissioner or Garda authorities. Of course, I was assured I was wrong and that would not happen, but the figures do not lie. Nationally, in 2010, there were 1,182 community gardaí. At the end of 2024, there were 700, which is a reduction of 40%. In Tipperary, it is even worse. In 2010, we had 108 community gardaí; they are now in single figures. There is just one community garda serving the town of Clonmel. I will repeat that - there is just one community garda serving the town of Clonmel.

Community policing is invaluable in building up relationships with communities, building trust with communities and individuals within those communities and, crucially, building up relationships, trust and friendship with young people through becoming involved in local activities, local residents' associations and youth clubs. It is about community gardaí being seen and being active in their community. As a result, crime and antisocial behaviour are prevented and, importantly, gardaí are able to identify at an early age young people who might tend to stray. All this has been lost. The few community gardaí left work above and beyond and are stretched to the limit. A new priority must be given to community policing, with gardaí working from the ground up in partnership with communities and young people. This requires the recruitment of a significant number of community gardaí in the future.

Visibility of gardaí on the beat is crucial. Gardaí must be seen walking the streets of our towns and villages. Unfortunately, too many of our town and city centres are being abandoned to antisocial behaviour, drug use and drug dealing. There is now a reluctance by many people to walk our streets. They routinely see antisocial behaviour, drug use and drug deals. Those participating in these activities are often known to the public and the Garda authorities, but the position is becoming normalised as little or no action is taken. Gardaí on the beat are vital to the security and safety of the public. The Government must do better.

I will take this opportunity to thank the various youth and community organisations operating with young people across the country, particularly in south Tipperary. I commend the Waterford & South Tipperary Community Youth Service, which has been operating for over 50 years delivering community-based services and youth services across Waterford and south Tipperary. These services include community projects, Garda youth diversion projects, community-based drugs initiatives, LGBT services, drug outreach services, information services and local training initiatives. In Clonmel, the service has three centres in Elm Park, at the Wilderness, in Carrigeen, and in Irishtown. I also thank Youth Work Ireland Tipperary, which covers the west of south Tipperary and east Limerick. This organisation deals with young people aged between eight and 25 years. It operates a series of youth clubs right across the county and does absolutely excellent work with young people. I commend the Le Chéile youth mentoring service. This is a volunteer-led service mentoring young people, which is a core service of Le Chéile. It works with young people between the ages of 12 and 24, who have either committed an offence or are at risk of committing an offence. It meets on a weekly basis with these young people in an informal setting to help and support them to make positive changes in their lives. These organisations do excellent work. I commend them on that.

**Deputy Barry Heneghan:** Go raibh míle maith ag Deputy Gogarty for bringing the motion to the House. It concerns something we all see across this Chamber in emails we constantly get about antisocial behaviour. The people of Dublin Bay North are raising it with me every single week. Just this week, a parent in Raheny wrote to me to tell me about masked teenagers on e-scooters and scramblers and open drug dealing outside a crèche. I am being told by different representatives that nothing can and will be done. The sense of powerlessness this parent had when I called to their house was not acceptable. On another occasion, across the constituency, we saw vigilante gangs of people. I do not blame these young people. They have nothing else to do. That is the real issue. We are not investing in young people's futures. We want to see prevention officers going out on the streets, talking to these young people and giving them other options. I bring it back to the analogy that is constantly used for homelessness but could also be used for antisocial behaviour. If we constantly see people floating down the river, we take them out eventually. Eventually we go to the top of the river and ask why they are jumping in in the first place. We need to prevent people falling into the river of crime and antisocial behaviour and give them options other than going into drug dealing or robbing houses. I will push the Government to do this.

It always starts with prevention. Too many young people in north Dublin are involved in antisocial behaviour. It is because they have nothing to do after school. They leave school too early - at the age of 16, 17 or even 14. It is horrible to see. I have spoken to young mothers in Artane, Raheny, Clontarf and Coolock who do not know what to do with their children who have left school. Significant developments are taking place in Coolock Development Centre and I congratulate everyone involved in it. Great things are happening in youth work in north Dublin but they are underfunded and understaffed. Sphere 17 in Darndale is really struggling so I ask the Minister of State to give it the funding it deserves. I will bring people from Sphere 17 to the House next week and I look forward to speaking to them.

We spoke about immigration and migration earlier and the significant matter of the Crown Paints site in Coolock. I look at that site now and ask what could be done to it to help the community and target antisocial behaviour. It would be great to see it being used as an extension of the Coolock Development Centre to give young people who have left school early the option to get into the trades. Some people are not designed for school and that is very evident. We should give them the option of getting into the trades, entering apprenticeships and setting up their own businesses to keep them away from trouble.

Scramblers and e-bikes are another issue. I was driving two nights ago when a young lad came down a one-way street towards me on an e-scooter who was easily going 50 km/h or 60 km/h. It was dark and rainy. These children are not just putting other people at risk; they are also putting themselves at risk. I would be very upset if I heard another story like the one I heard when I knocked on a door last week. I was talking to an elderly lady who asked me to target these scooters and e-bikes. I asked her what sparked this issue and she told me a horrifying story of a young man who lost his life coming through Fairview Park four or five years ago. This cannot be ignored. It is something we need to target. From speaking to police, I know there is legislation in place but police are struggling to enforce it so we need to support gardaí.

Communities will also play a role. Investment in local community groups across Dublin Bay North needs to be fair. Sanctions need to be there. The northside has been neglected for too long. It is something I have spoken about constantly in this Chamber. Members have heard me time and time again.

I will sum it up as prevention where we can and firm actions when we must. We need a future that gives young Irish people a real alternative. I hope Deputy Brabazon will support me in looking for more investment in the northside. I see him nodding to me. It is something I have heard him talk about with e-scooters and antisocial behaviour - information coming to both our email addresses.

The budget is coming. We need more funding for youth diversion projects, funding for technical and trade education on the northside and proper resourcing for community policing. The parents emailing are right to expect better. Our communities deserve better.

**Deputy Tom Brabazon:** I commend Deputy Gogarty on tabling the motion, which is very timely. It reflects a lot of the commitments in the programme for Government, which the Minister is very committed to implementing. Much of the behaviour we see around north Dublin is not antisocial behaviour. We should call it what it is - crime. Changing the term to antisocial behaviour seems to downgrade it and dilutes effective responses to it so we need to call it what it is. It is crime. It damages public spaces, discourages positive community use and can drive people indoors away from our public open spaces and make these spaces even more dangerous as a result of lack of footfall. It deeply affects vulnerable groups such as the elderly, children and people with disabilities.

I would like to see meaningful consequences, particularly for those under 18, for those involved in this type of offending. I take the point that more investment and diversion - all of the issues mentioned by Deputy Heneghan mentioned - are needed. This is without a shadow of a doubt. However, we cannot put it all down to that. Far more responsibility falls on the individuals who live under the roof of adults who do not seem to know what is happening to their own children, which is unacceptable. If offenders face no accountability or consequences, they become emboldened and continue such harmful behaviour. I can tell the House about parts of my constituency where a feral gang goes in and out of an apartment complex and have literally taken over the common areas. They defecate, urinate, sell drugs, charge up their e-bikes and e-scooters, go out on the streets and cause the problems described by Deputy Heneghan all over Dublin Bay North. This behaviour is unacceptable. I listened to Paul Reid at a meeting of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Drugs Use. He put it very eruditely that the drugs problem seems to affect many of our more vulnerable members of society. Unfortunately, the problem is found more in areas with social housing than in other areas. Drugs affect all of society but it is very much concentrated in areas with social housing. There is a connection between our ineffective antisocial behaviour policies that are not implemented properly and our local authorities and approved housing bodies. Much more work needs to be done. In light of our housing crisis, if we had effective antisocial behaviour policies, it would remove the fear regarding social housing developments going ahead in new areas. This is something that needs to be examined and we need to move on it without further delay.

