



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters	2
Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate	3
Special Educational Needs	3
Special Educational Needs	5
Youth Services.....	8
Vacant Properties.....	11
Hospital Waiting Lists	14
Abolition of Carer's Allowance Means Test: Motion [Private Members].....	18
Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions.....	47
Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltáí Eile - Other Members' Questions.....	57
Ceisteanna ar Pholasáí nó ar Reachtaíocht - Questions on Policy or Legislation.....	59
Situation in Gaza: Statements	69
Investment in Sport and Sporting Infrastructure: Statements	117
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage: Motion.....	153
Industrial Relations (Boycott of Joint Labour Committees) Bill 2025: Second Stage (Resumed) [Private Members].....	153
Insurance Costs: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members].....	155

DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 1 Deireadh Fómhair 2025

Wednesday, 1 October 2025

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly) i gceannas ar 9 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): 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 Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss the failure to provide an SNA for a primary school child.

Deputy Matt Carthy - To discuss the impact of delays of SNA allocations on pupils and families in Cavan-Monaghan.

Deputy Barry Ward - To discuss the progression of the Sutton to Sandycove, S2S, cycleway.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil - To discuss paediatric surgery waiting lists affecting families in Kildare North.

Deputy Pa Daly - To discuss the north Kerry CAMHS review.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss ongoing human rights abuses against the Uyghurs.

Deputy David Cullinane - To discuss the development of a youth mental health centre for the south-east.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny - To discuss the roll-out and funding of DEIS+.

Deputy Paul Murphy - To discuss the case of a school in Rathfarnham and the need to reduce class sizes.

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss the crisis in youth services in the north inner city.

Deputy Thomas Gould - To discuss vacancy and dereliction in city, town and village centres.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss the 23% rise in thefts in Cork city in the second quarter of this year.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss the need for an increase in funding for the LauraLynn children's hospital.

The matters raised by Deputies Ó Murchú, Carthy, Ó Cearúil, Gould and Gannon have been selected for discussion

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Special Educational Needs

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is very hard to discuss anything relating to SNAs without dealing with the onslaught of fears that have been expressed to politicians due to the guidelines from the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, which provide that there will be a very limited school-led review and that the window will be shut. There has been row back on that. There has also been row back on the fear that SNA allocations would be unified across mainstream and special classes. I welcome that we have heard that from the Department, Government and the NCSE. I know this will be delivered in written form to schools. I ask that the guidelines be updated. The guidelines should state exactly how things are. That request is fair enough. We have all met with SNAs, teachers and principals on that and that is all they are looking for.

There are issues relating to the conditions for SNA allocations. On this basis, I raise the issue of Tiernan Clarke. It is an issue I brought up with the Minister of State previously. I have also spoken to the Taoiseach and the NCSE around it. It is something we really need to see movement on. Tiernan Clarke is from Riverstown on the Cooley Peninsula. He is now aged four. He is in Rampark National School. He is registered blind and he has a condition that renders his bones prone to breaking if he falls. I have been told that he has had a number of what I am going to call minor falls. We are dealing with a health and safety issue. There is an ASD class to be opened in October, but at this point in time there are three SNAs in his class setting. These circumstances are going to get a lot worse at some point this month.

I understand the way the allocations are done this weather. They are not done on the basis of a single allocation for a child. However, we are talking about a child who at best can see 6 m where we can see 30 m. We are talking about a four-year-old. He has albinism and photosensitivity. Someone has to make sure he puts sun cream on before he goes out for fear of his propensity for cancer.

We need to ensure that he has a one-on-one SNA allocation. At this stage I cannot see anything other than this working at this stage. While his condition may get worse, he will get older and learn a skillset. In the future he might not need the supports that are needed now. His mother has said this. Whether talking to his teachers, principal or his visiting teacher - I have given Minister of State correspondence - who deals with children who are visually impaired, they are absolutely afraid that he will not have the supports that are required.

I understand the rules. They need to be examined in general, but, beyond that, we need to have an element of flexibility because we are talking about a health and safety issue that is causing huge stress for a family. We are also talking about a child who at this point in time does not have the supports he should have. It is a circumstance that is going to get worse over

the next couple of weeks. I ask that the Minister of State does everything in his power to resolve this issue.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I thank the Deputy for raising this sensitive matter before us. I assure him that clarity was brought on the issue of the SNA guidelines but there were some concerns in relation to them. Nothing has changed. We are working off the circulars for 2014 and that will continue to be case. I would like to allay the fears that some people have in relation to the guidelines and the letters issued last week. We understand the central roles that SNAs play in ensuring that students can access education and enable them to achieve the best possible outcomes. In a lot of instances, special education and education for children with additional needs is very much on the backs of special needs assistants and the work they do.

On the issue the Deputy raised, the NCSE is responsible for co-ordinating and advising on educational provision for children with additional needs. We will have 23,000 SNAs working in our educational system by the end of this year. It is important that we have. The number of SNAs available for allocation has continued to increase annually. Budget 2025 provided for 1,600, which is the largest ever number.

The NCSE manages the allocation of SNAs to schools and it is responsible for ensuring that these resources are allocated to children with the greatest level of need. The NCSE advised each school in June of their allocation for the 2025-26 school year. Each year schools are advised of their SNA supports, which indicates that the NCSE will undertake reviews to ensure that SNAs are allocated to the children with the greatest level of need. Such reviews can see an increased or reduced level of support or no change in allocation. This has always been part of the work of the council and is necessary to ensure that resources are allocated in line with the level of need.

Regarding the issue that the Deputy raised, the NCSE advised me that it has been in communication with the school regarding the deployment of an SNA allocation and that the student is being provided with support at present. The school submitted a further request to the council. There were a number of issues with that request. The council went back to the school looking for further information. This information was received by the council on 15 September and the review is being processed. I assure the Deputy that I will liaise with the NCSE and the Department to make sure the review is done as speedily as possible and we can get back to him. I take the points the Deputy made relating to his constituent and the level of need that is there. I assure him that I will work with the NCSE to ensure there is a timely review of the matter and we can get back to him as soon as it is completed.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The NCSE guidelines need to be updated to ensure there are no further worries about what people believed were the changes introduced. We do need to look at some element of flexibility in dealing with specific children like Tiernan. He is registered blind and has a propensity to break bones. We can all imagine the difficulties that exist and we talking about a four-year-old child. The circumstances could improve in the future and he may need fewer resources. At this point in time he is lucky that the ASD class has not yet opened. I welcome the fact that the Minister of State will engage with the review process.

It probably should not have come to this House, but if we could have that happen as quickly as possible and deliver a positive result his mam, the principal and everyone else would be especially happy with that. Then we could provide the child with the necessary school framework in which he can learn. I want to put on record a letter that was written before the child was there. It was written by a visiting teacher for young people who are blind or vision impaired who was very concerned about the fact the school had told Tiernan's mother they were not in a position to provide SNA support for him. The visiting teacher stated:

Tiernan has a significant visual impairment and he also has a medical condition whereby his bones break very easily. He is coming from a nine child preschool room with full level 7 Aims support into a Junior Infant classroom of over 30 children with no additional support. Tiernan has blind registration and aside from the fact that he is going to have great difficulty navigating such a big classroom, if he trips and falls, he has the added danger that he could have a serious bone break.

There had been NCSE correspondence before but it was the usual stuff about the SNA resources; in other words, not an individualised resource but a school allocation to be deployed to children who have significant primary care needs. That is not a good enough answer. As I said, we need to ensure this process happens speedily and that Tiernan is provided with the supports he should have.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I take the Deputy's point and thank him for putting the matter relating to Tiernan and his care needs on the record of the Dáil. I could give him a long-winded answer, but I take the point he has made and I assure him I understand the importance of SNAs in enabling students like Tiernan across the country to access education and get better outcomes. I undertake to consult the NCSE and liaise with the Deputy in a timely manner. I will ask for the review to be completed and will certainly bring the matters he has put on the record of the Dáil. I understand as well that documentation is with the NCSE, through the school authorities. I will certainly liaise with the Deputy if that is okay.

Special Educational Needs

Deputy Matt Carthy: Cuirim fáilte roimh an Aire Stáit. I thank him for being here. We mentioned during our Private Members' business debate the other week that many families are being left in complete distress as a result of what I consider, being kind, the inefficiencies within the NCSE.

A fortnight ago I raised the case of Sonny McElvaney from my constituency with the Minister of State. He is a young boy who has significant additional needs. He has made huge progress, more than anybody would ever have envisaged, largely due to the efforts of his parents, especially his mother. His mother is very proactive. She engaged with the NCSE last November to inform its officials that her child would be attending school, to identify the school of choice and to state categorically the child would not be able to attend school unless he had one-on-one SNA support. That was not her view and she would say she did not like having to come to that view, but it was the view she had received from the professionals who had dealt with Sonny.

She contacted me in June. It is October today and from last November she had been engaged with the NCSE. In June, she told me the NCSE had been in touch with the school and the likely decision was the school would be asked to split the one SNA it currently has between two children and that simply was not possible. I will give an outline of how frustrating this must be for parents because it has been frustrating for me as an elected representative who deals with official bodies all the time. I contacted the NCSE immediately after that. That is going back to 6 June. I indicated there was substantial evidence to say Sonny required one-on-one supervision and an assistant and would need a full-time SNA. I received an acknowledgement from the NCSE. A couple of days later I sent it the occupational therapist, OT, assessment that had been carried out, again stating the need categorically. On 19 June, I had reason to meet NCSE officials and provided additional substantive documentation. I later sent correspondence from the school, with the permission of the other child's parents, that showed that child needed a full-time SNA. On 9 July, I received an email from the NCSE which referred to my previous correspondence. I am sorry; it was on 14 July the NCSE confirmed an appeal had been received and an outcome would issue before the end of July. On 25 July, I asked whether there was any update on that. On 1 August, I got notice from the NCSE that the school's submission would have an outcome likely next month. On 11 August, the family was contacted by a Fine Gael representative, not by the NCSE, to tell them the appeal had been unsuccessful. It took until 12 August for that to be officially notified to the school by the NCSE. Correspondence was ongoing constantly with the NCSE. On 20 August, I sought, on behalf of Sonny's family, an urgent meeting with the NCSE-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Matt Carthy: -----and I received a response on 21 August that basically said-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): You can come back, Deputy.

Deputy Matt Carthy: -----no further application or information is required at this time. I am only halfway through this story. Can the Minister of State see the frustration this family is going through, which I share?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. The question was about the impact of the delays in the Cavan-Monaghan area. I can speak to the amount of work being done by SNAs, which I have spoken about in response to Deputy Ó Murchú's matter, and the commitment of the Government to SNAs. Special education is built on the huge commitment by SNAs the length and breadth of the country and I thank them for the work they do. The NCSE makes these decisions. When the Deputy was going through the events there, he said he submitted an OT report in relation to Sonny. What date was that report? The Deputy might come back to me in his supplementary contribution. I want to get the facts. I have all the other dates here relating to this case, but the Deputy mentioned he submitted, on behalf of the family, an occupational therapist's report to the NCSE and I would appreciate that. If the Chair will allow I will give time to him to outline the case out of my time. I will endeavour to try to bring this to a satisfactory conclusion.

When parents contact the NCSE about the needs of their children they are constantly asking what the best possible outcome is, whether it is mainstream, a special class or a special school. They are constantly worried about whether the right supports are in the school and whether their child will be able to survive in the school environment. In the cases of a lot of children with additional and complex needs, parents will constantly say that if there is an SNA there, they will be able to encourage the child, help them and ensure they are integrated into the school as best as possible. I understand that. I also understand very specifically the importance of the SNA role in schools and of course for the families as well. I will work with the Deputy. He mentioned this to me during Private Members' business the other week. I will work with him and the NCSE to see if we can get a resolution to this. I can understand the frustration about the dates he has given me. I would appreciate it if he could give me as many of the dates as possible. If he could put the dates on the record, I will endeavour as a matter of urgency to address this. I understand from my previous conversations with the Deputy and with the NCSE that officials were working with the school to resolve these issues. I will go back again. It might be this afternoon before I get a chance to do it, but I will certainly go back to them. I would appreciate it if the Deputy could give the date of the OT's report. Then if there is any further information he wants to put on I will take it on board.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I thank the Minister of State. I sent the OT report to the NCSE on 9 June last year. I do not know whether that report had previously been submitted to the NCSE but I know mountains of documentation were submitted. Just to give a sense of this, after all the assurances that this was going to be dealt with in July, the email I received on 21 August stated:

I appreciate your ongoing attention for the enclosed. Duly confirming as per recent correspondence to the school, all documentation and information relating to the SNA review for the school has been recorded by the NCSE and provided to the SNA review panel. No further application or information is required at this time.

I had to respond to the NCSE to say I did not know what that meant and to ask what I was supposed to tell the family. On 26 August, I received an email from the NCSE stating that it appreciated my follow-up correspondence and confirmed that the outcomes of all outstanding SNA reviews were due to issue to the school as soon as possible in the first week of September. Then we go on, waiting for the first week in September. No update arrived. On 9 September, indication was given to the school that the review was complete and that the school remained at one SNA. The school is back a number of weeks at that stage. Sonny could not go. This child had a full-time SNA in preschool and then it has essentially been withdrawn from him. Since then, we have been trying to raise these issues. In all of the correspondence I receive from the NCSE, officials finished with this absolutely insulting line: "Schools are expected to operate within their existing allocation." There are two children in the school who both need a full-time SNA and there is one SNA. One of the children is going to miss out and at the moment it is Sonny because he is the newest child in the school. When I first started engaging with the NSCE on this particular issue, I thought the case was clear-cut and it was so blatantly obvious that this would be resolved fairly quickly. The fact that it is not concerns me. How many Sonny's are there the length and breadth of the State whose parents do not have the wherewithal or even the energy to knock on the door of their local TDs and have them do some of the fighting for them? If TDs are getting information from the NCSE that is turning out not

to be actually what is happening, what are parents being told? That is a serious question. This particular issue needs to be addressed but we need to make sure there are no Sonnys out there who are being denied their school place because of incompetence - and that is what this is.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy. First, when a child is in preschool and is availing of the AIM programme, something I noticed when I got this role was that in the Department of children and the Department of Social Protection the information that was across the system was not being shared. Children who are in preschool and availing of the programme should be very much taken into account when they start off in primary school as well.

The Deputy mentioned the dates. I have the dates. The one thing I was not sure of when I went back was if the OT report was only submitted on 9 June, but the Deputy has clarified that. It may have been submitted prior to the application. I will endeavour to go back. I had discussions with the NCSE regarding this issue since he first raised it with me and I will endeavour to bring clarity on it as soon as possible. I take the points he has raised very earnestly and I will endeavour to help in this situation. I give an undertaking to do that and we will come back to him when I have an update.

Youth Services

Deputy Gary Gannon: I thank the Minister of State for being here to discuss what is frankly a crisis in the way the State approaches youth work in the north inner city. Over the past few weeks we have all seen the headlines on the spate of crimes in the area. I am not going to sensationalise what is happening. Instead, I want to force this Government to acknowledge that these youth people, some of them not even out of their teenage years, are being pulled into drug-running and dealing because we have failed them long before members of An Garda Síochána even met them on scooters. I cannot overstate this. Youth work is crime prevention. I wish to speak to the Minister of State about youth work, specifically in the north inner city. It is, to some degree, underfunded. We also have youth workers feeling scared as they go about their daily lives trying to just do the job that is so important for the communities they serve. I give a particular shout-out and recognition to Independent Youth Works Project Dublin, which has 20 projects across the city, including the SWAN Youth Service, Cabra for Youth and Rutland Youth Service. They came together last year with one simple modest ask: sustained structural funding rather than the piecemeal grant system it is forced to survive on year after year. There is also the Bradóg Youth Service, which is currently paying €70,000 a year for its building and is struggling to stay open because of it. When we hear the Government talk about tackling so-called antisocial behaviour or launching initiatives on community safety, we cannot talk about safety while continuing to underfund the very services that prevent crime in the first place.

What I am talking about today is not in the abstract. In Mountjoy Square, a community after-school project has been asking for months for something as basic as a new front door because there are holes in the one it has. This is the reality. Kids in one of the most deprived parts of the capital are walking into a youth space that cannot even afford a proper front door while millions of euro are found for surveillance and policy initiatives. The Minister for justice has often told me I need to be more positive about the city. I have just suggested some real, positive measures that can be taken. We do so consistently. Will the Minister of State commit

to real, targeted, ongoing funding for youth services in Dublin's north inner city? I am not talking about *ad hoc* grants, pilots or press releases but about sustained investment in the very services that will keep our young people out of crime and give them a chance.

In the north inner city, which is actually often discussed in a way, there are communities that experience generational poverty and trauma but we have always had people willing to stand up and give good community-orientated service to the area in which they grew up. Oftentimes, the services in which they do that are cut to the bone in terms of funding. These youth workers are those we ask to be on the front line of many of the issues that talk about when we talk about addressing antisocial behaviour. It is often the youth workers themselves who are going in and talking to younger people who are often traumatised or in the throes of addiction. At this point, we are a stage where young people are now being groomed into drug gangs. These services are supported to a degree but not to the extent that would make a sustained difference to the areas. Last week, I was taken aback to see reports in the newspaper of something I probably understood but when I saw it written down it was blatant and that is youth workers being scared at the moment, such is the level of intimidation, drug-related intimidation and associated violence. If we are to take these communities - and not just in the north inner city - and their safety seriously, we need to invest, not only in more community gardaí on the street, but in tackling the violent disrupters themselves who are operating in centres that are often underfunded and unsuitable.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue of the crisis in the youth services in the north inner city, which gives me an opportunity to set out the position regarding these services. Supporting youth services is an absolute priority for the Department of Education and Youth, ensuring that young people in the north inner city of Dublin and across the country have access to valuable resources and opportunities.

The UBU your place your space, scheme is the Department's largest funded youth scheme. It targets young people aged between ten and 24 who are identified as marginalised, vulnerable and at risk of not flourishing. A budget of €50.7 million was allocated under the UBU scheme in 2025, representing a 6% increase on budget 2024. Over €17 million of the UBU scheme has been allocated to the City of Dublin Education and Training Board in its capacity as a grant administering body in respect of the scheme.

More specifically, €2.8 million was allocated to five UBU youth services that support young people in the north inner city. This year, in addition to the base allocation of the UBU funding, the Department is providing a further support of €170,000 in recognition of the challenges facing the youth services to address the needs of young people in the north inner city. The aim of this additional funding was to provide additional youth services in the north east inner city, NEIC, to ensure that young people who are marginalised, disadvantaged or vulnerable are afforded the opportunity to participate in voluntary youth services to support their wellbeing.

The Department is also represented in the north east inner city's task force, including its various subgroups. The Department participates in subgroup 3, which focuses on supporting children, young people and family wellbeing. A key objective of the current NEIC strategic plan, being led by subgroup 3, is to develop a strategic plan for youth work and youth services in the area. Department officials are working closely with the NEIC structures to progress and support this objective.

The Department funds the NEIC city connects pilot project, currently running in ten NEIC primary schools and eight schools serving children of post-primary age who live in the north east inner city. City connects organises student support and leverages existing school and community-based resources to improve students' academic and social-emotional outcomes. This includes relevant youth services in the area. Working together with the city connects team, some youth services in the area have been able to adapt or change the services they provide to ensure they are meeting the strengths, interests and needs of young people based on information provided by these young people to the city connects team. The Department is actively engaged in reviewing and strengthening the youth work services in the north inner city to ensure they are responsive to the evolving needs of young people, inclusive in their reach and effectively resourced.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I thank the Minister of State for his response. The north east inner city task force is referenced quite a bit in the Chamber and other Deputies ask for similar schemes to be applied in their own areas. Why would they not? A substantial amount has been allocated over a nearly seven-year period. We should remember why that task force was initiated. It was initiated to confront the crime, drug-dealing and violent feud that tore the soul out of this city, but looking at the outcomes seven years later, despite considerable funding, we have drug-dealing and associated violence that is more insidious. Liberty Park in the north inner city is effectively a no-go area, such is the level of open drug-dealing, violence, and people almost being corralled into that space. I am here consistently calling for a safer city centre. The displacement factor when the gardaí do that drives problems into the north inner city. We effectively have places at the moment where policies of containment are going on, with the idea being that if this is happening there, it is not spilling over into the more commercial part of the city centre.

The people who are most tasked with addressing that, in the absence of real Garda or State involvement, are our youth work services. The youth work services I engage with include the Diamond Project in the Belvedere Youth Club, which is working with about 15 young people who would previously have been in the throes of all the negative commentary that I often bring to the Chamber, but through restorative justice practices, it has taken those young people and worked with them intensively, and they are no longer in the criminal justice system, saving the State an absolute fortune, but more importantly, probably saving their lives. That is the type of intervention that we need. It is considered, targeted and measured. In the absence of that, we are continuing to throw money at outcomes that we have not yet seen to be successful.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy for his second contribution. As outlined, the Department provides significant support to the UBU scheme for youth services that support young people in the north inner city. Many communities across the length and breadth of the country are looking for the same intervention as has happened in the north east inner city and north inner city. They are looking at resources that I outlined in the previous answer, including the €50.7 million and other funding that has been put in place.

I take the point that we have to look at the outcomes. The Deputy also made a point about people turning their lives around and the number of young people who have successfully done that. There might be very few, but every success is a success. I assure him that the Department of Education and Youth is very much aware of the marginalised and vulnerable, and those at

risk of not flourishing. One key issue before us as a State is the percentage of people who, because of intergenerational issues, including crime and drugs, are outside the State or not really engaging in education or with services, which is a key objective. We have seen an increase in the budget for this over recent years. There are other disadvantaged communities, which have been raised by other Deputies in the House.

It is important that while we continue to support and invest in these communities and ensure that the marginalised and vulnerable are given an opportunity to flourish and move forward with their lives, we take stock of how these programmes are working and whether the outcomes are successful, and if not, we have to tweak them to make sure that we have the best possible outcomes for the people involved. I will endeavour, within the Department, to work with the Deputy to get as much funding and targeted measures as possible.

Vacant Properties

Deputy Thomas Gould: Right across cities, towns and villages, there are empty, vacant, and derelict houses and buildings lying idle. They are being left to rot. These are properties and homes where people should be able to live, work and raise families, but instead they are left derelict and vacant. GeoDirectory has found record levels of commercial vacancy. It has also found that only 2,377 homes have been charged with the vacant homes tax. There are probably two or three times more than that in Cork city alone. This is a shockingly low figure. Why is more not being done to tackle vacancy and dereliction? These empty buildings are ripping the heart out of communities in our cities, towns and villages. They are destroying local economies and forcing people to live in overcrowded, substandard accommodation and in many cases emergency accommodation.

More than 5,000 children are in emergency accommodation and at the same time, we have vacant, derelict buildings in every town, city and village. It is madness. What is being done about it? I will give a couple of ideas to show what I am talking about. I have a printed image of a street in Cork. It has been like that for years. It is not just Cork. I have an image of Crumlin village. What could be a lovely house with an extension on it has been boarded up. It is not just that. I have an image of Dublin city centre. A block of houses has been left boarded up to rot while there is a huge waiting list in Dublin for the many people in homeless accommodation. People cannot rent or buy. It is not just here. A massive building in County Kerry is vacant and derelict. I have an image of another in Buncrana, County Donegal. I also have an image of a vacant building in Sligo. In every town and every village, we have boarded-up properties.

What is the Government doing about it?

We do not know whether these buildings are on the derelict sites levy. Even though the data was collected in quarter 2, and I have looked for it at least ten if not 12 times, I cannot get an answer from the Minister. Will the Minister of State commit to responding to me and to releasing the data in relation to derelict sites levies? Are the levies being charged? How many sites are on the levies? What local authorities are either putting sites on or charging the levies? There is information that needs to be delivered. Will the Minister of State commit to releasing that data? To be honest, it looks like to me that a cover-up is going on around dereliction.

We know from previous years that local authorities are underfunded, understaffed and under-resourced. If we want local authorities to deal with this, the Government must support them. I propose that the derelict sites levy be taken off local authorities and given to Revenue because the one thing we know is if Revenue is given the job, it will do that job. What we have at the moment are land hoarders. They do not have to pay the local property tax because the property is derelict. They will not pay the derelict sites levy because local authorities do not have the staff to enforce it. What is happening? Will the Minister of State release the derelict sites data? Will he look at moving the collection of it to the Revenue Commissioners?

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue and giving me this opportunity to update Members on the issue of vacancy and dereliction. I am taking this Topical Issue on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy James Browne.

Tackling vacancy and dereliction is a key priority for the Government. The reuse of vacant and derelict properties can provide much-needed housing, while also being a catalyst to revitalising communities. A number of national structures have now been established, including a dedicated vacant homes unit in my Department, a full-time vacant homes officer in each local authority and the implementation of a vacant homes action plan to ensure co-ordinated, cross-Government action. In March 2025, the Minister, Deputy Browne, published the 2025 progress report, which shows the significant progress being made in tackling vacancy and is available on my Department's website.

A key focus in the action plan relates to the interaction with the Government's town centre first policy approach, which was launched by my Department and the then Department of Rural and Community Development in 2022. Town centre first provides a whole-of-government policy framework to address the decline in the health of towns and support measures to revitalise them. To drive the delivery of town centre first, dedicated town regeneration officers are now established within local authorities and are working in concert with vacant homes officers and other local authority staff to tackle dereliction and develop regeneration initiatives.

In addition, where local authorities find that the acquisition of particular derelict properties is the appropriate mechanism to return them to use, they are enabled by the provisions of the Derelict Sites Act to acquire them compulsorily. This approach is now supported through the urban regeneration and development fund, URDF, which has established a €150 million revolving fund specifically for local authorities to acquire vacant or derelict properties, residential and-or commercial, if necessary, using their compulsory purchase powers, and to carry out any associated works needed to make them more attractive for use or sale. On completion of the most recent review of this element of the URDF programme, over 1,370 residential and commercial properties were approved by the Department for inclusion in the approved programmes for all 31 local authorities.

My Department has also introduced planning and development regulations that provide an exemption from the need to obtain planning permission for the change of use of certain vacant commercial buildings to residential use, including above-the-shop living. The most recent local authority returns from 2024 show that local authorities have received notifications of

1,457 exempted development proposals to date, with plans put forward that result in the provision of 3,429 new homes nationwide.

These exemptions can be combined with other funding supports, such as the vacant property refurbishment grant and the repair and leasing scheme, in order to bring buildings into residential use. At the end of quarter 2 of 2025, over 13,730 applications had been received for the vacant property refurbishment grant and almost 10,000 had been approved. Over 2,800 grants have been paid to date as refurbishment works have been completed. Further information on the range of supports is available on the Department's website.

This month, the CSO released new vacancy data for 2022 and 2023. It notes a national vacancy rate of 3.3% at the end of 2023, dropping from 3.6% in 2022. While varying levels of vacancy are indicated in different data sources, the overall trend is downwards and vacancy levels are declining nationally.

The new programme for Government, *Securing Ireland's Future*, also includes actions that aim to further continue work on town centre living and regeneration challenges. These measures will be considered in the context of the forthcoming new national housing plan that is currently being prepared by my Department, including consideration of potential funding and financial supports to assist in encouraging the use of vacant or derelict buildings in towns and cities for new homes.

I will bring back the point the Deputy raised to the Minister.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I accept that town centre first is a good model. The problem is that only 26 town centres were done in the first three years, between 2021 and 2024, and another 26 have been passed for 2024 and the next three years, as I learned from the answer I got to a parliamentary question. The town centre first policy is a good policy, but it will take 90 years to implement because there are over 800 towns in the State and we are only doing 26 every three years. That is crazy. The Government has a project that is good in principle but it is not funding it and not rolling it out at the level needed to target vacancy and dereliction in town centres.

The Minister of State spoke about one vacant homes officer in every local authority. That is a joke. We put pressure on the previous Government to get that one vacant homes officer. What we are looking for is a vacant homes team in each local authority to tackle vacancy and dereliction. I will be honest. We got a response here that sounds great and suggests that there is loads going on. I invite the Minister of State to walk the streets of Dublin with me, and I will also bring him to my home city of Cork, where I will walk him around and show him the dereliction and vacancy. He can list out all the projects but the facts are that houses and buildings are being left to rot in the middle of communities, when we have people who cannot rent or buy and others who are in emergency accommodation.

I will say one thing to anyone who is watching or listening. This Saturday at 2.30 p.m. on Grand Parade in Cork city, we are holding a Raise the Roof rally with unions, other left-wing political parties and student unions. I ask anyone who is listening, if they are sick and tired and fed up seeing good buildings left to rot while people have no homes, to come out on Saturday to support Raise the Roof.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: Once again, I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter. Addressing vacancy and dereliction is a key priority for the Government. As I stated, I am taking this debate on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy James Browne.

As I mentioned, with to regard to dereliction and vacancy in Ireland, particularly in small towns and villages, the Government is taking a proactive, co-ordinated and whole-of-government approach, which recognises the importance of supporting and empowering local businesses and residents to make real and lasting change in their communities. The Deputy referenced local authorities. Many local authorities have specific vacant homes and properties teams operating. Substantial progress is being made on delivering on the town centre first approach and the vacant homes action plan through the provision of dedicated staff and resources for the dereliction and vacancy issues I referenced. These are being complemented by the financial supports for planning reforms aimed at converting underutilised buildings to new homes in our towns and urban areas.

The range of measures being taken by the Government to address vacancy and dereliction are having a real success and vacancy levels are declining. Significant investment through schemes, such as the urban regeneration and development fund, the vacant property refurbishment grant and the repair and leasing scheme, are helping both local authorities and ordinary people to bring vacant and derelict properties back into use and revitalise towns across the country.

With regard to derelict sites, my Department initiated a review of the Derelict Sites Act and invited local authorities to make initial submissions on potential improvements to the legislative provisions and the way they are applied.

I again thank the Deputy for raising this issue and providing me with an opportunity to inform and update the House.

Hospital Waiting Lists

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I appreciate the opportunity to raise this issue, but I do so with anger and frustration on behalf of Evan Gardiner and his family, who are constituents of mine in Kildare North who have been utterly failed by Children's Health Ireland and by the system.

In September 2022, Evan was assessed by Mr. Pat O'Toole who recommended urgent surgeries on his knees, his ankles and, potentially, his hip. The advice was unambiguous: without intervention Evan faced the risk of lifelong mobility issues, including possible wheelchair dependency.

That was over three years ago, and no surgery has taken place. Since then, Evan's family have done everything that has been asked of them. They attended every appointment, followed every piece of medical advice and remained fully engaged with CHI, yet instead of action, they were told Evan had been lost in the system; a child with a severe and deteriorating condition lost in the system. That is completely indefensible. To make matters worse, Evan's father, Vincent, is himself undergoing cancer treatment. The family is under immense pressure, and they deserve clarity, compassion and timely care, not entities and cancellations and, to be honest, excuses.

My office became directly involved in May of this year. Since then, we have contacted CHI and the HSE over 40 times by email and over 20 times by phone. Every one of those contacts is documented and with me today. If this is the effort that a TD has to make to try to get some sort of answer, what hope do parents have in situations like this? It is completely farcical.

I will give the Minister of State another example. Last Friday, the family received a letter telling them that the surgery on 10 October was cancelled. I submitted today's Topical Issue last Friday, and on Monday, they sent a letter saying that the surgery on 10 October is back on. I will mention some of the other communications between CHI, the HSE and me and my office. On 23 June, I submitted a parliamentary question. The response took nearly four weeks and when it arrived on 7 August, it was incomplete. It failed to acknowledge two full years of Evan's medical history, a critical period of assessments, consultations and missed opportunities. That omission was disgraceful. On 26 September, as I said, Evan's long-awaited appointment on 9 October was cancelled by phone with no explanation given. On 29 September, as I mentioned, CHI confirmed that Evan's surgery had been rescheduled for 10 October but yesterday afternoon, Vincent, his father, received a phone call from Crumlin hospital saying that Evan is now to be admitted on 9 October with surgery on 10 October. Does the Minister of State think it is any coincidence that once the Topical Issue matter was submitted for this morning, suddenly, CHI at Crumlin got into action? This is something we are seeing time and time again, not just myself but other Deputies. We raise numerous parliamentary questions. We contact the relevant phone lines and email addresses, yet it takes standing here in the Dáil for anything to happen. It is not feasible for the number of families throughout the country, like Evan's, that TDs, as in this instance, are raising individual cases to try to get some action. This case also shines a harsh light on how CHI is treating families. It also shows how CHI treats elected representatives. As I said, if a TD with every avenue open to him or her cannot get timely, honest information, how on earth are families supposed to get the answers they need?

I have a number of questions I will put to the Minister of State in the final two minutes. This is a situation we are seeing. Harvey Sherratt was one example, and now we are seeing an inquiry into what happened there. This is not just in relation to hip dysplasia and scoliosis. This is going across the board into multiple areas of children's health. I welcome the decision that CHI is now going to be subsumed into the HSE because as far as I am concerned, it is not fit for purpose.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank Deputy Ó Cearúil for raising this matter. I am taking this debate and matter on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. Deputy Ó Cearúil will appreciate that I cannot talk about individual cases before the Chamber. Obviously, if the Deputy has questions in relation to individuals, they can be raised directly with the Department of Health. I acknowledge the case he has highlighted, however. While I cannot specifically talk about it, I acknowledge how difficult it has been for the family. I welcome the fact that the procedure has now been scheduled. It should not have had to come to this, and I appreciate that. I acknowledge that he has raised it, but I cannot speak about individual cases.

It is acknowledged that acute hospital waiting lists are too long, and many patients are waiting an unacceptably long time for care. The Government is focused on having a public healthcare service in which everyone has timely access to high-quality scheduled care, where

and when they need it. Since the commencement of the waiting list action plan approach in September 2021, significant progress has been made in reducing both the number of patients on waiting lists and the length of time they are waiting. In relation to the Deputy's particular query on paediatric hip surgery waiting lists in north Kildare, I can advise that the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, does not publish data on subspecialties. Therefore, I will refer to the orthopaedic waiting list, within which hip surgeries are a subspeciality.

According to the NTPF, the total outpatient waiting list for orthopaedics in CHI was 3,406 at the end of August 2025. This compares to a total of 3,930 waiting at the same time last year. This is a 13% decrease. Additionally, the inpatient and day case waiting list for orthopaedics in CHI reduced from 764 in August 2024 to 671 in August 2025. This is a 12% reduction. Further, the percentage of inpatient and day care patients within the Sláintecare targets was 27.3% at the end of August 2025. This is compared to 22.1% at the same time last year.

I can also advise the Deputy that for Kildare specifically, the number of children waiting for inpatient and day case paediatric orthopaedic procedures in CHI has reduced from 58 in August 2024 to 46 in August 2025. This is a 20% decrease. This highlights that the waiting lists are trending in the right direction. I acknowledge the case he has raised on behalf of his constituents, however.

Further developments to these lists are under way, including the migration of the specialty to a central referral system. The NTPF has advised the Department of Health that it has approved both outpatient and inpatient and day case initiatives for orthopaedics, which will facilitate treatment for patients on these waiting lists in Children's Health Ireland.

As the Deputy is aware, the final report of the developmental dysplasia of the hip audit was published on Friday, 23 May. The Minister's immediate priority following the publication of the Thomas audit was to ensure there was clinical follow-up and care for patients who had undergone pelvic osteotomy surgery. All patients and families were sent a letter from CHI and the National Orthopaedic Hospital in Cappagh about the next steps that will apply to them and their child, and how they can get further information or support. As of Tuesday, 23 September, a total of 196 patients have had clinical reviews as part of the multidisciplinary team clinics.

In relation to retrospective reviews of cases to determine the indications for surgery, the HSE is establishing a separate process involving external experts. It is expected that the panel will be established in the coming weeks and that the review of individual cases will commence in January 2026. The recently established HSE CHI improvement steering group is overseeing the progress of these reviews. This group was established by the HSE CEO in recognition of the need to co-ordinate oversight of a range of matters of focus in CHI in a cohesive fashion. This group most recently met on 29 September 2025, and senior officials from the Department of Health attend these meetings. The improvement of waiting times and particularly waiting times experienced by children and young people remains a priority for the Minister for Health. The Minister is committed to ensure that reform remains centred around putting the child and their family at the very heart of our paediatric services.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Go raibh maith agat, a Aire Stáit. This surgery was scheduled previously, and it was cancelled. Surgery is a traumatic and worrying period for any person no matter what age. For any of us with children, it is even more worrying and scary. Then for the child, it is extremely traumatic, and how a parent deals with that is extremely difficult. For

surgery to be scheduled, cancelled, rescheduled and cancelled is far more difficult on a family than the actual surgery itself in a lot of instances because of the fear that the hope of getting something done will be taken away. There is also, naturally, concern about the impacts and dangers that come with surgery.

I know the Minister of State is not the direct line Minister for Health, but I will ask three particular direct questions of him today. If he could give them to the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, I would appreciate an answer. How can it be justified that a child at risk of permanent disability has been left languishing in the system, in this case for over three years, and in other cases even longer? How is it acceptable that CHI can refuse to provide written explanations to a parent whose child's surgery is being cancelled? What accountability will be put in place to ensure the culture of indifference finally ends? As I said, this is not an isolated case. Families across Ireland are waiting far too long for essential procedures. CHI's failures are well known, and while it is now being folded into the HSE, changing the letterhead will not fix the problem. We need structural reform and a complete change in culture that places the child at the centre, not bureaucracy.

I ask the Minister of State to acknowledge the unacceptable delays in Evan's case, investigate why this family were put through years of suffering and ensure that the Gardiner family receive not only timely surgery but also a full apology for how they have been treated. Evan's surgery must now proceed on 10 October, and nothing less will do to be honest.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: Once again, I thank Deputy Ó Cearúil for the attention he has given to this important matter. As I already said, I am taking the matter on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. Once again, the Deputy will appreciate that I cannot speak on individual cases, but I do want to acknowledge the matters he has raised in respect of his constituents.

The procedure needs to go ahead as scheduled. That is hugely important. I acknowledge the angst and anxiety caused to families when operations and procedures are cancelled. I acknowledge that. I will bring the three points the Deputy has raised to the attention of the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and the Department. I suggest the Deputy also communicate formally with the Department on this matter.

The Minister for Health is conscious of the impact the prolonged waiting times are having on patients and their families. The Deputy has brought up the specific case of his constituents. The waiting list action plan 2025 follows an outcomes-informed approach and specifically focuses on reducing the length of time that patients wait for care. The total CHI paediatric orthopaedic waiting list has reduced compared with this time last year. Importantly, the length of time children are waiting has also decreased. Nevertheless, the Deputy raised the specific situation of his constituent, and I acknowledge that.

Work is ongoing to improve services, including a migration to a central referral system and a national reporting initiative to increase capacity. The HSE CEO has also commissioned an audit to assess the governance and inequity in access to care within CHI, especially regarding the balance between public and private patient management. Further consideration will be given to any additional actions required.

The HSE CHI improvement steering group, co-chaired by the REO for Dublin and the midlands and the chief clinical officer, is co-ordinating the oversight of the implementation of the recommendations from the completed reviews, including the audit of developmental dysplasia hip surgeries in CHI. I assure the House that the Minister for Health remains fully committed to the improvement of waiting lists, including in respect of children awaiting paediatric orthopaedic surgeries.

Abolition of Carer's Allowance Means Test: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Liam Quaide: I move:

"That Dáil Éireann:

recognises:

- the invaluable contribution of family carers, who provide full-time care to family members with disabilities, chronic illnesses, or age-related care needs, often at great personal, financial and emotional cost;
- that family carers play a critical role in the Irish care system, providing unpaid labour that saves the State more than €20 billion every year, preventing avoidable hospital admissions, and enabling many people to remain safely in their own homes and communities; and
- that, despite their immense contribution to this country, carers are disproportionately affected by social and financial hardship, with many experiencing isolation, stress, and difficulty balancing caring responsibilities with paid employment, as documented in the State of Caring Reports and other research conducted by Family Carers Ireland;

notes that:

- modest increases to the income disregards in recent budgets have not resolved the underlying unfairness of the means test and have left many carers ineligible for support;
- the application of a means test penalises households in which carers are providing full-time care, resulting in many carers being denied support, despite undertaking work that benefits the State and the wider community; and
- the removal of the means test will simplify administration, reduce delays in payments, and eliminate a barrier that currently forces many carers to navigate a complex and intrusive process, simply to access the support to which they are entitled;

further notes that:

- this reform is consistent with a rights-based approach to social protection, recognising that carers provide essential care and should not be treated as means-tested dependents, but as partners in delivering care in Irish society;

— carers themselves have called for an end to the means test, citing the emotional and financial toll of current arrangements, the complexity of the assessment process, and the stigma of being judged on household income rather than on the care they provide;

— Family Carers Ireland, and other advocacy organisations, have repeatedly called for the abolition of the means test, highlighting that current arrangements create bureaucratic complexity, financial stress, and disincentives to claim;

— in September 2024, the Regional Group of TDs introduced a Dáil motion demanding the abolition of the means test for carers by 2027; and

— the Government has not firmly committed to abolishing the means test for carers, and the Programme for Government instead says "commits to significantly increase the income disregards for Carer's Allowance in each Budget with a view to phasing out the means test during the lifetime of the Government";

agrees that:

— the abolition of the Carer's Allowance means test is a necessary step towards creating a more equitable, transparent, and humane social welfare system, that recognises the contribution of all carers, including those who are currently excluded due to household income; and

— the introduction of this measure in Budget 2026 represents a timely opportunity to honour the social contract with carers, deliver on election commitments, and create a system that treats all full-time carers with fairness, dignity, and respect; and

calls on the Government to abolish the means test for Carer's Allowance with effect from 1st January, 2026."

Carers play a vital, under-recognised and undervalued role in our society. They take on the enormous task of looking after a family member with a chronic illness, disability or age-related need. The unrelenting nature of their work often comes at great personal, financial and emotional cost. Carers are the unsung heroes of a society where the basics, on so many levels, are not met for the relatives they are looking after. They experience the sharp edge of the State's failings every single day. Carers' work can be deeply rewarding, yet due to poor support, it is often isolating, draining and demoralising. The last thing they need or deserve is the intrusion and administrative burden of a means test for the carer's allowance, which is a modest payment on which most people would struggle to sustain themselves amid today's cost-of-living pressures. That is why today the Social Democrats are bringing a motion before the Dáil calling for the means test for the carer's allowance to be abolished with effect from 1 January 2026.

Our Government talks a lot about valuing carers. However, those words will be put to the test in the upcoming budget on 7 October. Will the Government continue to tinker around the edges of the carer's allowance means test or will it finally scrap it, as advocacy groups and carers themselves have been urging successive Governments to do for years? Pre-budget kite-flying in newspapers last weekend, as well as the Taoiseach's comments on Leaders' Questions yesterday, indicate that, unfortunately, it will be the former. The Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Calleary, intends to increase the income disregards for the carer's allowance means test to €825 per month for a single person and €1,650 per month for a couple. While more carers will become eligible for the allowance as a result, a deeply unfair two-tier system will remain,

with thousands of carers still failing to qualify for a payment. Additionally, many carers currently in receipt of the allowance will continue to live in anxiety that a slight change in their financial circumstances or those of their partner will tip them into no longer being eligible.

Any Government talk of phasing out the means test over the lifetime of the Thirty-fourth Dáil will be of little comfort to the thousands of carers in need of help now. Carers make extraordinary sacrifices to look after their family members, often at the expense of their careers or academic ambitions. In doing so, they are estimated to save the State a staggering €20 billion per year, with their unpaid labour preventing avoidable hospital admissions and enabling many people to remain living safely in their homes and communities. The means test is an insult to the tireless work of carers who are shut out for the offence of having a modest income or hard-earned savings. With care responsibilities falling disproportionately on women, it is also a clear case of gender inequality. Means-testing effectively sends a message to women that their work is not real unless their household is poor enough. It reinforces dependency, limits autonomy and perpetuates gender discrimination. Over 70% of carers are women, with many forced out of the workplace or trapped in part-time jobs. The means test compounds inequality by tethering their entitlements to their partner's earnings or household savings. In effect, the system tells women that their caregiving has no value unless their husband or partner earns little enough for them to qualify. In a modern society, it is an antiquated method of assessing an application for a State payment. No other form of employment is treated in this way. Teachers, nurses, gardaí and bus drivers receive wages based on their work and not on household incomes or savings, or, absurdly, the earnings of their spouses. Only carers, whose labour is indispensable to the health and social systems, are asked to prove they are poor enough to qualify. This approach implies that carers are seeking charity rather than fair recognition and basic remuneration for their work.

The carer's allowance is officially classified as a social assistance payment, which is deeply problematic. Family Carers Ireland rightly argues that this is inappropriate as it frames care as charity for the poor rather than recognising it as essential work that sustains the health and social systems. It reduces the essential skills and exhausting efforts of carers to a discretionary handout. Advocacy groups consistently stress that this treatment undermines dignity and reinforces the false notion that care is optional rather than work that keeps families together and prevents overcrowding in our health system.

The means test is an extremely blunt instrument. For many carers, even if income disregards are expanded, a modest amount earned by a partner can still result in the loss of the carer's allowance, plunging families off a financial cliff. Regular reviews by the Department of Social Protection leave carers living in constant anxiety that this modest payment will be taken away. Family Carers Ireland has long argued that the means test punishes rather than supports. With over one third of applications initially refused, families are being forced into lengthy appeals. Inclusion Ireland has highlighted that parents supporting a child with an intellectual disability face bureaucratic barriers that pile further stress on top of the exhaustion of their daily lives.

There is widespread acceptance across the political divide that the means test for the carer's allowance needs to go. In fact, three Regional Independent TDs who are supporting the current Government, Deputy Michael Lowry and the Ministers of State, Deputies Grealish and Canney, signed a Private Members' motion in advance of last year's budget seeking the abolition of the means test by 2027.

Raising the income disregards for carer's allowance might sound generous but is fundamentally flawed. It is piecemeal and bureaucratic, and always lagging behind inflation and the actual cost of living. It penalises dual-income families and forces many carers into endless paperwork. It feels like a draining and grinding process for which they often do not have the energy. The prospect of a small pay rise wiping out or depleting an entitlement is a constant worry for many.

Carers deserve better in next week's budget. The Government must commit to the full abolition of the means test, along with greater investment in respite, training and mental health support for carers. Under the Social Democrats' proposals, the full €370 million cost of ending the means test could be met by tripling the bank levy. Treating carers as though they are charity cases whose work is conditional on household income or their partner's wages is callous, unjust and antiquated. Carers need immediate and real change, not incremental measures masquerading as serious reform. Reform would provide immediate recognition and some security and support for carers whose unpaid labour sustains families, communities and the State.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): I note that no amendments to this motion have been tabled. I call Deputy Hearne.

Deputy Rory Hearne: It is the responsibility of the Government to ensure the welfare and well-being of everyone in this country, especially the most vulnerable. Carers provide for those most vulnerable. They are some of the most incredible people in this country. Their tireless and important work needs to be properly recognised. Often when people in the Government talk about carers, they note how inspirational, hardworking and compassionate they are.

What seems to be the harder truth for Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Government to acknowledge is that, actually, carers are some of the most exploited workers in this country today. The work done by those who care for children, the disabled and the elderly is not recognised, and there is no real conversation about the value of this work or the cost of this work to themselves and to wider society.

None of us would survive without care. It is fundamental to our relationships as human beings as well as to our survival, yet the economic market model we have places no financial value on care, and that is fundamentally flawed. We have a skewed economy and a skewed society that rewards speculative greed and ignores, penalises and undervalues caring roles. We need to see a change to this. Carers need to be viewed as central to our economy and society for us to recognise the role they play.

Poverty and deprivation disproportionately affects carers. The 2024 Pobal disability and deprivation report found that rates of deprivation are higher among people with disabilities or health limitations. The risk of consistent poverty hovers over these families and it is them whom the Government is subjecting to means-testing that is part of the fabric of their daily lives of worry. They worry about the future for their relatives, their health, the health of those they are caring for, access to services, waiting lists and must constantly push and try to find services. The least that could be done to recognise these carers is to remove the punitive means test. There are adults in their 20s, 30s and 40s who have ageing parents and have started caring for them. These are adults who cannot afford a home and are among the 15% of carers who

rent privately and precariously. Of the 37% of carers who are mortgage holders, 17%, or nearly one in five, missed a mortgage payment in 2024. Of the 15% renting privately, 35% missed a rent payment in 2024.

These are carers missing mortgage repayments or rent payments. Alongside the stress, challenges and commitment involved in caring, carers are also struggling financially. Can the Minister imagine the stress of that struggle, the daily toll it takes, and how it shortens their own lives and reduces their ability to provide the care they are so dedicated to providing? There is a cost-of-living crisis, but it disproportionately affects carers. The State must step up and ensure no carers are living in poverty. We need a change in approach to carers. We need Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Government to support this motion. The Social Democrats' vision for Ireland is a vision for a compassionate, caring republic; a social, democratic Ireland of care, where everyone can live in dignity, a true social democracy. Abolishing the means test is the first step in achieving that.

Deputy Jen Cummins: The Social Democrats have brought forward this motion to abolish the means test for carers, which was promised by this Government, and I am very happy to see there is no amendment to the motion. Carers and people with disabilities cannot wait any longer for the Government to fulfill this election promise. One area that is often overlooked when we speak about carers is education. Family carers are not only the backbone of our care system, saving the State over €20 billion every year through their unpaid labour, but they are also parents, partners and guardians who want the same opportunities for learning, training and participation in society that everyone else does. Yet, the way the carer's allowance is structured today actively undermines those opportunities. Currently, carers may work, study or train for 18 and a half hours a week while still providing 35 hours of care. Many try to upskill or pursue education in order to keep one foot in the workforce, but that rigid means test penalises them. A modest increase in household income, perhaps through a partner's job or small bursary linked to a course, can push a family over the threshold, cutting them off from vital support overnight. These restrictive rules are void of any common sense and are a deterrent to education. Access to education should not be a luxury reserved for those who can afford to risk losing their allowance. Education can help carers reskill after years out of the labour market, improve their mental health through social participation, and allow them to contribute in different ways to society. However, under the current system the choice is often too stark, making them choose care or education but not both. I think particularly of the young people I met in the audiovisual room last year. These young people are caring for family members while going to school and should be able to dream of further and higher education like many young people do. The unfairness of the means test is stark when compared with conditions in other professions, like teaching and nursing and the Garda. They are never told their pay depends on their spouse's income, yet over 70% of carers, the vast majority of them women, are forced into economic dependency through this system. By treating the carer's allowance as a social assistance payment rather than the recognition of essential work, we send a clear and damaging message that care has no intrinsic value unless you are poor enough to qualify for support.

The numbers speak volumes. Approximately 37% of applications are refused. That is nearly 9,500 refusals every year. Appeals drag on for an average of 23 weeks. This is bureaucracy and it is a waste of time and energy that carers could be investing in their families or indeed in their own education. Worse still, some 6,500 full-time carers receive nothing more

than the once-off carer's support grant of €2,000 annually, leaving them significantly disadvantaged compared with those who do qualify. This reform is affordable. The estimated cost is €370 million, a figure that can be met, for example, by tripling the bank levy. This is a small price to pay for recognising carers as equal partners in our health and social system. Education opens doors but for too long, carers have found those doors slammed shut by an unfair, outdated and punitive means test. Let us open those doors by removing this barrier once and for all.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: On my first day in the Dáil last year, the Taoiseach quoted the former Governor of New York Mario Cuomo, saying, “You campaign in poetry; you govern in prose.” He then went on to say, “I am not sure that there was much poetry during the recent [general election] campaign”. I saw it differently. Poetry is not always uplifting. Sometimes it recounts sorrow. It is not always magnificent; sometimes it is dark and sad. Poetry is also told in tragedy and defeat.

There was poetry in Kanturk that day in November when a care worker, plunged into poverty by this Government and the ones before it, a woman with little power other than her will and her voice, challenged the most powerful man in the country in a supermarket. There was great poetry in the election results days later, which meant his party returned fewer seats than projected and relegated him to second fiddle versus his rivals in Fianna Fáil. There is a sad rhyming in his replacement, a man who sat at the Cabinet table that crashed the economy 15 years ago now telling the country there is no money to help alleviate the plight of those who care for others.

Rightly, the focus of disabilities is on those who have them. They should be at the centre of the discussion. We must deliver pay parity and good conditions for care workers, in particular section 39 workers, who have been so badly treated. However, I am also conscious of the enormous toll caring has on families and individuals who, out of generosity of heart, help those who are more vulnerable than themselves and, in the process, often make themselves vulnerable. Caring is work. It is hard work. It is some of the hardest work any of us does. All caring is work. It is work that is not glorified. It does not bring riches or fame, but it should bring security and it should, like all modern work in a modern republic, bring dignity. That applies to all of it, regardless of who does it or for whom they do it. The means test, among other ways carers are treated, is an affront to the dignity of that work. It effectively says that at some point for some people, a carer's labour should be free and permanently so, which seems an impossible position for any sane-minded person to take.

It effectively says that at some point, for some people, a carer's labour should be free, and permanently so, which seems an impossible position for any sane-minded person to take. Not only should carers have dignity, they should be valued. They save the State billions, in economic terms, and provide immeasurable love and support for those in our society who desperately need it.

What more noble calling is there in our country than to serve those less fortunate than us. There was poetry in our election, if we sought it, and there will be poetry in our politics again, when the electorate seeks it a few years from now, but there will be never poetry in this Government. For, "Conservatism makes no poetry, breathes no prayer, has no invention...", as a great writer once said. Perhaps the Taoiseach and his Government should read Emerson and

expand their repertoire of political thought. Perhaps they should consider the critical role care plays in our society and economy and consider the poetry of supporting the most vulnerable in our society. Voting for this motion to abolish the means test for carers would be a good start.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta Quaide as na Social Democrats as an rún seo inniu. Ní bheimid ag cur i gcoinne an rúin. We will not be opposing the motion put forward by Deputy Quaide and the Social Democrats. I welcome the opportunity the motion gives us to discuss the very important issue of carer's supports that are provided by my Department. The motion is timely and I welcome in particular the focus given by Deputy Cummins to the educational aspect. That issue was raised with the Department in June during the carer's forum we host annually and I am committed to looking at it. She raised a very important issue.

The Government remains committed to phasing out the carer's allowance means test over the term of this Dáil. We cannot do so in a single budget, as the motion proposes, and I will deal with that point later, but we will do so in a progressive manner. Over the years we have sought, and ensured, that the interests of carers are front and centre of budget discussions. This approach has been evidenced across the suite of care income support payments. As part of budget 2025, we extended the social insurance-based carer's benefit scheme to the self-employed for the first time. In June, we increased the carer's support grant. It now stands at €2,000 a year, its highest ever rate. Significantly, we also delivered on the commitment to provide a pension solution for long-term carers. This hugely important reform enables long-term carers, predominantly women, as was acknowledged by Deputies in the Social Democrats, who have been caring for an incapacitated dependant for 20 years or more to qualify for the State pension. Under the scheme, for the first time, full-time carers can get long-term carer's contributions to cover the gaps in their contribution record that arose as part of their caring, and that can then help them to qualify for the contributory pension.

Since January 2024, long-term carer's contributions can be awarded to somebody who has cared for an incapacitated person for a period of 20 years or more. These contributions are treated the same as paid contributions for the contributory State pension entitlement only. They can be used to fill gaps in that person's contribution record, including satisfying the minimum 520 paid contributions required. Over 12,600 applications have been received since the introduction of the scheme. At the end of August of this year, over 2,800 customers had been awarded over 20 years of long-term carer's contributions.

There have been other positive developments. The carer's allowance is now included as a qualifying payment for the fuel allowance, once the other qualifying conditions for the fuel allowance have been satisfied. We have increased the carer's allowance disregards, which I will come back to later.

The income supports for carers are the carer's allowance, carer's benefit, the domiciliary care allowance and the carer's support grant. Investment in these payments in 2025 is expected to be in the region of €1.9 billion. The carer's allowance is the main scheme by which the Department provides income support to carers in the community. Almost 102,000 people are currently supported by the carer's allowance. This year, investment in the carer's allowance scheme is estimated to be over €1.24 billion.

As all Deputies are aware, the carer's allowance is a means-tested payment awarded to those who are providing full-time care and attention to people who need such care. We will significantly increase the income disregards in each budget with a view to phasing out the means test over the lifetime of this Government. The carer's allowance operates on the basis of a means test. In short, we agree with Deputy Quaide that the means test should be abolished. There is nothing between us on that. However, it is not as simple as just abolishing the means test in one fell swoop, much as many of us might want to do. I have to be mindful of other demands on the State finances and other priorities including addressing child poverty, direct payments to people with disabilities and other areas within my Department. Means tests were developed as a way of targeting limited resources at those who have the lowest incomes. They are used not just for carer payments but for pensioners, disabled people, lone parents, jobseekers and others. It is a system that applies across the board, based on supporting households with the lowest means.

However, removing the means test, in effect, creates a new scheme for those meeting the scheme's basic caring condition. This change has wider cost and policy implications, including under EU rules that differentiate between social assistance or mean-tested payments, on the one hand, and social insurance and universal payments, on the other. The former can be subject to conditions relating to residence; the latter two types of payment are not. This is why, while we are committed - and I absolutely guarantee the Deputy and the House of my strong commitment - to eliminating the means test, we have to do so in a phased and measured approach that enables us to balance improving outcomes for carers with also improving outcomes for people with disabilities, pensioners and children and in a way that does not create unanticipated exposures. In doing so we will build on the significant improvements which have already been made to the capital and income disregards, allowing many more carers to qualify for the carer's allowance. The disregards for the carer's allowance are now by far the highest income disregards in the social welfare system, higher than those for any other weekly payment.

The capital and savings disregard was increased from €20,000 to €50,000. This equates to a disregard of €100,000 for carers who are part of a couple. Since 2021, the carer's allowance income disregards have been increased from €332.50 to €625 for a single person, and from €665 to €1,250 for carers with a spouse or partner. These disregards have practically doubled, amounting to cumulative increases of €292.50 for a single carer and €585 for a carer who is part of couple. As a result, a carer in a two-adult household with an income of approximately €69,000 will retain the maximum payment. The same carer with an income of €97,000 will retain a partial payment. Before the disregards were increased in June 2022, that figure of €69,000 figures stood at €37,000 and the figure of €97,000 stood at €60,000.

The number of carers on the carer's allowance has increased by over 8,000 to almost 102,000. The increase in the disregards also means that many current recipients receive a higher payment than they would have otherwise. It is notable that from July last, when the latest increase occurred, 98.4% of existing carer's allowance recipients have received the maximum possible rate, whether they are on a half-rate or full-rate payment.

In addition to significant improvements to the means test, over the last four budgets the weekly carers payments - the carer's allowance and carer's benefit - have been increased by €41

per week. As part of budget 2025, the rate of the carer's allowance increased by €12 to €260 per week for a carer aged under 66 years caring for one person.

Before concluding, I wish to address the variation in the estimated cost of abolishing the means test for carers. The figure of €375 million that has been quoted is taken from a costing carried out by the Parliamentary Budget Office. It assumes that some 25,600 carers would become eligible for the scheme if the means test was removed. My Department has conservatively estimated that the cost of removing the means test for the carer's allowance would be in the region of €600 million each year. This is based on our internal administrative data, which tells us that there are some 146,000 care recipients in our country. In the absence of a means test, it is reasonable to assume a carer's allowance payment could be paid in respect of each of these care recipients. However, to facilitate further discussion, I will provide Deputy Quaide with our methodology and a breakdown of this costing after the debate on this motion.

The Deputies speak of tripling the bank levy to pay for this measure. We have already demonstrated how the Government has supported carers over recent years. However, we have just heard calls for other groups to be catered for during some of their colleagues' speeches today.

As Minister for Social Protection, I am committed to continuing the work that has been done for carers and to growing it further, both for carers who are in receipt of the carer's allowance and any carers who will benefit from further changes to income disregards. As Deputy Quaide's colleague said, however, I also have a responsibility to other vulnerable groups, including lone parents, children experiencing poverty, working families, and people with disabilities. I have no doubt that every Deputy will support me but I have to be realistic; my resources are not unlimited.

We are not opposing this motion. I welcome this debate and the good ideas that are coming. I will engage further on those ideas. In the programme for Government, we are committed to phasing out the carer's allowance means test and we will do this in a progressive manner over the lifetime of the Government. All of us recognise the valuable contribution that family carers are making every single day. We are doing a lot to improve the payments to carers and will continue to do so because we recognise that much more needs to be done. We will not be found wanting in terms of delivering on this. We have to ensure that it is sustainable.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I thank my colleague Deputy Quaide for bringing forward this motion. I want to respond first to some of the comments from the Minister. The Government has not opposed our motion, is not tabling its own amendment and will not vote against the motion. What the Government is not doing is acting on our motion, which clearly sets out that the means test should be abolished this year. It is okay not to oppose our motion and say he agrees with it, but we and carers need the Minister to act on it now. Why is he not acting on it? He says he cannot do it in a single budget and he must be mindful of other people with demands on the State finances and other priorities. The simple case is that, in the budget next week, if it had the courage and ambition to actually widen the tax base and take some measures to produce more finances to do things that are needed, the Government could have a cost of disability payment for people with disabilities. It could have measures to introduce a second tier of child benefit that is needed to lift tens of thousands of children out of poverty, and it could abolish the means test for carers. These choices are in front of the Government but there

is a lack of ambition and courage from it. The Government is going against all of the advice from all the experts that it needs to widen the tax base and not narrow it. Narrowing the tax base, as the Government proposes to do, is grossly irresponsible and smacks of the kind of decisions that were made back in 2008 when Fianna Fáil crashed the economy.

Let us be clear on this: if the Government had the courage to triple the bank levy, or if it disputed the figures from the Parliamentary Budget Office, and in fact a quadrupling of the bank levy would be needed to fund the €600 million the Minister cites, why not do that? The banks are making massive profits on which they are paying very little tax because they are writing off taxation on their profits against losses in previous years. If the Government is not going to change that law, why not triple or quadruple the bank levy? Then it would have the resources to abolish the means test for carers. That would be the right thing to do. It is a thing the Government could do next week if it was actually courageous about this.

We have seen the waste from Government as well. We have reports today of €12 million being spent on empty offices that were being rented by the Government. I want to give the Minister a quote from a full-time carer from east Galway, Louise Mac an tSaoi, who is the sole carer for her teenage son Liam who has severe physical and intellectual disabilities. Louise feels the means test is restricting carers from living full lives, and that the Government should do a lot more to support families like hers. Louise told the *Irish Farmers Journal*:

"Liam is 14, non-verbal, autistic and peg fed. He is completely dependent on me as his carer and has been since he was born prematurely at 23 weeks," [...] "My husband Sean passed away four years ago which meant my Carer's Allowance was halved as I went on to the Lone Parents Allowance, both of which were means tested. Liam is in a wheelchair as he had one of his legs amputated when he was younger and we need an adapted car to bring him to his various appointments and school and respite. We have had to rely on a fundraising effort by family, friends and the community because I couldn't get a loan because my income is so low. I know there's a concern about people abusing a system that doesn't have means testing, but genuine people like me shouldn't have to jump through hoops for a bit of financial security when we are saving the country so much by caring for our children at home."

Louise is just one of thousands of carers who are being unfairly put through this means test system. The Minister does have a choice in next week's budget to abolish the means test, if the Government chooses to do so.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Earlier this week, my party leader, Deputy Cairns, asked a very simple question. In what other profession in this country are people subjected to a means test, just to be recognised for the work they do? It is a stark question that gets to the heart of the matter. That is what this is about. Carers are professionals in every sense of the word. They do the work that is essential to the running of our health system, work that saves this State over €20 billion every single year, yet they are treated as though their contribution is somehow lesser and that they should be judged before they are asked to serve. It is an old adage at this point but politics at its very heart is about choices. Next week, we get to see the choices of this Government. The Minister has said there is very little between us in the sense that all of us are seeking to remove the means test for carers. However, time is the difference. A means test that is phased out over the next four years is four more years of carers having to justify their poverty,

with some having to stand beside and be based on the income of a partner and others simply having to miss out because their means are just a little bit too high, even though the contribution they give is far more.

The motion we bring today is simply about a choice. It is a recognition that we can abolish the means test for carers in this budgetary cycle to take away the strain, stress and anxiety for anyone who has to justify their means before they can contribute in the manner that they do. The facts speak for themselves about the Government's choices. According to Family Carers Ireland, two thirds of carers experience financial distress. Almost half say they have to cut back on essentials like heating and food to make ends meet. Many are caring around the clock, with no pension, no security and often in total isolation. On top of that, they are put through an intrusive and bureaucratic process that judges them not on the care they provide but on their household income or that of their spouse. It does not make sense. In what world is it acceptable to make the lives of carers, people who are already stretched beyond breaking point, even harder?

The Minister told us that abolishing the means test is too complicated and that there are other pressures. When we talked about tripling the banking levy, he talked about how we also have to care for lone parents, children experiencing poverty and people with disabilities. We do not need to pit vulnerable groups against other vulnerable groups. There are other ways. We are talking about the bank levy. We do not need to talk about people with disabilities. The Social Democrats' fully costed budget tomorrow will include measures for people with disabilities, to remove 40,000 children out of poverty and to abolish the means test for carers. There are choices. Tonight's vote, which the Government is not allowing us to have, would have come down to the choices the Minister is making for family carers.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I thank the Minister for being here and for his contribution. We are starting to see a trend across the House in the words we are using about carer's allowance. It comes down to choices. The Minister has spoken about the idea that he cannot abolish the means test now. I take issue with that. The Government can do it but it chooses not to. As he will agree, family carers make an invaluable contribution to our communities and society, providing full-time care to family members with disability, chronic illness and age-related care needs, often at great personal, financial and emotional cost. Back in 2011, the Minister said: "[t]he coverage of social welfare is frequently reduced to soundbites and slogans targeted at particular audiences, depending on the speaker's particular political view." He further said: "The Department, as one of the most important Ministries in expenditure terms, should be the lead Department in breaking the cycle of poverty." I have no doubt the Minister meant those words at the time and given the opportunity he would say and mean them again. However, now the big difference is that he has the opportunity. This Government has the opportunity to meaningfully address structural poverty.

I appreciate that the Minister mentioned child poverty levels and different stresses on his Department in terms of costs. We need to know how this Government intends to break the cycle of structural inequality and poverty in Ireland. It is his commitment to abolish the means test for carers.

Carers deserve the rightful acknowledgement of the value of their role in our society. In the Minister's words again, the media attention given to the Department of Social Protection needs

to reflect its importance in government, and more importantly, the lead role it and the Minister can play should they choose in rebuilding society. We are back to that word "choices". We firmly believe in it and are offering constructive proposals about how we could abolish the means test for carers now. If not now, why? If not now, when?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank the Deputies for bringing forward the motion. The Government knows well the difference between not opposing something and supporting something. The Minister is around long enough to know the nod in the direction of saying something is a good idea and actively and proactively working for it are two very separate things. I urge the Government to not just not oppose this motion, but also accept it in the spirit in which it is put forward here this morning.

The need to abolish the means test for carers is made up of thousands and thousands of individual needs and millions of hours of care delivered. Behind closed doors, families struggle to care for their loved ones and pay their rising bills. The motion tells us that carers save the State more than €20 billion every year. That is likely an underestimation of the real situation. Caring work is work and just because it is done with love is no excuse for taking advantage. That is effectively what the State does; day in, day out, it takes advantage of the love people have for their family members and the care they deliver. Carers are exploited and exhausted. They are sick and tired of having to beg for every tiny little bit of help and support. When they get that help, it often comes very late and is not enough to keep pace with the rising cost of living.

I was contacted in advance of this motion by a woman from my constituency. I will call her Laura - I generally try not to say people's names - because to be honest, it is humiliating enough the way people have to beg so I will call her Laura. She tells me that she cares for her son. He is now 14 years old. In May, she had to leave her permanent job where she had worked for 23 years in a management and specialist role because the demands of caring and working were gruelling. She could not keep it up anymore. She is not eligible for carer's allowance because of her husband's salary, which is not something we should be saying in 2025. She asked me to remind the Minister that during the previous election, it was promised that the means test for carers would be abolished. She wants to know when that promise will be delivered.

There has been a lot of talk about the cliff edge a person faces and the pay-related jobseeker's allowance was brought in. This woman left her job. We talk about a cliff edge but this woman gets nothing. She gets absolutely nothing. She is punished for making up for the failure of the State to provide adequate services for her son. She is punished for that. I ask the Minister to reflect on that.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Cuirim fáilte roimh an rún seo. I thank Deputy Quaide and the Social Democrats for bringing forward this motion. In reality, there should not be need for this debate today. It is absolutely beyond argument that the carer's means test is unfair and disrespectful. As my colleague set out, it is actually demeaning. It needs to be scrapped. Two days before the general election was called in the previous year, a Sinn Féin motion was passed in the Dáil calling for that means test to be abolished. During the campaign, we all stood shoulder to shoulder with Ireland's carers in pushing for that to happen. The inescapable truth is that carers have been let down and left behind for decades by successive Governments.

When it comes to platitudes, barren words and empty promises, there is absolutely no shortage. Indeed, there is an abundance but when it comes to really showing up for carers and their families with the fundamental changes they need and deserve, all of that commitment dries up. The action never ever matches the promise. What carers get instead is a slow motion tinkering around the edges and they are asked to wait and wait, whether it is for the scrapping of the means test, the provision of respite care, adequate services or vital supports. It should not be this way. Carers are the backbone of our society and in many ways, they are the best of us. Every day they do incredible work and they save the State billions of euro. We know this. They do it for family with pure love. It is 24-7 and non-stop. There is no clocking out and carers just keep on going.

The sad reality that has to be confronted and named is that the State and Government take advantage of carer's love and their work. It is not fair, it is not right, it is not acceptable and it has to end. The means test has to go. That is where we are at so do it.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: I strongly welcome and support this motion. I worked as a carer for people with disabilities for 18 years. I have witnessed first-hand the invaluable work carried out by thousands of other carers across this country and I can say this: I, along with the carers who I worked with over those years, am sick and tired of hearing the Minister and his colleagues singing their praises in this Chamber. Enough of the empty words of praise. The time for the respect and support the Minister promised is long passed.

We are nearly a year on from the general election, an election where the Government made a clear commitment to abolish the means test for carers. Yet, here we stand with no plan, no timeline and only more excuses. Scrapping the means test is not a complex policy puzzle. It is a straightforward act of justice. It should have been a day one priority for this Government. This broken promise ensures that thousands of carers, who provide vital work in every community, are left struggling financially each and every week. These carers have sacrificed their own financial security to care for a loved one. They stepped up where the State stepped back. Let us not forget that the vast majority of carers are women. They bare the brunt of the Government's failure. Their work saves the State billions of euro, yet the Government has pushed them into financial dependency, forced to rely on a partner's income just to get by. The time for words of praise has passed. It is time for action and the first action must be the abolishment of the means test now. Week after week, I am contacted by parents of children with disabilities. These are parents who are struggling, fighting and sacrificing in every way imaginable. For them, being a carer is not some nine-to-five job. For them, it is 24 hours a day, hands-on caring, with little or no respite. Thousands of them do not even get the recognition of being a carer. Let us be clear: the State has not just failed these carers. They are shamefully failing those in need of care.

I have stood with grown men and women who have broken down in despair because they want to stay in their own home and not be put in a nursing home. They want to stay in the environment they have known their whole lives. Families are torn between caring for their loved ones or paying their mortgage. Let us be clear: the carer's respite grant is not used for respite or holidays. It is swallowed up by household bills. Those in need of care are failed from cradle to grave. We are letting down the most vulnerable among us.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: Family carers deserve an income support that recognises their care. The current system does not do that because if you are living with someone or are married to somebody, no matter how much care you provide and whether it is 24-7 or whatever it may be, it does not matter. The care does not matter because your partner, your husband and the person you are living with has an income. I always recall a constituent who came to my office many years ago. She was in receipt of the blind pension. Her partner got a promotion at work, which was something to celebrate. She lost her blind pension. She was still blind but it did not matter because her partner got a promotion at work and their household income increased.

It is so inherently flawed in a system where your need means nothing at all. It depends on the income and the household income.

I remember when I was my party's spokesperson on social protection and in 2022, the then Minister, former Deputy Humphreys, announced after 14 years an increase to the income disregard. It was announced at the time, "Minister Humphreys introduces first changes to the means test for carers in 14 years", as if it was something to be proud of. What it actually meant was that from 2008 to 2022, there was no increase in the income disregard and that was not something to be celebrated. That is how far behind this Government is now with regard to abolishing the means test. All of those years were lost to family carers. It also reminded me of the national carers' strategy, published in 2012. It was to be cost-neutral. Family carers stood back as they were told there were limited resources. They have waited but they are not getting what they deserve. There has been a lot of talk on this issue. The budget is an opportunity to do something for family carers and give them what they deserve, which is to abolish the means test.

Deputy David Cullinane: Carers do invaluable work and each and every one of us, in our constituency offices, deals with family carers almost on a daily basis, certainly on a weekly basis. I visited one family in Waterford last week. It was a woman who was looking after her father. She was actually sick herself. When I got to the house, she was physically lifting her father, who is much heavier than her, out of a bed and trying to manage that in very difficult circumstances. Her father was very sick.

We know the work that carers do. I had another woman in my constituency office last week in tears because she works part time for an education and training board. As she put it, she did everything right. She tried to work for as long as she could to get as many hours as she could. She has to provide for her family. Her son is in his 30s. He has disabilities and she is caring for him. She did a couple of extra hours unknown to herself - there were some irregular hours - and because of that she received a letter from social services to say she owed €1,600 back, which she just could not afford. She was absolutely livid. For everything she does, for all the work she does and a couple of extra hours here and there, which she did not really notice, she now has this bill on top of all the other bills, by the way, that a family has to pay.

Abolishing the means test is the fairest thing to do. The Government committed to it. A lot of promises were made during the election campaign, which seem to have come and gone. I hope this is not one of them. I support the motion here today. It is one the Government needs to urgently deliver on.

Deputy Mark Ward: I thank the Social Democrats for bringing forward this motion. It is simple: the means test for carers needs to be abolished. The means test excludes thousands of carers right across this State. I will give some examples. These are real people from my constituency who have come into my constituency office looking for help. There is a woman from my own area who was in receipt of carer's allowance. Her income and her partner's income were reassessed in January 2025. The Department used her partner's payslip from November 2024, which included his Christmas bonus. She explained this to them and then submitted the payslips for January and February 2025 to show what the normal income was. The Department continued to assess his income from the November payslip and reduced her carer's allowance by over €200 a week. That is nearly the entire payment. She appealed this and only yesterday - I will send the Minister the details - we got news that she lost this appeal. This is simply not fair.

Other carers tell me they do not even bother to apply for the carer's allowance, even though they should get it, because they know they are going to go over the threshold. I think this is something the Government wants. Other carers are afraid to go back to work in case their carer's allowance is taken off them. It is creating a glass ceiling for carers.

There is another lady who is working part time and caring for her son. Her partner refused a promotion because their income would bring them over the threshold and she would lose the carer's allowance. Can the Minister tell me how this is fair, valuing carers or valuing the people who carers care for? It does not matter what your income is; a carer is a carer. The Government failed to keep its promises at the last election. It has a chance to rectify that in the budget and a chance to keep its word to the people.

I thank the carers in this country for the service they provide. It is absolutely invaluable. I value them and it is high time the Government valued them too.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: When we speak about carers, we are speaking about people who take on a huge responsibility for no other reason than that they deeply care for the person they are providing the care for. Over 500,000 people across this State are quietly caring for their loved ones. They do not do it for reward. They do it out of love.

Carers can be anybody at any stage of their lives. We have parents caring for a child, children caring for their parents, or a close friend who steps in for someone who does not have the family support around them. They do not have the time to protest. They do not have the energy to fight this system and they feel they are being continually ignored by the Government.

There is not a week that goes by where I do not see somebody distraught in my office after being refused their carer's allowance. This means test adds nothing but hardship and stress to lives already stretched to the limit by a system that is not offering them enough support. Carers are struggling and many are living below the breadline. That is a failure of the Minister's Government, especially when we see the billions of euro these carers are saving the State year on year. The very least this Government could do is treat them with the respect and dignity they deserve. The Minister can do that by simply abolishing this unfair and cruel means test.

Deputy David Cullinane: Hear, hear.

Deputy Martin Kenny: First, I commend the Social Democrats on bringing forward this motion. Family carers are a vital part of the health service in this country and they are not recognised or respected for the work they do. We all know from experience that the healthcare service provided by the HSE is in crisis. The home care service across the country cannot get staff and we are in a situation where thousands of people have been allocated home care hours by the HSE but they are not receiving it because there is simply no staff to provide the care. There is little effort being made to recruit that staff in my experience.

Just imagine if we did not have the countless number of people - mainly women - who are providing the care to family, friends and neighbours. The HSE would collapse altogether. Yet, these family carers have to struggle from week to week because the Government refuses to recognise the work they do and pay them for the vital service they provide. There are many people providing care for loved ones who are not receiving any payment, and they are doing this work seven days a week with no respite or no possibility of respite. If they have accumulated money or assets over the years that puts them outside the threshold for the means test, they simply get nothing. When they look at what they should be entitled to, the Government's answer to them is: "You are doing a great job, providing great care and saving the State millions but we are not going to give you anything. You should spend your own money. You should sell your assets and live off it." What is that? Is that respect for carers? I do not think so and nobody thinks so. The Government should abolish the means test for carer's allowance and increase the payment as an absolute priority.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: In the programme for Government, it states that the Government is committed to the abolition of the carer's means test. We in Sinn Féin have been calling for this for a very long time. The Government declares itself to recognise the enormous contribution that family carers make to Irish society, yet applying the means test to carers is an unfair and regressive policy. Over 70% of carers are currently under enormous pressure to provide the most basic things like food and clothing. We are always aware of the enormous bill this State would have to face if these carers decided to withdraw their services. It is quoted at €20 billion. When you compare this figure to what it would cost to abolish the carer's means test, it is pittance.

I had a case in my own constituency of Wexford of a man who ran his own small business, who retired to look after his wife. She has dementia. He was €10 over the threshold. His only hope came from Family Carers Ireland, which provided him with one hour a week for respite. In that precious hour, he did his weekly shopping and his banking business. I know another woman who looked after elderly mother but she had to take up cleaning jobs to get by. She is totally exhausted by the end of the week as she looks after a young family as well. Surely these citizens deserve better?

There are 611,000 family carers in the State, 16,000 of them in my own County Wexford. They are the unseen and often forgotten about workforce. This State would fold in the morning if they decided to quit. Very often, these carers must leave their jobs to look after their loved ones who are sick, who have a disability or who are stroke victims, leaving them financially worse off. Some must take up part-time jobs while juggling their hours to fit around their caring duties, with no hope of respite. The fact is that carers fall far short of the established minimum standard-of-living income.

It is time to abolish the carer's allowance means test. We have to look after the people who look after our sick, elderly and people with disabilities. They have sacrificed their own careers, social lives and hobbies and often face long bouts of loneliness. I thank the Social Democrats for bringing this motion forward at this crucial time ahead of the budget next week.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I welcome this motion brought forward by the Social Democrats. It follows motions put before this House before. The Labour Party has raised this numerous times, particularly for young carers who are really discriminated against. If I may reach back into the annals, there was a Deputy, Willie Penrose, who raised this matter here for at least a decade if not longer. He argued that in real terms this was self-financing because of the fact that people were kept out of acute healthcare settings.

I believe the Minister is committed to getting rid of this. The differential relates to the timelines for doing it. While the Minister will, in fairness, increase income disregards and all of that, he needs to commit to this House how long it will be before he fully gets rid of it. He has hinted at it previously. Will he be brave enough to do it in this budget? It sounds like he will not. Will he be brave enough to do it in the following year's budget, or predict if he will be able to do it? He might outline to us what he intends to do.

We all know - it has been said often in this House - the role that carers play and how critical it is. I am the same. I see it every day all around me, where I live, everywhere. Across the country we have so many people who provide care. What we are not saying is that we are trading on their love for their family members. We are trading on it. Regardless of whether they are getting paid or getting an income for what they do - "pay" is not the right phrase - they are going to do it one way or another because they love the people they are caring for. We are really taking them for granted. There are young people who sacrifice years of their lives, careers, education, social lives and relationships because we, as a State, are taking them for granted. It is not just a case of providing a form of income for the work they do and giving them dignity. It is also about giving them options in life. We are taking away more than just an acknowledgement that they deserve an income.

For many families, anytime there is a change of circumstance within the household - a promotion, an additional payment, someone turning 18 or returning from college and starting work - there is huge concern and anxiety. A whole range of other things can happen across a household and the means assessment starts all over again. This worry and concern is something that we really have to be cognisant of.

The bottom line is that Willie Penrose was right when he said that the amount of money we save as a State because people do not end up in healthcare settings, particularly acute settings, is ginormous. It is huge and unquantifiable. That is the *quid pro quo* for getting rid of the means test on carers. The people who perform this duty - it is a duty - are saving the State so much. Getting rid of the means test on carers is a *quid pro quo* for that work. To show that we support them, it is our duty as legislators to ensure this happens and I encourage the Minister to do so.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I too thank the Social Democrats for bringing forward this motion. According to Family Carers Ireland's State of Caring report, which was published last year, 69% of carers report that they find it difficult to make ends meet. Some 29% of those struggling

financially are cutting back on essentials such as food and heat, the cost of which has gone through the roof in recent years. Some 23% missed a mortgage or rent payment in the previous year. Some 71% of carers provide care for over 120 hours a week.