Early intervention reduces the risk of minor antisocial behaviour escalating into criminal activity. I take the point about the numbers of community gardaí falling. The Minister is working on increasing the numbers of gardaí and there will be a consequential increase in that. I also welcome the efforts by him and the Minister for Transport regarding transport police. That is really timely because an antisocial and criminal element has taken to public transport to sell drugs and engage in nefarious activities.

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration(Deputy Niall Collins):** I thank Deputy Gogarty for raising this issue, acknowledge the contributions

of all speakers and reiterate that the Government is not opposing this motion. There has been significant interest in this motion and it is an area we take very seriously. We are all in agreement about the need to address the root causes and impact of antisocial behaviour. The harm this behaviour causes communities can be significant. As Minister of State with responsibility for international law, law reform and youth justice, I am committed to supporting the Minister and other Government colleagues to continue driving forward the commitments set out by the Government to tackle antisocial behaviour and crime in our communities.

A number of measures are proposed for assessment in this motion that require very careful consideration from a legal and operational point of view. However, the spirit of these suggestions is something on which we can all agree. Nobody should live in fear in their community and this Government is committed to taking appropriate, effective action to address antisocial behaviour. As the Minister highlighted earlier, this Government is actively progressing actions to align with those proposed for assessment in this motion.

*6 o'clock*

These include measures to further increase An Garda Síochána member and staff numbers, establish local community safety partnerships, continued diversion of young people away from crime, enactment of legislation to combat antisocial behaviour and continued cross-departmental collaboration to tackle underlying causes of antisocial behaviour.

In addition to these I can also assure Deputies numerous other initiatives are being progressed that have as an objective the reduction of antisocial behaviour and that align with the measures proposed in the motion. For instance, the Government has committed to increasing the use of CCTV to enable local authorities to install new CCTV schemes. The Garda Síochána (Recording Devices) Act 2023, which was signed into law in December 2023, provides for a new regime for the authorisation and operation of CCTV schemes. There is a new requirement under that Act for the Garda Commissioner to develop a code of practice for CCTV. I am advised by Garda authorities that work is ongoing with respect to the development of this code of practice. Following the publication of the new code of practice local community safety partnerships will be the appropriate avenue for discussion of community CCTV. I am further advised by the Garda authorities that the Garda is currently working on a new CCTV strategy that will outline how CCTV infrastructure utilised by the Garda can be modernised and integrated with other CCTV infrastructure throughout the State. It is hoped the implementation of a modernised CCTV platform for An Garda Síochána can commence in 2026.

I can also assure Deputies the Government is resolute in its commitment to tackle the issue of retail crime and to protecting retail workers, who provide an essential service in our communities. I am acutely aware of the personal and economic impact both physical and verbal assaults have on retail staff and their families. The programme for Government includes the examination of the introduction of a specific offence of an assault on a retail worker. The development of legislation is a complex task that requires consideration of all the potential implications of any change in the law. Work to progress the commitments within the programme for Government has commenced and I am happy to engage in further discussions on proposals for the protection of retail workers.

It is important, in particular in my capacity as the Minister of State with responsibility for youth justice, that I highlight the progress that has been made in implementing actions in the Youth Justice Strategy 2021–2027, which undoubtedly play a positive role in addressing con-

cerns around antisocial behaviour. Diversion continues to be at the core of the youth justice system and its success can be measured through the reduction in the number of young people coming to the attention of An Garda Síochána. The Youth Justice Strategy 2021–2027 has as a priority enhanced engagement and intervention with children and young people who are most at risk of involvement in criminal activity. There is currently a network of 93 youth diversion projects, or YDPs as we call them, operating across the State. Services have expanded to include dedicated early intervention, family support and hard-to-reach youth justice workers. On average YDPs engage between 3,500 and 4,000 young people across the State in any one year. As such, they are a fundamental support to the operation of the statutory Garda diversion programme and provide a vital service in enhancing community policing partnerships. There is a strong evidentiary basis for the effectiveness of our current youth justice regime, with a 2023 evaluation concluding youth diversion projects impact positively on areas linked to reduction of crime and re-offending. Furthermore, since the introduction of the Children Act, recorded criminal offences by people under 18 years of age have reduced by 44%. This reduction correlates with an increased youth diversion budget, which has been doubled from €18 million in 2020 to just over €36 million in 2025. There is a link between youth diversion investment and significant reductions in the number of children being prosecuted or detained. This is testament to the success of youth diversion, as fewer children are progressing to the adult prison system. Our Department is continuing work to enhance the range of interventions applicable to reduction in youth crime, including measures to engage with the harder-to-reach cohort of young people who are actively engaged in criminality, which will in turn make our communities safer.

I will pick up on a number of issues that were raised as part of the debate. Mention was made of the bail supervision scheme. To clarify for the benefit of Members, this is a scheme which is not run by An Garda Síochána. However, it is overseen by our Department. The scheme is carried out by two youth justice service providers, with referrals mostly coming from the courts. The Probation Service will in future take over supervision of that scheme.

Reference was made to the commitment in the programme for Government to a public transportation police service. That is being advanced between the Department of Justice and the Department of Transport. The Ministers have had a number of meetings and official engagement between the two Departments is ongoing. That is being advanced and will be delivered early within the lifetime of this Government.

On the ongoing recruitment campaign An Garda Síochána has undertaken, another recruitment drive was announced by the Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan, two days ago at the National Ploughing Championships. I encourage anybody interested in engaging with that campaign to apply. People can apply online. Serving your country and your community through the Garda is a fantastic career and I would encourage anybody to do that. I was delighted to see the increase in the number of people who applied in the last campaign and I am delighted to see an increase in the intake and the output from Templemore of probationer gardaí attesting out of the college and into our communities. In my county of Limerick we recently received 20 new probationer gardaí from Templemore, which was really welcome. Unfortunately that good news was misrepresented, because there is always a city-county dynamic in Limerick and Deputy O’Flynn’s colleague, Deputy O’Donoghue, tried to present it as the city winning over the county. If he bothered to look at the detail, which is very important in these things, he would see when probationer gardaí come to Limerick they go to Henry Street or Roxboro Road. That allows senior Garda management scope to push more experienced gardaí into the county, which is my constituency, to police it. I have confirmed that is happening with senior Garda manage-

ment in Limerick, so to say Limerick city is benefitting and the county is being left behind or somehow not being significantly policed with the resources the chief superintendent has available to him is simply not true and misrepresents the situation.

**Deputy Ken O'Flynn:** I will address the Minister of State's last point first. He and his Department are very good at misrepresenting a number of facts as well. Earlier his senior Minister stood in the Chamber and told Deputy Collins it was Ken O'Flynn's fault for securing 20 gardaí to Cork city. Getting 20 gardaí for Cork city is more than welcome, but the Minister failed to recall how many people have retired and left the force as well. Those figures are not being released by the Minister of State's Department on a regular basis. The Department is great with fanfare and announcements, whether in Limerick, Cork or Dublin, about how many new gardaí there are but it never releases the figures for how many are retiring, how many are replacing and how many others have left the force. I have seen piles of them leave the force. It is great to see a Garda recruitment drive, it absolutely is-----

**Deputy Niall Collins:** It is not a secret.

**Deputy Ken O'Flynn:** Excuse me, Minister, I am speaking. You have been longer in the House, so you know the rules the House. I am speaking now.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** It is not a secret.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please, allow the Deputy to speak.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** It is not a secret when you refer-----

**Deputy Ken O'Flynn:** The Minister of State mentioned the Garda drive and the Garda-----

**Deputy Niall Collins:** -----to publicly available information.

**Deputy Ken O'Flynn:** A Cheann Comhairle, would you speak to him, please?

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Please let the Deputy speak.