The means test for carer's allowance is outdated. It is also deeply gendered because the majority of carers are women. My mother is a carer to my 89-year-old grandfather. She has had to step out of the workforce and does not qualify for carer's allowance under the income disregards that are there for her and my father.

Family carers save the Government approximately €20 billion each year and yet they are penalised if their family income is too high. The means test actively discourages a family from trying to increase its income. If a person works hard and wants to provide more for their family, if they earn too much they will lose some or all of their carer's allowance. This really disincentivises people from going out to work. In a country with full employment and skills shortages left, right and centre, we need to actively encourage and support people to enter and stay in the workforce. We should not be penalising them by reducing their benefits.

Carers make an enormous contribution to this country. At best, they are invisible; at worst, they are actively ignored. Applying for carer's allowance, as all of us as Deputies know from dealing with our constituents, is a very intrusive experience. People have to explain in incredible detail the level of care they provide. Frankly, it is ridiculous. A constituent said to me recently that carers are forced to jump through endless hoops to justify the work they do. To refuse them carer's allowance, or to offer them a reduced payment due to their income, is an insult.

I welcome the fact that the Minister is looking at increasing the income disregard, which has been increased previously. I really welcome the commitment in the programme for Government to get rid of it, but we need to see a timeline for this. My concern is that this commitment is one of those things that could get pushed and pushed and will eventually fall off the agenda.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I also thank the Social Democrats for bringing this motion forward. I do not doubt the Minister's bona fides on this matter. He is a good man. I am well aware that it is more than likely there are people coming into his constituency office and applying for carer's allowance. I do not doubt that. At the same time, people - women are predominantly the carers in this country - are feeling significant pressure. They are finding it extremely difficult to care for loved ones in their households when the application for the carer's allowance involves a means test.

Every week my secretary and I find ourselves filling out application forms. As my colleague Deputy Sheehan has said, it is an extremely intrusive application form. People have to go into in-depth detail on the level of care they provide and it is extremely difficult to write down on a piece of paper. We often find that people get extremely emotional when they submit an application form. It is difficult for public representatives when people come into their constituency offices in extremely emotional states.

I welcome the fact that the income thresholds are increasing. However, the Minister needs to fulfil his duty to abolish the means test for carer's allowance over the lifetime of this Government. We need a timeframe on that. Carers across this country, who are predominantly

women, need the security of understanding that their household means will not stop them from having their own income for providing care for a loved one. It would be completely wrong in any sense or form if this were to happen. I ask the Minister and his Department to give us a timeline on what is going to happen in relation to the abolition of the means test for carer's allowance.

Will it be this year, next year or the last year of this Thirty-Fourth Dáil? We are unaware.

I have significant issues in relation to children with special educational needs. Parents across the country who are caring for children with additional needs provide a deep understanding of what children with such needs are facing. They should not be put up against the barrier of a means test for caring for their children 24-7.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I thank the Social Democrats for introducing this motion. I have lost count of the number of times we have debated this matter in the Dáil. I welcome that there is a commitment in the programme for Government to get rid of the means test, but I will not be surprised if we end up going into the next general election with Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael promising to get rid of it. The failure to provide a timeline is extremely concerning and suggests this is one of these promises that will not be met and many more debates like this will be required to keep the pressure up.

We in People Before Profit are against all means testing of social welfare payments. We believe in universal benefits. If you have a child, you get child benefit. If you lose your job, you get jobseeker's benefit. In the same way, if you are a carer you should get carer's allowance. It is as simple as that. There should be no intrusive questions asked about whether you are in a relationship or how much your partner earns. That is irrelevant. It is also deeply sexist, as the majority of family carers are women.

We need to get away from the approach that underlies this, which is about putting responsibility for care onto families. It is very convenient for the State because it saves it about €20 billion per year, but instead of privatising care or expecting families to do the work for free or at a very low cost, the State needs to step up and properly resource care. It needs to fully fund respite and care services rather than expecting charities to raise funds all the time to keep the doors open. It is especially important for older carers, like Tony and Susan Murray, who are caring full-time into their 70s and 80s because of a lack of Government services. Tony told RTÉ that "we have this kind of playing around with rights - there are no rights ... the fact is Aoife [who is their daughter] needs care and needs service and it's going to cost".

Our alternative budget, which is being launched tomorrow, would immediately abolish the means test for carer's allowance, disability allowance, the blind pension and the invalidity pension. We would also increase the basic rate of carer's allowance by €90 to €350 a week. At the moment it is €260. You jump through all the hoops, you fill out a 28-page application form and your reward at the end of that is a measly €7.43 an hour. That calculation is based on working 35 hours a week as a carer. As we all know, many carers are working much more hours than that, meaning they are being paid even less than €7.43 an hour. This is completely unacceptable. It shows a continued lack of respect for carers from Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Lowry group. As long as there is a means test for carer's allowance and an income disregard, there will be an official State disregard for carers and the people they care for. Carers have had enough. It is clear. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael need to stop paying lip service to

carers, put their money where their mouths are and abolish the means test for carer's allowance. They could do it in next week's budget.

Deputy Charles Ward: Over 10,000 unpaid carers in Donegal are awaiting next week's budget in the hope they will finally receive long overdue recognition for the difficult and important work they do every single day. The lack of respect for people who provide an essential service and save the State over €20 billion a year is staggering. Most of us, in our lifetime, will either become carers or be cared for. This is a reality we do not realise until we are faced with the unrelenting responsibility of becoming a carer.

Nobody expects to become a family carer. Sometimes it happens overnight and sometimes it happens over time. As a family carer, your time is no longer your own and you no longer have the freedom or flexibility to go where you like when you like. Caring is not just a daily duty but an ever-present weight that is on your mind. As you are caring in the physical sense, it is not a job for you as a family carer. You are looking after someone you love and you see the decline in your health. That love and care should not be exploited, as it has been for years. This was a burden that was never openly discussed, but always expected to be carried by women and is all too often carried by them. It is called a family issue and kept behind closed doors where women will give up everything to stay and look after a relative. It is just a ridiculous situation they find themselves in, in this day and age. They have no money because they are staying at home to look after somebody when they should be adequately rewarded for this. We fail as a State to recognise what they have given to us. This has been going on for generations and now it is expected. That is wrong and it is exploitation of the highest order.

The carer's allowance as it stands is extremely outdated and gender-biased. The Government has the opportunity to address this in its budget next week. It has the opportunity to abolish the means test and pay carers for what they do. I am urging the Government to join us in supporting this motion and show carers they are valued. Since 2011, there has been an increase of 60% in the number of people who need care. The people looking after them are doing an average of over 80 hours a week. They are saving the State billions of euro but we cannot recognise the people who are providing this. We need to address this before people are left behind without any support. What kind of message is that sending out to carers in this day and age?

Deputy Seamus Healy: The acid test of the bona fides of this Government on carers and caring is the immediate abolition of the means test for the carer's allowance. This has been the demand of carers and Family Carers Ireland for years and was promised by all political parties during the course of the last general election. It was understood by the public that the means test would be abolished within the first 100 days of this Government, but of course we are still waiting. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael misled the public again. The Minister should announce the abolition immediately and should take the opportunity of next week's budget to do that.

Some 500,000 carers, including 67,000 young carers, are doing 19 million hours of unpaid care a week, thereby saving the State about €20 billion a year. Family Carers Ireland say:

Despite being described as the backbone of Ireland's health and social care system, Family carers continue to shoulder the consequences of underinvestment in home care supports, outdated policies, eligibility criteria that no longer reflect the realities of modern caring ...

Surveys show that 69% of carers struggle to make ends meet, with 29% having to cut back on food and heat and 23% missing a rent or mortgage payment. Research by the Vincentian Partnership in April 2022, before the cost-of-living crisis, showed that income supports for carers were inadequate and caring households incurred additional weekly expenditure of €244 per week. This effectively wiped out the carer's allowance completely, meaning people were effectively caring for free. Caring is work and should be paid accordingly. Respite is another issue and three out of four carers never receive it. That is leading to a situation where carers become ill and those they care for end up being admitted to hospitals.

The budget next week must do three things. It must abolish the means test for the carer's allowance, it must substantially increase the carer's allowance payment and it must provide targeted supports for families who are caring for persons with complex needs. Last week, I referenced Alex, a 14-year-old boy who is being cared for at home in his bedroom, which is effectively an intensive care unit, with the support of two carers 24 hours a day. This family is under severe general and financial pressure and was recently threatened with electricity disconnection. This week they were refused the fuel allowance on a technicality. This is absolutely shocking and this Government must do better.

Deputy Michael Collins: On 21 May this year, Independent Ireland put forward a motion, part of which called for the abolish the means test for carers. The Government said it would not oppose the motion. Budget 2026 is here next week so let us see if the Government puts its money where its mouth is. Family carers save the Irish State over €20 billion every year by providing 19 million hours of unpaid care each week. That is not just a contribution; it is a cornerstone of our health and social care system. These carers are keeping loved ones at home, out of hospitals and nursing homes and giving them dignity and quality of life yet many are denied carer's allowance simply because their spouse earns just over the threshold. That is not support; it is punishment.

We are facing a serious shortage of nursing home beds. In Bantry alone, 17 beds remain closed in Aperee Living Nursing Home - an issue I brought up with the Minister but he did not come back to me - due to delays in HIQA paperwork, despite this home being fully refurbished and passed by the fire officer. Every week, my office hears from families desperately trying to find a bed for loved ones, whether it is in that nursing home, in a community hospital or wherever. It is getting worse and worse. The people on the ground are telling me it is a crisis situation. Do not bother turning to home help. Mother of Jesus, the Government has made a right hames of that anyway. You will get a simple answer: there is no home help available. If you meet the home help people, they say they will do the extra hours but they will not be given them. There is a right cock-up there. It needs to split clean down and started right up from the ground again.

Since 2024, across Cork and Kerry over 11% of public nursing home beds are currently closed due to staffing shortages, refurbishment delays and regulatory bottlenecks. This is happening while families are being forced to look far outside their communities for care. I hold clinics every Saturday across west Cork and I hear the same story every week. A constituent caring full-time for a loved one is unable to work yet is denied support because of household income. These carers are doing full-time work, often more than 35 hours a week - often a hell of a lot more - and still get nothing. It is not good enough; not in 2025. Let us look at the facts. Some 611,828 people aged 15 plus are providing unpaid care; 67,000 children

aged ten to 17 are also carers; 69% of carers find it hard to make ends meet; 48% report severe loneliness; 41% have a long-term health condition themselves; and 72% have never received any respite. These are the people who are holding up our care system and yet they are being left behind. The Government has increased income disregards but that still leaves thousands excluded. We, in Independent Ireland, are fully supportive of the complete abolition of the means test. That is what carers need. That is what carers demand. Life is hard for those who need care but it is also hard for those carers. Many get no break, no support and no recognition. The very least we can do is ensure they receive a payment, regardless of household income.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: This time last year, Aontú proposed a motion in this Chamber seeking the ending of the means test for the carer's allowance. That motion was co-signed by Seán Canney and Noel Grealish who are now junior Ministers in this Government and it had a timeframe of 2027 for the complete abolition of the means test. It is very clear that there is absolutely no will in the Government to abolish the means test by 2027, which is shocking. This particular motion had the will of the Chamber here. The big problem I have with the Government at the moment is that it treats this payment as if it is social welfare. It is not social welfare. Care work is some of most essential work that happens in Irish society. The idea that it is being treated in the same manner as social welfare is absolutely wrong. It is often done out of love but it is tough work. It is long hours and it often means significant sacrifice. I am talking about sacrifice in terms of income as well; income that would be earned if that individual was in another job. It is also work that is predominately done by women therefore it also has a significant impact on women throughout the country and their incomes. If we want to know what this Government values, just follow where the money goes. In all forms of care, the Government does not value care. Whether it is childcare, care for people in nursing homes or children in State care, these are many of the jobs that are paid the least of all the different jobs that exist in this country. There is also a fool's economy here in relation to this. If the Government does not fund carers, carers do not do the work they do and if the State has to step in and fill that gap, it will cost the State billions of euro. Indeed, it is estimated that the whole value of care that carers are providing at the moment is worth about €20 billion. Therefore, it does not make sense that the Government is not focusing funding in this space as it saves the Government significant money.

I wish to mention a reply to a parliamentary question we got back over the last few days. Incredibly, 37% of carers who applied for carer's allowance last year were refused. That is an incredibly high figure. Nearly 40% of the applicants are being failed on an annual basis. The truth of the matter is that it looks like the Government is going to fail more applicants this year than it did last year. The Government talks about the fact that it has improved the income disregard in the last 12 months, but the income disregard change is actually having no effect on the number of people who are being failed in their application for carer's allowance. Unless the Government gets real in this, it is going to condemn tens of thousands of people to lower incomes, poverty and to not being recognised for they are doing. That is wrong.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Independent Ireland has looked for the means test to be abolished. It is not about the means test; it is about care. If we are practical about it, an awful lot of people could be outside the threshold because they may have been left something by a loved one or their partner might be working two jobs to try to put food on the table and it puts them outside the means test threshold. If we look at areas where we have no home help and

where we cannot get care for people in this country, the Government has put an obstacle in the way of a means test. It is not about means; it is about the care. If the Government looked at what it would cost the other sectors to provide the same care and put that into funds, it would not be able to provide it anywhere. Why is the Government putting an obstacle in the way for care? Talking about home help, it cannot be got. Why? Again, people are afraid of being targeted. I have people in my office day on day, wanting to care for people who the Government cannot allow for. They are willing to do it but they are saying their family will be affected if they do it because it is means tested. We have inflation, we have things going double the cost in this country and people are trying to live. They also want to care but the means test is what is stopping this. It is mean of the Government not to allow care. Independent Ireland is asking the Government to scrap the means test and to look at the care and the benefit of looking after people in their own homes. To wrap this up, it is mean for the Government not to allow care when it looks at it from a financial point of view. It is about the care, not the means.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I am disappointed to see that the senior Minister has left the House. Nobody ever gets rich from social welfare. Nobody ever makes a profit from social welfare. We can put that idea to rest in this House and put it on the record. When it comes to carer's allowance, €20 billion is being saved by the State from people caring. We have application forms as long as my arm in which people are meant to give every detail and 37% of those are turned down. Then there is the appeals process. God knows, surely people have enough on their plate when they are caring for their husbands, mothers and their children without having to go through this entire rigmarole about how many times they feed them, dress them, shower them and take them to the toilet. That is the type of intrusive information that people in the Department of Social Protection are looking for. It has been stated well in this House what happens when you become a carer. Many times, when it is dementia-related, not only does the world become very small for the person who has the dementia but also for that carer. Many of those, because of a private pension, an income, a piece of land or a house they have inherited, do not qualify. They cannot get the respite, the carer's allowance and other supports and services around that. That is unfair. It is wrong. Who is caring for the carer? The State certainly is not. They cannot access those extra services that could be made available to them. I have a constituent who drives from Mallow to Blarney Street every day. She cannot get carer's allowance for her father because of her husband's earnings. No other social welfare is related to your partner, your husband or your boyfriend's earnings. No other document is as intrusive as the application form needed to receive carer's allowance.

Women - mothers, daughters and sisters - are the majority of carers. I wonder whether there is discrimination in this regard. That should be tested.

Deputy Gillian Toole: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. I thank all the family and young carers who carry out their tasks on a daily basis and save the State an absolute fortune. I thank the Oireachtas Library and Research Service, the Parliamentary Budget Office and my predecessors in the regional group, particularly Denis Naughten, who did substantial work on this issue and contributed to the position we are in today.

To restore a little balance, and it is vindicated to some extent by Family Carers Ireland in its budget 2026 proposal document, we have, since 3 July, met the single carer's allowance payment of €625 and the couples payment of €1,250, with the previous and current programme

for Government committing to abolish the means test by 2027. As someone who worked in healthcare, I would crunch the numbers and say, "Yes, it possibly could be done away with". The upper-level cost would be €459 million, which possibly could be done in one budget. That sum could be taken from the HSE, transport, social welfare, etc. However, the practicalities of doing that render it impossible. There are system changes to be invoked and perhaps even a culture change. There is the accountability, efficiency and productivity aspect, including changing work practices at the back end of all this, to make sure, as speakers have noted, that payments are made on time and the reject percentage is reduced.

Apart from crunching the numbers and modelling, we have to prioritise the dignity and respect that should be afforded to people in caring roles. Ultimately, the improved well-being of the State depends on fostering, valuing and nurturing a caring and compassionate society. It should not be entirely about the monetary aspect but that part is moving in the right direction. It is just not practical to do it all in one fell swoop.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to have an opportunity to debate this issue. I thank the Social Democrats for putting the motion before the House. It certainly is very timely with the budget happening next week. I have been and am appealing to the Government to get rid of the means test for people who are caring for loved ones. We are talking about human beings. When people become carers, they must, in many instances, live the other person's life. Whether someone has Alzheimer's disease, a disability or whatever else, their carer has to work around them to make sure they are looked after and treated as humans and that their daily and hourly needs are met. It is a fierce responsibility.

It is not fair to deny people carer's allowance just because their partner or some other person in the house is earning money, to which the carer may have no access. A promise was made to get rid of the means test during the lifetime of the Government. That suggests the cap will be increased year by year over four or five years. I ask that the Government go further at the start than raising it by just one fifth. It should do more because this is an essential support for carers, who do massive work. Many speakers have noted that carers around the country are saving the State €20 billion.

During the summer, I never had so many people coming to me wanting a few days off and to put the person they are caring for into some respite place. It is impossible to get a respite bed in Kerry for anyone who wants to go away for a week. One woman who looks after her mother said to me, "Danny, I do not mind too much myself but I want to go on holiday for a week with my little boy, who is more attached to me than to his father". She has been minding her mother continuously for five years. Can the Minister of State imagine that? She has been continuously seeing to the daily and hourly needs of her mother and she could not go away for one week. It was absolutely savage.

There are no respite beds. Taking the area from Mick the Bridges, where drivers turn off the N22 for Kilgarvan, and all that territory down through Kilgarvan, Kenmare, Sneem, Castlecove and back into Caherdaniel, there is only one respite bed in Kenmare hospital serving that area. People are supposed to get four weeks of respite in a year but there is no way for that to happen. They only get one week and the bed will have to be booked now if they want it in the middle of summer next year. Can the Minister of State imagine that? People must book a respite bed a year head in Killarney, Kenmare, Listowel and Cahersiveen community hospitals.

They are being treated terribly and it is not fair. Will the Minister of State look into this? The beds are there but the staff are not. That is what needs to be addressed. I am very hurt about it when I see that a young girl with a family and an autistic little boy cannot go away for just seven days for a bit of a holiday. I have spoken to another woman in Killarney who has been minding her mother-in-law, who needs an awful lot of care and attention, for many years. She could not get a respite bed anywhere. I do not know how she managed in the finish but she was crying to me on the phone for days.

What is happening in Kerry is a terrible situation. We have been let down very badly. We do not know when the new community hospital is opening. We have been asking about it but the opening has been put back. There are other plans for the old district hospital and for the grounds of St. Finian's. We do not have the primary care unit in Killarney we have been waiting on for so many years.

Deputy Michael Cahill: Means-testing for the carer's allowance is not fair on either carers or patients. It could end up costing the State hundreds of millions of euro. The carer's allowance is a weekly social welfare payment to people who care for someone because of their age, disability or illness, including mental ill-health, for at least 35 hours per week over five to seven days. Personal savings should have no impact on whether people qualify for the allowance. Giving of their time to care for someone who is ill takes a large burden off the State and saves it large sums of money annually.

I have been campaigning for years for the removal of the means test, which is counterproductive to the State, to carers and to patients, who are the most important consideration in this. We have more people than ever who qualify as carers by way of assisting on a daily basis in the healthcare of our sick and elderly. We should not be placing obstacles in the way of their receiving the carer's allowance. Otherwise, the State will need to provide the staff, facilities, wages, etc. at an enormous cost.

We have a huge issue with respite provision in County Kerry. I have dealt with many families who have not received a break in six or seven months. I was informed very recently that St. Mary of the Angels in Beaufort is to be sold. It is a phenomenal facility in the heart of the county catering now for young adults - originally, it was children - with profound disabilities.

We also have St. Francis Special School there, which is another amazing facility. I cannot understand or accept that it would be sold off. The land was originally donated by the Doyle family of Beaufort for the benefit of children with profound disabilities and now it is being off-loaded by St. John of God Community Services. I plead with the Minister and everyone involved-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Brian Brennan): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Michael Cahill: -----who is in a position of power to address this issue and reverse what they are trying to do. Otherwise, we will be looking for more carers for these people. That is the point I am trying to make.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Brian Brennan): The Deputy's time is up.

Deputy Michael Cahill: This is a facility that the people of Kerry fundraised for, which was given free of charge. It should continue to be used for the purpose for which it was originally given to the people of Kerry by the Doyle family.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I thank all Deputies for their contributions to this important debate. On behalf of the Government, I acknowledge the great work provided by carers. I say that on a human level. We all deal with them every day, both in our daily lives and as public representatives. I want to put that on record. The Government is very aware of the valuable work being carried out by family carers. This is evidenced by the extensive measures that have been taken to support carers in recent years.

The approach to date has been targeted and has involved increases to payment rates in conjunction with widening eligibility to payments through, for example, increasing the income disregards for the carer's allowance and making carer's benefit available to the self-employed. This approach was maintained and continued in budget 2025, and it is our intention to continue this pattern in budget 2026.

There have been calls to abolish the means test from 1 January 2026. I thank the Social Democrats for tabling the motion on this issue. I have listened to the various inputs of the Deputies regarding the complete abolition of the means test for carer's allowance from 1 January 2026. The Government has been very clear on this issue. It is our intention to abolish the means test and we have set out a definitive timeline in the programme for Government. We have committed to phasing out the means test during the lifetime of the Government. We cannot do it in just one budget. We need to phase it in over a period.

It is important to acknowledge that a range of supports for carers provided by the Department of Social Protection are not based on a means assessment, such as the carer's support grant, carer's benefit and the domiciliary care allowance. In recent years, we have progressively improved the rates of these payments and widened their accessibility to family carers.

The carer's support grant, which people know historically as the respite care grant, is a payment for all full-time carers, even those not in receipt of carer's allowance. It can be claimed by carers regardless of their means or social insurance contributions. As part of budget 2025, the annual carer's support grant was increased by €150 to €2,000 from July. The rate of this grant has increased by €300 since 2021 and is now at its highest ever rate. I encourage all carers to apply for this grant on an annual basis. It comes automatically to those in receipt of the carer's allowance or carer's benefit, but people who are not in receipt of those payments should still apply.

Carer's benefit is based on social insurance contributions. It is a very effective payment for people who may be required to leave the workforce or reduce their working hours to care for a person in need of full-time care. It is payable for a period of up to two years for each care recipient and is estimated to cost almost €58 million this year. As part of budget 2025 and since January, carer's benefit has been made available to the self-employed for the first time.

The domiciliary care allowance is payable to a parent or guardian in respect of a child who has a severe disability and requires continual or continuous care and attention substantially over and above the care and attention usually required by a child of the same age. From January, the rate was increased by €20 to €360 per month. This monthly payment has increased cumulatively by €50.50 since January 2023.

I want to touch on this payment briefly as an example of how we have engaged with and listened to carers. We listened to the voices of families of very sick children and heard about the financial stresses they experience while their children are undergoing medical treatments. As a result, several changes have been made to this payment, which include extending the period during which domiciliary care allowance can be paid for children in hospital from three months to six months, and making the domiciliary care allowance available for babies who remain in an acute hospital after birth for a period of 18 months. This came into effect from May last year. While I appreciate these may seem like relatively small changes, they have made a difference to the families who are thrust into these difficult situations, particularly the parents of newborn babies who are unable to bring their babies home after they are born. It is a very difficult time for people.

Census 2022 recorded approximately 299,000 people who self-declared on the census form as providing unpaid care at the time. The Irish Health Survey 2019 suggests a higher figure, in the order of approximately 517,000, as reported by Family Carers Ireland. It is worth noting that figures contained in a Healthy Ireland survey of 2024 from the Department of Health show that some 14% of respondents, or approximately 750,000 people, reported that they are carers, that is, they are providing regular unpaid personal help to a friend or family member with a long-term illness, health problem or disability.

I thank the Deputies for bringing forward this motion. The Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Calleary, has committed to continuing to keep the range of income supports available to carers under review during his tenure to ensure the overall objectives of the schemes are met. The Government has not opposed the Social Democrats' motion. We recognise the important and valuable role that carers play in our communities. That is reflected in the improvements we have made to carer's income support schemes in recent years. We are committed to removing the means test from the carer's allowance payment. As I have stated, we will do that over the lifetime of the Government, but we cannot do it from 1 January 2026 as called for in the motion.

I am sure that Members all agree that an effective social welfare system is one built on principles of the equitable distribution of wealth and ensuring an adequate standard of living for those who are most marginalised in our society. This not only means carers but also disabled people and lone parents and their children. We are now less than one week from the budget, and I assure Members that the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Calleary, and others continue to strongly advocate on behalf of carers and other marginalised groups. Finally, it is important to emphasise again that the Government remains committed to continuing its long-standing practice of consultation and close engagement with stakeholders and carer representative groups.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank my party colleague Deputy Quaide for bringing forward this motion. As a member of the Social Democrats, I am very proud to put it forward. I realise that

the issue has been debated many times in the House, but we have a clear commitment from the Government to abolish the means test and we have a clear rationale for how to do that, yet the Government chooses to continue to hedge and dodge what it has to do.

We have heard a lot of detail today, but I want to zoom out for a moment and talk about care more broadly, mar beidh cúram ag teastáil uainn uilig ag pointe amháin nó pointe eile. We all receive care over the course of our lifetime. Many of us will give care as well. It is really important to start from that point, because in his opening statement, the Minister, Deputy Calleary, said: "In short, we agree ... that the means test should be abolished. There is nothing between us on that." I will speak a little to the differences that we do have in both the how and the why.

I am not going to go over the figures Deputy Cian O'Callaghan already put forward to show how we can do this. The Government can do this in one swoop with this budget. It can abolish the means test for carers. It can broaden the tax base. It can look at the other ways in which we can fund this, but instead this morning we get from the Minister, Deputy Calleary, and the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, essentially a form of whataboutery. The Minister, Deputy Calleary, implied that by introducing this we would then have to penalise other groups in society, such as lone parents and people with disabilities.

That is not what we are suggesting. The Social Democrats do not suggest that. We are putting forward a motion that offers a way for the Government to do this overnight. That "how" is one of the big gulfs between us and the Government, but the wider one is the "why" of this. It is the motivation. In his opening comments, the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, acknowledged the great work being done by carers.

I do not doubt the Minister of State means that, but I think he comes at it with a very different world view to us. I argue there are ways in which the Government views care which holds on to the very paternalistic, very charitable model of care and disability we have in this society. What he is seeing from us, all across the Opposition benches, is the opposite. My colleagues have spoken about the professional care that is delivered in the homes. The Government must start to recognise that is what it is and reassess the entire relationship this State has with care and start recognising it for what it is: professional care that is provided in the homes of many people across this country. The one stark way one can tell the difference is that those families that have means pay for carers. That is the difference. It is the families that cannot afford to that have to put in the hours themselves and care for people. Until the Government starts to recognise that fundamental "why" - why we need to reward carers in a professional way - we will never meet across that gulf.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I thank Deputy Quaide for all his hard work on this motion. There should be no need for this debate. We are all in agreement that the means test for carers needs to be abolished, so the question is: why do we not just do it now? It is extremely insulting to reduce the work of carers down to numbers on a spreadsheet. It is the only type of work that is means tested like this. Carers who are slightly above income thresholds are often denied any support. People who have carer's allowance live in fear of it being taken away. The process is draining, it is stressful and it is bureaucratic to the extent that some people do not even bother to apply for it.

Of course, to say that this disproportionately impacts women is an understatement . According to the report from the Citizens' Assembly on gender equality, women make up 98% of full-time carers. We are all well aware that linking an entitlement like that to partners' incomes only entrenches economic dependency. The result is far too many women are highly dependent on the income of their partner, exposing them to the very real risk of financial abuse. The impact the means test has on carers is immeasurable, it is exhausting, and it is wrong.

Katie Healy Nolan lives in Cork. She is a carer for her daughter, Penelope, who has a life-limiting illness. On Monday, she told me that caring for her daughter, Penelope, is, "an absolute honour and the most fulfilling role I will ever hold, but I, like so many other unpaid carers feel like we are being punished for caring for our loved ones". Due to means testing, Katie and her family are not eligible for supports. Any savings they had are long gone and recently they had to crowdfund for a downstairs bedroom for Penelope ahead of her scoliosis surgery in February. That is the reality of the means tested system. We hear time and again how the Government values carers, but where on Earth is the evidence of that?

It is important to say the Government is paying lip service to a rights-based approach to disability, particularly in relation to the right to independent living. Disabled people should have a choice on how they live their lives, but that choice is not there at the moment because personal assistance hours and so many other essential supports are threadbare. Under a rights-based approach, family care would be a choice. In Ireland, most of the time it is not.

We have to support carers with more than words. We will not improve the life of carers by tinkering around the edges; by increasing an income threshold. Carers are saving the State €20 billion a year. It would cost a fraction of that, €375 million to remove the means test. That is something the Social Democrats have allowed for in our alternative budget. It is not too late for the Government to do the same.

Deputy Liam Quaide: I thank all my colleagues who supported our motion. The Minister, Deputy Calleary, emphasised in his response to the motion that he will not be opposing it and that there is "nothing between us", regarding the means test for carer's allowance. Yet, there is a major difference between abolishing the means test for carer's allowance in budget 2026 and abolishing it in budget 2030. Within that gulf between nice words and concrete actions are the experiences of carers who have had to leave their careers to look after a family member who requires full-time care and support and who are not even granted a modest payment to provide them with a modicum of financial security because their savings or their spouse's income makes them ineligible. For carers locked out of this basic financial support, applying for carer's allowance and being rejected is a demeaning, gruelling process. The Government talks about being unable to abolish the means test in budget 2026 with a sense of inevitability, almost as if it is a law of nature that a proposal of this kind is fanciful or naive. Dragging out this decision over a five-year term is not inevitable; it is a political choice. The Government can ask banks that are highly profitable and that were bailed out by the State during the financial crash to pay more, or it can continue leaning on carers for their thankless, intruding into their finances and devaluing their contribution to society.

I want to share the words of a constituent who wrote to me about her experience. She captures very powerfully the core injustice of the means test for carer's allowance.

I am a mum to an 8-year-old autistic girl who was diagnosed following a long drawn process and following a complaint having to be lodged to have the assessment of needs carried out for her.

In February 2023 due to lack of services and intervention as well as the demands of trying to navigate having a child with ASD and working full time I ended up suffering from parental burnout and have been out on sick leave due to my emotional and mental health being affected caring full time for my child. People don't see the sleepless nights. I feel that carers should be recognised for what we do. Carers save the Government millions a year. I feel we are being exploited for our hard work. Carers who don't qualify for the carers allowance as they are over the means threshold are made to feel worthless as they aren't recognised for what we do and have the added stress of having to depend on our partners financially. We also then have the cost-of-living crisis on our hands with the expense of ESB, food, petrol, private therapies, various resource to help with regulating etc. I am lucky in one way as my husband has full time employment but due to his work, we are over the threshold for me to qualify for carers. I feel it is extremely unfair that my husband's earnings have to be taken into account given that I am at home 24/7 with my daughter currently as we also do not have an appropriate school placement either. Having no financial independence or stability on top of lack of supports, no school placement as well as trying to navigate my child's anxiety and other issues has become such a worry and has had a detrimental impact on my mental and emotional well-being. I would love to work part-time if not full time again at some stage but given the lack of supports, no school placement and my daughter's heightened anxiety I am not in a position to and as a result I have to choose but to be a full-time carer, advocate, OT, SLT, teacher, psychologist etc. The Government needs to wake up and look after carers who are looking after their vulnerable citizens.

There is a choice to make in next week's budget. Political decisions are not inevitable and the Government can continue treating carers as charity cases who are a burden on the State or, alternatively, as the essential backbone they are to our society and care system.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Government has a big problem with wasting public money. Yesterday, I raised with the Taoiseach that taxpayers will stump up €100,000 for another bicycle shed and the never-ending catalogue of waste on the watch of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. The Government is pouring millions of euro in people's hard-earned money down the drain.

The Comptroller and Auditor General's report published yesterday raised serious concerns regarding the spending of taxpayers' money across the board, including the Office of Public Works, OPW, paying €20 million to rent offices that were left empty. One of the loudest alarm bells was sounded on the spending on the International Protection Accommodation Service, IPAS, which is the responsibility of the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration. The damning report points to a lack of due diligence and payment control in the awarding of IPAS contracts, on which the Government will spend €1.2 billion this year.

Some of it is breathtaking. There is evidence of overcharging by private operators, including companies charging for beds that were not provided and charging VAT when the accommodation is VAT exempt. One operator overcharged the State by €7.4 million for VAT and it still has a Government contract. The report shines a light on other serious issues, including incomplete due diligence records and unverifiable invoice rates. Signed contracts could not be found in more than one third of the cases examined. Proof of ownership of the properties or a copy of leases was provided for only 5% of the properties examined. Astonishingly, the prepayment system used by IPAS did not include a check to establish capacity or occupancy levels. We are talking about billions of euro of public money and the management around it is utterly incompetent and wide open to abuse.

Even before the Comptroller and Auditor General's report, we knew there were serious issues with spending on IPAS. We knew that two directors of a café-turned-IPAS-accommodation paid themselves €4.6 million in 2024 when only three years earlier, that same company made a profit of a mere €2,092. That is some pay hike. This is cowboy stuff and the big fear is that this is just the tip of the iceberg. The Government has allowed a small number of private operators to become multimillionaires overnight at the expense of the taxpayer and this cannot go on. Faoi stiúir an Rialtais seo, tá airgead poiblí á chur amú go scannalach ar bhrabúsaíocht atá ar bun acu siúd atá ag tabhairt faoi sholáthar sheirbhísí lóistín d'iarratasóirí ar chosaint idirnáisiúnta. Caithfear stop a chur leis. This squandering of public money is happening on the watch of the Government and on the Minister's watch and it is his job to sort it out. It is time to end the extreme profiteering from IPAS accommodation. Does the Government accept responsibility for this scandalous waste? Will the Minister urgently initiate a thorough review of every IPAS contract?

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank the Deputy for her question. I welcome that yesterday the Comptroller and Auditor General's published his report for 2024. One of the items in it, as she identified, was a chapter on the management of IPAS contracts. That report is helpful because it sets out, what no doubt the Deputy believes as well as I believe, how spending on IPAS has increased significantly in recent years. In 2019, we spent €129 million on IPAS accommodation. Last year, we spent €1 billion. As the report indicates, however, the real driver of expenditure in this area is the number of residents in the system. In 2019, 7,683 residents were accommodated by IPAS. Last year, there were 32,700 and the real driver of the number of residents coming into the system is, being frank, the number of people applying for international protection. In 2022, 2023 and 2024, a total of 25,000 people came to Ireland and applied for international protection. That was significantly in excess of the numbers in the years prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. We also have to take into account that, as well as dealing with those people, we had to provide accommodation for 114,000 Ukrainians who had arrived. The effect of the arrivals and the increase in the accommodation requirements was that we went from a situation in 2019 when the State had 78 centres to a situation in 2024 that it had 324 centres.

The Deputy correctly identified that issues raised by the Comptroller and Auditor General were precontract due diligence, precontract compliance and the VAT issue. I want her to know, however, that I have taken steps to ensure we are getting better value for money. This year, I renegotiated over 100 contracts. I have been informed that the saving to the State resulting from those renegotiations is in the region of over €50 million. I have also terminated 12

contracts for a variety of reasons, including inadequate services being provided and inadequate quality. We need to recognise, in respect of the VAT issue, which was brought to my attention by the Department, that the overpayment of VAT was brought to the attention of the Department and Revenue by the provider. It indicated that there had been an overpayment because of charges being imposed on accommodation that is not VATable, while food is VATable. My understanding is that the money has been reconciled and repaid and that no further moneys are outstanding.

However, to ensure we can reduce our expenditure in this area, I am seeking to move from commercial enterprise provision to State enterprise provision. I had a good engagement with the Deputy's colleague, Deputy Carthy's committee on the subject of IPAS. The reason I want to move to State provided accommodation is that at present it costs €30,000 per annum to accommodate an asylum seeker in private accommodation, whereas it costs €12,000 per annum in State accommodation. That is why this year I have been able to increase the number of State units from 900 last year to 4,000 this year. The objective of the Government is to get to 14,000 accommodation units by 2028. Steps are being taken. However, I have sympathy for Deputy O'Gorman who was the Minister when the surge happened and had to provide accommodation. I have no doubt the pressures on the Government at the time resulted in contracts being entered into that we would not enter into now.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I asked the Minister two questions. Does the Government take responsibility for the scandalous waste and lack of accountability and proper management I have set out?

By way of response, the Minister reached for everyone else bar the Government. He should attribute this waste to those who are in the accommodation. That is simply not an accurate reflection. That is not what the Comptroller and Auditor General found. What the Comptroller and Auditor General has found is utter incompetence and an incredibly cavalier attitude by the Minister's Government. What the failures in due diligence and compliance actually mean, just to decode it, is that the Government has created a golden opportunity for people to turn a fast buck courtesy of the Irish taxpayer.

I ask the Minister again to take responsibility for this situation. Will there be a review of every IPAS contract? I fear that what the Comptroller and Auditor General has revealed - as shocking as it is - is only a fraction of what has actually been going on. The Irish taxpayer wants to know whether the Government has played fast and loose with billions and billions of their hard-earned money.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: All of the contracts are being reviewed as they are come up for expiration. That is why I have managed to bring about a situation where we have achieved savings of over €50 million this year as a result of renegotiating 100 contracts. The Deputy asked whether or not I accept the recommendations of the Comptroller and Auditor General. It is apparent from the report and if the Deputy read it she could see-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: No, responsibility for the state of play.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: -----that in respect of each recommendation, the response of the Department of justice is agreed. We agree with the findings set out in the Comptroller and Auditor General's report.

What we need to do, however, is to try to ensure that we can reduce the cost on the State. We have a new rate card in place which will ensure we pay lesser amounts for the accommodation. The new average is €71 per person per night. That is significantly down on what it was previously. However, we need to recognise what is the driver of it is the number of people seeking accommodation.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: They are not responsible for the Minister's incompetence. That is on him.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I will certainly ensure there are efficiencies in the system. I am achieving efficiencies in the system. I want to get more State accommodation purchased but we need to recognise that when the contracts are coming up for negotiation, I and my Department will ensure that we get the best deal possible for the State.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: The recent RTÉ "Prime Time" programme into the purchase of mobile phone location data was shocking. For very little money, and with very little effort, journalists were able to buy data which tracked the journeys of smartphone users across Ireland, based in different locations. They even tracked naval vessels, people in Irish prisons and they tracked phones here in Leinster House. Using this data, as we know, they were able to trace the residential addresses of political representatives. The Minister and Deputy Barry Ward were featured in the programme.

It was particularly chilling - and the findings were chilling - given the recent reports of very serious online abuse and threats of violence against the Tánaiste, Simon Harris and his family. I want again to condemn absolutely outright those threats. Threats against public representatives and their families represent a threat to democracy. They undermine our political system and they deter people from entering politics.

This is a very serious issue but it is not new. It affects the civil liberties of all our citizens and not just those in public life. As long ago as 2020, the Irish Council for Civil Liberties, ICCL, undertook a similar exercise to RTÉ's "Prime Time" team. It purchased data, identifying 200 Irish people who had been tagged as survivors of abuse but despite handing those findings to the Minister's predecessor and the Data Protection Commission, no action was taken at the time to protect the privacy of individuals.

Following the recent "Prime Time" programme just last month, the Data Protection Commission, DPC, has pledged to look into this matter at last but it seems that the best response the Government could give was a watery commitment to looking at the possibility of vague new laws. Frankly that is not good enough nor is it appropriate.

As I made clear, the GDPR already contain the safeguards necessary to enable the DPC to take the action that is needed to prevent the sale of data where no meaningful or informed consent has been given as it could not be given when we see this absolutely brazen use of data in this way. As the Minister knows, the DPC has the statutory powers it needs to protect the

privacy of smartphone users in this country and we know this but, to date, it has not taken necessary action to protect people whose smartphone data is up for sale right now. It is welcome that the DPC has announced it will commence investigations with a view to taking enforcement proceedings against two of the companies featured in the “Prime Time” programme but the question remains: why did the DPC not use its existing statutory powers sooner to protect people’s privacy? Why has the Government taken such a hands-off approach to this?

I raised this in this Chamber two weeks ago in advance of the “Prime Time” programme. The Tánaiste offered me only a holding response and nothing of substance and the Government did not put up a spokesperson on the “Prime Time” programme that evening.