**Deputy Ken O'Flynn:** Would you ask the Minister of State to have a small bit of respect for me and for the people I represent in my city?

The Minister of State spoke about drives for Garda recruitment, which is all very welcome, but those gardaí have to be supported by the Government. We continually see gardaí leaving the force and going to work in Eli Lilly, Abtran or one of these businesses because it is safer for them and because they do not feel that they are being supported. It is not their fellow gardaí but they are not getting support from senior management and from the Government. I do not blame senior managers because the Government is not providing enough services to help gardaí do their jobs.

Thankfully most of us will not go through violent, vicious attacks in life but most people I know in my constituency and around the country will suffer antisocial behaviour in some way, whether it is the keying of the car, the guy driving his quad bike over someone's roses or through their garden, the guy who has broken the window or the young fellow who has knocked on someone's door and done something naughty or the rest of it or the people who are going out and doing worse. I previously told the Minister of State in this House that an eight-year-old child, well known to the Garda, is being used for drug trafficking in Cork city. He is rewarded

with bottles of Coke and a couple of bags of sweets. That is how difficult things have got in parts of the city that I represent and nothing can be done.

Many people here on the extreme left and of the left persuasion have been talking about the hug-a-thug idea, suggesting that we have to put in this facility and that facility, and we have to spend more money on this, that and the other. I agree that we have to invest in our young people. However, we have fantastic hurling and football clubs, tennis clubs and other sports clubs. We have fantastic speech, drama and all those type of clubs around my city, but there is still a cohort involved in antisocial behaviour and we cannot get them out of it. Where are their parents? When did it become the State's responsibility to mind their children? When did it become the State's responsibility to say, "We have to take over"?

I do agree with the notion that a village has to rear a child, but come off it. I am sick to death of hearing, "It's not my Johnny. It's not my Mary." It's about time that the Government got tough on those who commit violent offences and what we're calling antisocial behaviour which is terrorising elderly people in communities, destroying other people's lives, knocking on doors demanding money from people, knocking on doors saying, "We're going to get your young fella at school tomorrow unless you give us this, that and the other," knocking on doors and saying, "Your child owes us money for drugs." They are sending under-18-year-olds to doors to do this. Why are they doing it? They are doing it because they cannot be prosecuted. That is the reality of it. That is the reality of what life is now in certain parts of not just Cork but Dublin and Limerick as well. I am sure if the Minister of State were not so removed from reality, he might know it himself. The reality for many people is that their lives are a living hell and nobody is responsible for it because they are under 18. When did we decide that because someone is under 18 and is a menace to society, they should get away with it? The ASBO idea you brought out-----

**Deputy Aidan Farrelly:** That is not true.

**Deputy Ken O'Flynn:** I am speaking, please. You had your time.

**Deputy Aidan Farrelly:** The Deputy should speak the truth.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputies, please let him speak.

**Deputy Ken O'Flynn:** The ASBOs brought out in the nineties, championed by Fianna Fáil at the time, have not worked. Gardaí do not have the time to go and check on young men and young women with ASBOs to see if they are in their houses. We have to look at the best practice and standards of Iceland, which introduced a curfew.

**Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty:** I welcome that the Government is not opposing this motion which is hugely welcome. As I said at the start, some work has been done but we need a lot more. Some of the wording of this motion is actually time-based. It proposes taking some of the suggestions here - my suggestions, other people's suggestions and the Government's own ideas - putting them together and coming up with a plan in the next six months to move forward. That is what I what I hope will come out of this.

I thank my constituency colleague, Deputy Mark Ward, for his general support of the motion. I accept that some of the activities that I referenced and he referenced are indeed criminal rather than purely antisocial behaviour. I had three reasons to describe them as such. First, a lot of people generally call them antisocial behaviour. Second, some of the perpetrators are under

12, under the age of criminal responsibility. Third, the aim of consequences is to try to keep people out of the criminal justice system and give them a couple of nudges before they actually get involved. In that context, I welcomed Deputy Donnelly's contribution about the use of drones and other positive contributions from Members. Not every contribution was positive. I noted that the Social Democrats decided that they are not going to support the motion and called it nonsense, ostensibly, from what I can gather, by reading one line of the motion.

**Deputy Aidan Farrelly:** I read the whole-----

**Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty:** You are no Deputy Stagg; please let me continue.

At the start of my contribution on the motion, I mentioned that we needed action to deal with the causes of crime. I have spoken about that many times. I previously referenced the Garda numbers but this is a motion purely on the consequences for antisocial behaviour. Again the Social Democrats said this is a very offensive motion to young people. Let us go back to the motion we had on keeping children out of crime back in March or April. We found that only 2% of children have come before the authorities, which means that 98% of our young people are decent law-abiding citizens going about their business and they need our support. The final line of my speech that day was "Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí".

As someone who was instrumental in getting education cuts reversed when everything was being torn to shreds during the economic crisis, I know well about the investment in tackling the causes. God knows how many times I have mentioned the HighScope Perry preschool project about how every €1 of investment in quality early education has a €7 return. We know we need to do more about the causes but when people are consistently subjected to ongoing barrages by people who feel they can act with impunity, we also need to look at the consequences. This is what this is about. Those consequences affect young people.

I mentioned the 13-year-old boy whose eye socket was damaged. I could have mentioned two other individuals who had the lard beaten out of them in one of the local parks. It happens throughout our constituency and there need to be consequences for that rather than allowing another 20 or 30 young people to be assaulted. They always pick on the vulnerable. It is the young person on their own or two or three years younger. It is the woman out with a buggy. It is someone from an ethnic minority who is new to Ireland and does not know the area that well and they throw out the racial tropes. They pick those they feel they can target. They also know that even those who are well able to defend themselves feel a sense of powerlessness. If someone came up to a grown man of 6 foot 5, that person knows they have to be very careful about what they do. These individuals play on that. They intimidate communities.

I am not talking about the high-level drug dealing and other high-level crime. I am talking about the apprentices, the ones who, if they are allowed continue and get away with it for long enough, will enter the criminal justice system. I am also talking about the hangers-on who could be influenced by a nudge. I am not saying my suggestions are gospel. I want to have a debate. I want to see if something makes sense and if something else does not make sense. It is about coming up with solutions because as it stands people in our communities feel nothing is being done to deal with it right now - 20 years' time is too far away. Six months' time or nine months' time for an ASBO is too far away. We need to have something more quickly and that includes issues like community courts and getting gardaí out of having to go to court in the first place and some short, sharp consequences.

Once again, I thank all my colleagues for their positive contributions.

Question put and declared carried.

### **Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters**

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

Deputy James Geoghegan - To discuss preventing judicial reviews of critical infrastructure projects.

Deputy George Lawlor - To discuss the inclusion of commercial bus operators in fare reduction schemes.

Deputy Pa Daly - To discuss the reopening of Rattoo Round Tower, closed for 15 years for maintenance works by OPW.

Deputy Louis O'Hara - To discuss the need for comprehensive development guidelines in relation to energy developments.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue - To discuss waiting lists for speech and language therapy in CHO 9.

Deputy Claire Kerrane - To discuss the downgrading of maternity services at Portiuncula University Hospital, Ballinasloe.

Deputy Barry Ward - To discuss expansion of Irish language-medium primary and secondary schools.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny - To discuss the recent fish kill on the Blackwater River in Cork.

Deputy Mark Wall - To discuss the lack of available childcare places in Kilcullen, County Kildare.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss the failure to provide an SNA for a primary school child.

Deputy Thomas Gould - To discuss the lack of school transport for children in special schools in Cork.

Deputy Matt Carthy - To discuss the impact of delays of SENO allocations on pupils and families in Cavan-Monaghan.

Deputy Tom Brabazon - To discuss the sustainability of the fishing sector.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss waiting lists for child psychologists in Kerry and in the Kerry-Cork region.

Deputies David Cullinane and Conor D. McGuinness - To discuss day services for children

and young adults with disabilities in Waterford city and county.

Deputies Ruth Coppinger and Roderic O’Gorman - To discuss the regulation of commercial drone delivery.

Deputy Conor Sheehan - To discuss the restoration of the home birth service in Limerick.

Deputy Rory Hearne - To discuss social and affordable housing delivery in Dublin North-West

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - To discuss issues with public transport in Wicklow.

The matters raised by Deputies Louis O’Hara, George Lawlor, Tom Brabazon, James Geoghegan, and Ruth Coppinger and Roderic O’Gorman have been selected for discussion.

## **Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate**

### **Energy Infrastructure**

**Deputy Louis O’Hara:** In recent weeks, I have attended a number of different community meetings in my constituency relating to proposed energy projects. These are causing a lot of concern and are very divisive. They are all being led by private investors. To give a few examples, in Athenry, Bord Gáis Energy is proposing to build the Cashla peaker plant 2.5 km from Athenry town. This is an open-cycle gas turbine plant with a capacity of more than 300 MW and a 100 ft high emission stack. In Portumna, a reserve gas-fired generator is awaiting a decision from An Coimisiún Pleanála. This project alone would represent more than 1 GW of generation capacity, with three chimney stacks in excess of 100 ft. These two developments would be among the largest individual generation units on the island. In Monivea and Abbeyknockmoy, the proposed Bellville solar project led by PCRE is planned to cover approximately 1,000 acres within the community across multiple different sites. This is a small, rural community that would be left totally unrecognisable should this development go ahead in its current form. We also have a huge number of wind farms at various stages of planning in my constituency, especially in north Galway. In some cases, these involve turbines of up to 200 m high in close proximity to homes.

We have a significant concentration of developments in east Galway, which is something that needs to be looked at. These are all very large developments in close proximity to residential areas and schools. There is a target of at least 2 GW of new, flexible, gas-fired generation by 2030 in the climate action plan. From the projects I just outlined, the two developments in Athenry and Portumna would provide roughly 1.5 GW, or three quarters, of this target. Two proposed projects within 40 km of each other would contribute three quarters of what is supposed to be a national target.

People have serious questions around safety, health and well-being and the impact on their homes, property value, quality of life and the local landscape and environment. In Monivea, there are particular concerns about the long-term impacts on the community. Will their children

be able to build there in the future? What will the future of farming look like in the area, given that prime agricultural land is being taken up? There is no clarity for people on these issues.

When it comes to large-scale developments, we need to consider the impact on the social fabric of communities. Like I said, these projects are very divisive within communities. Neighbours and families are falling out with one another because they may have facilitated land or access.

The role of private developers is also causing a huge amount of frustration. They are landing these massive proposals on top of communities. The public consultation is not sufficient. People are not being made aware of it and it seems to be a box-ticking exercise. Serious allegations have been made of people being misled as to the nature of projects, as well as people being coerced into facilitating access, which is very serious.

That is just a flavour of the issues coming up in the communities I represent. We could talk for a long time in detail about all of the concerns these developments are causing and the frustration with how these private companies are treating communities while they profit massively from them.

The Government is failing communities due to the absence of a plan-led approach with regard to these developments. The wind energy development guidelines are completely out of date. We are told that solar guidelines are starting to be developed, but there is little information other than that forthcoming. There are no specific plans regarding gas plants. Is this something the Government will finally get a handle on? Of course, we need energy, particularly renewable energy, but this is not the correct way to go about it. What response does the Government have to these issues? How will it ensure, as much as possible, that developments are appropriate to communities?

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Niall Collins):** The development of renewable energy is an important issue. Therefore, it is useful to have the opportunity to update Members of the Dáil on the status of planning guidance with regard to wind and solar energy development. From a planning perspective, the programme for Government contains commitments to prioritise the publication of the wind energy development guidelines and to introduce new planning guidelines for solar energy development.

With regard to the wind energy development guidelines, the review is addressing a number of key aspects of the guidelines, including setback distance, noise, shadow flicker, community obligation, community dividend and grid connections. The review aims to strike an appropriate balance between addressing the concerns of local communities by ensuring there is greater and earlier community engagement by wind energy developers. While the review of the guidelines has been ongoing for years – it has been going on too long - significant progress has been made towards concluding the review process. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, in conjunction with the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment, which has primary responsibility for environmental noise matters, has been working to advance guidance on the noise aspect of the guidelines. This work, which is highly technical in nature, is substantially complete.

The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage will ensure that the final guidelines, once published, are fit for purpose to provide guidance in line with renewable en-

ergy and climate targets, while having appropriate regard to the impacts of wind energy development. The evolving policy and technical context, including the Planning and Development Act 2024 and the first revision of the national planning framework, reinforces the need to ensure that the finalised guidelines, once issued, are fit for purpose.

Also included in the programme for Government is a commitment to introduce planning guidelines for solar energy developments. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage has begun an initial scoping process to identify the component factors relevant to the preparation of these guidelines, including the possible timeframe for publication. Until the finalisation of solar panel development guidelines, it will remain the case that, as with the large majority of development types, there are no specific planning guidelines to deal with solar energy development.

In line with the EU directive requirements, a strategic environmental assessment is being carried out on the draft wind guidelines and will be carried out on any draft solar guidelines. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage intends to undertake a public consultation on any draft guidelines, for either wind or solar, before they are finalised whereby individuals, communities and organisations will have an opportunity to submit observations on the draft guidelines. Finalised guidelines will be prepared following detailed analysis and consideration of the submissions received during the consultation phase.

With regard to biogas or anaerobic digestion, the current planning system provides a sufficiently robust policy and legislative framework to facilitate the proper planning and sustainable development of developments, which may be considered on a case-by-case basis in accordance with the relevant county development plan and Government policy, as applicable. In that context, there are currently no plans at present to introduce statutory planning guidelines for these development types.

**Deputy Louis O'Hara:** It is unacceptable that the review of wind energy guidelines has taken several years. It is a dereliction of duty from the Government while these developments are causing such unease in our communities. We all recognise that this is something that will never be perfect. There will always be controversial developments, but the Government, at the very minimum, needs to step in to put some kind of plan or framework in place that regulates where these developments should be located so that the impact on communities can be minimised as much as possible.

The wind energy guidelines are from 2006. They are totally out of date and have not kept up with the technological advances that we have had since then. People are suffering as a result. The updated guidelines need to be brought forward as soon as possible. Similar guidelines need to be put in place for other types of development.

The bottom line is that people are frustrated that these companies can bring forward applications for large-scale developments without any real consultation, engagement or proper consideration of the impact on those communities. We should remember that such developments are hugely profitable for these companies as well. They should be held accountable for not treating communities with respect and not having the decency to engage with people regarding their concerns. That drives people mad, and rightly so.