What is the Minister doing to protect the privacy rights of our communities and, because we are an EU tech hub, what is he doing to protect privacy across the EU? Let us be clear: this poses not only a risk to individuals but also to our national cybersecurity. We know that Ireland lacks an adequate overarching strategy to guard against cyber attack. We saw that with the HSE ransomware attack recently.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for her question. I did see the “Prime Time” programme two weeks ago and I thought it was very concerning. It was an issue of considerable concern to me, not that fact that I or, indeed, other politicians were identified in it, but the potential that was there for brokers, of whom we were unaware, to sell on the market details about an individual’s movements. Obviously, from a security point of view, that could be an extremely serious matter if it was the case that individuals could identify the movement of individuals such as gardaí or prison officers. I am extremely concerned about it. In the aftermath of the programme, I met with officials in my Department and asked them to engage with the DPC which, as the Deputy correctly pointed out, has statutory responsibility for this area. My information is that the DPC has used the statutory powers it has already to investigate this matter. As a result of its investigations, it has been able to identify that one of the two entities identified in the “Prime Time” programme is based in Ireland. I understand the DPC has visited its offices for the purposes of continuing its investigation. I am also aware that the other entity that was identified in the programme that is selling what is personal data is based not in Ireland but in another EU country. I am informed by the DPC that it has contacted the equivalent of the DPC in that country and notified it of it.

The Deputy asked why I did not do anything sooner. Just because I did not announce it does not mean I am not doing something. I have given her an indication of what has been done in the two weeks since the programme. It is important to point out that the Data Protection Commissioner has very considerable powers under the data protection legislation that this House has enacted. Under those powers, they are responsible to protect the personal data of individuals in this country. If one looks at what was revealed in the “Prime Time” programme, what was most concerning was that individuals’ movements could be so readily identified and also sold on. We do not want to find ourselves in a situation where that type of personal data as to where a person is going on a daily basis is available for sale on the commercial market.

On what the commission is continuing to do, it is, as the Deputy knows, fully independent in the exercise of its functions but it does engage with officials in my Department. I am satisfied that the investigation that has commenced is ongoing and we will get to the bottom of who

these data brokers are. Personal data is very clear when we identify it. It is unquestionably the case that the movements of an individual - whether he or she is a TD or not is irrelevant - being sold on the market for the purpose of commercial enterprise or more nefarious activity is unacceptable.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank the Minister for that response. It is welcome to hear that his officials are engaging with the DPC on this and that the DPC is using the statutory powers. I am also glad that the Minister confirmed to me what I had said at the start which is that the DPC does have adequate statutory powers and that the issue is about the usage and application of those powers.

The Minister said that one of the brokers is based here in Ireland. That is welcome because clearly enforcement proceedings will be more straightforward. He said there is another in another EU country. He might clarify which EU country that is. It is vital that there is follow up here in relation to data brokers who are acting in flagrant disregard of GDPR and of our own data protection laws. However, individuals still have concerns. Appeals Centre Europe, which is based Ireland, issued a transparency report today. It says that only 78 eligible disputes emerged from Ireland between November 2024 and August 2025 and only 50 decisions have issued.

Given the widespread proliferation of online abuse, toxic language and horrible threats, it is extraordinary that so few decisions have been made by this body, which is supposed to be safeguarding citizens' rights. The decisions it makes are not even legally binding on platforms. What are the Government's plans to reassure citizens that our data will be private?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I am not going to identify the other EU country as of yet.

Deputies: Why not?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I do not want to put the focus on that country or the entity. In terms of the issues that arise, one of the difficulties is that many of us have granted permission to use apps to gain certain services on our mobile phones, for instance weather apps, location apps or maps. This can have the impact that we are giving information out about our location. I am not suggesting all responsibility should rest on the individual but certainly since that programme aired, I have turned off any of the location apps on my phone and I recommend to other Deputies that they do the same. We can turn them on when we need to use them or when we need to use a map.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: But the consent does not cover sale.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Of course it does not but notwithstanding that, if we manage to put ourselves in a situation where we are not making the information available it cannot then subsequently be sold on. This is a recommendation I make. It is certainly inappropriate for it to be sold on and I know the DPC is looking at it. Further engagement will take place in respect of it.

Deputy Holly Cairns: There is less than a week to go before the budget is announced and it is apparently "elbows out" at the Cabinet table, or at least that is what the newspapers are reporting. We are told there are battles going on behind the scenes as Ministers try to secure money for their Departments. You would swear this was a Government that made every single penny count. Of course, then we read the latest damning Comptroller and Auditor General report about enormous levels of waste across government and public bodies. A total of €20 million was wasted on renting unoccupied offices and €248,000 on unused hotel rooms for gardaí for one event. Tens of millions of euro of public money have been flushed down the drain because of the same old story of no controls, no oversight and no accountability. Never before has a Government had so much money to spend and achieved so little. The opportunity those record budget surpluses represented were wasted by the previous Government on one-off measures. What do we have to show for it? We have an ever-widening gap between rich and poor, a worsening housing disaster, threadbare disability services and crumbling infrastructure.

What is most alarming is that it seems no lessons have been learned. We do not hear anything from the Government that indicates it wants to change course. This is why the kite flying about this year's budget is so concerning. If leaks are anything to go by, this will be an uninspiring budget which just tinkers around the edges. What strikes me is the lack of ambition and the absence of any imagination. The disconnect is staggering. Where is the understanding of how much some people are struggling? Where is the ambition to do better? Where are the big ideas? Where are the radical measures that can make a real difference in making this country more affordable and more equal?

This afternoon the Social Democrats will announce our alternative budget to show people that there is another way and that it is possible to drive down costs for families and target money wisely. Our plan includes a second tier of child benefit that would lift 40,000 children out of poverty; a weekly cost-of-disability payment; abolishing the means test for carers; a reduction in childcare fees of €200 per month as well as finally rolling out a public model; plans for the State to acquire a modular housing factory to turbo charge the delivery of affordable homes; and a €400 energy credit for households in the bottom 40% of income. Does the Minister support any of these ideas and, if so, why the Government is not adopting any of them?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I have not noticed any elbows out at Cabinet when it comes to budget negotiations. In fairness to Ministers, their objective is to try to ensure they can get sufficient resources to fund their Department for the year ahead. In my area of justice, it is something I am seeking to do but I also have to be conscious and responsible that we need to keep restraint on public spending. Notwithstanding that, we find ourselves in a unique position in this country whereby we have a very large surplus. We are not in the position that other countries find themselves, whereby they do not have a surplus. Many countries cannot agree spending in any specific area.

It is also important to point out that this did not happen by accident. The surplus we have arises as a result of political decisions that were made by Governments of the past. When Deputy Cairns is criticising this Government, she should just recall the fact that the reason we are in such a sound financial state is decisions made by previous Governments, and they deserve credit for them. We decided we would try to adopt an open economy that would attract

in outside investment and have the effect of creating large surpluses that we could spend for the benefit of our citizens.

I agree with some of the Deputy's criticism regarding what the Comptroller and Auditor General identified in his report. I previously replied to Deputy McDonald in respect of the chapter on IPAS. Deputy Cairns identified another chapter in the report relating to wholly unnecessary expenditure by An Garda Síochána in respect of rooms for the Europa League final last year that subsequently were not used. This type of spending should not have occurred. The Garda has accepted the recommendations of the Comptroller and Auditor General in his report and recognises it should not book rooms that far in advance and, if it does so, that it does not need to book them all. It also needs to ensure it has an appropriate cancellation policy in place to ensure the State and the Garda are not left in a position whereby they have to meet such a large bill for unused accommodation.

I am very pleased that the Social Democrats will launch its prebudget submission late. I have no doubt that the Ministers, Deputies Donohoe and Chambers, will give careful consideration to it. I note what the Deputy said about some of the proposals the party is putting out there. I have no doubt that, together with Deputy O'Callaghan, she has carefully crafted the expenditure to be spent on them. However, as the Taoiseach said yesterday, this comes down to a matter of choices. The choices that Deputy has identified may all be creditable and appropriate but they will have an impact on other types of expenditure. I can assure her that the Government will give consideration to the Social Democrats budget. I cannot give any assurance that we will adopt the policies put out in its budget. It is not the case, however, that simply because they are in the Social Democrats' budget, we will not give them consideration. The Ministers will, and the Deputy will be able to find out what is in the budget next week.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I do recognise the big surpluses, and something the Social Democrats highlight every year at budget time and, indeed, throughout the year is that they need to be spent wisely because they are not necessarily forever. It is exactly a year ago today since the previous budget, a giveaway on steroids basically to try to buy the election. Now that there is no election on the horizon, the Government has suddenly realised that untargeted one-off measures are not a good idea, as if giving €100 million in energy credits to owners of holiday homes ever made sense. Meanwhile, last year the number of children living in consistent poverty doubled. I will repeat that. There were record budget surpluses, €100 million was given to holiday homeowners and the number of children living in consistent poverty doubled.

This Government and the previous Government have consistently squandered opportunities to make a real difference to those children's lives. Budgets are about choices and the Government has a big choice to make next week on how it spends public money. The Social Democrats has outlined a number of suggestions and new ideas that would alleviate child poverty. Will the Government reconsider introducing a second tier of child benefit payment?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: It is unfair of her to describe the budget introduced last year as "a giveaway on steroids". When the one-off measures were introduced, I do not recall anyone in opposition describing them as that. In fact, they were wholeheartedly accepted and there was no criticism of them by Opposition Members.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: That is not true. We clearly called them out.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Child poverty is an extremely important issue from the point of view of the Government. I have no doubt that when Members see the budget that will be announced next week they will see recognition given to the importance of child poverty from the Government's point of view. In terms of a second tier of children's allowance, as the Deputy identified, I cannot give an assurance or confirmation as to what will be in the budget.

I am sure the Deputy will have costed such measures and will appreciate that they will have significant consequences for expenditure elsewhere. I assure her that, as I identified before, the Ministers, Deputies Donohoe and Chambers, will give careful consideration to what is contained within the Social Democrats' pre-budget submission.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: Le 11 lá anois, tá ceathrar - triúr ban agus fear amháin - i mbun stailc taobh amuigh den Dáil agus éilimh thar a bheith bunúsach acu. Tá siad ag iarraidh rochtain a bheith acu ar phinsean ranníocach agus ar chárta leighis speisialta, an cárta HAA. Ceapann siad nach bhfuil an dara rogha acu ach leanúint ar aghaidh lena stailc ocrais. Is mór an náire é go bhfuil orthu é sin a dhéanamh agus muidne inár suí anseo gan tada a dhéanamh.

For 11 days now, four people have felt they have no choice but to go on hunger strike. They are drinking but they are not eating. I am extremely worried about those three women and one man who feel they have no choice but to go on hunger strike to have the most basic requests met. They are asking for a HAA medical card and access to a contributory pension. Nobody from the Minister's Government met them until Monday. They are standing there and I am ashamed, as I would say most of my colleagues are, that those four people feel they have no choice but do to this to achieve something as basic as that.

There has been a mean-spirited approach from this Government and previous governments in relation to redress for people who have been in institutions. We saw this in the mother and baby home redress scheme, where babies under six months, those who were boarded out and those who suffered because of their mixed-race background were excluded. These four people have been in institutions and suffered intergenerational trauma. They have also worked in those institutions. What they are asking for is very reasonable.

On every occasion, each government has been held to account but there have been no consequences. To go back, the special advocate for survivors, Patricia Carey, has said that the Supports for Survivors of Residential Institutional Abuse Act is not fit for purpose. The Justice for Magdalenes group has said "the denial to institutional abuse survivors of the HAA medical card is an intolerable injustice". To go back further, Mr. Justice John Quirke's primary recommendation for the Magdalen survivors back in 2013 was exactly that, but this was ignored. Coming forward to the mother and baby home report and the various processes that were set up following that, the OAK consultation said clearly that a HAA card should be provided. The Department of Education and Youth's consultation with residential survivors under Barbara Walshe and Catherine O'Connell said that this is the most basic request and should be satisfied.

I ask the Minister to take action, to meet those four brave and courageous people who feel they have no choice, to look at this and to resolve the issue as soon as possible.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as an gceist a chuir sí orm. Is ceist an-tábhachtach í. Bhí inní orm nuair a chonaic mé na daoine taobh amuigh den Dáil cúpla lá ó shin agus iad ar stailc ocras. Beidh mé ag caint leis an Aire oideachais faoin gceist sin.

I am also very concerned about what I have seen recently. This issue was raised with me last week by Deputy Michael Cahill. It is a matter of extreme concern that there are individuals who are making such dangerous efforts to make their point. It is a point they are making admirably but I urge them not to make it through hunger strike. Like the rest of us, the Deputy will be aware of the dangers such a strike poses to health. I ask those involved to try to engage.

The Deputy made the point that there has not been engagement. However, I understand that officials from the Department of Education and Youth recently met directly with the group to listen to their concerns. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, also spoke to members of the group who were present during the passage of the Supports for Survivors of Residential Institutional Abuse Act 2025 in July.

One of the points the Deputy made is that she wants the survivors to be provided with the HAA card they are demanding. I will point out that the supports for survivors Act enables the HSE to provide a package of ongoing health supports and services to survivors. This entitlement will be for life and will not be subject to means tests or periodic reviews. However, I acknowledge that some survivors have sought the provision of what they refer to as a "HAA card". It is important to note that the HAA card provided under the Health (Amendment) Act 1996 was introduced specifically to meet the very significant health needs of a particular group of individuals who contracted a serious and life-threatening condition. I believe it was individuals who had contracted hepatitis C as a result of the negligence of the State. The package of health supports to be provided under the supports for survivors Act is the same as that previously provided to survivors and former residents of the Magdalen laundry and mother and baby home institutions. The Act therefore provides that survivors of industrial schools and reformatories will be treated consistently in this regard.

I am also aware that another of the concerns of the survivors is that they want a pension top-up payment. Again, it is acknowledged that there have been calls for the State to provide this pension payment to survivors and that payments of this type are made to survivors of the Magdalen laundries. However, it should be noted that those payments reflect the very particular circumstances involved, where the women in the Magdalen laundries were engaged in commercial work as adults, in some cases for many years, without appropriate contributions.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I appreciate the Minister's concern but four people have had to take this action. I have asked them to stop. It is very difficult to watch four people on hunger strike. The Minister talked about consistency. All of the governments have been consistent in their mean-spirited approach to this. They have been saving pennies while spending other money foolishly, as was outlined earlier on. The requests are basic. These people want access to a contributory pension and to a special medical card, the HAA card. I know the background to that card and the specific Act it related to. I also know why it was brought in. I will go back to Mr. Justice Quirke, who specifically asked for a HAA medical card for Magdalen survivors. I have mentioned all of the other processes that were set up, the special advocate, Patricia Carey, the Justice for Magdalenes group and the Department's own report back in 2019. We

cannot continue with this mean-spirited approach. There is a finite number of people involved. It is time we made our apologies mean something. We have had 26 years of apologies and different redress schemes, all of which have been unjust, exclusionary and unfair. Let us finally learn.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I will speak to the Minister, Deputy McEntee, in respect of the matters the Deputy has raised. It is unfair to say that the State does not face up to its financial responsibilities arising from terrible events that happened in the past. It clearly has done. I identified the Magdalen laundries scheme and other redress schemes that have been introduced. People have been provided for. I am conscious that the specific ask here relates to the pension and the HAA card. There are obviously consequences to decisions such as this. It will have an impact on other areas. I suspect the Deputy would join me in urging the individuals who are on hunger strike to come off it and to recognise that they can have engagement with the Government without the necessity of exposing their health to such danger. It is a very damaging experience for them. I urge them to end their strike. I will speak to the Minister, Deputy McEntee, in respect of the matter.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to have this opportunity to raise with the Minister the matter of young fellas, boys and girls, leaving our shores to go to Australia simply because they cannot buy or build a house in this country no matter how good a job they have. I attended an event in Barraduff in east Kerry a couple of weeks ago for ten local youngsters who are departing our shores. Some of them have already gone and the rest will be gone before Christmas.

In other words, they will not be sitting at their parents' table for their Christmas dinner this year. I am hurt by that. They have been educated to the highest standards and persevered through long days and nights in colleges in Cork, Galway, Dublin, Limerick or wherever else. They are highly educated and their parents helped financially to put them through school. They are now caught because those aged between 25 and 32 feel they cannot get to a point where they can purchase or build a house. Houses in Killarney cost between €450,000 and €650,000. That is too much and people cannot get a mortgage for such houses. That is why they are departing.

On the other side, people cannot get planning permission. Kerry is unusual in that on about 100 km of national primary and secondary routes people are not allowed to exit from their own land due to restrictions on those routes. We have raised this issue several times.

A strict rule about urban-generated pressure was imposed on us by the planning regulator. It was intended to prevent people coming to the country from towns in order to build houses for themselves. Not only is it stopping such people, but it is also stopping people who are local to those sites, including those with a site close to their parents' house. I am not talking about the sons and daughters of farmers; they are getting permission. However, their neighbours next door are not. In the east Kerry hinterland of Killarney and the mid-Kerry hinterlands of Killorglin and Kenmare that is what is happening. People would build houses if they could get planning permission.

Many affordable housing schemes are not available in Kerry. We never had an affordable housing scheme. We do not have the cost rental scheme in Kerry. We are asking for fair play. I ask the Minister to address the restrictions on national roads. We have raised that several times. What will be done about it?

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank the Deputy for his question. I am conscious that many young people emigrate from Ireland and go to Australia. That happened many years ago as well as now. I am sure, as the Deputy said, many go to try to get accommodation. I would advise that when they get to Australia they will find there is a similar housing issue there. Accommodation costs and the price of housing in Australia are exceptionally high.

The good news, however, is that people are returning. People may go to Australia from Ireland for a number of years to train in the work they do and for enjoyment. In general, a lot of them come back. We have seen that in the recent CSO statistics. Although many thousands leave Ireland each year, similar amounts return having spent a number of years away. Part of the reason for that is that they enjoy the quality of life in Ireland.

I am conscious that the Government has tried to introduce many measures to facilitate the young people the Deputy is talking about. He spoke about cost rental and affordable housing. Another great measure introduced by the Government is one he should tell his constituents about, namely the help to buy scheme. We know that scheme is specifically designed to encourage people who believe that a home may be out of their reach. It helps them to get through the extra required in order to ensure they can gain access to the property ladder.

We know from the latest available data from 30 May 2025 that the help to buy scheme has supported more than 56,000 first-time buyer individuals or couples to buy their own homes. It gives a refund of income tax and DIRT paid in the State over the previous four years, subject to certain limits. I ask the Deputy to inform people who are concerned that they may not be able to purchase accommodation to consider the help to buy scheme.

I also want the Deputy to be aware that 5,400 single one-off houses were approved for planning permission in 2024. I am conscious that the demands on the housing system are significant and severe, but the supply is increasing as time progresses.

The Deputy also mentioned the planning regulator and planning permission. We need to ensure that local authorities are giving planning permission and zoning land. We want to ensure there is enough zoned land available so that houses can be built. We are in the middle of a time when we need to build housing accommodation as promptly as possible. The planning regulator has a role to play in that. As the Taoiseach has stated, local authorities have a very significant role in ensuring adequate and sufficient land is rezoned so that people can build homes and live in the areas from where they came.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank the Minister. The people I am talking about know about the help to buy scheme. Many of them do not qualify.

The Minister referred to zoned land. We have zoned land in Kenmare. Johnny Healy-Rae raised this last week. There are two applications before Kerry County Council that have gone out for further information. Developers are supposed to provide their own water. They have

been asked to do so because the water is not adequate in Kenmare. No private housing scheme has been built by any individual in Kenmare in the past 20 years because of the treatment plant. Some €40 million has been spent on that plant, but now we have no water. Kerry County Council tried to take water out of the Bonane river ten years ago. The case went to the High Court and the European Court of Appeal and the council lost. The council spent €3 million on that case. We still have no water in Kenmare, even though we are surrounded by lakes, springs and everything else. I ask the Minister to address this.

The Minister is doing a lot of things, but he must make sure local authorities build houses again. They are not building any houses in places like Gneeveguilla, Currow and Scartaglin, or other local parishes.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Healy-Rae, you should conclude.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I ask him to increase the cap that prevents people from getting on the housing list from €37,000 to €60,000. People are going away and not enough is being done.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You will get no reply to your question. We are moving on to Questions on Policy and Legislation.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I ask the Minister to ask the local authority to build rural cottages on land owned by family members because it is only building one house a year at the minute. That is not enough. We would want to have-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Healy-Rae, resume your seat.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Talk to your brother.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We have gone past time. We are moving on to Questions on Policy and Legislation.

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: We have some very witty Members on the Labour Party benches urging Deputy Healy-Rae to talk to his brother.

The big insurance rip-off continues. VHI customers will be hit with an increase today, quickly followed by Laya Healthcare and Irish Life Health in the coming days. The latest health insurance hike will see some families paying an extra €600 on their premiums. People now fork out almost €2,000 every year for health insurance, which is an extraordinary sum. Private healthcare in Ireland, as the Minister knows, is totally reliant on the public system. Health insurance is supported with tax subsidies to the tune of €400 million every year. The Minister's Government has leverage and I believe it is now time to get off the bench. The Government needs to do its job. I believe it needs to haul in the top brass of the insurance

companies and tell them to stop ripping people off. The Government has leverage and it should use it because families are struggling, as the Minister well knows.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank the Deputy. I am concerned about the impending increase in private health insurance. It is obviously a big issue for people who are hit with these increases. In terms of what can be done with insurance companies, I will obviously speak to the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, in respect of the Department of Health and what can be done in respect of that in terms of her position as Minister for Health. I am also conscious that the Government has previously engaged with insurance companies and has informed them that we do not want to them to increase their premiums in circumstances where that is having a very negative impact on the consumer. I will engage with my colleagues in respect of the issue. The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission and other statutory authorities under the provisions of the Department of Health also have a say in respect of that matter.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: We know that workers and organisations in the community and voluntary sector provide essential supports to victims and survivors of sexual, domestic and gender-based violence. Yet organisations under sections 39, 56 and 10 are continuing to suffer from severe uncertainty in terms of their finances because of the Government's failure to clarify matters. As of last week, Cuan, which is the Minister's Department's statutory agency tasked with reducing the incidence of gender-based violence, had made no contact with more than 70 organisations it funds. We understand the Department of justice, the Minister's Department, was supposed to release funding to Cuan to pay the organisations so they could pay their workers and staff. Moneys were meant to be paid by 1 October to go to payroll this month. We understand that has not come through. Can the Minister, as the line Minister, explain to those who work for such organisations providing such vital services why they are not being paid on time during a cost-of-living crisis? Why has there, apparently, been no sanction for this money from the Departments of justice or public expenditure? I think it is a very serious matter.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for raising that matter. It is opportune that she has done so, because on Monday morning, I met with the chair and chief executive of Cuan. There was an event in the Department in respect of a launch by Cuan and I had an opportunity to meet with the chair and chief executive in advance. They informed me of issues in respect of the funding of Cuan itself and other issues in the sector too. Obviously, Cuan has been extremely well funded since it was set up by my predecessor last year. A lot of funding has gone into it. I obviously want to prioritise the continuance of the protection of women from domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, and I recognise that to do that these services and agencies in the community have to be funded. I will seek to continue to engage with Cuan in respect of this issue. I am not fully aware if funds have not been released by Cuan. If it has the funds, I have no doubt it will release them. I will, obviously, engage with Cuan in respect of this matter.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I raise the deeply concerning issue of student contribution fees. Freshers week across the country is wrapping up and students have started lectures, and yet families across Ireland are none the wiser as to what they will be paying in fees. The rumour

mill around the Government's budget is that the decrease will only be €500. The confusion and concern about student contribution fees is unacceptable and was completely avoidable. There is a cost-of-living crisis and families and students are staring at a very long and cold winter. In the Social Democrats' alternative budget, which we are launching today, we have outlined the need to decrease the student contribution by the full €1,000, but also to increase the threshold for SUSI and to ensure more affordable options for student accommodation. The Minister's Government seems determined to make it more difficult for students to access and stay in third level education. Can the Minister confirm that his Government will at least reinstate a €1,000 reduction in student contributions permanently and finally give students and their families the opportunity to plan ahead financially?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for her question. I cannot give her information in respect of the student contribution fees at present. However, an awful lot has been done in respect of facilitating students to gain access to third level and to get financial support. I know the threshold for SUSI grants has now increased to €115,000 per family. I note what the Deputy said about what is in the Social Democrats pre-budget submission. Obviously, issues in respect of the contribution fees will be considered in the context of the budget. I am not going to say, and nor do I know, whether there will be any announcement in the budget next week in respect of it. Certainly, though, significant measures have been put in place by the Government to try to facilitate persons at third level.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The last thing we need are people on hunger strike outside the gates of Leinster House, especially people who were incarcerated by this State, some of them as children, for 16 years. I cancelled what I had planned to raise today because I met those people - the three women and one man - yesterday. The things they are looking for are so basic it is embarrassing. These include access to the HAA card for medical care - as the Minister will know because it was raised with him earlier and last week too - and a contribution in terms of pension. Some of these people were taken from their homes while their father was outside and literally kidnapped and put inside an institution because of the church. The State was also paying money to these schools. The Minister said earlier that the Minister, Deputy McEntee, had met them in July. This is October and these people are outside the gates on a hunger strike, and the only thing that will end it is the Minister going out and organising a meeting with them. The Minister knows that. It is not good enough that a few officials went out to meet them. We need to engage with these people and to try to deal with their issues. These people have been failed by the State. An Act was passed here in the summer - I was not in the Dáil at the time - that leaves-----

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

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: -----these people out of the usual redress and this is why they are outside the gates. We need action.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: As I said to Deputy Catherine Connolly, I am extremely concerned about people going on hunger strike. It has a really detrimental impact on their health. I urge them to come off their hunger strike. I will speak to the Minister, Deputy McEntee, in respect of this matter. She met people before and I have no doubt that she will

again. Her officials have engaged with them again. It is not, though, an appropriate way to try to get a meeting to put huge emotional pressure on a Minister by saying, "We are going on hunger strike". I urge the people to use more reasonable approaches to get the meeting they are seeking.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Do you think they have not? Get a grip.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Britain's digital ID card - the so-called "Brit-card" - may be a domestic policy, but the consequences will not respect borders. By making the ID digital card mandatory for work, housing and basic services, Britain risks displacing thousands of people from the grey economy. If we consider for a moment where these people will go, are they likely to return home or to come to Ireland via the North? We already know that 88% of all asylum applicants come via the North of Ireland. We must work proactively and not reactively in relation to this issue. We must address this matter before the spillover arrives in Ireland. I call on the Government to establish an Irish Sea border to check Irish ports and airports. We must get ahead of this problem before the situation presents itself. Ireland cannot become Britain's overflow. Indeed, Ireland cannot become the big brother's playground either. The other big issue here is around control in relation to digital IDs.

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

Deputy Paul Lawless: What analysis has been done in terms of immigration and the number of asylum seekers in relation to the Brit-card and will the Government establish an Irish Sea border for people?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for the question. The British Government announced just last week that it is considering the introduction of a UK digital ID card. In fairness to the British Government, it notified my Department in advance. We were aware just a day or so in advance of the announcement that was to be made. There is still a long way to go in respect of this scheme. Obviously, there has to be the production of White Papers, the preparation of legislation and a debate in the House of Commons. In my assessment, the introduction of a UK digital ID card is a long way off. The Deputy may be right in terms of it having an impact on Ireland. However, I cannot go out there and just establish an Irish Sea border. That ignores the reality of the fact that there are two jurisdictions on this island. I assure the Deputy, though, that there will be engagement with the UK Government.

Deputy John Connolly: One of the things that has worked so well to make our schools more accessible and more inclusive is the deployment of additional SNAs to our schools over the past two decades. I raise this issue in light of the recent publication of the guidelines for the review of SNA allocations in schools provided by the NCSE and the concern raised around it. I have to say I feel some of the concern is very justified. Specifically, it is disappointing in light of the investment the Government made prior to the summer in non-mainstream classes in mainstream schools. The point of concern is that the guidelines now refer to schools now being resourced "on a whole school allocation basis. Schools are expected to deploy SNA posts to their mainstream or special class based on the greatest level of need across the student

population". This infers a departure from the standard provision of two additional SNAs per non-mainstream class. It infers the departure in the existing review and is also something schools could be concerned about in future. In the clarification provided by the NCSE, it is said that no change will be made to the baseline of two SNAs in each special autism class. It leaves other categories of special classes unaware of their provision.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Connolly. I ask him to conclude.

Deputy John Connolly: Classes for children include those for language, reading classes, etc. I think further clarification should be provided.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I thank the Deputy for the question. The guidelines that were issued last week in relation to the SNAs were reaffirming the 2014 circular that forms the basis of SNAs being employed within schools. There was some misinformation last week in relation to it. I can assure the Deputy that the allocation of two SNAs for the special classes, of whatever form they are, is sacrosanct. It is hugely important that we get that out there. Clarification has been issued by the NCSE and there has been engagement with the union bodies over the past number of days to bring clarity on it. We are committed to ensuring that the SNAs are right across the board and that they are meeting the needs within schools.

Concerns were raised by schools and school management over the past week, but we have sought to bring clarity on it and to assure people that the role of the SNA is sacrosanct, that everybody knows it is based on the 2014 guidelines and that the allocations will be accordingly.

I take the point that there were concerns about it. I am concerned about that as well. Further clarification will be issued to ensure what we are saying.

Deputy Joe Neville: The issue that I am raising here today relates to the Irish Stock Exchange and its importance to the success of Irish incorporated companies and, indeed, Irish investors. The decline of companies listed on the Irish Stock Exchange has been well reported, with a decline from up to 100 in 1999 to a current level of 24. This decline is in stark contrast to the growth in the wealth of the Irish economy since then.

Irish people are saving also at a higher rate than they have done before. While this is positive, some of this wealth could be used as investment in Irish SMEs as they transition to publicly listed companies. This could lead to a greater democratisation of wealth and ensure that the value created by Irish companies does not just remain in the hands of the few and, indeed, private equity.

A mechanism must, therefore, be found for savings and investment schemes which would be sensible and tax efficient to ensure ordinary people can benefit along with Irish incorporated businesses. Also, Ireland currently applies a stamp duty of 1% on the trading of shares, which is much higher than other EU states, many of which apply a 0% rate.

With all of this, can the Minister outline what steps this Government will take to ensure growth and renewal in this key area of our economy?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy Neville for raising that interesting point. It is clearly the case that there has been a decline in the number of companies listed in the number of companies listed on the Irish Stock Exchange since the end of the last century. The Deputy gave the statistics there. We cannot stop companies from making a decision that they no longer wish to be listed in Dublin if they have a preference to be listed on the larger stock exchanges, such as in London or New York.

The Deputy raised a number of issues that could improvement the attractiveness of the Irish Stock Exchange. I will bring them to the attention of our colleague the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, who would have responsibility in this area, and I will see whether he would give any consideration to them.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: County Roscommon is one of a number of counties with no domestic violence refuge. I met with Roscommon Safe Link over the summer. I must commend them on the great work that they do.

For a number of years, they have been struggling to find a location for a refuge, which they are anxious to establish for the county. They are struggling to find one that meets the standards that are being applied by the Housing Agency. They are finding them too restrictive. What they have asked is that there would be a more realistic and flexible approach to site assessment, without which we are not going to have a refuge in County Roscommon. Will the Minister please look at the standards that are being applied and see can there be some level of flexibility in cases where a site has not been found despite the best efforts of those involved?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy Kerrane. Part of my function, in ensuring that we have adequate protection for women who are subject to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, is to ensure that there are adequate safe homes and refuges through the country. The Deputy will be aware of the progress of that by the Government. I will have a look in respect of Roscommon.

I have to be careful. I do not want it to appear that there is an absolute necessity for a refuge in every county. It may be the case that there will be a refuge in every county, but it is important that we look to see where the services are needed and ensure that they are provided adequately close to the people. I am conscious that the women of Roscommon will want to see one close enough to their county, if not in it.

Deputy Brendan Smith: There are unacceptable delays in children and young adults accessing orthodontic care in Cavan and Monaghan. This morning, again, I spoke to a young mother whose 14-year-old son, with a category 5A classification in relation to provision of dental braces, was told he would be lucky to be seen in another year.

Oftentimes, in relation to healthcare provision, we are told that a lack of capacity, both public and private, is the problem. This is not the case for orthodontic treatment. A welcome initiative by the HSE was the introduction of an orthodontic framework agreement to enable patients referred by the HSE to have orthodontic care provided by capable and competent private orthodontic service providers. I understand that contracts have been awarded and relevant personnel have gone through Garda vetting but the scheme is not operational.

Our public dental system is not in a position to provide an adequate level of service to meet demand in a timely manner. In some cases, parents have to access treatment for their children outside our jurisdiction. At the same time, the capacity is here in the State to ensure that children and young adults get orthodontic care in a timely manner.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Conclude, Deputy.

Deputy Brendan Smith: Whatever obstacle there is, funding or administrative, must be removed without further delay and appropriate and timely orthodontic care must be provided for patients needing this essential treatment.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy Smith. I agree it is essential that children get orthodontic care in a timely manner. There can be very upsetting consequences if they do not.

I am aware the Minister for Health knows there currently are delays in accessing this service nationally, and the HSE has put in place a number of measures to address waiting times. There has been significant investment, as the Deputy will be aware, but I am conscious his concern is specifically focused on the orthodontic services in Cavan-Monaghan.

I am informed that patients in Cavan-Monaghan are seen in the orthodontic clinic in Dundalk, which is currently experiencing staffing challenges. There is no orthodontist in post at present, as the Deputy well knows. The HSE has sanction to fill the post and is actively pursuing both temporary and permanent recruitment options, but I will raise with the Minister for Health the issues the Deputy highlighted here about Cavan-Monaghan orthodontic care.

Deputy Peter Roche: The issue that I want to shine a light on here today is in relation to wind and solar energy in east Galway. I know that it is outside of the Minister's area of responsibility.

In east Galway, particularly in the Tuam-Athenry area, we are being bombarded with proposed developments for wind turbines towering 185 m high, a solar farm that is planning to take up 800 acres and a gas plant in Athenry causing untold annoyance and distress. I am trying to understand why east Galway is being unfairly targeted for a vast number of these energy developments and when we can anticipate that the planning guidelines pertaining to the 185 m wind turbines will be revisited. Right now, they are the most visually intrusive developments anywhere in the country.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy. I am sorry I do not have a specific answer for him. I do not have the detail on the incidence of turbines in east Galway as opposed to other parts of the country. I will speak to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, in respect of it and will highlight the issue the Deputy has identified.

We also need to recognise that we are trying to ensure that we have renewable energy in the country. If we are serious about renewable energy, we will have to see wind turbines not only on land but certainly offshore as well. I am conscious of the fact that very significant amounts of our energy is now fuelled by renewable energy, such as wind.

I will speak to the Minister about the issues the Deputy has raised and hope he will come back to the Deputy.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I want to talk to the Minister about the defective concrete block legislation once again. We have been back for three weeks. Each week I look at the programme for the week and each week my colleague Deputy Mac Lochlainn, the Sinn Féin Whip, asks for the legislation to come before us here, to the House, to be able to be dealt with.

We are in a situation where homeowners are still waiting for the updated grant rates and the increased timeframe for completion to be applicable retrospectively to all applicants. It is not acceptable. We showed them in June. We said exactly what needed to be done to bring this legislation to the floor of the Dáil. Homeowners are stuck in this limbo where they cannot get the increased rates.

I hope the Whip behind the Minister has some answers on this, maybe that it will come, but we absolutely need this to be brought to the floor. We in the Opposition, and this goes across all Opposition parties, will move heaven and earth, once it comes onto the floor of the Dáil to make sure that it goes through quickly.

We have waited far too long for this legislation.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: In fact, Deputy Ward raised this issue with me last week. I answered him by stating that it is on the priority list for publication. It is important legislation from the Government's point of view. It is being worked upon. I am informed by the Chief Whip that it is not as simple as may be presented. I will certainly speak to the Minister, Deputy Browne, in respect of it. He appreciates the urgency of it. Since it is on the priority list for publication, I think it should be forthcoming promptly.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I want to ask a specific question regarding Daly's roundabout in Killarney, on the N22, which the Minister knows well. There is a proposal by TII and Kerry County Council to remove the roundabout and replace it with a traffic light. Five sets of traffic lights are supposed to be put up instead of the roundabout. I ask that temporary lights be provided first to see how this will work. Killarney is already choked from every side with respect to getting in and out of the town. In any case, what I am saying to these people is that this roundabout should not be removed, and the work should not be done, until the outer bypass is finished and clearly done. It will create mayhem to replace the roundabout with traffic lights. I ask the Minister to deliver that message to the Minister for Transport.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I am aware of that roundabout. I was unaware, however, that it was being replaced with traffic lights. I do not have strong views on the preference for roundabouts or traffic lights, or which are preferable, but I suspect there are engineers in the local authority who have views on it. There must be some reason that they are seeking to replace the roundabout with traffic lights. I will raise the issue the Deputy has mentioned with the Minister for Transport but I cannot guarantee that he is going to start sticking his nose into a row about whether we need a roundabout or traffic lights.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Today, there are 105 people on trolleys at UHL. On Monday, there were 147. The people of the mid-west have been let down by successive Governments. Yesterday, the HIQA review into emergency care capacity was published. It has taken 16 months for a review that states the complete obvious. The question for the Government is what it is going to do about it. I believe the outcome of this review was predetermined and that is why its publication was delayed. As public representatives, we were essentially told by the HSE earlier this year that it did not favour the establishment of a model 3 hospital in the region. Can the Minister confirm what I believe to be true, namely, that a site has been identified in close proximity under a shared governance model, as in option B, and that will go ahead? When is the Minister for Health going to outline exactly when the Government will make a decision on this and move towards giving the people of the mid-west the health service we deserve? We need a pathway towards a model 3 hospital in the region, not more delay.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: In fairness to the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, my understanding is that she got the report last Thursday and it was published yesterday. It is a 1,200-page report. As the Deputy said, it sets out three options. I would have thought consideration needs to be given to the report before any decision is made in respect of the options. I am conscious that the Deputy has a particular view as to which option should be pursued. I will pass that on to the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. Ultimately, it is a big decision that needs careful consideration. I have no doubt she will give it that consideration.

Deputy Emer Currie: The trading online voucher was previously available to businesses of up to ten employees to help them move online, boost sales and access new markets. The Grow Digital voucher was then launched in September 2024 to be available to more businesses for more services, with more funding. In the 12 months since, there were only 150 applications across Ireland, with 139 approvals, so something is not working. The upper grant limit of €5,000 does not seem enough to incentivise cash-strapped SMEs to invest more of their own reserves in digital transition. It is not about the size of the budget allocation for the grant scheme; it seems to be the design. This is at a time when the EU Digital Decade reports are pointing to a worrying slowness in the pace of digital transition among Irish SMEs. I ask the Government to look at reform and a tiered system of grants, and to give an update on any plans to reform the scheme to deliver more effectively for Irish SMEs. They need access to digital supports more than ever.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I will speak to the Minister, Deputy Burke, about it because I do not have the level of detail that is required to give Deputy Currie a full answer. I note the issue is about the trading online voucher and the Grow Digital voucher. I will ask him to come back to the Deputy with an update in respect of that. I am conscious that online trading capacity is essential for SMEs in Ireland.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: During the week, the HIQA report on the inadequate accident and emergency services at University Hospital Limerick was published after HIQA had considered the matter for 16 months - it took 16 months to produce the report. The report told us what we had already been telling the Government for several years. It refers to a significant inpatient bed deficit in University Hospital Limerick and a growing demand for services, which continues to grow strongly. This is all presenting a risk to patient safety, and I can quote many

cases where it actually compromised patient safety. The report concludes by saying that urgent action and investment are needed. I understand what the Minister said in his previous reply to my colleague. Nevertheless, I ask the Minister to assure us that there will be no avoidable delay. This report was undertaken as a result of a meeting that Deputy Cathal Crowe and I had with the previous Minister for Health, Deputy Donnelly. We told him there was no need for a report but, nevertheless, it has taken 16 months and the situation continues to worsen.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Deputy O'Dea deserves to be commended on the meeting that he and Deputy Cathal Crowe had with the then Minister, Mr. Donnelly, which resulted in there being a report. Obviously, Deputy O'Dea has read the report in detail. As I said previously, it is the case that the Minister only got the report last week and she published it yesterday. It is a detailed report. Notwithstanding the detail, Deputy O'Dea seems to believe there is a very succinct option that should be pursued. I have no doubt he will communicate that to the Minister. I will also send on to the Minister his views and, hopefully, a decision will be made promptly.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: My question relates to tuberculosis, otherwise known as TB. Last year, TB rates increased by 30%, which is really concerning. In 2024, TB cases in children under 12 months equalled the number recorded in the previous decade combined. This year, TB cases are expected to hit 300, yet this growing health crisis has been largely ignored by the Government. The sharp end of this crisis is experienced by some of the most marginalised people in our country. Professor Anne Marie McLaughlin has highlighted that a significant number of the cases are those living in overcrowded settings like direct provision and prisons, both of which the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, is responsible for. Increasing levels of homelessness have also contributed to the sharp rise in TB.

If action is taken, we can turn this around. After all, TB is 100% curable. The Government just needs to make resources available. Somebody I met said that if this were in cattle, the Government would not be found wanting. A TB strategy was published last year but there has been no real progress. Will the Government provide the necessary funding for the TB strategy and the national TB centre so this worrying trend can be reversed?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I agree with the Deputy that it is a worrying trend to see a growth in the incidence of TB. We thought in Ireland that we had eradicated TB, which, of course, had such an extraordinary social and health impact on people in Ireland prior to the 1950s or 1960s. I hear what the Deputy says in respect of the increase in numbers and I will speak to the Minister for Health about it. Obviously, we need to ensure adequate funding is provided to respond to TB because if we allow it to spread, it will not only have catastrophic consequences for individuals but will also cost the State more money in the long run.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I take this opportunity to pass on my condolences on the death of Mark, Louise and Evan O'Connor, a family who suffered absolute devastation. I do not have words for the shock that that family and the wider community have suffered. Superintendent Andrew Waters said that he would maintain engagement with the family and would also ensure that those supports that are needed would be provided, which is absolutely necessary. Mark and Louise were instrumental in setting up Drogheda ABACAS special school. I know Mark

was involved with Inclusion Ireland and Autism Support Louth & Meath. They provided great advocacy.

Both of them were involved in volunteerism across the board.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: There will be a need, at times, to deal with the issues relating to social media. I would ask that people desist from any speculation and leave the investigations to the Garda. We need to make sure the supports are provided. I am aware there is a candlelit vigil tonight at Stonetown community walking track at 9 p.m. and I have no doubt the community will come together on this.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I also extend my condolences to the wider O'Connor family on the appalling tragedy that occurred. Obviously, an ongoing criminal investigation and prosecution has commenced. I can assure the Deputy that in an incident like this, a family liaison officer will be engaging with the close relatives of the O'Connors. It is a very difficult issue for An Garda Síochána and a traumatic event for the people of Louth. It is important that in the House we extend our condolences to all concerned.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: On 1 May, I asked a parliamentary question about the cause of the high volume of refunds in employment permit applications, which was resulting in delays. People are able to get permits, on the one hand, from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment but, on the other side, at the Department of justice, there are delays for visas. The left hand is doing one thing and the right hand is doing another and we have massive delays for critical workers. Can we not ensure one side talks to the other and streamline the processing of these critical workers? I am dealing with businesses that are going out of business because they need mechanics and many other critical workers. Why can we not streamline this so that one side talks to the other? We can get people the permits but we cannot get them the visas.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for his question. It is opportune that he mentions this because this morning I had a meeting with American Chamber of Commerce Ireland where we discussed issues with the granting of work permits and subsequently visas. I agree it would be preferable if there was a single entry point where people could apply. When it comes to visas being issued by the Department of justice, it is a more complex process. Work and enquiries that need to be made in many instances take longer than the granting of the work permit by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. I hear what the Deputy is saying. Digitalisation will happen and the process will become more efficient.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.22 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.21 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.22 p.m. and resumed at 2.21 p.m.

Situation in Gaza: Statements

Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Simon Harris): I have just returned in recent days from the UN high-level week in New York, where the Middle East was a central focus of my agenda. This is a timely debate as we assess the horrendous situation in Gaza and the West Bank and as we look at the implications for wider regional security. I hope that this week's announcement of a proposed peace plan is a step towards a lasting peace that is so desperately needed. Progress is being made to secure an agreement that brings an end to the violence and an end to what I believe to be a genocide in Gaza, secures the release of the hostages and ensures that vital humanitarian aid gets into Gaza. I welcome the sincere engagement of states in the region, representatives of many of which I met with in recent days, to secure a path to peace, and their willingness to work with the US, the EU and other international partners to achieve this goal. I also hope Hamas now seizes the opportunity to lay down its arms and release all the hostages.

The conflict, the genocide, has gone on for far too long and with an unconscionable human cost. When we look to Gaza, we continue to witness unspeakable scenes. Ireland's consistent position since the beginning of the conflict has been to call for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages held by Hamas and immediate and unimpeded humanitarian access at scale into Gaza. The IPC has confirmed that famine is occurring in Gaza and is projected to spread further across the strip. This is a man-made famine. Hostages remain in captivity. The daily statistics are incomprehensibly appalling: the numbers who have died of starvation, the numbers killed as they desperately seek food, the number of UN workers, medics and journalists killed as they work to save lives and document the horrors of this conflict. The UN Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory has concluded that Israel has committed genocide in Gaza. That is no longer just my view or the view of this House or this country; it is now the view of a UN commission of inquiry. This is a formal conclusion of what we have been saying for some time, and Ireland takes the findings extremely seriously. More than 20,000 children have been killed in Gaza during the 23 months of this horrific situation. The devastating death toll of innocents is an affront to humanity. Tens of thousands have been injured and left permanently disabled without the medical attention and services they require. I was told by a high-ranking UN official in recent days of children having to incur amputations without anaesthetics because Israel will not let the anaesthetics into Gaza. Thousands more are missing or buried under rubble. I think of all the children killed, maimed, orphaned and abducted on 7 October. I struggle to find the words for these atrocities, these crimes against humanity.

Despite this horror, humanitarian workers and medics, UNRWA, the wider UN system and international organisations continue to do their utmost for the people of Gaza. Under extreme pressure, and despite what must feel like insurmountable obstacles, they keep going. It is also with their determination in mind that the Government continues to act to confront and end this genocide. That was my message to international partners at the UN last week, that it is time to move from words to action. We urgently need to see an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and we welcome the ongoing efforts in this regard. We need to bring an end to the violence, get the hostages out and get humanitarian aid in.

I commend the efforts to date by mediators, including the continuing efforts of the US, Egypt, Qatar and others. These negotiations are now at a crucial stage. I urge everybody - Israel, Hamas, everybody - to engage positively and flexibly to secure this urgently needed agreement. We know in this country, on this island, better than most that the way to end all

horrific conflict is through a political pathway, through engagement, through a peace process. No peace process is perfect, but I know from talking to the leaders and foreign ministers of Arab nations in recent weeks the amount of work they have put into getting a plan and engaging with President Trump to try to bring forward a plan on which the world can speak with one voice and say, "Stop. End this. Here is a way forward."

While the world is rightly focused on the horrors playing out in Gaza, we cannot be distracted from the ever-worsening situation in the West Bank. The expansion of settlements, the displacement of tens of thousands and rampant settler violence continue unabated. Life for Palestinians in the West Bank is being restricted from all sides. Since October 2023, the Israeli Government has approved 49 new settlements. The decision to approve plans for settlement construction in the E1 area is unacceptable and a violation of international law. Since January of this year, at least 40,000 people have been displaced. Beyond this, the levels of settler violence are now unprecedented. One thousand attacks have been documented in 230 communities across the West Bank since the beginning of this year.

Let me be clear: these developments predate the ongoing situation and the events of the past 23 months. For years, Israel has conducted a policy of marginalisation and oppression of Palestinian people in Gaza and in the West Bank. A stark example of this oppression is the arbitrary arrest and detention by Israel of hundreds of Palestinian children. Children report being physically and emotionally abused while in prisons, many held without charge or trial. Ireland will continue to work with the international community to ensure that the violations of law and human rights in the West Bank do not go unchecked.

Against this background, I view the two-state solution not as an aspiration but as an absolute legal obligation. There can be no interests that outweigh the fundamental principles of human rights. I welcomed the decisions of the UK, Canada, Australia, France, Luxembourg, Malta, Belgium, Portugal and others to recognise the State of Palestine over recent weeks. There are now over 150 countries globally that recognise Palestinian statehood. Ireland took that decision last year as a recognition of the principle that Palestine should be able to vindicate the full rights of a state, including self-determination, self-governance, territorial integrity and security. The recent recognitions are also a response to the intolerable humanitarian catastrophe unfolding in Gaza and the need to inject fresh impetus into bringing about a just, lasting peace where Israelis and Palestinians live side by side in two states - Israel and Palestine - in peace, security and dignity. This is not insignificant. At a time when the multilateral order is perhaps the most challenged it has been in its history, progress has been made. I firmly reject the bizarre and despicable suggestion that recognising Palestine is an aggressive act or any form of reward for terrorism. It is the exact opposite. It is a confirmation of our commitment to a peaceful path, to the rule of law, to an international order where states can work together on a common footing. Criticisms from those who consistently choose unilateral actions, military force and, indeed, the engagement of genocide are not credible.

Ireland was an active participant in the UN high-level conference on the implementation of the two-state solution, which the Taoiseach attended last week. As co-chair of a working group of the conference, alongside Türkiye, Ireland was part of a core group of countries that negotiated the outcome document of the conference, known as the New York Declaration, at its meeting. That document was endorsed by 142 countries in a vote at the UN General Assembly on 12 September. Ireland is now part of a strong coalition of international partners

ready to press ahead with securing and implementing the two-state solution. The meeting last week demonstrated that the vast majority of UN member states are committed to empowering a sovereign and economically viable State of Palestine, living side by side in peace and security with Israel and forging regional and international partnerships in support of the two-state solution.

Last week, I was proud to represent our country at the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution, an alliance that will be the follow-up vehicle to the work of the UN conference. Given the catastrophic situation in Gaza, the immediate goal of the global alliance is an end to the war and an end to the genocide and to secure immediate humanitarian relief at scale. At the meeting in New York, I announced that Ireland will host a meeting of the global alliance in Dublin in the coming months. The meeting will be an opportunity to share some of our own experience of what a successful peace process can look like, like what we saw in Northern Ireland, with relevance to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including creating the appropriate conditions for a ceasefire and underlining the importance of civil society.

No two conflicts are the same but we are eager in this country to share our learnings from our peace process. The Dublin meeting will also draw a clear link between the global alliance and the implementation of the New York declaration agreed at the UN high-level conference in July. This is another practical action Ireland is taking to drive the implementation of a two-state solution. Ireland has been to the forefront of member states at an EU level pressing for an appropriate response to Israel's actions in Gaza and in the West Bank. Ireland together with Spain first called on the EU to undertake a review of Israel's compliance with its human rights obligations under Article 2 of the EU-Israel Association Agreement in February 2024. I welcomed the finalisation of that review in June this year. It is crystal clear from the review that Israel is in breach of all human rights obligations under the agreement. This is a significant finding of fact.

Ireland has consistently called for the EU to now take concrete action in response to the egregious Israeli breaches of human rights and democratic principles. In September, we welcomed the proposals put forward by the European Commission to suspend the core trade-related provisions of the EU-Israel Association Agreement. This has the potential to be a major moment. For the very first time since this genocidal activity in Gaza began, the European Commission - not any one individual member state - has proposed suspending the trade-related provisions of the agreement. I accept it is far too late but we now have a proposal for effective sanctions on the table. In practice, this would mean that imports from Israel would be subject to significant tariffs in accessing EU markets. This is important. There is a lot of focus on whether the US is the only country that can put pressure on Israel. Politically, it might be the case that the Prime Minister of Israel will only listen to the President of the United States but economically Europe has the ability to play a part in changing the calculus in Netanyahu's actions to date. The proposal represents an extremely significant step forward. It is now time for countries to put up their hand, yay or nay, in favour of the proposals. This is an acknowledgement that the EU must act in the face of the rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation in Gaza, Israel's ongoing blockade of humanitarian aid - people are starving while trucks of food are within touching distance, if only the blockade was lifted - intensifying military operations by Israel and the decision of the Israeli authorities to continue to advance the settlement plan in the so-called E1 area of the West Bank, an effort to further undermine

the two-state solution. The package also supports sanctions on extremist Israeli ministers and violent settlers as well as on Hamas. Ireland supports these proposals. In addition, the Commission announced it is putting bilateral support to Israel on hold with the exception of support to civil society and the Israeli Holocaust Memorial Institution.

In terms of next steps, the trade-related proposals need to be adopted by the Council with a qualified majority and further sanctions require a unanimous decision. The EU now has an opportunity to demonstrate to its international partners and, crucially, to its citizens, that it is ready to act in the face of the catastrophic situation in Gaza and stand up for our core principles, values and international law. Ireland is working to urge fellow member states to vote in favour of this package of measures to support the proposals. I have also requested that the Council be convened as a matter of urgency. It seems quite unforgivable in the face of genocide and famine that there is not an emergency convening to have a vote on this. I co-authored a letter with four other member states calling for an urgent convening. We could vote on this today and should. We continue our diplomatic campaign to seek an earlier meeting of the Council to vote on this package of measures. The Irish people are united in righteous outrage at the hideous scenes in Gaza. My office receives hundreds, if not thousands, of petitions a week from citizens of this country voicing their deeply and sincerely held convictions about the atrocities taking place across Palestine. Thousands of citizens rightly protest against the horrors in Gaza on a weekly basis. Teachers write to me dumbfounded about how they can teach the Universal Declaration of Human Rights when students witness daily violations of those rights through the images we see from Gaza. Medical workers stand in solidarity with their counterparts in Gaza who are working under the most extreme and untenable situations, some of whom I have spoken with.

I am keenly aware that a number of Irish citizens including Members of the Oireachtas are participating in the Global Sumud Flotilla. The peaceful efforts of those on board reflect an understandable desire by many people around the world to urgently address the humanitarian needs of the people of Gaza as endorsed by all parties and groups in this House in our debate yesterday. Reports of attacks are extraordinarily concerning. I urge all parties to refrain from any unlawful or violent act against the flotilla and to respect international law and international humanitarian law. The welfare and safety of the people aboard has to be a priority of the international community. In accordance with the wishes of the families and friends of those on board the flotilla, who were here yesterday, I issued a statement last night, as they asked, clearly outlining that international law must be respected in relation to the flotilla and any violation of international law must have consequences. I have also been engaging with my Spanish counterpart specifically on this, the Spanish presence in the waters nearby and the fact that any Irish citizen will be treated as European citizen in the context of that flotilla, which is important.

It is that righteous outrage of our citizens and elected representatives that has driven Ireland to take domestic measures in response to the egregious situation in Gaza and the West Bank. As a commitment to the two-state solution and to upholding international law, the Government is advancing work on the commitment in the programme for Government relating to an occupied territories Bill. This is an area where Ireland has been at the forefront in taking action. In June, the Government approved the general scheme of the Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory (prohibition of importation of goods) Bill. The Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade subsequently held a number of hearings and received submissions representing a range of views and perspectives, for which I thank the committee. The

committee has published its report. I acknowledge the presence of members of the committee and thank them for their diligence and dedication throughout the process. Work is well under way to analyse the report and its recommendations with a view to getting the best and most robust piece of legislation. The next steps in the process including the timeline for progress of the Bill will be considered by Government very shortly. I intend to meet Senator Black, subject to her availability, next week.

A number of other EU member states recently announced they are taking similar steps to ban the importation of goods from Israeli settlements in the West Bank including Spain, Slovenia, Belgium and the Netherlands. In many cases, we are sharing notes and information on our legislative plans. These initiatives are welcome and I hope they demonstrate the growing will of the international community to take action to try to force the current Israeli Government to change its course. Let me clear: alongside the occupied territories Bill, OTB, our preference is for robust EU-level action. If we want to make a difference, move the dial and have an impact, the proposals put forward by the European Commission need to be passed and enacted. We stand ready to take further national measures in response to the situation. I am reviewing options in this regard. This includes taking forward the work the Taoiseach outlined to the UN last week to prevent individual members of the government of Israel from entering our country in keeping with steps taken by other EU and like-minded partners.

Last month, I was pleased to welcome the arrival of a further 18 Palestinians from Gaza, all of whom are holders of long-stay visas and the majority of whom will study in our country. They are very welcome here. I am pleased they are here. Since the beginning of the crisis, my Department has supported the travel of more than 200 people from Gaza to Ireland. Further evacuations are planned. As we can imagine, this is an extraordinarily challenging area. I thank my Department, diplomats, colleagues and countries in the region for their assistance. We continue to explore options to assist individuals in Gaza. Unfortunately, travel cannot be guaranteed and depends on many factors some of which rest outside the control of the Government of Ireland. That said, I hope those new arrivals will experience the warm Irish welcome we are known for globally. I wish them every success during their time here. The Government also approved the evacuation of up to 30 sick children from Gaza last year. So far, two successful medical evacuations have taken place and planning is under way for a third. This kind of practical support - not just words but actions - will continue at the same time as our efforts to move the dial politically at a European Union and international level.

Turning to the wider region, the fates of Lebanon and Syria are intertwined with Palestinian statehood and broader steps towards mutual recognition, peaceful coexistence and co-operation among all states in the region. The international community agreed to make a renewed effort to improve Syria-Israel and Lebanon-Israel relations with the aim of achieving a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East. Ireland's connection and commitment to Lebanon remain strong. I had the pleasure of meeting the Foreign Minister, Mr. Rajji, during UN high-level week. We discussed the various challenges confronting Lebanon and its people but also welcomed the progress made in the past year. After too many years of external interference, Lebanon must be allowed to rebuild within secure borders. I hope to see Lebanon restore security control over all of its territory. For this, we need to see Hezbollah lay down its arms and for Israel to fully withdraw its remaining presence from Lebanon. I hope displaced communities on both sides of the border can return to their homes in security. UNIFIL has been central to our commitment to Lebanon. I am in no doubt of the

valuable role that the force and the Irish contingent play. We welcome the extension of UNIFIL's mandate until December 2026. The renewed mandate gives the government of Lebanon time to secure the south. I am still concerned about this mission ending at a time we are trying to build up the Lebanese Armed Forces.

During my visit to Lebanon earlier this year, my counterparts impressed on me the important role UNIFIL plays in supporting the Lebanese Armed Forces under UN Security Council Resolution 1701 and in implementing the ceasefire agreement. Ireland will continue to support the work of UNIFIL and it must be allowed to carry out its mandate.

Let me take this opportunity to emphasise that the deliberate targeting of UNIFIL personnel or installations by any party is a violation of international humanitarian law. Let me also state on the record of the House my ongoing efforts to secure justice for Private Rooney and those others caught up that evening in his brutal murder.

Syria has emerged from decades of civil war and a brutal regime. A stable and united Syria is essential to the stability of the region. Syria's future must be decided by its people. This transition comes during a difficult context where armed groups that emerged during civil war are still in existence. Israeli strikes on Syrian forces, attacks on communities inside Syria and expanded occupation of Syrian territory undermine efforts to rebuild. Turkish strikes on the northern border are not justified and do not help to secure a unitary state.

The Syrian people have a long road ahead and Ireland wishes to support them in rebuilding a Syria that is inclusive and respectful of all religious traditions and ethnicities and respectful of Syrian women. We continue to provide significant humanitarian aid in response to the Syrian crisis. Ireland pledged more than €22 million to the Syrian crisis in 2025 at the Brussels IX Conference in March. Ireland supports the EU's speedy removal of most economic sanctions on Syria and will continue to encourage the new Government's commitment to truth, justice and reconciliation.

Iran has been at the centre of much of the instability in the Middle East for many years. Its continuing support for armed non-state actors in the region, including among its immediate neighbours, and its efforts to export its revolution have not served either the country or its people. We remain concerned about the human rights situation in Iran, especially the denial of rights to Iranian women and minority groups. Iran is also contributing to war in Europe through its supply of weapons to Russia in its brutal war of aggression against Ukraine. The recent war between Israel and Iran was a very significant escalation in the regional conflict and risked dragging in countries that have not been directly involved. The attacks on nuclear sites were reckless. We remain concerned that this conflict might reignite and derail wider peace efforts.

We cannot ignore that much of the tension in the Middle East arises from Iran's nuclear programme. Ireland has been consistent, in line with long-standing policy on non-proliferation, that Iran must not be allowed to develop a nuclear weapon. Iran remains in breach of its obligations under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA. This has led to the reimposition of UN and EU sanctions against Iran. At the UN General Assembly last week, I met with the Iranian foreign minister, Mr. Araghchi. I impressed upon him the importance of Iran engaging meaningfully with international partners, including the US and the E3, and with the International Atomic Energy Agency to reach an agreement on its use of nuclear technology. Even with the

reimposition of sanctions, I urge Iran to return to the talks table to address the legitimate concerns of the international community. Further conflict would bring a very real risk of regional spillover. This would be disastrous for all the peoples of the region. We must find a way off the path of violence. I continue to urge all parties across the region to exercise restraint and engage in de-escalation, dialogue and diplomacy.

Against these complex regional realities, Ireland is taking action and pressing others to do so. Above all, we need an immediate ceasefire, the release of the hostages, a massive, unimpeded surge of humanitarian aid into Gaza and a political process towards a two-state solution. It is my hope that the announcement on Monday can help to bring this about and lay the groundwork to achieve peace in the interests of the people of both Palestine and Israel. All peace processes are imperfect but the genocide, killing and famine must stop. I welcome this debate. I look forward to continuing to work with colleagues on Ireland's contributions to peace and security in the Middle East.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: As we sit in this Chamber, the Global Sumud Flotilla approaches ever closer to Gaza. We do not know what the coming hours will bring. We wait with much trepidation and concern for our fellow Irish citizens, citizens of the world and our fellow Oireachtas Members, including my colleague Senator Chris Andrews, with whom I am in contact every couple of hours. Yesterday, along with some colleagues, I met with family members and loved ones of those on the flotilla. They are anxious, no doubt about it, and justifiably very worried, but they are also full of pride and fully respectful of the wishes and objectives of those taking part in the flotilla. They understand, as do those on the flotilla, what is happening on a daily basis in Gaza while we sit here today.

What is happening in Gaza is a war on children like no other in living memory. Citing UNICEF, UNRWA has stated that in the past five months of the war, an average of 540 children have been killed every month. We see the footage on almost a daily basis. It hardly bears thinking about what those families are going through, the children left without parents and those maimed for life on a daily basis in what often seem to be deliberate attacks on children and innocent people.

The Tánaiste spoke about the famine situation we are seeing. Has there been, for generations, a famine that has taken place within reach of so much food and so much supply? I cannot think of any example. At an Oireachtas joint committee meeting last week, we heard from UNRWA representatives that during the ceasefire, 4,200 trucks entered Gaza in a week. Before the attacks and the genocide, 700 trucks arrived daily. Now, on a typical day, there are fewer than 50 or 60. We are seeing famine play out, with tens of thousands of people malnourished and at risk of starvation. Following on from that, of course, is the potential for disease, illness and all the human suffering that will follow.

A great deal of the discussion in the Oireachtas on Gaza, Palestine and the Middle East generally has focused on the occupied territories Bill. The people of Ireland, and the people of Palestine, deserve to know what the Government will do on that legislation and what will be in it. The Oireachtas joint committee was very clear in its position that there must be a ban on goods and services. The entire point of the occupied territories Bill, and what it represents, is that it is an extension of the decision of the International Court of Justice. It is about applying international law. It is about ensuring there are consequences for actions. The advisory

decision drew no distinction between goods and services. People deserve to know what will be in the Bill. People right around the country are asking what the Government will do. Some actions have been taken but this one is crucial. It has been spoken about internationally and has led to other countries acting. There should be no arbitrary distinction between goods and services. The Government must show leadership by putting in place a ban without further delay. It would send a clear message that the occupied territories are illegal settlements and nobody should trade goods or services with them.

Most of my comments have focused on Gaza but I take the opportunity to welcome the condemnation of attacks on Syria by Israel. It is also important to express concern regarding attacks on minority groups in Syria, particularly the Druze and Christian communities.

I will comment briefly on the proposed deal announced by the US and Israel in recent days. Our priorities for Gaza are an end to the genocide, unrestricted access to aid, the release of the hostages and a long-term peace deal. Any peace deal that will end the wholesale slaughter of tens of thousands of people in Gaza should be welcomed and efforts to that effect must continue on the part of everyone. Of course, our hope is that a deal will bring about an immediate and permanent ceasefire, unrestricted aid to the strip and a long-term peace agreement. However, it should be noted that the details are high level and vague. The implementation details will be key. Unfortunately, past experience suggests that considerable caution is warranted. There have been numerous examples of bad faith on the part of the Israeli Government in breaking previous ceasefires. Mr. Smotrich is already attacking the plan as a whole.

It is also crucial that the pathway to Palestinian self-determination and sovereignty is not lost in this. Great strides have been made in recent months towards full and proper recognition of Palestinian statehood. Self-determination and statehood are recognised in the plan as an aspiration of the Palestinian people but no clear roadmap is provided nor is there any mention of the West Bank. Caution is warranted. We will monitor the situation regarding the flotilla with great care. If there is action against it and if any harm comes to an Irish citizen in the next few hours, the Government needs to say to the world that Israel's days of acting with impunity must end.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Any plan that could end the wholesale slaughter of tens of thousands of civilians in Gaza is to be welcomed. The world has watched a genocide as children starve and aid rots just miles away. I welcome that a core part of the 20-point plan is to end the weaponisation of aid from the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation and place it in the hands of the UN and the Red Crescent.

However, for any peace deal to work, it must be constructed and agreed by all parties to the conflict. A unilateral deal is not the platform for a stable or lasting peace.

The Good Friday Agreement worked because it was a constructive process that all parties built and signed up to. At its centre was parity of esteem, new political institutions, demilitarisation and consent. It was voted on and there was a peaceful pathway forward for those who desired independence. It was not forced upon a battered population with the promise of only more death and destruction should they refuse.

Great strides have been made in recent months towards full and proper recognition of Palestinian statehood. To remove Palestinians now entirely from the peace process is a

regressive step that returns Palestine to an occupied territory stripped of sovereignty and self-determination. The war criminal, Benjamin Netanyahu, has already said he will not remove troops from Gaza - that there will be no demilitarisation. He absolutely does not agree to Palestinian statehood. Statehood and self-determination is recognised in the plan as an "aspiration of the Palestinian people", but any movement is conditional on the redevelopment of Gaza and the reform of the Palestinian Authority. There is no agreement on borders. Any hope of a pre-1967 border seems to have been erased from this plan, nor is there any mention of the West Bank and East Jerusalem where settler homes are springing up by the thousands. There is no plan to address the apartheid system that leaves Palestinians second-class citizens in their own land.

My fear is that any plan that fails to address the core conflict that has existed since 1948 will only be another false dawn. If there are to be guarantors of peace, it must be an international coalition, certainly not those who supplied weapons and gave the political and military cover, which enables the occupation and the ongoing genocide that continues to kill innocent men, women, and children in Gaza and across Palestine.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Agus muid ag labhairt anois, tá Flotilla Sumud le 40 bád ag teannadh ar chósta na Palaistíne agus treise leo. Tá mo chomhghleacaí an Seanadóir Chris Andrews san áireamh. Smaoinigh go bhfuil léigear Iosrael ar chathair Gaza ann le beagnach 20 bliain. Bhíos leis an Seanadóir Andrews agus daoine eile 17 bliain ó shin ar bhád eile a bhris an léigear sin ach tar éis dhá bliain d’ár, léirscrios leanúnach, cinédhíothú barbarach agus léigear níos daingne ar phobal, ar chathair agus ar cheantar Gaza, le breis agus 70,000 duine marbh agus na céadta mílte gortaithe agus stiúgtha le hocras, tá ár á dhéanamh ag Iosrael. Guím gach rath ar an bhflotilla agus guím síochán agus faoiseamh ar fhir, ar mhná agus ar pháistí na Palaistíne ón síorionsaí ó Iosrael.

Israel is not only intent on levelling and depopulating Gaza; it is using the cover of its onslaught to accelerate its attacks on all Palestinian lands, its institutions and peoples. Last week, the governor of the Palestine Monetary Authority briefed some of us in the House on the threats to their credit and banking system by the self-proclaimed fascist Israeli finance minister, Smotrich.

Palestine's present is under unprecedented assault by bombs and apartheid, while its future is being carved up by imperialist greed. Not alone are western forces intent on imposing the war criminal, Tony Blair, as viceroy in Gaza, but the genocidal regime of war crime fugitives in Israel is being given the green light to annex 82% of the West Bank with its E1 plan to permanently dismember any hope of a Palestinian sovereign territory. It is for the Palestinians - not Israel, not Trump, and not Tony Blair - to govern their own land, free from occupation, annexation and genocide. Saoirse don Phalaistín.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Time is measured in blood in Gaza. Those are the words of Bisan, a young Palestinian journalist whose people have endured nearly two years of bombardment, siege, starvation, and displacement, and still, the world watches and still, we do nothing.

Now we hear talk of so-called peace plans - plans pushed by Trump, who shows no regard for international law, and by Tony Blair, an unconvicted war criminal with blood on his hands

from the war in Iraq. These men, products of settler colonial states like the US and Britain, have no moral authority to dictate terms to the Palestinian people.

Francesca Albanese called Trump's "deal of the century" exactly what it is: a trap of the century. It was never about peace; it was always about control. The United States - built on stolen land through genocide and slavery - has launched hundreds of military interventions globally, yet it postures as a peace broker. Israel, another settler colony, has been committing genocide in Gaza, and Washington continues to arm and defend it. How dare they claim the right to speak on peace? It is the people of Palestine not warmongers and imperialists who have the right to decide their future.

What about us here in Ireland? American warplanes pass through Shannon Airport without question, using our neutral soil as a military pit stop.

Deputy Simon Harris: No, they do not.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: The Government has not passed the occupied territories Bill. It has placed no sanctions - not one. It is always words, never action. Meanwhile, the Associated Press exposed harrowing stories of Palestinian women being exploited and offered food, water, work, or shelter in exchange for being raped. The perpetrators were reportedly linked to the aid organisations operating in the chaos created by Israel's total blockade and bombardment. This is not a side effect; this is a direct result of Israel's policy of total blockade and bombardment. This terrorist state has turned Gaza into a protracted humanitarian catastrophe. One million lives are being held hostage and there are 1 million realities of suffering.

The Irish people are screaming for justice and sanctions. The Opposition is screaming for justice and sanctions, and this Government, once again, does nothing. The Government is weak. It is failing to act in the face of genocide, and history will remember that silence, because silence is complicity.

Deputy Simon Harris: Deputy Ní Raghallaigh is so wrong. It is disgraceful.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I want to read into the record the names of three brave rebels who are now on a flotilla 120 nautical miles from Gaza - Tadhg Hickey, Donna Schwarz and Paddy Cole. They join our friend and comrade, Senator Chris Andrews, and many others who are sailing to Gaza. They are taking their lives in their hands because we know other flotillas have been attacked and people have been murdered. These people are showing bravery in going to Gaza, and to sail in the face of Israeli aggression. They have already been attacked by Israeli military drones. They know they are under threat. The bravery they show is only a fraction of the bravery the Palestinian people show every day. The Government must send a clear message to Israel about the people who are sailing to Gaza. Irish citizens and any other citizens on the flotilla should not be attacked or victimised in any way, shape or form. These people are going to bring aid and food to starving children. Israel is supported by some of the biggest countries in the world - the Americans, the British, the French and the Italians - who have given them guns so that they can slaughter men, women and children and now they are in the danger zone.

Israeli snipers are shooting children dead. The flotilla is trying to bring medical aid and food to children who are starving. Did we ever think it would happen again in our lifetime? How can genocide be allowed to happen in 2025? It is a shame on the Americans, British and Germans for backing the Israelis. How dare they murder people, including children, because they want freedom and justice. Where is the justice for the Palestinian people?

We are only a small country but we have a big voice and we have big hearts. The Tánaiste and the Government need to send out a clear message that we will stand with the Palestinian people. We want to protect our own people who are going to aid them. Saoirse don Phalaistín.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I have a genuine fear for the reverberations and scars Gaza will have on humanity for generations to come. International law has been rendered meaningless. The primacy of United Nations institutions has been decimated.

We recalled many times in this House and across chambers all over the world the phrase "never again". It became the battle cry of humanity after the Holocaust. The phrase that will be used by generations to come in respect of what happened to Palestinians will be "too little, too late", because the making of what we have witnessed in Gaza in recent months has been coming for decades. Israel, repeatedly, for decade upon decade broke one international law after another when it engaged in occupation, annexation, illegal settlements and mass forced displacements. People warned decades ago that the trajectory was leading to a genocide. Unfortunately, the horrendous events of 7 October were used as the excuse for Israel to carry out the genocide we are now witnessing live on our television screens. Whatever the world is doing in response is too little, too late. I genuinely hope and pray we are at the point where a ceasefire is immanent. I hope that humanitarian aid, food and water is making its way to the children, women and men of Gaza. The work for humankind will only begin on that day. I genuinely fear it will take as many decades as it took to reach this point to get to the point where future generations will forgive the world and all those political leaders who allowed it to get to this point. We must make a start today. There must be a ceasefire, there must be the delivery of humanitarian aid and the world must finally demand that Israel stop its absolute barbarity.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: At the outset, I acknowledge the protesters who gather every weekend around this country, and what the Irish people have done to stand up for Palestine and what they continue to do. I want to acknowledge that in the House today and thank them for it.

I extend deepest solidarity to the Palestinian people who are living under unimaginable and horrific suffering and starvation at the hands of the Israeli Government and its allies. The outbreak of this horrific genocide is approaching its second anniversary. Gaza has been flattened to the ground. There have been more than 66,000 deaths. In one week alone, between 3 and 10 September, 499 Palestinians were killed. Almost 170,000 people have been injured and 90% of the population has been forcibly displaced. There has been prolonged and enforced starvation on a civilian population. Famine was confirmed in Gaza for the first time by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has said Israel is committing war crime upon war crime. There have been 248 journalists killed and 540 aid workers slaughtered. Humanitarian aid has been weaponised by the Israeli

Government, which controls every access point and aid distribution network. All aid distribution must be independent, impartial and neutral in line with humanitarian principles.

As I stand here today, I wonder what it will take. I go to different gatherings, as the Minister does, and I hear people talking about the occupied territories Bill. We both work in the business sphere. I hear businesses saying that services should not be included in the Bill. It is up to this Government to lead and to implement the occupied territories Bill without further delay. It has to be done. We have to stand up. Recognising the State of Palestine has to mean more. At a minimum, it has to mean implementing the occupied territories Bill, whatever it takes. We are willing to come in here day or night to do that.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The situation in Gaza is not just a tragedy; it is a moral catastrophe. Over 66,000 Palestinians have been killed, entire districts have been reduced to rubble and hundreds of thousands of people have been forced to flee under relentless bombardment. Starving children are murdered while they wait for food. We have genocide and we have man-made famine. I say "man-made", but they are not men; they are monsters. Ireland knows the pain of occupation, and the struggle for dignity and for peace. Our history compels us to speak out when others are silenced. What is happening in Gaza is not a conflict, it is a systematic assault on a people's right to exist. The international community must do more, and Ireland must lead. Veto after veto by the United States at the UN is a betrayal of humanity. Aid convoys are being blocked, journalists are being targeted and the very fabric of civil life in Gaza is being torn apart. The Government here must follow the lead of the people of Ireland. Words must be turned into action; that is the real measure. There must be an immediate ceasefire, unfettered humanitarian access and accountability for war crimes. We must support the Palestinian people, not just with words but also with actions through boycotts, diplomacy and solidarity. Silence is complicity. In the face of such suffering, we must choose courage, justice and humanity. The eyes of the world are on the Global Sumud Flotilla. We wish them safe passage. They must be guaranteed that by their own governments and by the international community.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: What is happening in Gaza is not a natural disaster, it is a man-made catastrophe. Entire families are buried under rubble, hospitals have been turned into graveyards, and children are starving not because food does not exist, but because it is deliberately withheld. Yet some so-called guardians of international law stand idle. They issue statements dripping with empty concern while continuing to arm and fund the very machinery of the Palestinian people's destruction. For too long the international community has chosen paralysis or, worse, complicity. They speak of restraint as though one of the most powerful militaries on earth and a besieged population of refugees are equal. They speak of both sides, when one side is caged, starved and bombed without pause. While they do nothing, ordinary people put themselves on the line to say Gaza will not be erased. They, in turn, often face the rigours of justice systems that are not just blind but also deaf and dumb to the humanitarian disaster that is Gaza and the barbaric action that is Israel. The Global Sumud Flotilla is sailing with nothing more than determination, humanitarian aid and the fundamental principle that human beings deserve to live free. For them, the next 24 hours are crucial, and our thoughts are with each and every one of them. Let us be very clear: solidarity ships should not be necessary, and international law should not be optional. In my opinion, the blood of Palestinians stains every capital of every country that has chosen silence and complicity over

justice. The people of Palestine need more than outrage; they need us to be relentless in our pressure, to boycott and to protest. They need us to ensure what is delivered in terms of a peace plan is long-term and sustainable and results in a Palestinian State. History is watching and it will remember who stood with the oppressed and who enabled their very destruction.

Deputy Duncan Smith: The greatest ally genocide has is those who choose not to call it out when they see it. Over the weekend, I saw a commentary about whether there is the need for these statements on Gaza and, indeed, yesterday's statements on the flotilla. Some people in this country were questioning whether we should have these statements at all, considering the issues our own country faces. To those people I say: remember our own history. When the violence on this island came to an end, we required the assistance of other countries. We required international action and solidarity to help to negotiate and sustain a peace. We should not and we cannot forget our own history when we look to the plight of the Palestinians.

The Palestinian struggle is one of self-determination. Over 65,000 people have died since Israel launched its bombardment on Gaza following the abhorrent 7 October attacks. We have been and we need to continue to be clear that Hamas is a terrorist organisation. It is our belief that it should have no role as a jihadi terrorist organisation in a free Palestine. However, Israel's assault has not been entirely about destroying Hamas; it is about destroying Gaza and the Palestinian people. The Israeli Government does not believe in a Palestinian State. This is not controversial to say; it is a fact. In fact, since the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 and the extinguishing of the flicker of hope that the Oslo Accords brought, the rise of Netanyahu has resulted in the diminishing hope of a Palestinian State.

Let us look at the comments of Israeli cabinet ministers. National security minister Ben-Gvir actively supports the continued annexation of the West Bank. Finance minister Smotrich has said there is no such thing as the Palestinian people. They have come a long way from Golda Meir, the Israeli Prime Minister of decades past who described herself as a Palestinian, to the point where the Israeli finance minister says this. He should look to his country's short but violent history. In his entire time as Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has undermined and blocked Palestinian statehood. He actively facilitated the funding of Hamas. This is not a secret. His logic was that a strong Hamas would lessen pressure on him to negotiate forward a Palestinian State. This is why genocide experts, Amnesty International and the United Nations have declared what Israel has done in Gaza to be a war crime and genocide.

We now have a tentative so-called peace agreement, which, according to reports, is changing faster than anyone can keep up with. The original pitch President Trump presented to the world seemed straightforward. It was that Israel, the US and its Arab partners were all aligned. We now hear that the original deal has shifted significantly, due in no small part to the actions of Benjamin Netanyahu who has managed to negotiate a number of changes to the original deal, in particular on the conditions and timetable of Israel's withdrawal from Gaza. The new proposal ties Israel's withdrawal to the progress in disarming Hamas and gives Israel a veto over the process. Even more concerning is that, if all the conditions are met and three phases of withdrawal are completed, Israeli forces will still remain within a security perimeter inside Gaza, "until Gaza is properly secure from any resurgent terror threat". This is not a vista of freedom for the Palestinian people. It is continued internment.

Eight countries have issued a joint statement welcoming with some reserve this ever-changing plan, without expressing full support for it. Officials from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and Türkiye have been enraged by some of the recent changes. That is because they know Netanyahu's game plan. They have seen it before. In March of this year, Netanyahu broke a ceasefire blaming Hamas for not releasing hostages who were not part of the ceasefire agreement. He looks for any reason to continue to destroy the Palestinian people and continue to push them out of Gaza. We know what the Israeli Government wants. It has brought in demolition companies to clear the rubble in Gaza, not just making sure Palestinians cannot rebuild their homes should they get back to them, but ensuring Israeli settlers can build on that land and on the graves of those they have carpet bombed. This is the end result of allowing Israel to operate without limits.

Since the start of September, it has attacked six countries. It has been given *carte blanche* by the American Government to do so. It is a country that has been given absolute power and, as history has consistently shown us, absolute power corrupts absolutely. Netanyahu has form for corruption. He was indicted in 2019 on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust and so far has found ways to delay his trial and avoid any consequences. Netanyahu is concerned only with Netanyahu, growing Israel and extinguishing any Palestinian hopes of self-determination and statehood.

What does the plan on the table look like? From what we know, Trump's plan takes the forced displacement of Palestinians from Gaza off the table, along with any permanent Israeli occupation of the enclave. It also rules out Israeli annexation of the occupied West Bank. It promises a surge of humanitarian aid to Gaza and includes support by the Trump Administration for "a credible pathway to Palestinian self-determination and statehood". It commits the US to resuming peace talks between Israel and Palestine. Despite who is making the proposals, they all sound positive but none - or very few - of us trust that there is real intent behind them.