I fully recognise the need for energy security. I am very much in favour of renewable energy, but the way these projects are being handled and carried out is wrong. It is proving divisive

and causing much frustration. These companies are making a huge profit out of other people's suffering. We must make sure that, as much as possible, developments are in appropriate locations and at an appropriate scale and are evenly spread across the State. People in my constituency feel very hard done by with the number of developments that are entering planning in the local area. I urge the Government to take on board the concerns of the communities I represent and to bring forward real guidelines, regulations and a plan as soon as possible.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** Deputy O'Hara knows that I represent a constituency that is very similar to his. I attended a number of meetings there during the summer. I understand all the concerns and issues he has highlighted because I have heard them in my constituency. I am also advocating on behalf of my constituents. They want to see the new wind energy guidelines published as soon as possible. The delay has been completely unacceptable. I referred to that in my opening statement.

When the guidelines are published, they will be part of what will be considered when planning applications are lodged, but there are many other factors planning authorities consider when they look at planning applications. As Deputy O'Hara knows from his days on the local authority, permitted developments follow the zoning matrix within a county development plan. As local authority councillors prepare county development plans, they have a significant input and say into the zoning contained within a development plan. They have a major role to play. The guidelines are very important but zoning is even more important. That is what I said at the public meetings in my constituency.

I agree with Deputy O'Hara. I am advised that the guidelines are at a very advanced stage and that they will go to public consultation. I am hopeful that we will see them very shortly. That is what Deputy O'Hara and his constituents want to see, and it is what my constituents and I want to see.

## **Bus Services**

**Deputy George Lawlor:** This issue pertains to the extension and expansion of the free travel scheme for under-nines to include and involve commercial bus operators. It aims to build on the Department of Transport's expansion of the fare reduction scheme introduced in recent years. If we are to have equity, equality and fairness, it is essential that this modest but impactful extension would include children under the age of nine travelling on commercial buses operated by companies within the free travel scheme. It would also address a growing disparity between PSO and commercial services. It would ensure equitable access for children across the country and reinforce the national commitment to increasing public transport usage and reducing car dependency. Those relying on commercial bus operators often reside in rural or underserved areas of the country, and they are excluded. This creates a two-tier system that is inconsistent with broader policy goals on transport, equity and inclusion.

The inclusion of the commercial bus operators would ensure fairness for all families, regardless of geography or the service providers. For those children who reside in areas where public transport is not always available – we all know those areas – it would support a broader modal shift by fostering a culture of public transport use from an early age. Commercial bus operators are already integrated into the Leap card infrastructure and participate in the free travel and young adult card schemes, so there is no requirement for any additional technological investment or major operational overhauls to implement this extension. The system is ready

and the commercial operators are ready, willing and able to deliver.

A report was compiled by Jim Power in 2024. It was commissioned by the Coach Tourism & Transport Council of Ireland. The report highlighted that unequal application of fare supports is creating an uneven playing field between public service operators and licensed commercial operators. Extending free travel to under-nines on commercial buses is a practical step that would improve competitive fairness while directly benefiting thousands of families. There is also strong public support for it following the findings of a recent survey.

The key figures and costs indicate that after adjusted fare levels and even factoring in occasional long-distance trips, the total cost for the entire country is unlikely to exceed €1 million annually. Large swathes of this country have either a non-existent or a very poor public transport service and are dependent on private bus operators. To exclude children under nine years who cannot avail of public transport and who depend on private operators is just not fair. There is no equality. The inclusion of commercial operators in the free travel scheme for under-nines would deliver strong social value at minimal fiscal cost. It would also align directly with the Department's objectives on equality and accessibility.

I respectfully ask that this move be taken by the Minister for Transport and his Department in an effort to introduce and maintain equality for those people across the country who have no access to public transport at a time when we have commercial bus operators that are trying to compete, unfairly, in this regard. If a child under the age of nine is travelling, he or she gets used to travelling on public transport, but their families also travel with them, which is a success story for everybody. I urge the Minister for Transport to carry out the move I am suggesting.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** I thank Deputy Lawlor for raising this important topic. I am replying on behalf of the Minister for Transport, Deputy Darragh O'Brien.

The Minister for Transport has responsibility for policy and overall funding of public transport, but neither he nor his officials are involved in the day-to-day operation of public transport services. Statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally rests with the National Transport Authority, NTA. The latter works with the public transport operators that deliver the services and that have responsibility for day-to-day operational matters. The NTA also has statutory responsibility for the regulation of fares charged to passengers in respect of public transport services provided under public service obligation, PSO, contracts. However, unlike PSO services - where the NTA sets, monitors, and regulates fares - services operated by commercial bus operators fall outside this remit. Fares on services run by commercial bus operators are determined independently by the operators and are a purely commercial decision.

That said, I assure the Deputy that the Government is committed to delivering an accessible, reliable and affordable public transport system for all our citizens, including children. Under the programme for Government, our commitments include the roll-out of contactless payments, keeping fares affordable and examining the further expansion of free public transport for children.

In recent years, the Government has introduced a range of fare initiatives aimed at improving the affordability of and access to public transport, while also encouraging increased usage across all age groups. These measures include the 90-minute fare, the 20% fare discount on PSO services, and the young adult card, YAC. Notably, the YAC scheme has been broadened

to include eligible services operated by commercial bus operators. Specifically, in budget 2025, the Government approved the extension of free travel to children aged five to eight years on State-subsidised PSO services, with the application portal formally opening on 3 September 2025. This targeted initiative is designed to encourage children to start using public transport from an early age. The Government decision to expand this initiative did not include broadening this measure to commercial bus operators.

As is the case with all such budgetary measures, any decisions regarding potential future fare reductions are a matter for the Government and are considered within the context of the available fiscal parameters and the medium-term fiscal plan.

**Deputy George Lawlor:** I appreciate the Minister of State is here with a prepared script not of his making, but from the Department. To say on an issue like this that the Minister is not involved in the day-to-day running is a lame excuse in the context of what I am asking. Effectively what is happening here is discriminatory. The Government is saying to children and their families who reside in an area where a public transport system is readily available that they can benefit from this, but it is saying to children who do not have that luxury and live in largely rural areas sadly that we are not going to extend it to the bus operator that they have access to. I acknowledge that very good work has been done and very good initiatives have been introduced. The Minister of State has outlined these in the area of children from the ages of five to eight. However, Ministers arrive with great fanfare at these announcements but then tell us that they are not involved in the day-to-day operation, and it is the NTA's issue.

The notion that we would have one set of children being able to benefit from something in this country while others are told, "Sorry, you make your own way", is a bit ludicrous in the context of equality and fairness. I am sure there is a case to be taken and won somewhere. For the amount involved and the fiscal impact this will have, and the return we would get, it is ludicrous for a Minister to wash his hands off it and say: "Look, it is nothing to do with me. I will announce any initiatives. I will take the pat on the back, but when it comes to actually making a decision that is down to the NTA." That is absolutely ridiculous. This is a simple request. It is not going to break the bank in the context of the overall budgetary situation. I urge the Minister of State to go to his colleague and tell him that this is about fairness and equality for the children aged under nine who do not access public services.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** This year, the NTA introduced a new distance based zonal fare structure for the greater Dublin area. This move aims to make fares equitable, more consistent and easier to understand with significant reductions for many commuting from outer areas aligning prices more closely with distance travelled. I acknowledge the vital role commercial bus operators play in the overall public transport network by providing essential connectivity that complements that delivered under the public service obligation programme.

I assure the Deputy that the Government remains committed to making public transport as accessible and equitable as possible. The Minister for Transport has met, and will continue to meet and listen to, the representatives of the commercial operators. While fare initiatives have delivered clear benefits for passengers, they also carry financial implications, emphasising the need to balance affordability with long-term sustainability of the public transport system. Any decision regarding fare initiatives will be a matter for Government decision during the annual Estimates process. The equity point the Deputy made is valid. I will relay and press it upon the Minister and the Government.

## Fishing Industry

**Deputy Tom Brabazon:** I wish to raise an issue relating to Howth Harbour. Howth has been a harbour and fishing village since the Middle Ages. Boats are experiencing an issue with the harbour's depth. It has not been dredged since the 1970s. That is almost half a century ago. Boats, especially the larger boats, which have a clearance of 5 m or less have a much narrower window to get in and out of the harbour than they used to have because of the silting up of the harbour. Dredging is due to be carried out. There is a programme to build a public park on one side of the harbour and use the dredging materials to build up the soil levels to do that. Unfortunately, the planning permission has been granted, but we are waiting on a consent to issue from the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA. It has been with the agency for some time. This issue came to a head a number of weeks ago when a vessel was stuck in the harbour for a couple of hours at low tide. Dredging is required urgently.

Howth has become a hot spot for tourism. The area is a contributor for both the economy of Dublin and the country overall. Each year tourists and people from across the country travel to Howth to celebrate Howth, Ireland's maritime heritage, our seafood and Howth Maritime and Seafood Festival. In the current global environment, it is essential that we have food security, and our fishermen contribute greatly to that reliable source of food. This is an important project. Dredging will greatly benefit all who use the harbour and assist in the continuance of the tradition of Howth as a fishing village. I ask the Minister of State to impress on his colleague Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, to impress upon the EPA to move this consent process along if possible.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter. I am taking this matter on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley.

The programme for Government commits to securing a thriving and resilient seafood sector. The appointment of a Minister of State with responsibility across fisheries and the marine to co-ordinate and integrate these key policy areas, in addition to the establishment of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Fisheries and Maritime Affairs, underpins the dedication of the Government in this regard. Bord Iascaigh Mhara, BIM, in its business of seafood report 2024 offers a comprehensive assessment of the economic impact of the seafood sector. The report states that the Irish seafood industry is valued at €1.24 billion, an increase of 4% on 2023. Almost 8,000 people are directly employed across the fishing, aquaculture and processing sectors. This rises to almost 17,000 people when indirect employment is included. Fish landings in Ireland were valued at €461 million in 2024, with €325 million of that figure coming from Irish vessels. The report also shows a value growth of 25% in the aquaculture sector. These figures demonstrate the ability of the sector to adjust to a changing environment when supported with strategic investment, both public and private.

Through the seafood development programme, the Government is delivering essential support to strengthen competitiveness, sustainability and employment across the sector. This programme is cofunded by the Government and the European Commission under the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund, EMFAF, 2021-2027. Separate to the seafood development programme, the Department also funds supports and services provided by Bord Bia to the agrifood sector, including seafood. Funding supports are also provided to the commercial seafood sector by Enterprise Ireland and by Údarás na Gaeltachta.

In May, agreement was reached between the EU and UK on extending the existing arrange-

ments for reciprocal access to fish in each other's waters for a 12-year period up to June 2038. This is significantly longer than the four years sought by the UK and, crucially, did not involve any additional transfer of quota from the EU to the UK. Ireland carried a disproportionate burden of the quota transfers to the UK under the trade and co-operation agreement. However, the extension of the reciprocal access period will provide certainty and stability for the seafood sector. This will allow our sector to make sustainable, long-term decisions for their businesses. We will continue to highlight the issue of the disproportionate burden-sharing with both the Commissioner and other member states. We will pursue every opportunity at EU level to increase the available quotas for our fishing fleet.

The European Commission's evaluation of the Common Fisheries Policy regulation is currently ongoing. During the Department's first meeting with the Commissioner for Fisheries and Oceans, Costas Kadiris, the Minister of State emphasised to him the importance of this evaluation in addressing the impacts of Brexit on our fishing sector. Since the Minister of State was appointed, he has engaged regularly with the seafood sector. He has visited four of the State's fishery harbour centres: Killybegs, Castletownbere, Ros an Mhíl and Howth. He intends to visit Dingle and Dunmore East in the near future. He has also engaged directly with all recognised stakeholder representative groups across the catching, aquaculture and processing sectors. The programme for Government commits to publishing a five-year fisheries sector strategy. To progress this, the Minister of State has engaged Mr. Kieran Mulvey as a facilitator to work with seafood representatives in order to identify and articulate issues, priorities and opportunities for the sector. This engagement is ongoing.

**Deputy Tom Brabazon:** I thank the Minister of State for the positive outline of the general scenario in regard to the fishing industry, which I of course welcome. I have spoken to the Minister of State directly on the EPA consent regarding Howth and he is aware of it and of the urgency of the issue. I wanted to raise it with the Minister of State on the record, that it is much wider than that. The leisure sector is affected by this as well. I know the Howth Yacht Club, for example, has a very significant investment in a new marina, which has been held up by the fact the dredging has been held up. The big concern I have is that the RNLI operates from Howth Harbour and God forbid that it would need to get out with one of its larger vessels and get stuck at a low tide without having a window to get out for a rescue. I would be very concerned about that.

The EPA consent needs to be moved along as swiftly as possible.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** I again thank the Deputy for raising this issue, specifically in relation to Howth Harbour. He has rightly highlighted the need for the EPA consent, which I will absolutely follow up with my colleague the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley. As Deputy Brabazon has pointed out quite correctly, it impacts on the commercial sector within the harbour of Howth. It also impacts on the leisure sector and people who are involved in leisure boating. Most importantly, it also impacts on the RNLI service there, which is critical to keeping people safe and is often involved in the rescue and recovery of people who get into distress. The Deputy has made the case very strongly and has articulated it well and I will absolutely follow up with the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, to ensure we can move this project along and ensure the EPA consent is issued post-haste.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I thank the Minister of State and the Deputy, and I could not agree more.

## Planning Issues

**Deputy James Geoghegan:** I thank the Minister for being in attendance. He will be aware the greater Dublin drainage project was granted planning permission in July and a judicial review was subsequently initiated. This is an absolutely essential project for the existing half a million homes in this country and tens of thousands more homes that will not be built unless this project is continued. I do not need to tell the Minister, as a Dublin Bay South TD, about the impact the absence of the drainage project is having on the Ringsend wastewater treatment plant. On Wednesday, I raised with the Taoiseach the question as to what more can the Government do about judicial reviews, specifically on this project. The Taoiseach said in his reply that he has asked the Attorney General and the Minister to look at the option of bespoke legislation to drive that project, the Dublin drainage project, through because the common good is overwhelming here. That is one indication of what the Government intends to do about this specific project.

A second area the Government has made clear it intends to act on is to commence the relevant provisions of the planning Act legislation. It is not within the Minister's remit but as part of that there is a requirement that he be consulted in respect of that. At what level will we fix costs in respect of these types of Aarhus Convention environmental proceedings? What we do not want to have is some sort of cost incentive to bring forward these proceedings as distinct from the merits of the proceedings. Where are we with those regulations and the commencements of those provisions and at what level will we fix those costs?

A week ago, the Minister indicated he would bring a memo to the Government in respect of the civil reform Bill, which deals more generally with judicial review. Will the Minister clarify, in respect of that Bill, if it will impact planning at all because I am not entirely clear in regard to that Bill? Some of the recommendations contained in the civil report by President Kelly are already in the planning Act related to planning decisions. It is really about the commencement of the provisions of the planning Act to fix the costs of these types of actions, none of which will impact on these live proceedings regarding the drainage project that are before the courts, but other major critical infrastructure projects are being built in this country and this city, the Shannon to Dublin pipeline being one of them. That is another absolutely essential piece of infrastructure to ensure we see the delivery of housing.