The Irish Government has done more than many for Palestine. The recognition of statehood is both important and symbolic. Providing medical care to individuals who have managed to get out of the region has been vital and the aid supplies we have funded have been meaningful. Joining the Opposition in the cross-party motion yesterday was also important. However, better than others is not always good enough. We may be a small country, but no one could doubt the imprint we have left on the globe. We need to utilise that imprint to help the Palestinian people further. All the pageantry from Israel pretending it only cares about Hamas and wants Palestinians to live in a Gaza free of Hamas has now been dropped. There has been a systematic removal and destruction of a people and their living and economic environs, unencumbered by other nations. We have normalised this behaviour for far too long.

We should applaud RTÉ for being clear that if Israel competes in Eurovision, we will not. Cultural boycotts are important. Its football teams should not be competing in UEFA or FIFA sanctioned tournaments. Its athletes should not be allowed to compete in the World Athletics Championship or the Olympic Games. These are all measures that were imposed rightly on Russia when it invaded Ukraine, yet Israel seems to be outside that kind of cultural and sporting sanction and boycott. We will be complicit in the normalisation of what Israel is doing if we continue to allow it to act within the norms of international behaviour.

The international community has been too slow and has done too little, but the Government does not have to follow course. There are direct actions that can be taken. Passing the occupied territories Bill could be done in a short time. I sit on the foreign affairs committee and was involved in the pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill. There is support across the House, including among the Government backbenches, to move this quickly and it should be done. The Government could decide to support the Global Sumud Flotilla. We could do so in a way that would not have an impact on neutrality and would not breach the triple lock. We have precedents, such as Operation Pontus, which I mentioned yesterday. We could send a naval vessel in an observational capacity and we in the Labour Party believe that should be done. Our role as peacekeepers is respected globally and this would be another example.

What the next few days will bring for Gaza, peace in the Middle East or the flotilla that threatens to break the aid blockade, we do not know. It is a reality that has become all the more present in the post-Trump world that decisions with widespread consequences seem to be taken on a whim. In truth, we can do nothing about Trump or how he operates, but we can be consistent. We can provide consistent assurance to the people of Palestine that we stand with them and that we will back that solidarity with action. There will come a time when a large portion of the globe will have to reckon not only with the actions of Israel but also their own inaction when it comes to the plight of the Palestinian people. For years, Israel has acted with impunity, backed by the United States and many in Europe. The Israeli Government and the IDF do not see the Palestinian people as having any rights. They see them merely as something in their way. No amount of deflecting or PR spin can change that. Under the leadership of Netanyahu, the Israeli Government has committed mass genocide and will continue to do so.

I will close my contribution with a quote from Martin Luther King Junior, which we would all do well to remember:

The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience but where he stands in times of challenge and controversy.

There has been no greater time of challenge and controversy in the past 20 years than the past two years with what we have seen in Gaza. When history books are written, let us say we did everything we possibly could to end this violence and genocide.

Deputy Mark Wall: I begin by sending my solidarity to the global flotilla. A number of boats in the fleet have already suffered attacks as Israeli aggression tries to derail the flotilla's journey. I condemn these attacks and hope that all the crew and passengers will remain safe.

I highlight a petition by one of my constituents, Holly Caffrey, calling for action on Gaza. It is one of many actions by the people of Kildare South to call out these crimes on the people of Palestine. The death toll in Gaza has reached unimaginable levels. It has reached over 66,000 according to recent reports. These figures often hide the untold devastation inflicted on a whole population. We have seen the Israeli war machine wipe out entire generations, entire towns, entire villages. This is genocide of epic proportions, the effects of which will continue to ripple throughout history. We must always continue to call this out as what it is, a genocide. Every day Israel continues to commit war crimes against the people of Gaza while many western leaders stand back. It gives me great hope that so many in this House have called out this genocide.

However, we must move beyond words and towards action. The Government must act and make its occupied territories Bill a priority for the legislative programme this autumn and it must include services, as recommended by the Oireachtas Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade. While Ireland is a small country, our voice is one of the loudest on Gaza. We must continue this effort and lead the way as many countries are already following us by recognising the State of Palestine. Along with my Labour Party colleagues, I continue call for Israel to be isolated by the international community, whether that be through Eurovision or a UEFA ban.

We must look at every possible action to stop the genocide.

As my colleague has done, I cautiously welcome news of a peace plan for Gaza as announced by the US President Donald Trump. However, it has yet to be fully agreed by all parties. More details are needed on elements of the plan such as the proposed board of peace.

I hope we can see an end to the war in Gaza. Nothing else is acceptable. There must be a lasting peace in the region which is built on a two-state solution. We must see action soon.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I do not doubt all the efforts the Tánaiste and Government are making on the European and world stages to use every sinew of influence and diplomacy to stop the slaughter in Gaza, to call out the outrageous expansion of the illegal settlements and to call for the protection of the Irish citizens on the humanitarian mission on the Sumud flotilla, including Sarah Clancy, a constituent, and two Oireachtas Members. There are many others on that flotilla who all need the support of the Irish Government.

I also do not doubt the shameful hostility that Ministers and our Taoiseach and Tánaiste regularly face from other countries when they back the proposal to partially end the Israel-EU trade agreement. It is an outrage that any EU country would vote to block that partial ending, not even a full ending, of the EU-Israel trade agreement. Beyond the act of politics, there is the economics of peace making. It is really crucial that we in Ireland say that we have not run out of road here. With regard to the occupied territories Bill, we must move forward and we must not hand back. In Ireland, millions of euro are spent every year in State procurement on products purchased from an Israeli manufacturing company. As a trade unionist, I take very seriously that there are jobs in Waterford with Teva pharmaceuticals but the reality is they also have a major contract with the HSE providing pharmaceuticals in this country. We have to look at using every leverage this State has to influence major multinationals with influence in Israel. There maybe talk of peace but it is hardly going to be a lasting deal when it is foisted by one side over another. The ground war is well under way as we know to raze the remaining 800,000 people in Gaza. There is a child dead for every hour of every day over the past 23 months. More journalist lives have been lost in Gaza than in the past 100 years. More journalists lives have been lost than in World War I, World War II, Vietnam and all the other major wars over the last century. I am not sure that we have any real idea of what is happening in Gaza right now.

The key message for the Government today is that there can be no let up in the State's efforts. I am really clear, as are my colleagues, that while diplomacy and politics are really important we also have to look at the economics of peace making and ensure no stone is left unturned in our country to do what we can to influence and bring peace to Gaza and to all Palestinians.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the opportunity to raise the ongoing situation in Gaza and the West Bank. Gaza is enduring a man-made humanitarian catastrophe. Civilians, children, health workers and journalists have been killed in unconscionable numbers. Hospitals and UN facilities have been struck. Food, water and medicine have been used as levers of war. Starvation and disease are not collateral, they are the predictable outcomes of blocking aid and destroying life-supporting infrastructure. That must end.

The targeting of civilians, civilian infrastructure and attacks on journalists and healthcare workers must be absolutely condemned. A free press is not a luxury; it is a shield for the innocent and a witness for the truth. The killing and maiming of reporters in the line of duty is an assault on international humanitarian law and on accountability itself. Recent investigations underline why transparency, access and independent inquiry are essential.

I am sure we all welcome early indications of a long-overdue ceasefire and the diplomatic energy behind it. Any cessation of hostilities must immediately unlock safe, sustained and reliable humanitarian access at scale, the release of all hostages and a massive surge in reconstruction. It will be a long road - it will take a generation to fully rebuild Gaza's homes, schools, hospitals and basic services. The scars from this war will last much longer.

Ireland should remain at the forefront, funding lifesaving aid, backing UN agencies and supporting medical evacuations, while pressing all parties to comply fully with international humanitarian and human rights law.

We must also look to the West Bank where the continued expansion of illegal settlements, displacement and movement restrictions are eroding the viability of peace. The internationally agreed destination remains two states living side-by-side in peace and security, a consensus rooted in the Oslo accords of the 1990s and as explicitly affirmed by the UN Security Council in Resolution 1397 in 2002. That vision is being pushed further from reach daily by facts on the ground. Ireland should keep championing accountability by supporting the ICJ, the ICC processes, advancing proportionate trade measures consistent with international law and standing up for the simple principle that no one is above the law.

Finally, I want to address the Global Sumud flotilla. The safety and welfare of those on board, including two Members of the Oireachtas and constituents of mine, must be paramount. All actors must respect international law and avoid any unlawful or violent act. Our message is simple: let aid flow, protect civilians and humanitarians, de-escalate, and return to politics. There is no need for a military element.

Only a lawful, negotiated two-state settlement can deliver dignity, security and peace for Israelis and Palestinians alike. Let us use Ireland's voice to push for a ceasefire, the release of hostages and a durable, lasting peace.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: The American poet Maya Angelou famously coined the phrase, "You can't really know where you are going until you know where you have been". The Israeli cabinet either does not know or reflect on their collective history. There is certainly a sense of some selective amnesia. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's father-in-law was the sole survivor of his family following the Holocaust. Both parents of the Israeli minister for agriculture Avi Dichter were Polish Jews and survivors of the Holocaust. Avi Dichter's grandfather, after whom he is named, was murdered by Nazis, in his local ghetto. Both parents

of Israel Katz, the Israeli minister for defence, were Holocaust survivors from Romania. I could go on and on because the history of people of the Jewish faith is a very sorrowful, often brutal one. Nearly every Jew in this world can, unfortunately, trace family back to the Holocaust years. The murder of loved ones in concentration camps and in ghettos still hangs as a dark cloud of shame over all humanity.

Therefore how is it that any person whose ancestors had endured such destruction, barbarism, cruelty and murder could allow history to again repeat itself? How, in any moral conscience, can any of the aforementioned Israeli cabinet ministers wage a genocidal war against innocent men, women and particularly children in Gaza? Where is the moral compass of the Israeli Parliament and Government at this time?

At a meeting of the United Nations in 2009 Netanyahu, referring to an Iranian threat to his country stated, "We cannot allow evil to prepare the mass death of innocents." Yet, following the 7 October Hamas attacks, a campaign of revenge against a few people became overnight a war on humanity, an assault on innocence and a destruction of many. It is now a full-blown genocide.

I commend the efforts of this Government, acting in the international community in terms of recognising the legitimising of the Palestinian State while equally condemning Hamas and calling at international level for peace and the flow of aid for the people who so desperately need it.

The peace deal on offer this week has very much cornered the Palestinian people. I cannot see how it can work. One of the conditions of peace was that if they agreed to it aid, medicine and food would flow. How horrendous and disgusting is that that we will withhold and weaponise the very things that give life to people until they sign on the dotted line and sign away everything their country aspires to.

On the Sumud flotilla, like others in the House, I have constituents and people I know on those boats. They are to be admired. It is an act of heroism. They are putting themselves at risk. The international community needs to come together. I have some words of criticism before I finish. Far too many European countries have rightful hang-ups about their history, which they should have, but these hang-ups should not determine how they govern in the year 2025.

They should not tie their hands when they have to act and do the right thing. I will not name the countries; they all know who they are. Week on week, they are stifling the very actions and sanctions that need to happen. The same sanctions that were able to happen overnight against Vladimir Putin are simply not happening against the Israeli Government. The Irish Government has a lot done. We need to protect our citizens on the flotilla but the European community needs to speak better and with one voice.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: Like everybody else, I welcome the efforts to bring peace to the Middle East. I hope the present peace agreement takes hold. I am very disturbed by reports that the Israeli Prime Minister has unilaterally sought to change certain fundamental aspects of that agreement. If so, he is acting in very bad faith.

The Israelis say they have achieved their war aims but I am not entirely sure what their war aims are. Their only stated war aim is the destruction and elimination of Hamas. I suppose

from one point of view that is understandable, but it must be borne in mind that if something does not fundamentally change in the Middle East, and if the way in which the Israelis treat their Palestinian counterparts and neighbours does not change, then the conditions that brought Hamas, and before Hamas the PLO and other terrorist organisations, a number of which are still in operation out there, into existence do not change, it will not matter. Even if every single member of Hamas comes in tomorrow and surrenders, other similar organisations, whatever they wish to call themselves, will spring up.

There is no doubt the events of 7 October were barbaric beyond belief. However, to describe the Israeli reaction as proportionate or measured is to deprive language of meaning. We have had *ad hoc* brutality, 70,000 people dead, 20,000 of whom were children, people starving to death and food withheld; the Tánaiste spelled it out very eloquently. Then we have the threadbare excuses. A member of the Israeli military will appear on television when somebody hits a hospital instead of a military target and say that somebody in the military made a mistake and that they will have an inquiry into it. How many of these inquiries have been held? Have the results ever been published? Has anybody ever been held to account? I very much doubt it. Then there is the second excuse, that they killed X number of civilians but were targeting a Hamas terrorist. That is something akin to dropping an atomic bomb on a crowded shopping mall to get rid of one shoplifter. That is the level to which this has descended.

Incidentally, while I recognise the work done by President Trump and his team, I am very disappointed with the take-it-or-leave-it attitude of the Prime Minister of Israel and the President of the United States. There are several aspects of this agreement that need to be teased out, such as the question of Israeli withdrawal and the timescale for it and the fundamental question of Palestinian statehood. All of these issues have to be thrashed out. Instead of the Israelis saying they know there are things that have to be discussed, the Palestinians are being told that if they do not sign on the dotted line, as my colleague Deputy Crowe has said, Israel will not only withhold food and medicine but will rain down fire and brimstone on their heads and use the military power of the United States to help it continue unabated with the slaughter. That is not the way to approach a peace process, in my view.

Something has to be done about the West Bank. Obviously, it is not part of this agreement but something has to be done about it. There is continued aggressive encroachment by Israeli settlers, tens of thousands of them at this stage, actively supported by members of the Israeli military, without any sanctions or any effort by the Israeli Government to deter them. That simply cannot continue. I say again that if the Israelis continue to treat the Palestinians as they have done since the foundation of the Israeli state back in the 1940s, then there will be more groups such as Hamas in the future and endless conflict.

Deputy Mark Ward: As we speak, there are boats on the way to Gaza, boats with aid for a starving population and with support for a population inflicted with genocide. The only arms on these boats are prosthetic arms for children who have lost limbs during this genocide. There are also 22 Irish civilians on these boats. One of them is my friend and comrade Senator Chris Andrews. I have been in regular touch with Chris over recent weeks and I fully support the flotilla. I wish him and his fellow activists safe passage as they deliver food and aid.

We have to ask why they are doing this. It is because the Israel Defense Forces have murdered starving civilians as they queued for food. They have shot them dead where they

stood waiting for food. It is like a real-life version of "The Hunger Games" but this is not a fictional film. This is real life and these are real people getting murdered as they queue for the most basic of human needs, food. Israel has weaponised hunger and forced mass starvation. What we are witnessing is genocide in real time, played out for the world to see right across our TV screens and phones.

There has been eight decades of oppression, occupation and apartheid in Palestine. Today there are 6 million Palestinian refugees right across the Middle East, just because Palestinian lands have been taken by Israelis. Today there are over 750,000 illegal Israeli settlers in illegal settlements. These are war crimes under international law. Israel has ignored it and the international community has ignored it. Israel has caused the mass displacement of Palestinians from their homes. Families are running from one slaughter to another. Families do not even have time to bury the remains of their dead children or loved ones before they have to run. Gaza has been razed to the ground. Hospitals, schools, water, power stations and civilian infrastructure have all been destroyed. Entire neighbourhoods have been wiped out. Journalists, medical professionals and aid workers have all been attacked with impunity.

I listened recently to the new peace deal on offer. I will be honest, I will not start saying we need X, Y and Z in this peace deal; what I will say is that we need to stop the slaughter, the genocide and the bombs. Everything else can be sorted with dialogue but right now what the Palestinian people need is the genocide to stop, the bombs to stop, the guns to stop firing and food and aid to be delivered.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: With the slaughter that is now taking place in Gaza, it is easy to forget about the five successive wars that took place in Gaza between 2009 and 2022. The Israeli political and military establishment has long held a disdain and contempt for the Gaza Strip and always had an eye to taking it over and ethnically cleansing the area of its Palestinian population. These previous wars resulted in the deaths of thousands of Palestinian men, women and children. The number of Palestinians killed by Israel in the previous wars in Gaza pales in comparison to the wholesale slaughter that is now being carried out on the civilian population by the IDF in this current war, which began on 7 October after an attack by Hamas on communities and settlements bordering the Gaza Strip.

Israel's war on Gaza has been ongoing since the 1948 Nakba and even before then. The ultimate goal of Israel has always been to eradicate the Palestinian presence from Palestine. The Gaza Strip is only 25 miles long and from 3.7 miles to 7.5 miles wide. Over 2 million people are squeezed into this densely packed territory. In this tiny area, Israel has systematically wiped out homes, hospitals, religious sites, educational facilities, transport infrastructure and every other type of facility or structure required for the proper governance of a country. Israel has also deliberately created conditions for mass starvation and disease. It is clear the objective of Israel in this war is to make Gaza uninhabitable.

This effort at depopulation also applies to the West Bank, where the construction of illegal settlements has accelerated under the government of Netanyahu, whose cabinet includes far-right settlers. Settlers emboldened by the IDF have increased their attacks on local Palestinian communities, ransacking villages, killing residents and destroying farmland. Since 7 October, there have been more than 2,400 settler attacks on Palestinian properties, resulting in the displacement of thousands of people. Israel is clearly of the view it can operate outside the

norms of humanity with impunity. This deliberate blocking of food, water and aid to a starving population is a cruel collective punishment of the Palestinian people and a clear indication of Israel's contempt for humanity.

I extend best wishes to those on the flotilla bringing aid to Gaza, including Senator Chris Andrews and a local Finglas man, Diarmuid Mac Dubhghlais, or "Dougie", as we know him. We wish them all the best and safe passage but - my God - they are up against it.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I will pick up where I finished my speech on the Sumud flotilla yesterday. I was emphasising a point I have made again and again on this floor. This Government has a unique mandate, given to it by a population that is unwavering and unequivocal in our support for Gaza. Sadly, the Minister of State's Government has squandered this by not acting. We have heard the right words from it, but it has not acted on the occupied territories Bill, which remains unenacted a year after the election campaign in which the Government parties promised it and which it is watering down with the removal of services. It has not acted on addressing the role of our Central Bank in the approval of Israeli bonds. I realise that has now ceased but that was not as the result of Government actions. It has not acted to stop our airspace and Shannon Airport being used to transport munitions and personnel. At EU level, it has not pushed with all of the might of a member state of the European Union for the suspension of the EU-Israel association agreement. The Tánaiste referenced this in his opening speech, referring to it as a sanction. It is not a sanction. It is the revocation of a privilege. We have not got near sanctions yet.

All of that aside, I will focus my contribution on the issue of asylum and specifically on family reunification. I welcome to the Public Gallery today Bushra and her son Mohammed. I will tell their story. Bushra is a mother of four and was accompanied to Ireland by her son Mohammed as a medical evacuee. She had to leave her other children behind in the care of their elderly grandmother because her husband was killed in the same bombing that injured Mohammed and burned the passports of her three children who remain in Gaza. In that bombing, Mohammed lost one leg and severely injured the other. He has had 39 surgeries, 13 of them without anaesthetic. He speaks about his siblings every day. Bushra is desperate to be reunited with her children. I spoke with her before I came into the Chamber today. She put it so clearly, saying that this is life and death. It is a must. She speaks with her children but she cannot read them stories. She speaks to them to check that they are still alive. She was medically evacuated ten weeks ago. This Government promised family reunification but it has not happened. I appreciate that it is not simple and that there are difficulties in getting people out of Gaza right now. Bushra and the people supporting and surrounding her are very clear, however. They will remove those barriers if this Government shows its determination and willingness to bring her children to her.

I will also put on record that I believe the Tánaiste and other Cabinet Ministers misled the Dáil in dismissing concerns from Members on this side of the House some weeks ago that the Government's reasons for denying visas for the Palestine GAA group were not actually child safeguarding issues. We have since learned that an official in the Department of justice communicated with the Minister of justice that the principal concern was overstay. What I am hearing is that families are being treated differently from students and not being given the access to the family reunification the Irish people want to offer them.

I will finish by again emphasising that we, the Irish people, have given the Government a mandate to act but that it is failing to do so in the many ways I have mentioned but primarily in failing to bring families like Bushra and her son Mohammed's together again.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: The genocide in Gaza is, without a doubt, the issue I am contacted most about by people from Cork. I am frustrated by the lack of action we have seen and that I have nothing of substance to say to the people who contact me. I cannot answer their questions as to why the Government has not passed the occupied territories Bill or why it is allegedly allowing the use of Shannon and Irish airspace to facilitate the transport of weapons. The Government has the power to act on these issues and I urge it to use that power.

I offer my support to those on board the flotilla, including the 22 Irish citizens, which include two of our colleagues in Leinster House and the Cork citizens Tadhg Hickey and Donna Schwarz. I will echo what my colleague, Deputy Gibney, said yesterday that in the face of the intimidation tactics Israel has been using, we need to be ready to step up to provide whatever financial and logistical support we can to protect those on board.

I also want to mention the proposed plan. While I welcome the hope of peace, we have to look at what is being proposed. The reality of this deal is that Trump has presented us with a dangerous ultimatum, threatening devastating consequences should it not be accepted, Netanyahu has refused to accept even the concept of a Palestinian State and the people of Gaza have had no voice in the proceedings. Is this really how we end a genocide? Of course, we must always push for peace and diplomacy but we have to reflect on the reality of the situation and what it will mean for the people of Gaza, who have already been through such horrors.

In conclusion, I once again urge the Government to pass the occupied territories Bill, to end the use of Shannon by the US military, to apply the maximum pressure on the international stage and to protect those on board the flotilla. This is a defining moment. The Irish people have been clear. This genocide must end and the Government must act.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I will begin by joining Deputy Gibney in welcoming her friends Bushra and Mohammed to the Chamber. Their presence here is really welcome and we hope they will be joined by Bushra's other children very shortly. I will also acknowledge the 22 citizens who are on board the flotilla heading for Gaza, two of whom are colleagues of ours. They are bringing medical supplies, including prosthetic legs. All of us across the Chamber who know the people on board are genuinely fearful of what might happen to them as a consequence because we know who they are facing.

Ireland's voice has stood out on Gaza precisely because the bar has been so low. In a sea of silence, or worse, complicity, Ireland has spoken at times with clarity and humanity. That is something we absolutely should be proud of. However, two years on, thousands upon thousands of people have taken to the streets of Ireland to demand that we turn those words into actions. There is still so much more we can do.

Across the European Union, too many member states have failed the test of conscience. Countries that define themselves by the principle of "never again" continue to block the suspension of the EU-Israel association agreement, even as evidence grows of genocide, of the war crimes we are witnessing every day and of collective punishment. Others are hiding behind

process or empty declarations but the effect is the same; Europe has chosen trade and politics over human rights.

It was almost a year ago to the day when the Taoiseach came before the foreign affairs committee and promised us that the enactment of the occupied territories Bill would be one of the first acts of the Government should he be re-elected. That promise has not been fulfilled.

We are now presented with a US plan that is dressed up in the language of peace but which, in reality, entrenches injustices. It proposes outside control over Gaza, foreign overseers to manage reconstruction and an economic package without political rights. It speaks of stability but offers no genuine sovereignty, no pathway to Palestinian self-determination and no accountability for those who have unleashed devastation upon devastation upon its people. It is not a plan for peace. It is a plan to manage occupation under a new banner but, even still, we all hope for its success just so it can bring the genocide and slaughter to an end.

We should lead the call for the suspension of the EU trade agreement with Israel every single day. We should call for international law to be respected, continuously amplify calls for accountability at the International Criminal Court and stand against attempts by powerful states to repackage injustice as diplomacy. Ireland's voice matters because we know what it means to depend on law and not money. If the EU cannot or simply will not act and if the US proposes only management of the *status quo*, then Ireland must continue to insist that Palestinian lives are equal and that international law must mean something real now more than ever.

Deputy Liam Quaide: I was nine or ten years old when I first read about the Holocaust. I vividly remember what a profound impact it had on me at the time. I learned of unthinkable acts committed by people against other people and it shattered the rather innocent view I had of human nature up until that point. I recall going into a very dark state of mind, something akin to what the novelist Martin Amis later termed “species shame”, that feeling of alienation and disgust that comes with an awareness of what people like ourselves are capable of. I comforted myself with the notion that the Holocaust must have been an aberration so horrific it was in its scale of cruelty and destruction.

Yet, of course, there have been many other genocides throughout history. In 2025, Gaza has been plunged into hell and we are all witnesses to extensive crimes against humanity committed by Israel over the past two years.

One of the most shameful aspects of what the Israeli state is committing in Gaza is what Israeli historian Ilan Pappé has identified as its abuse and manipulation of the memory of the Holocaust to tar critics of its genocidal actions as antisemitic and to adopt a position of victimhood based on the historical suffering of the Jewish people while at the same time committing offences against civilians as horrific as what the Nazis did during their infernal reign. The flotilla volunteers will go down in history as heroes at a time when those with the most power in Europe did little more than take refuge in the rhetoric of condemnation while cowering from meaningful action against an out-of-control genocidal regime.

Deputy Rory Hearne: In many ways, our words have lost meaning. The words we speak include "genocide". Genocide is ongoing right now in Gaza. The word "genocide" has almost lost its meaning because we have all watched it live-streamed on our phones and have seen

thousands and thousands of people murdered by Israel, yet what has been done? The word "genocide" has lost meaning for the people of Gaza.

Our hearts are broken for the people of Gaza. In fact, the very souls of all of us have been hollowed by the murder of 20,000 children. Our eyes are burned by the images of fathers holding lifeless daughters and sons and daughters and sons lying beside lifeless fathers and mothers. How have we let this happen? How have we let these children be bombed in shelters, schools and tents? How have we let their beautiful laughs be silenced forever? How do we let this genocide continue?

Our governments use strong words to condemn Israel, but the words are empty without real action. Ordinary people across the world have bravely protested. They are in the Global Sumud Flotilla, holding our hearts and hopes for peace, our hopes that the blockade will be broken and humanitarian aid delivered. These ordinary people are taking the action our governments should. I call on the Irish Government and governments across Europe to protect them and protect the innocent children of Gaza and the people in the West Bank. I plead with the Government to implement the occupied territories Bill and put sanctions on Israel now.

It is upsetting, and I apologise for getting upset, but it is hard to really talk about this without talking about the actual people who are dying and being murdered every day. All of us need to show our humanity and reflect on what is going on, a genocide right now while we all stand and watch.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am sure all of the Members will join with you, Deputy Gibney, in welcoming Bushra and Mohammed to the Gallery and say them that they are very welcome. I have no doubt the Minister who sat in the Chamber during the Deputy's contribution will take that message, so eloquently delivered, to the appropriate Department and ask for the action that is required.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Healy-Rae): I too want to compliment all of the people who contributed here today. We in this House have to remember that whether we are in opposition or the people in government, we all have the one aim and ambition. We never thought that in our lifetimes we would witness what is happening today. The advent of modern communication methods mean we can see these horrors unfolding before our eyes. We did not ever think we would see this. It is a genocide and it is happening on the watch of all of us. Everybody is right - we are all outraged and we want action - but I believe this Government, led by our Taoiseach, Tánaiste and others, is acting.

For example, high-level talks took place in America last week. It was the priority of the Government to try to ensure that we would all come together, all over the world. I would be the first person to say larger institutions than ours are not playing their full role in this. It is not abdicating responsibility, because all of us in every country are responsible. All normal and right-thinking people would be outraged at the horror of seeing innocent adults and children, in particular, being killed. Deputy Hearne is dead right to talk about children and about fathers carrying their dead or severely injured children. It is shocking and upsetting.

It should not be the case in this House that it is us on one side and the Opposition on the other on this issue. We all want the same thing. All we want is for the killing to stop. We want the humanitarian aid to get through and the blockades to be removed. We want recognition that these people are entitled to live in peace, security and harmony. The people who are surviving are traumatised. Deputy Hearne put a very thought-provoking image in our heads when he spoke so excellently, but we also need to consider the children who are surviving, who will live the rest of their lives with the horror of what they have seen. Every one of us can remember our early childhood, including the good and bad things that happened. The bad things might have been something as innocent as losing a football match. That pales in comparison to the horror of what these children have survived and have to live with and the images they have seen. It is frightening beyond belief. It is right for it to be debated in this House.

Of course every one of us is frustrated. We all want to be sure that we are doing everything we can as quickly as possible and ensuring that other like-minded people throughout the world work together. Of course, my thoughts and prayers are very much with the people on the flotilla. We want them to be successful. As well as the practical success, the image of what they are trying to do being portrayed around the world is important, along with their safety and protection. I really believe that they should be successful in their mission. All of us on all sides of the House are praying for all of those good people, who are putting themselves in harm's way for what is probably the most important issue that will ever come before us as parliamentarians in our lifetimes. Please God we will never again live to see a time like this.

Ireland welcomes the ongoing efforts to end the war in Gaza, including those of the US even though it should be doing more. Progress is being made to secure an agreement that brings an end to the violence in Gaza, secures the release of the hostages held by Hamas and ensures that vital humanitarian aid gets to Gaza. In the hope that the US efforts can lead to a ceasefire and lay the ground for a lasting peace, Hamas needs to seize the opportunity to lay down its arms and release all of the hostages.

The Middle East was a core priority for Ireland at the high-level UN meeting in New York last week, in particular the implementation of the two-state solution between Israel and Palestine. The humanitarian situation in Gaza has never been worse and continues to significantly deteriorate. Ireland is extremely concerned about the escalation of the Israeli offensive in Gaza, which will only lead to more bloodshed, loss of life, starvation and even greater distance from any hope of peace.

The famine review committee of the integrated food security classification phase system has determined that a famine is occurring in Gaza and is projected to spread further across the strip. This is an entirely man-made famine and must be halted and reversed. Ireland calls on Israel to completely and immediately lift its blockade and allow the full resumption of humanitarian aid into and throughout Gaza.

Deputy Barry Ward: Tá roinnt ama caite agam i nGaza agus bhí seans agam a bheith ann in 2000. I visited Gaza for the first time in 2000. At that time, believe it or not, it was possible to get a bus down through Israel to the border at Rafah and cross into Egypt. That happened for a brief period. I was also there in 2005 after the disengagement from the Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip. These are, therefore, people and places I actually know. What is happening

there defies description and certainly defies justification. It is not just heart-wrenching but horrific and nightmare-inducing, so much so that I find it difficult to watch some of the coverage available, not on mainstream media but certainly online, where it is possible to see what is happening to ordinary, innocent people just trying to live their lives.

I have listened to what all the speakers have said in this debate and I absolutely agree with the upset it causes to people. We also need to look at what we can do to resolve this and what we are doing. I am proud of what Irish people have done and the stance Irish people have taken, despite people telling us it is against our economic interest, for example, in terms of our relationship with the United States. I welcome that we as a people feel that affinity with the people of Gaza and of Palestine in general and that we understand how important an issue this is. I share the frustrations of people who feel that Ireland is not doing enough but we should recognise that actually Irish politicians have led the way on this subject in Europe and in the world. The Irish Government was the first to really call out what Israel was doing in the aftermath of the attacks in October 2023, which cannot be justified. Hamas must accept responsibility for sacrificing a civilian population on the altar of its political ambition. There are no two ways about that.

What has happened since then has not just been grossly disproportionate and criminal on an industrial and international scale, but genocidal and contrary to all humanity and all law. I welcome, therefore, that Ireland is beginning to build a coalition at European level and that Ministers have gone to Europe and persuaded other countries to follow us, whether that is in terms of making the statement that we are not happy about what is happening to recognising the State of Palestine, to talking about imposing actual restrictions and penalties on Israel in terms of trade. However insufficient that may seem, it is what we can do. I am proud that Irish politicians and the Irish Government are doing this.

I am not trying to make a political speech and I am not trying to say we are great because it is beyond frustrating how powerless we are to stop this from happening. However, I will say this in a political context, though: as a proud European and chair of the European affairs joint committee here in the Oireachtas, I am infinitely disappointed by the failure of the European Union to deal with this. I am really worried that this failure of a response is going to fracture the positive relationship Irish people have with the Union. I say that in a context of my party colleagues in the EPP being President of the Commission and President of the European Parliament, both of whom went to Israel in the aftermath of the attacks in October 2023 and stood next to Israeli Ministers who were opening saying they were going to break international law. They said they stood with them. That is unforgivable. They have apologised for it, but it is not enough. One of the things we must do as a polity is convince our European colleagues that we have to stand together. If Europe cannot act together on this issue, then Europe will be ineffective in a way we have not seen previously. I am disappointed, but we have an opportunity as international diplomats to do something about it and we must call on our European colleagues to do that as well.

Deputy Albert Dolan: What has unfolded before our eyes in Gaza is nothing short of catastrophic. It is a stain on humanity and it demands our unflinching condemnation. Since the war began, over 65,000 people have lost their lives, tens of thousands more have been injured and millions are displaced and starving. Children are buried beneath rubble, hospitals

and schools are destroyed and an entire people are being deliberately deprived of food, water and medical aid. This is not just war: this is a systematic assault on human dignity.

Let us be absolutely clear that the barbaric and heinous attacks carried out by Hamas on 7 October 2023 were indefensible. Those acts of terror caused unimaginable suffering and should never be forgotten. Israel's response, though, has been disproportionate to a level that shocks the conscience of the world. It is indefensible, unlawful and inhumane. An independent UN commission has confirmed that what Israel is doing constitutes genocide. Its report found acts of killing, of deliberately inflicting conditions designed to bring about destruction and of causing serious harm, and even of measures to prevent births. These are not words to be used lightly. Genocide is the most serious of crimes under international law and, as Navi Pillay said:

The prevention of genocide is not a matter of discretion of states. It is a legal and moral obligation, and admits no delay.

Ireland cannot stand by in silence. We have recognised Palestine as a sovereign state. We have intervened at the International Court of Justice. We have been one of the strongest voices in Europe calling for the suspension of trade privileges with Israel, for sanctions against those who enable and perpetuate this brutality and for unimpeded humanitarian aid to flow into Gaza. Since January 2023, Ireland has provided more than €95 million in direct support to the Palestinian people. We have stood firmly with UNRWA, even as others tried to turn their backs. We have welcomed Palestinian patients and their families into our hospitals for urgent care but aid and words alone are not enough. The famine now gripping Gaza is entirely man-made. It is the direct result of a blockade that is strangling an entire people. That blockade must end immediately. Food, water and medicine must be allowed into Gaza unhindered.

There is a glimmer of hope. The peace proposal announced in Washington earlier this week, supported by countries across the region, must be seized upon. It offers the prospect of a ceasefire, the release of hostages and the beginning of reconstruction. Importantly, it makes clear there can be no displacement of the people of Gaza, no occupation by Israel and no role for Hamas in the political future. That is a framework we can build on. The only durable path to peace is the two-state solution.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: As we sit and stand here today, the genocide continues in Gaza. Some 65,000 people have been murdered, with 20,000 of those being children. I am conscious of not just what is happening in Gaza but also of what is happening in the West Bank and the displacement of people there as well. It is welcome and encouraging that there has been progress on a peace proposal and that significant countries in the region have committed to work with the US to finalise the agreement and ensure its implementation. What it lacks, though, is Palestinian engagement, Palestinian voices and a Palestinian consideration. That should be one of the primary objectives of any peace proposal. We are looking at trying to end what is a genocide in Palestine without the people of Palestine being engaged at this moment on the proposed peace deal. That is a serious problem and needs to be rectified as soon as possible.

It will take generations to rebuild Gaza and to recover from the trauma the people of Palestine have endured. Other Deputies mentioned the European Union. Ireland has led from the front in a European context as a small European nation but the European Union has not stood up to the challenge of addressing what are very clear war crimes and very clear genocide.

The suspension of the EU-Israel trade agreement is not something that should only be discussed now; it should have been discussed two years ago, and, in some cases, prior to that as well. The occupied territories Bill is going through as priority legislation. As many Deputies said, though, it has been discussed for so long and we have not seen it delivered to date. It needs to be delivered as priority legislation.

Regardless of this peace deal, war crimes have been committed and those involved in Israel need to be brought before the international criminal courts for those very war crimes and they cannot get out of those just purely by agreeing some sort of peace deal.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: There are times when we are lost for words. We see the absolute horrors being inflicted on the people of Palestine on our screens every day. It is hard to watch but we must continue to share these stories. Children and babies are starving to death. Israeli snipers are shooting children in different parts of their bodies - sometimes at their hearts, sometimes at their heads and sometimes at their genitals - just for fun or for target practice.

I watched last night, on a video, a young boy aged approximately ten or 11 running away from the Israeli advance in Gaza. He could not understand why he could not breathe and he did not realise he had been shot in the neck as he was running away.

The Taoiseach is meeting today with EU leaders. We rightly condemn Russia and sanction it, ban leaders and support the Ukrainian people. We rightly call for the upholding of international law and human rights, but not for the Palestinian people. Why are they denied the same rights, supports and sanctions from the USA, Britain and the EU? Those who dare to lecture the world on human rights and international law, the so-called "upholders of international laws on human rights" and of so-called "western values", all stand exposed as the liars and hypocrites that they are. They say that there will be no deal on Ukraine without Ukrainian people. That is absolutely correct, but the Tánaiste said in his speech as well that there should be no deal in Syria without the people of Syria. Where is the cry for no deal on Palestine and Gaza without the Palestinians? I hope with all my heart that there will be a deal and there will be genuine peace for the Palestinian people but I fear that this so-called "deal" is just another false dawn for the people of Gaza and also for the people of Palestine.

I will not use the Israeli propaganda of hostages or prisoners; I will use the word "hostages" for both Palestinian and Israeli hostages who are being held. Palestinian children, adults and women, in their thousands, are being held as hostages by the Israelis.

The Israeli Government has broken every deal and every ceasefire with no repercussions. I fear we will see this deal exploited by the Zionist regime to use it as a cover to continue its genocide.

I wish to extend my solidarity to the Global Sumud Flotilla and wish it a safe journey. I want to know if any civilian delivering aid to Gaza is harmed, that the international community will hold Israel to account. Words mean a lot, but actions mean even more.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: What we are witnessing in Palestine is beyond what we can describe here in words. It is the systematic destruction of a people, of human beings - babies, adults, toddlers and older people. It is the destruction of their homes and their lands, their children, their very future, their dignity and their peace.

There is no denying that it is a genocide and there is absolutely no denying the utter depravity of the Israeli regime and its terrorist IDF at this point. The horror of all this has been enabled by decades of impunity.

The lie that Israel is a normal democracy is long gone, despite its frequent propaganda claims. It is an apartheid state. It ignores international law and it shows nothing but disdain for international human rights norms.

It is a rogue state, a settler colonial outpost and should be treated as the international pariah that it is. Despite all the words from all the Government party representatives here and all the Independent, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael TDs, it still enjoys privileged access to EU and Irish markets. It still enjoys participation in cultural and sporting life internationally and unrestricted travel for its officials and for its military personnel.

Much has been said in this Chamber and internationally about the so-called "deal" on the table. It is not a peace process; it is an ultimatum. It is, as Lloyd George would have said, the threat of "immediate and terrible war". The irony is that war is ongoing in any case. It is an ultimatum to the Palestinian people to give up their people's right to freedom, dignity and self-determination and perhaps the killing will stop, but Netanyahu's own manoeuvring and briefing makes clear what we already know, which is that the Israeli regime has no interest in any genuine deal, peace or a future for the Palestinian people. To add insult to real and grave injury, it is placing this farce under the guidance of Tony Blair, a war criminal whose name will forever be tied to illegal wars, occupations and the mass killing of civilians.

Words are no longer enough. The Government must enact the occupied territories Bill now. The delay is a national embarrassment. The Government should be embarrassed and ashamed by the delay. The Bill needs to include services as well as goods. The Government should enact the Bill but, for God's sake, let us do more. Ireland must impose targeted sanctions and travel bans. We must block the use of our airspace, our seas and our ports for the transmission of munitions and weapons of war to Israel. We must make it clear that any Israeli war criminal who sets foot on our soil will be arrested and brought to The Hague to stand trial for war crimes.

Germany bears a heavy responsibility for the impunity enjoyed by Israel. If Germany wishes to add the guilt of supporting this genocide to its collective conscience, let it. The Germans can knock themselves out. However, we must not let our morals be bound by Germany's willingness to turn the other way and to allow "Never again" ring hollow.

The Global Sumud Flotilla approaches Gaza, as we speak, with food and medicine. If it is attacked and Irish or EU citizens are harmed, the Government must be prepared to respond with immediate political, diplomatic, travel and economic sanctions, decisively and without delay. I ask that they be prepared now so that they can be rolled out immediately. If the European Union, blocked by Germany and other countries, will not take action, we must act unilaterally or with other like-minded member states because we cannot allow this on our conscience.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I will reiterate the importance of passing the occupied territories Bill in this Dáil as quickly as possible.