It is essential we take every step possible not to restrict people's legal rights but to ensure the common good prevails. The public wants us to build this infrastructure. We cannot have a system where a single individual or a group of individuals can frustrate over half a million people. That is not proportionate and not within the intent of the Aarhus Convention.

I have a fourth idea for how the Government and State could respond to judicial reviews, namely, being put at risk of costs. Is it completely inconceivable that a party that brings this type of action would not have to face some risk of costs? That is a submission the TFI made to President Kelly's cost report review. Is that something the Government might also consider?

**Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan):** I thank Deputy Geoghegan for raising this extremely important matter. He started his contribution by referring to the greater Dublin drainage project, which is an absolutely critical project not just for the people in the constituencies we share but indeed for the whole Dublin area. Deputy Geoghegan's specific concern is what can be done to ensure unmeritorious judicial review applications brought before the courts can be prevented or short-circuited in some way to ensure the common good and public interest in such a project is represented and protected by the State.

I agree with the sentiments he is expressing.

What I have indicated to my Department, and the authority I received from Government on 15 July last, was that I was given permission to prepare the general scheme of a civil reform Bill. I am pleased to say that preparatory work is proceeding expeditiously and I hope to be in a position at some stage, probably next month, to publish the heads of the Bill and go to the Government to seek permission to draft, on a priority basis, legislation that would be entitled a civil reform Bill.

As Deputy Geoghegan is aware, President Kelly produced a very fine report back in December 2020. I am not prepared to let that report sit on the shelves. It needs to be given statutory effect. As Deputy Geoghegan will be aware, many aspects of it relate more generally to the area of civil litigation, such as discovery and trying to give greater powers to the precedents. They are issues I hope to see included in the Bill.

Also within the Bill, however, will be a part dealing with judicial review. As has been indicated by the Deputy, one of the biggest challenges facing the State is the delivery of critical infrastructure and affordable housing for our people. The greater Dublin drainage project is an example of that critical infrastructure. Despite the Government's significant efforts and what has to be recognised as an unprecedented allocation of resources to deliver large-scale infrastructure projects that would improve the living standards of people in our community, we find that many of these projects, which are both urgent and necessary, find themselves delayed because of judicial review applications, many of them in circumstances where there is an internal statutory appeal. The effect of it is that very many of the projects are delayed for significant periods because of judicial review applications. As the Deputy will appreciate, and as I appreciate, people are entitled to bring challenges before our courts but what we should seek to do, and what this civil reform legislation will seek to do in respect of judicial review, is try to rebalance the different sides in that argument. We need to ensure there is legislation in place that recognises and places a statutory obligation on a court to take into account the public interest and common good being served by a major infrastructural project.

*7 o'clock*

That is something that needs specific statutory recognition. There should also be some statutory recognition of the fact that a person who is challenging, by way of a judicial review, a project needs to have some direct impact or interest in the project itself. They must be directly affected by it as opposed to just an individual coming along, taking a challenge on the basis that they have a general interest in it. That is why I have decided to ensure that this general scheme is published. Deputy Geoghegan mentioned a couple of other matters in respect of the planning Act and the Aarhus rules on costs and I have had discussions in my Department about that. As I am sure he will appreciate, that is a matter predominantly for the Department of housing but when it comes to judicial review we will introduce new legislation that will complement and sit alongside the provisions within the planning Act.

**Deputy James Geoghegan:** I thank the Minister for the reply. It seems to me that we have put the laws in place in the planning Act in relation to trying to reduce the number of judicial reviews. We have not yet commenced the relevant provision as it relates to fixed costs. The Minister has a statutory role in relation to that, although I acknowledge it is the Minister for housing who has to discuss it with him. I wonder when we are going to make an actual decision on this and send a very clear signal of what the State's approach is in getting critical infrastruc-

ture over the line. I am still not very clear as to whether the Minister's civil reform Bill will have any impact at all as it relates to planning. It seems to me that the civil reform Bill, how it has been briefed and what is in Mr. Justice Peter Kelly's report, talks about a more onerous leave stage when it comes to judicial review whereas in the planning Act - and those provisions have been commenced - we have abolished a leave stage. I want to ensure that the public are clear as to what the Government is going to do here. I was heartened by what the Taoiseach said on Wednesday in terms of looking at bespoke legislation on the drainage project. He is going to seek the advice of the Attorney General. However, will we be able to do that with long-standing precedent of these Houses legislating as it relates to cases that are before the courts? The public wants this to happen. They want us to do something. We just simply have to do something. The Minister's Bill is very important legislation that will take some time to go through these Houses but ultimately we need to see radical action here because we know what is going to happen. The Taoiseach asked people politely not to judicially review the drainage project but they have done it. We know what will happen with the Shannon to Dublin water project. That, and other critical infrastructure, is going to be judicially reviewed. People are going to suffer. Young people are not going to get access to houses because of these laws and we have to do something radical to respond.

**Deputy Jim O'Callaghan:** First, on the bespoke legislation in respect of the drainage project, obviously that would be legislation coming from a different Department to the Department of justice. I have not given consideration to it. I hear what the Taoiseach had to say on it but that is a matter that would obviously have to come from the Minister for housing in respect of bespoke legislation. As the Deputy will no doubt appreciate however, introducing a piece of legislation to, in effect, determine the outcome of litigation that is put before the courts, can be subject to frailty. We need to be careful about that. I would like to see the planning Acts commenced as soon as possible. A huge amount of time in the previous Oireachtas was devoted to those Acts. We got them through the Houses of the Oireachtas and they should be commenced promptly. I will certainly speak to my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Browne, in respect of when it is intended to commence them.

Regarding the judicial review legislation that I intend to bring forward, it may not be enacted in time to deal with the Dublin drainage project; although sometimes when you look at the length of time these infrastructural projects take it may very well have an opportunity to deal with it. However, that legislation will put on a statutory basis the type of orders that can be made in judicial review applications. It is all very archaic in terms of orders of *certiorari* and *mandamus*. We need to set out what a court can do. We need to set out what the court has to take into consideration in its granting of any judicial review. We need to specify that a court cannot go down the route of engaging with a judicial review if there is an internal statutory appeal process available to an applicant under a statutory scheme. At present, with the greatest of respect to the other branch of Government, the Judiciary, we need to specify more precisely when the courts can intervene in judicial review. At present it is far too broadly available. I want to see a system whereby judicial review challenges are expedited and there are very specific grounds upon which it can be challenged, namely, the decision-making process was impacted and the basis for it will be set out in legislation.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** We have to begin by saying that we all agree drones have massive potential for good in society such as for emergency relief mapping and delivering medicines to isolated areas etc. The focus of this Topical Issue is the fast-food drones that have been operating in Dublin 15 in particular. Manna, which operates these drones to deliver fast food, has been doing so for about a year and a half. It is unlicensed, obviously, but it has three bases without planning permission. No consultation was ever held with the community before introducing this very invasive technology over the community. The recent policy framework process that the Department conducted acknowledges that societal concerns must be addressed. It also acknowledges that there must be approval of local authorities. The Dublin 15 service is in breach of both of those stipulations and in my opinion and that of residents, it should cease until there is regulation, community assent and it complies with all of those things. Complaints have been escalating. The impact is overwhelmingly negative given the few who use it for convenience foods such as ice cream and coffee. No environmental impact is required for its impact on wildlife. The privacy protections that Manna claims it has have been found to be completely not the case. It claims they only use cameras for the delivery drop that do not impact other residents. That is not true. We have evidence of that. However, the community is fighting back. A huge meeting took place in Dundrum over the summer, where this is also to be introduced, and Manna and the people who were talking about tech inevitability got their lesson there. In Dublin 15, there is now Drone Action Dublin 15, which is bringing residents together to organise a town hall meeting on Monday, 6 October and to inform and give the residents voice on this issue for a change.

**Deputy Roderic O’Gorman:** In February of this year, at my request, the first debate on drones in this Dáil was held. In that debate I made the point that I am not against drones. The vast majority people are not against drones. They do play an important role in society but commercial drone activity must be regulated. It must be regulated on issues to do with noise pollution and privacy. These drones have cameras. There are also issues to do with the planning status of drone bases and issues to do with safety. At the time, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, told me that these issues would be addressed in National Policy Framework for Unmanned Aircraft Systems. That national policy framework was launched - I would call it a soft launch - in August. It was quietly put out there. I can understand why it was a soft launch because on each of those four grounds the policy framework entirely fails to deal with the issues of concern. There are no clear commitments to deal with the current regulatory gaps that exist in the system. Even the council acknowledges these gaps exist in the system. There is no timelines for when the issues that residents and Members of the Oireachtas have raised will be addressed. The document leans in to more experimental use of drones. Under action 16, it is stated that “the Irish Aviation Authority will promote processes that allow for the allocation of airspace for experimental and developing UAS operations to be established.” Therefore, the scales are actually being weighed in favour of more drone activity around the country without the necessary regulations taking place. This document is not good enough. I will continue to work to ensure we have the correct rules and regulatory structures in place for the commercial drone development in this country.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** I thank both Deputies for raising this important matter. I am responding on behalf of the Minister for Transport. From an aviation safety perspective the regulation of the recreational and commercial use of drones, which are also known technically as unmanned aircraft systems, UAS, is provided for under the European Union regulations that

are directly applicable in Ireland. Two drone-specific EU regulations ensure drone operations across Europe are safe and secure. The two regulations are the Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2019/945 and the Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2019/947. These set out common rules for the regulation of drones and drone operators including training, licensing and registration. Regulation 2019/947 sets operational rules that apply to both professional drone operators and those flying drones for leisure. Regulation 2019/945 sets the common EU-wide technical requirements for drones and the features and capabilities that drones must have in order to be flown safely. This regulation also seeks to foster investment and innovation in this sector through a harmonised framework across the European Union.

The aim of the EU drone regulations is to achieve the same level of safety for drone operations as in manned aviation. The Irish Aviation Authority, the civil aviation regulator, oversees the implementation of the EU drone regulations and standards. The drone regulations are operation-centric and focus on the risk of drone operations, so regulation is lighter on low-risk operations and more demanding on higher-risk operations. Drone delivery operations are closely regulated from an aviation safety perspective. These types of commercial drone operations may fall into the medium-risk “specific” category which may require specific authorisation by the Irish Aviation Authority. This type of authorisation is recognised in all EU member states. To obtain an operational authorisation an operator must provide a comprehensive safety portfolio, which includes assessing and addressing both ground and air risks with appropriate mitigations. These might include, for example, co-ordination with air traffic control and fitting the drone with a parachute and flight termination system.

At a national level S.I. No. 24 of 2023, the Irish Aviation Authority (Unmanned Aircraft Systems (Drones)) Order 2023 came into force on 2 February 2023 and replaced an earlier drones order. It sets out the investigative and enforcement powers of the Irish Aviation Authority and provides for arrangements between An Garda Síochána and the IAA in relation to enforcement of EU drone regulations. It also includes a section on privacy rights, which draws the attention of drone operators to the preparation of a data protection impact assessment, where required, in accordance with the EU general data protection regulation.

In addition to complying with EU drone regulations, drone operators must comply with national laws including environmental, planning and privacy laws. While there is a comprehensive regulatory framework in place from an aviation safety perspective, there are areas where the rapid pace of expansion of UAS operations has resulted in gaps and uncertainty. The Government, which was aware that the impact of a growing UAS sector needed further consideration, included in the programme for Government a commitment to guide high-level strategic planning and development of the UAS sector in Ireland. The recent publication of the policy framework for unmanned aircraft systems is the first step in fulfilling that commitment. The policy framework aims to guide high-level strategic planning and development of the UAS sector in Ireland through supporting growth and innovation, while ensuring safe and secure operations and managing environmental and other concerns. The policy framework proposes a number of structures and actions that aim to address concerns in relation to increasing UAS usage and operations in balance with the realisation of the economic and societal benefits of the emerging UAS sector. Planning for the implementation of the policy framework is under way at the Department of Transport.

**Deputy Ruth Coppinger:** The Minister of State’s reply fails to grasp the point. The framework says that the Irish Aviation Authority oversees the implementation of the EU drone regulations, but it does not monitor noise. It said this at the Joint Committee on Transport. There

is nobody monitoring what is the biggest single problem of these drones, which is noise. The Minister of State has said that drone delivery operations are closely regulated for aviation safety. There is loads of evidence that these drones are flying in winds beyond what they are meant to fly in. There are a lot of safety concerns around that.

The community has never had its say on this. This technology mainly impacts people who cannot even enjoy their back gardens any longer or cannot even sit outside and read a book because of this constant drone noise. This is a real incursion into people's mental health.

Manna Air Delivery is portrayed as a plucky startup. I put it to the Minister of State that it is not. It is a €60 million venture and Coca-Cola is behind it. People are entitled to have basic privacy, noise reduction and a say in this. They will have a say.

**Deputy Roderic O'Gorman:** We have never had a conversation about how much of the traffic that currently is on our roads we want to move up into the sky because that is literally what is happening in Dublin 15 right now. Thousands of journeys that took place on our roads are now going over our roofs and going over our gardens. This represents a massive societal change. A change like that has to be done through a rules-based system. It cannot be done as an experiment as is actually proposed in the framework document the Government has put out. It requires a framework of rules. It requires public buy-in.

I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Collins, for coming in today. I know this is not the Minister of State's Department. What he has read out to me is almost identical to what the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, read to me in February, other than acknowledging that the framework is now published. It is published but it is not in any way adequate. I am going to continue to work to make sure we get that regulatory structure in place so there are rules around how commercial drones are used in our country.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** I am aware that the rapid pace of expansion of UAS operations has resulted in challenges and generated real concerns and uncertainty among communities, particularly around issues of noise, intrusion and privacy. The recently published policy framework seeks to identify and address any policy, regulatory or legislative gaps. It aims to facilitate consideration of how matters such as planning and environmental issues will be addressed by the appropriate authorities, including in the context of the expansion of commercial drone delivery services. Implementation of the policy framework relies on cross-government structures and the continuation of engagement and support from various Departments, agencies, the UAS sector, and of course the public. It will facilitate the addressing of matters such as planning and environmental issues, including noise nuisance, by the appropriate authorities.

The framework proposes a number of structures and actions that address concerns in relation to increased UAS usage and operations. It proposes 16 actions under three main areas: the use of airspace and planning; compliance and enforcement; and enterprise and innovations. The actions in the policy framework include the establishment of a national working group on UAS geographical zones to develop transparent processes and procedures for the designation of UAS geographical zones; the safe management of the integration of UAS into our airspace and the impact on society and the environment; the establishment of a national U-space steering group to develop an action plan for the implementation of U-space; the establishment of a UAS enterprise and innovation leadership group to foster the development of a robust ongoing policy on innovation and commercialisation; and the introduction of fixed charge offences for infringement of UAS regulations to augment the extensive enforcement provisions in aviation,

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civil and criminal law already on the Statute Book. All of that planning for the implementation of the framework policy is under way.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 7.19 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m. Dé Máirt, an 23 Meán Fómhair 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 7.19 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 23 September 2025.