It is important to acknowledge that the constant articulation of the need to sanction illegal Israeli settlements that are a direct threat to the possibility of a two-state solution in the Middle

East is paying off. The work done by Ireland, advocacy groups, civil society, political parties and the Government has changed the debate across Europe on this issue. While the EU as an entity has completely failed, individual member states, working alongside Ireland and influenced by us, are taking a similar approach. Slovenia banned goods from the occupied territories in August and last month, Spain banned goods and services from the occupied territories. Indeed, it is now a case that Ireland is not leading anymore; we are actually following in the legislative footsteps of other member states. Throughout this debate, Ministers have emphasised that Ireland should not be acting alone and isolated. It is clear that we are not now and that other member states are working alongside us and I am concerned that this process of finally passing the occupied territories Bill is taking so long. Both Spain and Slovenia acted rapidly as the situation in Gaza has deteriorated.

My other concern is that we do not link the passage of the Bill solely with the genocide in Gaza. The Bill is about stopping the illegal settlements that are a threat to the two-state solution, which is a cornerstone of our foreign policy *vis-à-vis* the Middle East. An alleged peace plan has been proposed by President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu. From what I have read, it offers very little to the people of Gaza. However, it is important for us to reiterate that even if, as we all want, a ceasefire is declared, the remaining hostages are returned and humanitarian aid is restored, these steps must not be used for a justification here in Ireland to stall the occupied territories Bill. That legislation must pass because, as we know, over the summer over 20,000 homes were given permission by the Israeli Government to be built in the occupied territories.

In the wrap-up to these statements, there are three questions I seek answers to from the Government. Can the Government give a timeline for when the occupied territories Bill will be debated in this House? When will the Government confirm if the Bill will include services? Can the Government also confirm that the Bill will be advanced irrespective of whether there is some sort of ceasefire applying in Gaza?

Deputy Seamus Healy: What is happening in Gaza is the ultimate appalling vista with 65,000 people murdered, including 25,000 children. Every day, on our television screens we are witnessing the deliberate destruction of the Palestinian people by bomb, bullet and starvation. Gaza is now one big concentration camp and 2.3 million Palestinians are facing obliteration and starvation.

In January 2024, the International Court of Justice found that the Palestinian people in Gaza had a plausible right to be protected from the imminent risk of genocide. That ruling triggered obligations under the Genocide Convention to take all possible actions to prevent genocide. Shortly after that, in June 2024, the United Nations international commission of inquiry found that Israel's action in Gaza constituted the war crime of willful killing and mistreatment and a crime against human against humanity of extermination. The International Criminal Court has issued an arrest warrant for Prime Minister Netanyahu.

Israel is stopping humanitarian aid to Gaza while Gazans starve. That is a war crime. The United Nations last week classified Israel's action in Gaza as genocide. There are strong sanctions on Russia for the war in Ukraine and, last week, sanctions were imposed on Iran. I have no problem with that but what does it take to impose sanctions on Israel, a state that is committing genocide in Gaza?

Famine and starvation are part of our heritage in Ireland. One million Irish people died in An Gorta Mór in the 1840s and 1850s. The devastation of the famine was a genocide of the Irish people by a foreign imperial government. British imperial power allowed our people to starve while exporting shipload after shipload of foodstuffs. In a similar situation, Israel is starving the Palestinian people by stopping thousands of truckloads of food and humanitarian aid from getting into Gaza. This country, because of its colonial past and the Great Famine, has a unique bond with the Palestinian people.

Strong words and condemnation are not good enough anymore. We must immediately impose sanctions, pass the occupied territories Bill on goods and services and stop the passage of military planes through Shannon.

Deputy Brian Stanley: After 78 years of occupation, with Palestinians driven off their land, hounded and subjected to exile, murder, torture and apartheid - the list goes on - in the past 24 months, we have seen levels of depravity never witnessed by my generation. There have been aerial bombardments, slaughter on a scale that words cannot describe, starvation and neighbourhoods bombed out of existence and flattened by the war criminals of Israel. An unknown number of people are buried beneath the rubble. In the West Bank, 700,000 illegal Israeli settlers are living there after driving Palestinians off their land. Over 700 people have been murdered in the last two years by Israeli terrorists in the West Bank. Some 6 million Palestinians are exiled as refugees outside of Palestine.

We now have a peace plan. I have concerns about the peace plan because it was created by the very people who have armed, supported and financed Israel, and have used Israel for the last 78 years as the policeman of the West. I am sceptical, unfortunately, about Trump's board of peace. It has all the signs of the Western powers trying to maintain their influence and control in the region. I hope it can be turned into a peace plan that works but it needs to be changed. Palestinians must be central to all developments in their own lands. The Palestinian Authority must be reformed and fully involved. The new police force has to be comprised of Palestinians from their own neighbourhoods in Gaza and the West Bank to police the areas with the consent of the people of those areas.

I have concerns about the international stabilisation force. Should it not be a UN force? I ask the Government to raise its voice on that. It is an international stabilisation force but who is it made up of? The Yanks and who else? It is driven by them and controlled by them. We still have a bit of neutrality and credibility left, and we need to use them. I ask the Government to use its voice to ensure that Palestinian self-determination is at the core of all proposals for Palestine and that all possible efforts are made to advance the case for Palestinian statehood.

We say "Yes" to the two-state solution and "Yes" to the release of all hostages, including the Palestinian hostages who are held by Israel in inhumane conditions in Israeli prisons. We must ensure that Israel is brought to the International Criminal Court, particularly Netanyahu and his ministers, who need to be brought to trial for the war crimes they have committed. We must pass the occupied territories Bill here and continue to press for EU sanctions. Like other EU countries, we must move quickly with that Bill and implement those sanctions ourselves, but also at a European level. I ask the Government to use its offices to do that as quickly as possible.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I want to speak about the so-called peace plan. It is not a peace plan. It is a plan for the continued colonisation of Palestine. That is what it is. I think it is shameful that the Irish Government is officially welcoming this plan, and even officially thanking Donald Trump for his efforts to end the conflict in Gaza. It is a plan for the continued colonial carve-up of Palestine - that is what it is - while they hope the global resistance movement will be halted by such a plan.

We look at where this plan came from. It is a peace process. You would expect it to be a negotiation between Israel and Palestine but, no, this plan emerged from discussions between Trump and Netanyahu, between the man who is directing the genocide, and has been for the past two years, and the man who is funding, arming and enabling that genocide. It is crazy. It is the equivalent of Hitler and Mussolini coming up with a peace plan to end the Second World War.

When we look at the content of the plan, and it can be found online, there is no mention of the right of the Palestinian people or people living in Gaza to select their own representatives or to have democracy. No. Instead, there is the installation of Donald Trump, Tony Blair and an obscenely named board of peace as viceroys of Gaza. Tony Blair, the war criminal, the man whose hands are dripping with the blood of 1 million Iraqis, the man who should be rotting in a prison for his war crimes, is instead installed as technocratic dictator, with others, of Gaza. There is the establishment of a special economic zone and a Trump economic development plan to rebuild and energise Gaza; in other words, a rebooted version of the Trumpian Gaza Riviera plan.

And for what? There is no guarantee of the withdrawal of Israeli forces. In fact, Netanyahu has boasted to the Israeli media that, no way, that is not happening and Israeli forces will not be withdrawing. There is just simply a sentence, after lots of other things: "... the conditions may finally be in place for a credible pathway to Palestinian self-determination and statehood, which we recognise as the aspiration of the Palestinian people." It does not even commit to any road to Palestinian statehood. It is another colonial carve-up of Palestine. It is why we need not be lulled into the sense that peace is going to come about. It is not going to be delivered by Trump and Netanyahu. We need to continue our movements. We need to support the flotilla. We need to be on the streets this Saturday. We need to push for workplace action, as we saw in Italy with the 24-hour general strike.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I wish to start by strongly condemning in the most certain terms the brutality that Israel is inflicting upon the innocent people of Gaza. Equally, I would like to strongly condemn in the most certain terms the atrocious acts committed by Hamas, particularly on 7 October 2023. The murder, maiming and unjustifiable terror being waged on innocent people on both sides of this conflict has no place in our world, yet it continues, to the horror of the world looking in. The continuing barbaric, murderous, genocidal Israeli military operations, which have brought unwavering suffering to the people of Gaza, are blatantly in breach of international law and basic humanity. There must be an immediate ceasefire, the release of all remaining hostages and access to unhindered humanitarian assistance to the people of Gaza at an unprecedented scale. It is simply wrong in principle and in law to inflict hunger and suffering on a civilian population, whatever the circumstances. The behaviour clearly constitutes a war crime. It is also wholly unacceptable to contemplate the mass

displacement of people in Gaza or to talk of permanent occupation. Not only is it an affront to decency and international law, but history tells us that it offers no solution.

Ireland remains convinced that the implementation of a two-state solution is the only way to establish lasting peace and security for Israel, Palestine and the wider region. Ireland must continue its work with international partners and to step up our efforts to achieve that goal. In terms of what Ireland has done to date, the State has intervened in South Africa's International Court of Justice case against Israel under the Genocide Convention.

We have recognised the State of Palestine as a sovereign and independent state and we welcome the fact other states in Europe are now following the lead of Ireland and Spain, in particular. We have provided €95 million in support to the people of Palestine since January 2023, of which more than €79 million has been provided since October 2023. We were the first country to call for UNRWA to remain in Gaza and provided €20 million for that.

I have no doubt that we will look back, and history will look back, with shock and rightful disgust at the delayed response from so many in the West and in Europe, and the actions of the current US Administration and others, and ask how this was allowed to go on for so long. Thousands upon thousands upon thousands of children, women and men have been displaced time and time again. Thousands have been murdered, starved, displaced and chased from their homes and terrorised time and time again. Aid workers and journalists have been killed, hospitals have been levelled, and war crimes and genocide have been committed. Vital aid has been prevented from reaching the people who need it most, those who are being starved. History will judge what has happened in Gaza and in the West Bank and history will not be kind.

A two-state solution is the only solution to this. This country must enact the Occupied Territories Bill. Those who are responsible for war crimes must answer for them. Innocent people in both Palestine and Israel deserve to live in peace, both from the threat of Hamas and the murderous Israeli military. The international community must step up and act now to provide a lasting and real peace. They must prevent further war crimes, murders, killings, displacement and the terrorisation of an innocent people.

Deputy Martin Daly: I will start with a quote:

What we are doing in Gaza now is a war of devastation: indiscriminate, limitless, cruel and criminal killing of civilians. It's the result of government policy - knowingly, evilly, maliciously, irresponsibly dictated. Yes, Israel is committing war crimes.

They are the words of Ehud Olmert, ex-Prime Minister of Israel. The devastation in Gaza defies human comprehension. Whole neighbourhoods have been flattened, hospitals have been reduced to rubble, healthcare workers and journalists have been targeted, and famine has broken out. This is not the tragic byproduct of war; it is a planned, strategic assault on civilian life and infrastructure in Gaza. Hamas is a terrorist organisation and its attacks on Israel on 7 October were obscene but no crime, however appalling, can justify what has followed. Collective punishment with bombings, shootings and the destruction of vital health and civilian infrastructure, resulting in famine and death, is unlawful and immoral.

Since 7 October, more than 66,000 people have been killed and over 168,000 wounded in Gaza. That does not include many people who are dying in Gaza, mainly children, due to

preventable illness and starvation. Many thousands are unaccounted for, entombed beneath the rubble. These are not just statistics; they are families expunged, generations extinguished and people pushed to the existential margins. What we are witnessing is not proportionate, it is not humane and it is not compatible with international law. The destruction of Gaza, brick by brick, together with the relentless spread of illegal settlements in the West Bank, is obliterating the very possibility of a Palestinian state. Let us be clear: this is ethnic cleansing in all but name. This is not simply my view; we have heard from Ehud Olmert and his view. He referred to concentration camps and war crimes. In August 2025, some 600 of the highest ranking ex-military and security officials, including former Mossad chief, Tamir Pardo, ex-Shin Bet chief, Ami Ayalon, and former Israeli deputy chief of the military, Matan Vilnai, wrote to Donald Trump to ask him to intervene and end the war. There is reported resistance, even within the Israeli army, to the continued prosecution of this abomination.

Ireland has not stood silent. While we must not appear to be self-congratulatory in the face of this horror, Ireland was among the first to recognise Palestine as a state, joined South Africa in the International Court of Justice, and has advocated consistently for a stronger international response through the EU and the UN. Today, many others, from Spain and Slovenia to partners across Europe, are following that lead but leadership is not a gesture; it is a responsibility. Futile gestures without consequences are meaningless. The EU must act by carrying out a full review of the EU-Israel trade agreement, seeking real accountability for breaches of international law and insisting unyieldingly that humanitarian aid reaches those who need it. Yet the greatest obstacle remains Israel's own leadership. Prime Minister Netanyahu has not defended Israel; he has diminished it. In tandem with the egregious assault on Gaza, he and his extreme right-wing cabinet members have undermined a two-state solution by enabling and actively encouraging illegal settlements on the West Bank. He will not be remembered as a guardian of security but as the architect of perpetual conflict; the man who extinguished the prospect of coexistence and condemned generations to bloodshed.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Liam Quaide): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Martin Daly: The new proposed peace deal is remarkable for the lack of Palestinian consultation. It has been presented as a threat, with obvious equivocation about Palestinian statehood on the part of Netanyahu. It is an anaemic strand of hope for a ceasefire, for the release of all hostages, for humanitarian aid and for the rebuilding of Gaza.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: To be very straight up, Gaza is not enduring any conflict; it is enduring a genocide. More than 66,000 Palestinians have been killed or murdered, with one in three being children. Families are being wiped out. I find it hard to reconcile the number of mothers who have watched their babies die and the number of babies and children who have sat with their parents who have been murdered alongside them. It is irreconcilable in my mind to think of all that horror and what the children of Gaza are bringing into their futures, if they survive this.

The starvation that is happening is not a consequence of war; it is a weapon of war. It is what Israel is putting down upon them and is wielding to absolutely destroy and break an entire people. Some 14 hospitals are barely functioning. What is most devastating to me is that the world is not stopping this. Countries like Ireland are leading the way but when you think things

cannot get any worse, it goes lower. You wonder how bad it can get before the countries of the world stand up and have some sort of morality. I am glad Ireland has led the way. Ireland knows what oppression is, what famine is and what it is to see our land, our voice and our dignity stripped away.

The Taoiseach, Deputy Martin, told the UN that peace is not a slogan; it is a responsibility. I absolutely agree but responsibility without action is complicity. Recognition of Palestine means nothing if in the same breath we trade with a regime that starves the Palestinian people. Recognition of Palestine cannot be a symbolic gesture while we continue business as usual with Israel. If we recognise Palestine's right to exist, we must defend it with more than words. That is why Ireland must, at an EU level, demand sanctions. That means suspending the EU-Israel trade agreement, which rewards apartheid. It means an immediate arms embargo. No Irish company or EU institution should profit from weapons that are raining down on Gaza. It means using every single diplomatic lever we have to push Europe away from complicity and towards accountability. I believe the future of Europe relies on how it reacts and moves on and how it upholds human rights in Palestine. If it fails here, what hope do we have for the European Union in the future?

I have to take a moment to commend the extraordinary bravery of the humanitarian flotilla that is sailing to Gaza at the minute. Ordinary men and women, including colleagues here in the Oireachtas, are risking their lives to deliver food, medicine and hope where governments have failed, and where the world has failed. They embody our conscience and should not stand alone. The world has to protect and support them. Ireland is limited but our voice is not. We must remember that Ireland is not too small. We were never too small to matter. We were not too small to stand beside Africa, we were not too small to oppose the Iraq War and we are not too small to stand with Gaza now.

We must continue to insist on a two-state solution, to insist the people of Palestine have a future and insist that they have their identity and their voice.

The people of Gaza do not ask for pity; they want a future and they want justice. Justice begins in chambers like this and begins by us all talking about it around the world, but with Ireland refusing to look away, standing up, refusing to wash our hands of this, choosing to act, choosing to stand out at the highest level, including at the UN, and speaking about the genocide and the atrocities being rained down on the Palestinian people.

We all know history will record this moment. We will all be judged. We will remember where Ireland stood when the Palestinian people starved and bled. The question now is, when will the rest of the world stand with us?

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I must start my contribution to these statements on Gaza by mentioning the peaceful Global Sumud Flotilla, our friend and party colleague, Senator Chris Andrews, and all who are on the vital humanitarian mission. In the early hours of this morning, an armed vessel with no lights on approached the flotilla. Those on board the flotilla ships believe that this is an Israeli military vessel that is trying to intimidate them, damaging their communications systems and doing very dangerous manoeuvres circling the lead boats, *Alma* and *Sirius*. The flotilla is now on high alert as it is close to the high-risk zone where the Israeli Government has publicly stated it will stop the flotilla. The flotilla is being escorted by one Spanish and two Italian navy vessels, but those Governments have clarified that these are not

expected to use military force. The Italians will turn their naval vessels around and return to base.

Now the flotilla is waiting for the Israelis to illegally board the ships, kidnap the activists and bring them to one large navy ship and, from there, to Ashdod port to be deported from Israel. The Israelis may even sink some of the flotilla ships as a punitive measure.

What are the Israelis scared of? The flotilla is only transporting humanitarian aid to the suffering, barely surviving population of Gaza. Food, medicine, baby formula and nappies - that is what Israel is scared of.

Israel has deliberately starved the people of Gaza. As of last week, it has killed over 66,000 Gazans, 217 journalists and media workers, 120 academics and over 224 humanitarian aid workers, a number that includes 179 employees of UNRWA. Independent sources have estimated that 80% of Palestinians killed are civilians. These are all war crimes.

This State, I am proud to say, is on the right side of history in speaking out against Israel's genocide. We have said all the right things but we must follow through with actions. We must pass the occupied territories Bill in its full form. We must press the EU to sanction Israel. Our EU Commissioner must raise this with the Commission. We and the EU must treat Israel as the genocidal apartheid rogue state that it is. Gaza needs us to be their voice as theirs is drowned out by the sound of Israeli bombs.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: Those on board the humanitarian aid flotilla are under clear and present danger as it approaches the coast of Gaza today. Our own Senator Chris Andrews and Barry Heneghan, TD, are on board. We know that Israel has no bottom line - anything goes, basically - and that, previously, it killed nine people on board a humanitarian aid flotilla, so we must act immediately.

Over 20 years ago, I experienced the hospitality of the people of Gaza and the West Bank. It is hard to imagine what may have become of those who warmly welcomed me back then. The unrelenting bombardment, the unimaginable brutality, the psychotic blood lust of a state that is using children's body parts for sniper target practice while they are being deliberately starved - it is like something out of *The Hunger Games*. I have heard of tanks driving and reversing over heavily pregnant women for sport, doctors being followed home from hospitals by drone systems in order that the Israeli forces can target and blow up their families, and children carrying the emaciated body parts of other dead children on their backs. We have seen stuff that we thought was unimaginable. It is psychotic and it is livestreamed into the palms of our hands. Unfortunately, it has been done with the complicity and the active assistance of the western powers, whether we like to admit it or not. While it has taken a genocide for the Irish Government to start taking meaningful action, we do now have the opportunity to become a leading voice for peace and justice in the world, owing to our own history of genocide, plantation and forced starvation. As Irish people, the attempted eradication of an indigenous people in a colonial land grab, which is basically what this is, is not alien to us.

What can we do today? We need to do all we can immediately to protect the lives of our own citizens, do all we can to get the humanitarian aid into Gaza and enact the occupied territories Bill in full as well as pushing for every form of international sanction that is possible

and that we can legally do against this psychotic entity that calls itself Israel. We must act immediately.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I did not get the opportunity to speak yesterday so, first, I wish to acknowledge the humanitarian work being done by the volunteers on the flotilla, trying to get food and medicine directly to the people of Gaza in the face of starvation, violence and ongoing oppression from the Israeli state. I acknowledge that many of those participating are Irish citizens, as others have said, including our own Senator Chris Andrews and Deputy Barry Heneghan, whom I was honoured to be asked to facilitate by means of providing a vote-pairing arrangement. I wish them the best in their ongoing voyage of hope.

I share others' concerns about what the Israeli state will attempt to do and urge sympathetic elements within that Government and civic society to ensure that the welfare and safety of those seeking to provide humanitarian assistance in a peaceful way is preserved. Obviously, the Israelis like to intimidate. I do not think they would be stupid enough to actually do any real damage, but it is horrific to be subjected to that type of intimidation in the first place, and there is always the risk of something going wrong.

We have the proposal from President Trump, his peace plan. Like others, I can see many flaws in that plan. It is an imposed solution that does not take on board the voice of the Palestinian people, nor, in my view, does it open up any real pathway to self-determination. It does open that chink, but Netanyahu has been trying to close it off. If it is not accepted by Hamas - and we do not know that yet; the signs are not encouraging - it would still in no way justify any renewed attacks by the Israeli state. The genocide has been going on for a considerable time now. You would sometimes wonder what is left to attack, but even though Gaza has been razed to the ground, there are still so many lives at stake.

In that context only, I can see why many people would grudgingly support the plan, I suppose because there is nothing else out there, as a means of immediately halting the ongoing genocide and subjugation of the civilian population. If it is the only deal on the table right now, and while the world is slowly moving to condemn and isolate Netanyahu and his ilk, but too slowly, by recognising a two-state solution we have seen some progress from European partners. Some have come out condemning the genocide, but this pace is glacial. In a sense, it is to Netanyahu's advantage and it is propped up by the US Administration. In that context only, as to what is on the table, I would urge Hamas - it is obviously not going to listen to Irish parliamentarians - if it truly loves its land and its people, to consider the plan seriously, allowing for the fact that there are other violent fundamentalist factions entrenched in the area that would ignore and fight on nonetheless. If Hamas did sign up and release the hostages, it is an imperfect plan but it is the only plan we have right now. I heard with interest my Dáil colleague Catherine Connolly's statement that Hamas is part of the fabric of the Palestinian people. I agree with her in that context - it is absolutely true - but Hamas needs to know, and it has been told in no uncertain terms, including by Arab states, that through its violent actions a number of years back, its adherence to blind ideology, its wish to see Israel obliterated from the map and, most importantly, its cruel and heartless treatment of ordinary Gazan civilians, it is not a credible voice in any future arrangement for Palestine that will allow its citizens to thrive. Yes, it might try to hold on to power, but if it truly loves its own people, it may see the writing on the wall.

There are other voices that need to come to the fore. The way Israel has treated innocent civilians has already, unfortunately, seeded the next generation of fundamentalists who hate Israel and, I would also say, Jewish people in general with intensity. However, there is still a chance for a solution to be found and it will require Europe, in particular, to step up.

For too long, out of guilt and other geopolitical factors, Europe been an apologist for Israeli atrocities in Gaza. I am talking about Europe as an entity and not individual countries like Spain and Ireland in particular. As an entity, Europe has been an apologist for the atrocities, the continued planting of the West Bank with illegal settlers and the perpetuation of a conflict that could have reached some form of uneasy but workable accommodation many years back.

Last week, I attended the Irish launch of an important book, *Diary of Gaza Surgeons: A Witness to the Genocide*, which tells the harrowing tale of medical professionals working on the front line. Judgment calls had to be made daily about who to try to save and who could not be saved, often in the face of ongoing bombardment and a massive lack of equipment. Many people died unnecessarily. Innovative surgeries were performed by physically and mentally drained medical volunteers using any tools available - even a chisel and a hammer to open a person's chest at one stage - to try to keep people alive. It is a heartbreaking testimony of life in the midst of relentless attacks, especially targeting women, children and the elderly. It is a historical book at this stage because it is from 2024 before the policy of mass starvation by the Israeli regime but it gives witness to so many different voices, not just Palestinian medical practitioners. They mention a letter sent by 99 American physicians, surgeons, nurse practitioners, nurses and midwives to President Biden and Vice President Harris back in the day, which was avoided. They pointed out even then that virtually every child under the age of five had a cough and watery diarrhoea. There were cases of jaundice, hepatitis A infections and malnutrition. In 2024, it led to widespread spontaneous abortions, underweight newborns and an inability of new mothers to breastfeed. This left their newborns at high risk of death given the lack of access to potable water anywhere in Gaza. As those giving the testimony pointed out, many of those infants died. They watched malnourished mothers feed their underweight newborns infant formula made with poisonous water. We can never forget that the world abandoned these innocent women and babies. That was in 2024 and was followed by what happened in the first half of 2025. It is absolutely shocking.

As I mentioned before to the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and various Ministers, Ireland has played an important role in putting pressure on our EU counterparts. We have done a lot. We need to proceed with the Occupied Territories Bill. If there is any chance of a fresh start, we need to support it and make sure Israel and Hamas support it as well. Regarding the Danish Presidency of the EU, there is the historic situation where Danish Jews were rescued during the Second World War and it feels a strong friendship bond with Israel. As with us and the US, friends should tell their friends the story like it is. Denmark as EU President needs to step up to the mark and be more forthright in calling out Israeli atrocities. Ireland has a role to play in this given our imminent EU Presidency. I congratulate all those taking part in the flotilla and commend the Government on the work it has done to date. We still need to do more because this is literally a life and death situation every single minute.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. When we were growing up, long before we were in politics, we looked at the news at night and saw the United Nations and said to ourselves, God they are powerful men in suits. We looked at the

G7 or the G8 - whatever you want to call it - and said, my God, they are going to solve the problems of the world. To look at the atrocities going on in Gaza at the moment, the UN and the G7 or G8 are standing idly by and letting all this happen. We saw all those guys on television and said they would solve problems because they have power, but they have no power. That is the reality. That is what we have got to face up to. People think they are important but they are not. They do not have the guts to stand up and be counted. In fairness to this Government and especially to all in opposition, we hope the Bill will be brought through shortly. It is good to see some countries in Europe coming on board.

When the Ukraine war started, Europe automatically brought in sanctions and rightly so. It brought in rounds and rounds of sanctions to try to cripple Russia. What have we done to try to cripple Israel's genocide? We have done nothing. Ursula von der Leyen should be ashamed of herself because of the way she has performed as leader of Europe - that is the reality. Sadly, there are a few countries in Europe that still control the European Union and unfortunately we are not one of them. There are a few big countries that nearly decide everything, like we see with the Mercosur deal. It is harrowing to get phone calls from people who would never ring politicians. While they might not understand the whole world of politics, they see children on screens - they have children - and fathers and mothers, people starving, hospitals in bits and no solution. The reality is unless America's deal goes through, there will be no solution now. It shows that American backs Israel. Unless that deal goes through, there will be no other deal on the table. There will be more genocide because Netanyahu does not care for anybody. That is the sad reality.

You wonder what is going on in the world and how we turn a blind eye. Our Taoiseach last week was at the United Nations. A few months ago, we saw what the Taliban did in Syria. There was an earthquake there and I read in the Spanish media - it was not covered in our media - that the men were told they could not pull the women or the children out. That is sickening. When we see someone from Al-Qaeda at that conference addressing something even though they are outlaws, we must ask where is world order and where is respect. Where are people coming together to work to bring peace to the world? The world is in disarray at the moment.

Deputy Colm Burke: Article 1 of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, which came into effect in 1951, is very clear: "The Contracting Parties confirm that genocide, whether committed in time of peace or in time of war, is a crime under international law which they undertake to prevent and to punish." It is now beyond question that Israel is guilty of committing war crimes in Gaza and that Israel is now committing the crime of genocide in Gaza. Senior Israeli politicians have no qualms expressing publicly the most extreme positions. On Monday, Nissim Vaturi, deputy speaker of the Israeli Parliament said, "We want to remove all the Arabs from Gaza" and the West Bank. He previously referred to Palestinians as scum and subhuman. Earlier this year, he called for the killing of all Palestinian males and has echoes of fascist ideology.

There are several conservative Jewish rabbis who are highly critical of Zionism. They see it as a rejection of traditional Judaism and its values. The oppression and crimes committed against Palestinian people for many decades were not a justification for the Hamas assault on 7 October 2023. What happened on 7 October was not a justification for Israel's two-year assault on Gaza. Hamas was and is a bloodthirsty terrorist organisation. However, we must not forget that for many years Benjamin Netanyahu and his criminal crew supported Hamas as

part of its strategy to undermine the Palestinian Authority. Writing in the *Financial Times* on 23 May, former Israeli Prime Minister Mr. Barak described how Benjamin Netanyahu encouraged and facilitated the transfer of around \$1.5 billion from Qatar to Hamas over a period of years.

That was part of a calculated policy to split the Palestinian movement and prevent a two-state solution. In the months prior to 7 October 2023, repeated warnings from their own espionage services regarding a possible major Hamas attack were ignored by the Israeli authorities. Warnings from Egypt in the days immediately prior to the 7 October attacks were also ignored, and in the final hours before Hamas attacked, further warning signs were not fully responded to by the Israeli security services. Even now, in a further twist, Israeli security forces are arming Palestinian militias and criminal gangs opposed to Hamas.

The second anniversary of the attacks of 7 October is next week. During the past two years, Israel has engaged in a sustained campaign of total destruction, carnage, starvation and genocide in Gaza. In a recent meeting, Mr. Herzl Halevi, former chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces, acknowledged that more than 200,000 people have been killed or injured in Gaza. Internal Israeli intelligence reports indicate that 80% of the casualties are civilians. Approximately 80,000 children have been killed or injured in Gaza in the past two years. Speaking on Israeli television, the former head of Israeli military intelligence, Mr. Aharon Haliva, said that 50 Palestinians must die for every Israeli killed on 7 October and it does not matter if they are children. The deaths were necessary, he said, as a "message to future generations" of Palestinians.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: I am delighted we are having this debate on Gaza. We cannot have enough debates on this matter for as long as the travesty happening there lasts. As one of the older Members of this House, I can remember the atrocities we have seen in the world down through the years. I remember Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge and the 2 million people slaughtered in Cambodia. I remember other, more recent events in Europe: the Croat war, in which 20,000 people were lost, Srebrenica, where 8,000 people were slaughtered, and the upwards of half a million people slaughtered under Assad in Syria. Despite all those travesties, there is something about this particular conflict that has touched the hearts of Irish men, women and children in a way no other conflict has done.

We are horrified by what we see happening. Deputy Fitzmaurice spoke a lot of common sense in his contribution. The public is horrified by the failure of international agencies to take action against the Israelis and provide support to the Palestinian people. I am horrified to think aid was sitting on the border waiting to be delivered to starving people and it was beyond the ability of the United Nations, NATO, the EU or any of the other wonderful and phenomenal organisations we admire, support and, in some instances, subscribe to, to go in and do something to provide food to starving people. Not only am I horrified by the international agencies, but I am horrified by those governments and those supposed leaders who supply support and succour to the monster that is Netanyahu and his Government. The people who have supported him, provided his Government with arms or provided him with any sort of encouragement might as well have pushed the buttons or pulled the triggers that exploded the lives of the men, women and children in Palestine. It is a travesty. We now see the flotilla trying to do something about the situation and raise public awareness. Those participating

deserve admiration. I have great admiration for Senator Andrews and Deputy Heneghan for their participation in that effort.

When we look at the Gazan situation, the greatest and longest lasting problem has been the illegal settlements in the West Bank. I have had engagement with successive Israeli ambassadors to this country, most of whom could not understand why Ireland was so supportive of the Palestinian people. They did not understand that our concern was based primarily around the issue of illegal settlements. That is one of the reasons the occupied territories Bill needs to be enacted immediately, as a matter of extreme urgency. The idea that people continue to talk about a two-state solution while the possibility of establishing a second state is steadily and inexorably being eliminated for the lack of space, as Palestinian people are driven out of their homes, the homes demolished and the land taken over, is appalling. Will the international community see the light and let us, please, have peace?

Deputy Brian Brennan: Let us be very clear: the attacks by Hamas on 7 October 2023 were simply barbaric. However, Israel's response has been called out for what it is, which is simply genocide. There has been the killing of journalists, medics, humanitarians and people of all ages, but the indiscriminate killing of children can only be described as the most horrific crime of our era.

I am lucky enough to be on the foreign affairs committee. We have met stakeholders from all sides, including the ambassador from Palestine, Senator Frances Black and people from the Jewish community, and we dissected everything they had to say. There was one box that was not ticked for me, however, in that I had not met anybody on the ground in Gaza. A few months ago, therefore, I paid my own way to get on an aeroplane to Egypt, where I set up meetings with representatives of NGOs. I went to a fabulous big shopping centre because they felt it would be the safest place to meet me. I sat down with them and discussed what was going on. Number one, they told me that they recognised the work Ireland is doing and, number two, they told me stories of what was happening to Palestinian people on a day-to-day basis. They spoke of a lady living in a tent with her family in what is a concentration camp whose job was to go and get the wood. The job of the father and son was to go and get the food. Many of those fathers and sons never returned. They were living in sweltering heat, listening to bombs morning, noon and night. I said it here yesterday that what I took out of those meetings was how those young people will be in the years to come. They will be angry young men and women. Let us not forget that there is little or no education available to them. The medical system is hanging on by a thread. To grow up in that environment is simply horrific.

At the committee, we asked what the Palestinian people need. Number one was a ceasefire. We do not know what will happen with the proposal currently on the table. All we can do is hope and pray. To make any agreement, as everybody knows, all parties have to be around the table. The second thing they want is recognition. To be fair, the Government, on behalf of the people of Ireland, was one of the first to stand up for the Palestinian people. It was great to be there last week to see 81% of UN members now recognising Palestine. Number three is they want us to look at the EU-Israel trade agreement. This is a huge stumbling block and where we have completely let down the people of Palestine. The EU has to look at itself and we have to look at our position. If we are not strong enough to make a decision on what has happened in Gaza over the past two years, we have a problem.

The last thing was the reconstruction. We can talk about reconstructing properties and medical services, but what about the reconstruction of the young people? Based on my visit there, they will need help. That must not be ruled out.

The very first time I spoke to the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, was at committee level. I said that how we handle this crisis will define us. I stand over those words today. I ask him the same thing today, as I ask him every day. We took the lead. Let us not take our foot off the pedal.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Brian Brennan: It is just too important. It will define us.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Before I start, I extend my solidarity to the people of Palestine at this terrible time for them. What we have witnessed in the Palestinian territories over the past 24 months has been genocide - the wanton destruction of the territories, the murder of men, women and children in the most horrific air and ground attacks, and the blockading of a people. The denial of humanitarian aid to those who need it, including starving people, reminds us of our own Gorta Mór here in 1847. We have seen the denial of journalistic reporting from Palestine and the wide-scale murder of journalists based in Gaza. We have also seen state terrorism inflicted on the most vulnerable population by one of the most advanced military forces, unfortunately supported by America, the world has ever seen. We have witnessed genocide through the deliberate mass displacement of people and the killing of more than 66,000 people, including 25,000 children, which is an average of 2,750 people every month.

The vicious attacks on the Palestinian people have been going on for decades, yet they remain steadfast in their demand for self-determination, including the release of those interned by Israel, which includes the release of Marwan Barghouti, who has been in prison since 2002.

It is my sincere hope that a ceasefire can be declared and that the Israeli army halts its daily murder of civilians, as we see on our TV screens every single night. I also hope that the Israeli hostages currently held by a variety of militant groups in Gaza are released unharmed, and that all Palestinian prisoners are returned to their families.

We have seen a rogue state operate with impunity, yet despite overwhelming firepower, US armaments and political cover, Israel has failed to achieve its stated war aims, including the destruction of Hamas and the release or rescue of the Israeli hostages held in Gaza.

I am conscious that as we speak today, Irish citizens, including our Oireachtas colleague Senator Chris Andrews, are participating in a flotilla of humanitarian aid aimed at breaching Israel's blockade of Gaza. I am also conscious of the Israeli naval commando raid on a flotilla in 2010, in which nine activists were murdered by Israeli forces.

The European Union needs to do much more to pressurise the rogue state of Israel to end its appalling massacre of the Palestinian population. We also need to see the suspension of the EU-Israel association agreement and an end to the unconditional and unqualified support of Israel by the EU Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen.

Domestically, we must pass the occupied territories Bill without further delay. The Bill must include both trade and services. There is no credible excuse to drag this process out any further. We must enact the Bill as a matter of priority. I hope the Government will keep its election commitment to do so.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I just went onto the RTÉ website and saw a headline: "Israel issues 'last' warning for Gaza City residents" to flee. Israel Katz followed that up with: "Those who remain ... will be considered terrorists and terrorist supporters." The article states:

The intensification of military operations in Gaza City has forced the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to temporarily suspend operations at its Gaza City office and relocate staff to ICRC offices in southern Gaza to ensure staff safety and operational continuity,

That is what the Palestinian people are going through. The next extract is very well put: "Accepting the plan is a disaster, rejecting it is another, there are only bitter choices here, but the plan is a Netanyahu plan articulated by Trump,". That was said by a Palestinian official familiar with Hamas's deliberations.

Trump has told Hamas it has three or four days to respond. The only person who has come out in absolute support of this 20-point peace plan is Benjamin Netanyahu, who said, "I support your plan to end the war in Gaza, which achieves our war aims." Only bad choices are in front of the Palestinian people at the moment.

The final quote is from the Taoiseach, who said that Israel must "behave within international law" over Gaza flotilla. That is it. The expectation is that they will not. We send solidarity not only to the Palestinian people but also to Senator Chris Andrews and Deputy Barry Heneghan. We dread to think what the IDF has in store for these people, who are literally trying to introduce a humanitarian corridor.

What have we seen in the last while? We have seen 66,000 Palestinians killed. We have seen famine used as a means of war. The only defence is that if they really wanted, they could kill more. One of Netanyahu's intentions, the absolutely criminal one, is to stay out of jail, so on that basis he continues the war. Smotrich and Ben-Gvir have been absolutely clear about what they want, which is a greater Israel and the removal of the Palestinian people from Gaza. They are using starvation, famine and executing children as they await food aid. What can you say about people who are willing to consider this?

Our only hope is that Donald Trump gets a rush of blood to the head and falls out to some degree with Benjamin Netanyahu. This is a very said affair. The only thing that can be done from our point of view is to ensure that pressure is maintained on America and on those powers that have provided weapons to the Israeli war machine. It is absolutely disgraceful. I welcome some of the moves that have been made in Britain and Germany, but they continue to supply weapons. None of this is good enough. We need to enact the occupied territories Bill in its entirety. That means for services and not only goods. We also need to take apart the EU-Israel association agreement.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We must do it whether it is by getting a number of countries working together or by getting the EU to do it properly by qualified majority voting. We need to make sure we take the agreement apart because Israel was given a prize it should never have been given-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: -----because of what it has been doing since 1948. We are looking at genocide. We have seen the western world absolutely fail. It is an utter disgrace.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Like everyone else in here and like most of the world, we are all outraged by what has been happening in Gaza to the Palestinian people for almost the past two years. It is terrible. It is horrible. No words I can use could capture the wrong that has been done.

I look at the Deputy across from me, from Wexford, Deputy Brennan, who spoke yesterday evening in such an eloquent and heartfelt way about children who are being killed before they even see the light of day. It is so wrong. Growing up as a young fellow, we were told about the terrible things Hitler did. We know he did terrible things, but to my mind what is happening now is altogether worse, if it is even possible to measure such a thing.

We are speaking in this Chamber and we were elected to represent the people of Ireland, and as far as I am concerned, to represent the people of Kerry. The people I talk to every day are so upset and they ask me what we can do. We are powerless in this Chamber. All we can do is talk, but we have to talk. I always believe in saying what is on my mind. I do not go behind the back door to say what I have to say. I do not talk in riddles.

I am very disappointed because I am someone who was brought up to appreciate America - the USA. Two of my uncles, my father's brothers, and two of his sisters, went out there in the late 1950s and early 1960s and they told us about the great country that it was. We are so disappointed with the Administration there now. We could blame one man, Trump, but there is a government and administration there and surely there should be some kind of humanity in those people. They should try to stop what is going on and stop giving them guns, money and whatever they are giving them to keep going because it is so wrong.

A human life is precious, and to think that little children are being blown out of it and are buried under apartments and buildings, it is so wrong, and the rest of the world has to stand idly by and can do nothing to help poor, innocent people. I am so sorry I cannot do anything. I know all of you are disappointed and concerned about it.

We respect those people who went out on the flotilla, and I know they are trying to do good, but my advice to them is not to have any more people go because it is not safe there. They need to understand that. There is no logic in Netanyahu's mind. If he appears in any other part of the world outside of Israel or outside of America, he should be incarcerated and never again let see the light of day. That is how I feel, I feel so badly about him. We always heard that the fine must fit the crime, and you pay according to the harm that you did, but there is no explanation, no understanding and no forgiveness anywhere for what he is doing to poor, innocent people, and they having no place to sleep and them covered in debris and everything.

It is horrible. I hope, however long we live, that we never again see anything like this in any other part of the world. Words cannot describe the hurt I am feeling for innocent children, elderly people, mothers and fathers, and the whole lot of them. What is going on is so disgraceful.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I thank all Deputies for their very sincere and heartfelt contributions to what is, once again, an extremely difficult debate that has taken place against the backdrop of a genocide and a famine unfolding on our television screens or on our mobile phones in our pockets. Let me be clear from the outset: there is no room for ambiguity. The war in Gaza must end. There must be an immediate ceasefire. The unconditional and immediate release of hostages held by Hamas is an absolute imperative. Israel must fully lift the blockade and allow humanitarian assistance at scale into Gaza, delivered by UN agencies including UNRWA and partner humanitarian organisations.

It is a sobering reality that famine has been declared by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification in Gaza City and it is likely to spread throughout the Gaza Strip. The Government has been crystal clear that this is a man-made famine. Forced displacement, destruction of civilian infrastructure and deliberate obstruction of humanitarian aid by Israeli authorities have only compounded the catastrophic humanitarian disaster we see unfolding in Gaza.

The heinous attacks launched by Hamas against Israel on 7 October were reprehensible. We have consistently and rightly condemned the terrorist organisation that is Hamas prior to and since October 7. Hamas has brought nothing but death and destruction to Palestine and Israel.

I welcome the ongoing US efforts to end the war in Gaza. We hope and, indeed, pray that Monday's announcement from the White House is a further step towards the peace that is so desperately needed. In particular, I welcome the sincere engagement of states in the wider region to secure a path to peace and their willingness to work with the US, European and international partners to achieve this goal. There is no such thing as perfection in this situation, but an end to the sheer, bloody slaughter as a first port is certainly something we should all aspire to. Israelis have the right to live in peace and security but so do Palestinians. However, international law limits the use of force in self-defence to no more than what is necessary and proportionate. The Government's position has been clear for some time now: Israel is breaking international law in its military response to the Hamas attack, and it is, in fact, engaging in genocide. International law, including international humanitarian law, is not optional; it is an obligation that must be adhered to.

It is a crying shame that two Members of these Houses have had to follow in the footsteps of other Members of the Houses and joined hundreds of activists from around the world to try to simply break a humanitarian blockade. I have already spoken to Deputy Barry Heneghan today and colleagues have mentioned Senator Chris Andrews. I absolutely respect what they are doing, but it is an utter shame that they have to do it. That is a shame that lands on pretty much the entire western world, and I have no issue saying that, because from a humanitarian perspective, Ireland has provided over €95 million in support for the people of Palestine since January 2023, of which, more than €83 million has been provided since October 2023. This includes €58 million to UNRWA since 2023 to support its programmes in Gaza and the West

Bank, including East Jerusalem, as well as in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. Ireland will continue to support the Palestinian people, including through UNRWA. I am deeply concerned by the Israeli Government's attempts to smear the good name of UNRWA, including through a propaganda campaign targeting donor countries. I urge the Israeli authorities to rescind legislation banning UNRWA operations in Israel and the occupied Palestine territory, which is having devastating consequences for UNRWA's operations in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem and in Gaza. There is no realistic alternative to UNRWA, which has a mandate from the UN General Assembly.

We have seen scores of Palestinian people come to Ireland both for study but also to receive medical attention. I am extremely grateful to my constituency colleague, Deputy Sinéad Gibney, for bringing in Bushra and Mohammed. Knowing that, while their father has been killed by the Israelis, there are still siblings and children in Gaza, and we will continue to work with all parties in the House to make sure families can be unified in a timely manner. The Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, is completely seized of their own personal situation. Anyone who took time to speak to Bushra and Mohammed in the Gallery had to have been touched, as any human being would be.

I acknowledge the continuing advocacy from my party colleague, Deputy Brian Brennan, on the need to not forget the horrors we are seeing in Gaza and to be prepared for the rebuilding work. I am extremely grateful for his attendance, at his own expense, not just to meet people on the ground in Egypt, but also at the UN General Assembly last week where he plied a very important parliamentary impact. Beyond that we cannot lose sight of the bigger picture, namely, the enduring need for a comprehensive political solution leading to an independent Palestinian state. A ceasefire is urgent, but a ceasefire alone is not sufficient to end decades of bitter conflict. That is why Ireland is deeply committed to a just and sustainable solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Ireland was an active participant at a conference co-chaired by France and Saudi Arabia at the UN in New York in July that was attended by over 130 countries. Ireland was part of a core group of 19 countries that prepared the conference and negotiated the outcome document, the New York Declaration, with subsequent follow-on meeting attended last week at the UN General Assembly by both the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach.

A lasting and sustainable solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must, of course, include the establishment of an independent and viable Palestinian state, alongside a safe and secure State of Israel. That is why formal recognition of the State of Palestine is not merely symbolic. I am proud of the leadership Ireland showed, together with Spain, Norway and Slovenia, in paving the way for recognition by others, including France and the United Kingdom, as well as Australia, two of which are permanent members of the UN Security Council. Their decision, while delayed, is welcome. We have to welcome it. At times of absolute darkness, we do need to seize the very few chinks of light.

A number of Deputies have understandably and rightly raised the issue of the occupied territories Bill, following the hearings at the Oireachtas Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade in the summer months. As the Tánaiste outlined in his opening address, and has consistently said for the past while, we are absolutely committed to bringing to the House imminently a piece of legislation that is fit for purpose. We have, understandably, talked a lot about international law in these Chambers and making sure that the rule of law is respected. We will ensure a piece of legislation will come to the House, one that all parties will be able to

support. Some will say it will not go far enough, and I accept that now, based on their long-held political beliefs or involvement in the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement or whatever else. I have already received confirmation from my ministerial counterparts in countries such as Spain and Slovenia, within the European Union, and Norway, outside the European Union, that have said if we get this right, they will absolutely copy and paste it. Then we will be able to build a coalition across the western world to make sure the economic gains coming from those occupied Palestinian territories are not allowed to continue.

I would like to use my remaining three minutes to refer to events at an EU level. They are increasingly important over the coming days and weeks. Ireland strongly welcomes the proposals from the European Commission to suspend the core trade related provisions of the EU-Israel association agreement. The package also proposes sanctions on extremist Israeli Ministers and violent settlers as well as Hamas. Ireland supports all of these proposals. In addition, the Commission announced it was putting bilateral support to Israel on hold with the exception of supports to civil society and Yad Vashem. It is important that, while we rightly condemn and castigate from a height the actions of this Israeli Government and regime that is propelling the IDF into Gaza, unleashing pure hellfire on the people of Gaza, there are tens of thousands of people in Israel who oppose this action and are rightly outraged by the actions of their Government.

We have seen them on the streets of such cities as Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa as well as joining protests in Ireland, representing the community.

The proposals by the European Commission represent a significant step forward. For many in this House it seems like a micro step or mini-step, but those of us who have worked at a European Union level - Deputy Ó Murchú and I have spent considerable time engaging previously - will realise that in European terms, this is quite a large step forward. Ireland has consistently called for the EU to take concrete action in response to the egregious Israeli breaches of human rights and democratic principles. This proposal is an opportunity for the EU to demonstrate to its international partners, and crucially to its 350 million citizens, that it is ready to act in the face of the catastrophic situation in Gaza and to stand up for its core principles and respect for international law. In the next three weeks - I wish it were a shorter period - the entire Irish Government at every level will be working to build a coalition in the European Union to get a qualified majority of member states to vote to suspend elements of the trade agreement and to get to a unanimous decision to introduce sanctions.

I appeal on the floor of the House to all Members. All of us present are part of wider European networks. The left wing group Sinn Féin is part of has been consistent on this and I acknowledge that. Parties in the European Party of European Socialists and Democrats, including the Labour Party, those who are part of Renew Europe, the liberal alliance and with difficulty in my party, the European People's Party, need to work on our networks and our allies to get the qualified majority by 22 October. We have that opportunity and, by God, we have that responsibility.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 5.32 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 5.35 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 5.32 p.m. and resumed at 5.35 p.m.

Investment in Sport and Sporting Infrastructure: Statements

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Cuirim fáilte roimh an deis an t-eolas is deánaí a thabhairt don Teach faoi na pleananna forbartha atá againn don spórt agus táim ag súil le tuairimí na Dála a chloisteáil. I am glad to be here for these statements on investments in sport, a sector which is vital to our society both at local and national levels, and on the major sports events that Ireland hosts.

The community sport facilities fund, CSFF, is the primary means of providing Government funding to sport and community organisations at local, regional and national levels. The fund aims to foster an integrated and planned approach to the development of sports and physical recreation facilities and assists the purchase of non-personal sports equipment. The fund was previously known as the sports capital and equipment programme, which operated on an annual basis from 1998 to 2008. It resumed in 2012 with rounds in 2014, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2020 and 2023. As the programme has evolved, increasing amounts have been made available to support new or improved facilities. Over 19,000 projects have benefited from sports capital funding since 1998, bringing the total allocations in that time to over €1.4 billion. These grants have directly improved sports facilities in every village, town and city and I have been fortunate, as have Members across the House, to see many of these for myself in our parishes since I was appointed Minister of State in recent months.

The 2023 round of the CSFF received 3,211 applications and saw nearly €278 million allocated to 3,046 sports clubs and facilities, benefiting over 40 sports, as well as multisport facilities throughout the country. As in previous rounds, grants were available to voluntary, not-for profit sports clubs, community groups, national governing bodies, NGBs, and local authorities. Third level colleges, education and training boards, ETBs and schools could also apply for funding jointly with sports clubs or organisations. Under CSFF 2023, applicants for local projects could apply for up to €200,000, which was increased from the previous maximum grant of €150,000. Maintenance equipment grants were capped at €40,000 and equipment grants of over €70,000 are only awarded in exceptional circumstances such as to NGBs. The maximum valid grant available for projects deemed to be of regional significance was increased from €300,000 to €500,000.

The large scale sport infrastructure fund, LSSIF, was established on foot of the National Sports Policy 2018-2027, which was published in 2018. The aim of the fund is to provide Exchequer support for larger sports facility projects. These are projects where the Exchequer investment is greater than the maximum amount available under the CSFF. In some cases, these are projects where the primary objective is to increase active participation in sport. In other cases, these are large scale venues or stadia where the focus is more related to social participation and high-performance sport. The scheme has a particular focus on NGBs of sport and local authorities. New swimming pool projects are also considered.

The first allocations under the LSSIF were announced in January 2020 with €86 million awarded to 33 different projects at that time. Additional funding of €37.5 million was then allocated to 27 of these projects in December 2023, bringing the total awarded under this first round of funding under the fund to €124 million. The 2024 round of LSSIF received an unprecedented demand for funding, amounting to €665 million from 96 applications. Grants

totalling €173 million, benefiting 35 individual projects, were allocated under this second funding round in November last year. With this announcement, the cumulative investment from the LSSIF since 2020 now reaches €297 million. Since the inception of the fund, a number of outstanding facilities have opened to the public and it is plain to see that this benefits society. Projects of significance that have opened since the fund began include the linear walkway and playing fields project in County Meath, phase 1 of Walsh Park in Waterford, the Munster Technological University athletics track in Cork and the redevelopment of St. Conleth's GAA park in County Kildare.

Significant projects due to open shortly include the Connacht Rugby stadium, Munster Rugby Centre of Excellence, which will officially open this weekend and Askeaton Pool and Leisure Centre.

Before I turn to major sports events, I would first of all like to touch on the related topic of sports diplomacy. In May this year, I was delighted to launch with the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan and the Tánaiste, the first international sports diplomacy framework for Ireland. The framework sets out a vision for Ireland's approach to international sports diplomacy and recognises the unique power of sport to bring different nations and cultures together and to build connections between communities around the world. It is designed to establish Ireland as a sporting hub and to help build our reputation as a premier sporting nation, while fostering opportunities for international partnerships, cultural exchange and diaspora engagement.

The goals of the framework are to elevate Ireland's international reputation as a sporting nation; to promote and increase a positive awareness of Ireland overseas to use sport, including our traditional sports, to foster our diaspora's connection to Ireland; to support international sporting partnerships and co-operation in line with Ireland's values and interests; and to maximise the economic benefits of our engagement in, and hosting of, international sports. The framework commits to developing a sports diplomacy strategy. My Department and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade have established a steering group to drive this forward.

It is in this context that I note that major international sports events can play a key role in increasing sporting participation, encouraging domestic and international tourism and promoting Ireland as a destination for education and business opportunities. They present a wonderful opportunity to showcase Ireland and our world-class tourism and sports infrastructure to Europe and the wider world. This was evidenced just last Sunday when Ireland hosted the first-ever American National Football League regular season game in Croke Park. The event was another endorsement of Ireland's capability to host world-class events and further established Ireland as a premier destination for major international sporting events. It is estimated that the American football game last weekend attracted more than 30,000 international visitors to Ireland and I look forward to receiving the post-event economic assessment soon. Anyone that was around the city or around the country subsequently would certainly have felt the impact of the game and the many visitors that came from abroad to attend it.

The pre-event economic assessment, commissioned by Fáilte Ireland, projected that the event would generate more than €64 million in additional economic activity for Ireland and the headline outcome data will be available to us in the coming weeks. The event provided global exposure for Dublin and Ireland with the live broadcast audience for the game likely to have

exceeded 5 million viewers in the US alone. I saw figures in online newspapers today indicating it had the largest viewership for an overseas American football game so far. The game was also broadcast live in Ireland and the UK and social media content from both teams and the NFL featured very strongly across a range of platforms in the lead-in to the game, as well as on game day itself.

The hosting of this event aligns strongly with the programme for Government commitment to "strengthen our political, cultural, economic and trade relationship with the US at all levels". Major sports events offer unique opportunities to forge new ties, strengthen existing ones and are ideal for developing partnerships and promoting Ireland. This is very much proven by the powerful bonds that are being created by, for example, the College Football Classic football game, which is now much more than a game and fosters widespread connections in business, education and culture when those events take place each August. Similar relationships are being developed through the hosting of other events and that is among the reasons the Government continues to support the hosting of major sports events in Ireland and to explore further hosting opportunities. This is demonstrated by the support being provided for a number of events such as the very successful College Football Classic series, which has been running annually since 2022. The series delivers strong all-island tourism benefits with attendees visiting every corner of the country before and after the games. The first-ever NFL regular season game at Croke Park last Sunday when the Pittsburgh Steelers hosted the Minnesota Vikings and the UEFA Europa League final that took place in Dublin last year brought a significant economic boost to the country, with over 54% of attendees coming from abroad and a substantial global viewership of 49.5 million. This final gives us a taste of what the UEFA Euro 2028 championship will be like when we host games in Dublin in three years. This will be the largest sporting event Ireland has ever jointly staged. It will also be the largest single international sporting event held in Ireland. Ireland will also jointly host the T20 Cricket World Cup with the United Kingdom in 2030 and I expect this to be a real "all island" event. The events of the weekend just gone, with Shane Lowry and Rory McIlroy spearheading Europe's victory in the Ryder Cup in New York, and we were also represented by young John Doyle from Cork in the Junior Ryder Cup, were a clear reminder that Ireland's hosting of this huge event in Limerick in 2027 is just around the corner. I will touch on that in some more detail.

Ireland's hosting of the 2027 Ryder Cup in Adare, County Limerick will be truly special. It will be the centenary hosting of this biennial match and it will deliver very strong returns for Ireland in terms of economy, long-term tourism benefits and business and other transatlantic networking opportunities. Last week, I had the pleasure of being in New York to support the European team as it readied for the drama that we all saw on our TV screens over the weekend. While I returned home on Thursday before the competitive action started, the visit afforded me the opportunity to gain first-hand experience of the scale, standard, benefits and logistical challenge of hosting this major sporting event. It also allowed me to witness the contribution Ireland has to offer on the international golf stage and to promote Ireland as the next host of the Ryder Cup with the assistance of Tourism Ireland. Local service delivery stakeholders representing organisations such as An Garda Síochána, Limerick City and County Council and the National Transport Authority, who attended an observer programme to better understand what is required to deliver an event of the scale of the Ryder Cup, were also in New York. These stakeholders will take their learnings away and plan for the successful hosting of the event in Adare Manor in 2027.

The Government and the European Tour have agreed a financial support package that involves investment in Irish golf tour events, marketing for the Ryder Cup itself and golf in Ireland generally. To strengthen the professional game in Ireland in the run-up to the event, additional financial support of €8.5 million is also being provided for professional golf events, the Irish Open and the Challenge and Legends tour events scheduled to take place annually in Ireland up to, and including, 2027. Although the competition is played between Europe and the USA, the Ryder Cup always attracts interest from wherever golf is played throughout the world. As the event in 2027 gets closer, work is under way to ensure a smooth delivery. One of our aims for the project is to secure long-term legacy benefits for the Limerick region and golf in Ireland as a whole.

Golf has a very important role in sport for Ireland. As Deputies may know, Ireland is an island paradise for golfers with an astonishing one third of all the world's natural links courses and some iconic parkland courses as well. Adare Manor is an example of the world-class golf courses that can be found throughout Ireland, where over 400 courses are dotted throughout our scenic landscape. Events like the Ryder Cup help increase participation in the sport and will only strengthen what is a growing sport in Ireland. In 2019, for example, Ireland welcomed 237,000 golf tourists to the country. Those visits generated around €230 million for the economy. Those golf tourists accounted for over 2.2 million bed nights in our hospitality sector. International golf tourism is worth more than €300 million to the economy. Fáilte Ireland research shows that a golf visitor typically spends three times more than the average leisure tourist.

The Ryder Cup is one of the most prestigious sporting events in the world and the staging of the biennial tournament at Adare Manor will deliver another major boost to the appeal of Ireland as a world-class golf and tourist destination. Over the coming years, Tourism Ireland will roll out an extensive programme of promotions in key international golf markets to leverage the tourism benefits of the event. As part of hosting the Ryder Cup in 2027 and other possible major golf events in the future, my Department, in partnership with Sport Ireland and Golf Ireland, has developed a comprehensive golf legacy programme created to gain awareness of the benefits of the sport and to increase participation.

Driving this work is a Ryder Cup Government steering group, which facilitates a central government approach to resolving any issue which may arise. This group is made up of all Government stakeholders, along with Golf Ireland, which have roles to play in the successful hosting of the event. The group is chaired by the former Secretary General to the Government and current ambassador to Great Britain, Martin Fraser.

I want to touch on some key sports policy areas that will be of interest to all Members. Increasing participation in sport and ensuring accessibility of sport for all is a key priority for the Government, as it is for people in communities throughout the country. In this regard, I want to highlight that the rate of active sports participation among adults is now 49%, the highest it has ever been. It is also heartening to note that the participation gap between men and women is now below 3%. This progress is due in no small part to substantial Government investment in sport over recent years. In 2018, the national sports policy committed to doubling funding in sport to more than €220 million by 2027, and I am very pleased that this target has been reached two years ahead of schedule. Budget 2025 had an allocation of over €230 million

for sport, and I hope to increase that again, given demands for specific additional funding across sport for some key initiatives and the fact of an increasing population.

Core funding of our national governing bodies for sport, local sports partnerships and other funded sporting bodies has also grown strongly. The figure of €31 million in core funding in 2025 is a 76% increase on 2018, when the national sports policy was published. This increased investment will assist in ensuring the long-term sustainability of our sporting organisations, and will enable the sector to continue to deliver increased opportunities for people to participate in a wide variety of sports. Most importantly, it empowers people on a volunteer basis in communities throughout the country to make sport what it is today. There is no doubt, and it is important to acknowledge in the Chamber today, that this is the core lifeblood of sporting participation throughout the country.

Day in and day out, people take time out of their evenings to participate in clubs, train young people and ensure the facilities for which they fund-raise, and which the Government significantly works to enable them to develop, are utilised in a way that delivers the outcome we all want, which is to see people enjoy life, be active in life and be healthy with their wellbeing enhanced as a result. I acknowledge and pay tribute to everybody throughout the country who tonight, this evening, every day this week, on Saturday morning, Saturday afternoon and next Sunday will ensure that so many people throughout the country have the opportunity to participate in sport and benefit from it, as a result of them being so generous with their time and their talents.

In terms of high-performance sport, we have allocated €27 million across Sport Ireland's high-performance programmes for 2025, including €4.5 million in direct support for athletes through the carding scheme. This is in line with the Government's target of delivering €30 million per annum for high performance sport by 2027. We need to up our ambition in this regard, given the challenges of competing in far-distant Olympiads in Los Angeles 2028 and Brisbane 2032, and we will not be found wanting in this regard. For the Paris Olympics cycle, which ran from 2021 to 2024, the Government provided a record level of investment of approximately €89 million towards high-performance sport. This was a substantial increase on the €59 million investment in the previous Tokyo cycle. We very much saw this feed through in the performance of our athletes in all disciplines.

Recently, it was wonderful to see our first medal in field sports at the World Athletics Championships, with Kate O'Connor in the heptathlon. In recent weeks we have also seen success in many other sports, from rowing to athletics. That is something we want to see continue, and that we encourage through investing in athletes to be at the very top level internationally, building on the opportunity, which is key, for them to start off the journey at community level and local club level.

Finances are only one part of the puzzle. Proper support for dual careers for athletes is also really important. Over the past two decades, there has been an increase in the number of high-performance athletes engaging in third level education. The short- and long-term value of gaining an academic qualification in advance of athletic retirement has been well-documented.

The Government is committed to a sport for all approach, aimed at ensuring that all persons can partake equally in sport and physical activity. This commitment is reaffirmed in the programme for Government and is reflected in Sport Ireland's Women in Sport policy. In

support of this commitment, we are investing €4 million this year to fund projects and initiatives across a wide range of sports and to deliver outcomes where women have an equal opportunity to achieve their full potential, while enjoying a lifelong involvement in sport.

We are also seeing a consistent increase in female representation at sport leadership level year on year, with the overall percentage of women on the boards of sports organisations standing at 48% today, compared to just 24% in 2019. It is important to have visible examples of leadership in both the arena and in the boardroom.

Disability in sport continues to be a key focus, and support for those with disabilities to participate in sport is important to me and the Department. A total of €10 million has also been allocated to sport under the Dormant Accounts Fund for 2025, and this funding will, in particular, drive inclusion, participation and access to sporting opportunities for those with disabilities. Sport Ireland's recently published Statement of Commitment and Action to Disability Inclusion in Sport, and the appointment of a new disability in sport lead, will be key drivers in meeting our targets for increased participation among those with a long-term illness or a disability over the coming years. Swimming continues to be one of the most popular sports and recreational activities for people with a disability. The national swimming strategy, published in August last year, is an example to all sports as to how we can develop a suite of actions to increase access for people with disabilities and improve the culture of inclusion.

I thank the House for the opportunity and for scheduling this debate today. I very much look forward to the contributions of Members. It is important to each and every Member, many of whom participate in sport, and all understand the value of it. Collectively we have seen massive progress over the past generation. There remains much untapped potential, which collectively we must all strive to ensure is achieved. I look forward to the contributions of Members and to working with them in the time ahead to try to build on the progress we have seen in recent times. Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): We now move to contributions from Members. Sinn Féin has 15 minutes, which is being divided between a number of speakers. First up is Deputy Joanna Byrne.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: Last week, when I saw that statements on sport were on the agenda for this week I was particularly pleased. When I saw the change to the much longer title, with a much narrower focus, for these statements, the realisation dawned that the Government benches were going to use this as an opportunity to be their own cheerleaders, focus on the positive and ignore the bigger picture and the significant challenges our sporting communities face. That said, I welcome the opportunity to highlight the positive effects that grant systems, such as the LSSIF, CSSF and sports capital programme, can have in our communities.

Sport brings people together by creating common good, fostering teamwork and friendship and breaking down social barriers, but sport needs adequate facilities to allow greatness to thrive and hearts to shine. In the last round of the large-scale sports infrastructure fund there were 96 applications with 35 being successful. Significant funding such as this is seismic for many sporting organisations throughout the entire spectrum of sport. It can alter the trajectory of a club for decades to come. That said, for those which are not successful it can also send clubs and organisations on a downward spiral with no alternative hope for the immediate future,

be it to expand their facilities which, in turn, opens so many opportunities, or whatever their ambitions may have been to preserve, protect and enhance their club for generations to come.

In last year's round of applications in my constituency Drogheda United and Louth GAA were both unsuccessful in their applications. I know first-hand the impact a setback such as this can have to development plans, morale and internal harmony. This is why it is crucial that there needs to be more investment in every one of these funding streams in next week's budget and, in particular, the LSSIF.

Despite these funding setbacks for infrastructure, both clubs defied the odds and on the pitch brought so much silverware home to the wee county throughout this year.

We had the Droogs with their FAI Cup win, the Louth GAA senior footballers with the Delaney Cup, the Louth ladies with the all-Ireland junior trophy, the Louth under-20s with the Leinster cup and the Louth hurlers with the NHL division 4 title. Persistence can change failure into extraordinary achievement. Both Drogheda United and Louth GAA, along with the 59 other unsuccessful applicants to the large-scale sports infrastructure fund, are keen and eager to persist and to apply again. With additional funding channelled into these streams, the Minister of State holds the power to allow these sporting clubs to achieve their aspirations and, in turn, to empower their sports stars to reach for the stars.

Both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael made commitments in their manifestoes to increase the betting tax from 2% to 3% and to use this funding to invest in sport. That has not been done yet. An increase of one percentage point in this levy would have raised approximately €50 million in desperately needed funding for Irish sport. Sinn Féin is committed to investing in sport, striving to increase participation and making our population healthier, stronger and more robust. The Minister of State can fund more projects and make more dreams come true if he just implements this simple measure. It is an easy win for him.

It would be remiss of me not to impress upon the Minister of State today the importance of League of Ireland academy funding in next week's budget. League of Ireland clubs have been waiting on Government funding for their academies for some years. A recent Double Pass audit of League of Ireland academies funded by this Government found that our academies lag significantly behind their international competitors in terms of full-time staff and player contact hours. Significant investment in infrastructure and personnel is required to meet standards. The audit highlighted a deficiency in full-time roles, a lack of indoor facilities and late-starting women's academies as major issues, leading the FAI to request €8 million in annual Government funding for academy improvements. While the audit is a crucial first step in establishing an academy certification model, the expectation is that this will unlock future investment. As a result, the League of Ireland academies investment proposal was submitted to the Minister of State this week in the FAI's pre-budget submission. It has taken on board feedback from the Department and Sport Ireland as well as the results of the Double Pass audit and revises the ask from last year to focus on a phased approach. In this initial phase, the proposal is for investment of €4.5 million per annum for two years, which will deliver 81 new full-time academy jobs, a women's under-15 programme for all clubs, athletic development testing equipment for all clubs, a centralised player platform to track all League of Ireland academy players and a quality assurance and audit process for all clubs.

While I acknowledge everything the Minister of State outlined in his opening statement and commend the strides that have been made so far, it is fair to say that, while much has been done, there is much more to do. I expect to see League of Ireland academy funding front and centre in next week's budget, along with enhanced funding for the LSSIF and other sporting grants to continue the positive effects the Minister of State outlined here this evening. It is not only I who expects this; nearly every house in this country has somebody involved in sport of some sort. They too will be watching in earnest to ensure the Minister of State is fulfilling his role and supporting the growth and sustainability of sport in this country.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Before I begin, I will give credit to Erica Stoll, who conducted herself with immense dignity, poise and grace during the Ryder Cup in the face of the abuse she experienced while her husband, Rory McIlroy, was playing. That abuse has no place in any sport whatsoever. It would be remiss of us not to acknowledge that here today. It was wholly inappropriate and those responsible for it need to take a long hard look at themselves in the mirror and figure out what exactly they were trying to achieve.

Decent sports facilities should not be luxuries because they are the foundation for community health and opportunity. We all know the headline figures but, while any funding is always welcome, the story beneath the headline exposes unfairness in some areas being consistently under-resourced in comparison to others. Earlier this year, Storm Éowyn took down the wall of Longford Town Football Club's stadium. That wall stayed down for months. No funding came through from Government or UEFA. In the end, the club paid for the repair with donations and local goodwill. That is just not sustainable. It is not fair to the communities who give so much to the game that they are continually asked to dig deeper and deeper. We must do better.

Not too far away from that stadium, Mostrim United in Edgeworthstown is one of the fastest growing clubs in Longford with some 150 children playing every week. However, those kids have to travel to Granard because there is no proper astro pitch for them to train on in their own home town. That is the real story. It is about those young players being left behind and the message that is being sent to them. This is happening against a fall in participation in sports. Teachers told me this week of concerns at school level. We are losing children at these stages, when activity, belonging and teamwork matter most. We should be trying to keep them engaged.

We have been talking about League of Ireland academies, pathways to elite performance and the important and vital work they do but without facilities and grassroots supports, who will be taking up those pathways? I genuinely fear that we will expose further disenfranchisement among rural and poorer communities. Do we want to keep patching walls when they fall and relying on locals and volunteers to dig ever deeper or do we want to invest properly in sport, pitches, facilities and the future of our young people? I know what my answer is.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I have raised with the Minister of State previously the need for a publicly owned swimming pool in Loughrea, County Galway. As he will be aware, this is something the community in Loughrea has been seeking for a very long time, more than 30 years at this stage. There is a new committee to work on this in place in Loughrea and I am pleased to be part of it. It is making great efforts to progress this. There is work ongoing to

get a feasibility study completed and to move things along so that a funding application can be made down the line. There is a huge need for this in Loughrea. It is a growing town with a population of over 6,000 people and a large rural hinterland. Of course, a project like this would bring huge benefits to everybody in the community, particularly children, older people and people with a disability.

The challenge will be to get this project shovel-ready and in a position to access capital funding. Significant funding is needed for the initial stages of project development because, as it stands, the LSSIF requires a huge contribution from the local authority and does not assist with project development, the purchase of a site and so on. As I have raised with the Minister of State previously, that is a particular challenge in County Galway because our local authority has serious funding issues. Galway County Council has made a specific request to the Government for €3 million to assist it in developing proposals for swimming pools. I ask the Minister of State to consider this request and to take into account the funding issues experienced by local authorities like Galway County Council when he is designing the next round of this scheme. The people of Loughrea and surrounding areas cannot miss out on a facility like this because of Galway County Council's underfunding. They are entitled to the same level of facilities as people elsewhere.

I also ask the Minister of State to ensure that funding is provided for League of Ireland academies in next week's budget. This is vital to protect the game in this country and to realise its full potential.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: Every community in Ireland knows the value of sport. It is essential for our physical health, our mental well-being and strengthening community cohesion. Countless reports show the enormous social and health returns on every euro invested in sport. While the Minister of State and his colleagues are quick to jump on the bandwagon and praise the success of our athletes, they do so with empty words. The reality is that Ireland is near the bottom of the table for investment in sport and recreation among our EU counterparts. This Government builds up the hype with announcements of new funding but, in reality, that money is locked away from the communities that need it. Since 2019, out of €124 million allocated through the large-scale sports infrastructure fund, a mere €32 million has been drawn down. This Government has a clear inability to handle money. With one hand, it locks away funding for vital sports projects and, with the other, it spends hundreds of thousands on a single bike shed. That same money could have transformed a sports facility in Carlow or Kilkenny.

Another prime example was the decision by the Minister of State's colleagues not to draw down millions in EU Brexit adjustment funding to make them available to Irish football. This could have supported the development of our own domestic football academies post Brexit. The European Commission stated that our League of Ireland clubs would have been prime candidates for this EU funding but the Government did not even bother to apply. A clear step change is needed in how the Minister of State and his Department view sport. It cannot continue to be yet another afterthought. Sport needs to be viewed as an investment in the well-being of our society rather than as a cost.

Deputy Mark Ward: Collinstown Football Club in my area is right at the heart of my community. There are 28 teams with over 400 players.

Since 2019, it has been waiting for a dressing room from South Dublin County Council through a sports capital grant. Nothing happened until 2024 and the club had to apply for more money because of the delay which meant costs had spiralled. This football team, which caters for boys, girls, men's and women's teams, has no dressing room. Some 400 players are without a dressing room. It is simply not good enough. South Dublin County Council is prioritising two other projects in the next while, but they have been delayed. Collinstown Football Club will not be provided with a dressing room until the other projects have been completed. There is delay after delay. Sports capital grants are welcome, but they must be put in place in a timely manner.

I am an avid League of Ireland supporter. I am never happier than when I am in Richmond Park cheering on St. Pat's at the weekend. I am a season ticket holder and I want to take this opportunity to wish St. Pat's all the best in the League of Ireland semi-final on Friday night against Cork City. The standard of football in the League of Ireland has improved dramatically over the years, but the clubs need more help. It is crucial that the League of Ireland gets funding for its academies in the upcoming budget, not only to protect the game but also to preserve football for future generations so that my kids can go and watch the standard of League of Ireland improve year after year.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Deputy Ward is never happier than when he is following St. Pat's but I hope he is not too happy on Friday night. Best of luck to City.

The growth in the League of Ireland is a welcome development in recent years. More and more people are interested in and are going to games. In terms of the League of Ireland and our national team, we need to examine the issue of academies. It is not for nothing that we are not in the place we want to be in terms of international football. The two are connected and we need to ensure the investment happens.

There is increased interest across the State in swimming following the success of Daniel Wiffen and so on. The infrastructure in our cities and towns is nowhere near good enough in terms of access. People are waiting a very long time to get swimming lessons for their kids. In the vast majority of cases, they are privately provided through hotels, private centres and so on. There are 17 leisure centres in Belfast City Council's area, but only three in Cork city. Belfast is about 70% larger than Cork, but it is not five times bigger. There is a huge discrepancy which I believe is replicated right across the State. We need to examine not only Cork but the situation right across the board in terms of the provision of publicly provided leisure centres. Clubs in Togher and Ballyphehane will be looking at applications for sports capital grants when they are released, but we also need to be looking of the municipal provision of sports facilities because we are way behind other jurisdictions in that regard.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): The Deputies from the Labour Party are dividing their time.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: Sport has always been more than just a game. It has the power to unite people, create memories, give us moments of pride that last a lifetime and improve health outcomes. I was a soccer referee for 15 years, which was good for physical and mental health to some degree.

Over the past year, Ireland has enjoyed some truly great sporting highs. Last weekend Shane Lowry played a key role as Europe clinched an historic win over the US in the Ryder Cup. We watched Kate O'Connor make history with silver at the World Athletics Championships. We cheered as our rowers struck double gold at the World Rowing Championships in Shanghai. These achievements remind us of what sport brings to a community and a nation. It brings us together, either through shared joy or shared heartbreak, and it builds lasting friendships.

Whether it is a child's first day playing for a club, a parent or guardian going to a wet pitch to cheer them on or a local club volunteer who is always on hand to help, sport connects us. Even those who say they are not sports fans will always take a peek when Ireland is playing or an Irish athlete is standing on the world stage about to represent the country because they feel the sense of pride and hope that it brings. While the benefits are clear, the truth is that we must do more.

In Dublin Fingal West, we have been lucky in funding streams over the past while for projects that are coming through like the Lusk Sports Hub, which we hope will begin next year, Rush Athletic Football Club's new all-weather pitch and, recently enough, the swimming pool in Balbriggan. Let us be clear; it is nowhere near enough. The population is booming across Dublin Fingal West, including Rush, Lusk, Skerries, Balbriggan and Ballyboughal which have all moved from being villages to significantly sized towns over the past 20 years. Rush Athletic Football Club has not had a new grass pitch in the past 30 years, yet the population has tripled during that time. We need proper investment in community hubs so that people of all ages can access and rely on them. Last week, I received emails from students in St. Joseph's inquiring about better sporting facilities for the area, many of whom play for Lusk United or Rush Athletic Football Club.

Ireland spends over €1 billion year trying to tackle obesity, but only €230 million on sports and recreation. The imbalance makes no sense if we are serious about public health, stronger communities and real opportunity. Funding for sport and recreation must match those words. The Labour Party believes sport is about inclusion, equality and integration. Every euro invested pays back many times over in health and community well-being. That is why we want a community sports facility guarantee so that every town of over 5,000 people has a multisports facility with pitches, pools and halls for communities to use. We also need inclusive facilities with proper changing rooms for women and girls and accessible spaces for people with disabilities.

The Labour Party wants sport and fitness to be affordable for everybody. That is why in budget 2026 we are calling for a social inclusion fund to support free or reduced memberships for gyms and sports clubs, as well as tax relief on fees and a lower VAT rate on gyms and activity classes. If we are serious about tackling health inequalities, budget 2026 must invest in making sport and fitness accessible to all. Sport is not just about medals; it is about health, inclusion, community and opportunity, but this takes proper investment at community level. The population in Dublin Fingal West is expanding significantly and is continuing to expand. We need to start thinking about this in terms of building communities, and a social inclusion fund is a step towards this.

Deputy Mark Wall: You learn something new about your colleagues every day in this House. Every euro spent on sports funding is money well spent. At a time when there is a

housing emergency, the Government must concentrate on the provision of the largest number of houses possible, but as I have said before in the House, this cannot be done without the proper social infrastructure, including sport. By investing in sport as one of the pillars of any social infrastructure, this will allow new houses to become inclusive communities, something which must become a target for all of us in the House.

A growing problem for many sports clubs that I deal with is the lack of additional playing fields. I have used the example of my hometown of Athy in the House, where many clubs, including Gaelic football, soccer and rugby, are struggling to cater for the growing number of teams they have given their current facilities. Unfortunately, the local camogie club, catering for over 300 young women playing that great game, has no facilities of its own and is dependent on the goodwill of the other local GAA clubs to train and play their matches.

Thankfully, we have a solution in Athy. As a former county councillor, I, along with my then colleagues, identified 13 acres of land that could be designed as local authority playing pitches and provide a solution to the growing demand from all these clubs, the local camogie club in particular. The current elected representatives in the area, including my colleagues, Councillors Aoife Breslin and Mark Leigh, have progressed this idea and allocated some LPT funding to the project. This would be an ideal pilot project for the Government to get involved with and is one I hope the Minister of State will support. Like Athy, many other towns in Kildare and throughout the State have the same problem. The Government, through the local authorities, now needs to lead in the provision of additional playing pitches through investment, the sports capital programme and the large-scale investment programme.

We need also to continue to invest in stadiums in this country. I have seen the difference in investment in my county grounds has made. The Minister of State mentioned Cedral St. Conleth's Park in Newbridge. The GAA is so important to our communities and our county grounds should reflect the pride that so many of us have in our county teams.

While League of Ireland teams continue to do us proud in Europe, some clubs have to switch to another stadium to host their home matches. Given the money now available to these clubs in Europe, the Government and private industry must look to investing in more of the stadiums in the League of Ireland.

Our successes on the international stage must be reflected in the facilities on offer for our elite athletes and those many aspiring athletes. The continued development of Abbotstown and ensuring we have the facilities for all sports to train and develop their athletes must be the ambition of this Government and all future governments. As the film stated, "Build it and they will come". The benefit to this country of participation in sport cannot be taken lightly and we must continue to see the investment at every possible opportunity.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I will be extremely parochial with my contribution. We are a year on now since the general election. Large-scale sport infrastructure funding was granted to Cork County Council, North Cork Athletics Club and Mallow Athletic Club for an athletics track at Carhookeal in Mallow. Speaking last year, the Minister of State, Deputy Thomas Byrne, said the project would be developed in the short term on a use it or lose it basis. One year later, nothing has progressed. This is not the short term. It is my understanding that all documentation requested by the Minister of State's Department has now been submitted by the applicants. There are now serious concerns in relation to the viability of the funding and

whether it is still on the table as an option, and in relation to the gateways being put before the local authority and both the athletics clubs.

I commend the local authority and both athletics clubs on what they have done to try to progress this project. It will be a significant one for the area and is a development so badly needed in what is a rundown centre. It was previously the GAA centre in Mallow. It is important that we progress this project as quickly as possible because there is extreme disappointment out there. Before the general election last year, a fantastic announcement was made by the Government of €2 million in grant funding. Ministers went on the radio and said this was going to be provided in the short term. We are now a year on and we have not seen one single thing done about it. Barriers are being put up concerning the amount of paperwork that needs to be submitted by the applicants. I ask the Minister of State and his Department to progress this project as quickly as possible. I ask the Minister of State to engage with me and my office in relation to getting a letter from the Department that I could produce to the members of athletics clubs and to members of the community that would show his commitment to the project for the Mallow athletics track in the short term.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I start by supporting Deputy Kenny's call for clarity for that project in Mallow. To be fair, the funding announcement was made. I do not think the funding is in jeopardy at all. I do not want this to turn into a negative story because the funding is still there. My understanding is that extra information was requested and it has now been submitted. It is now just a matter of sign-off. We would appreciate an update from the Minister of State. To be fair, Councillors Pat Hayes and Gearóid Murphy have been in contact with me about this project as well.

I will say something positive initially. I know it might be said that is surprising, but anyway. Sports capital funding is probably the most meaningful thing I have been involved with as a public representative over the last six years. I think its ability to deliver projects in every community is unmatched in terms of other projects the Government delivers. I can list off a whole range of projects that have been successful. I do not think there was a refusal in the last round for my entire constituency. I am sorry, there might have been one. Basically, anybody that applied, ticked all the boxes and provided the appropriate information got funding. The Minister of State's predecessor is to be commended on that, and when the current Minister of State does his own cycle of grants next year, I hope it will be equally successful.

I will make one point in relation to the LSSIF. It is something I have spoken to the Minister of State about previously. I will not mention any specifics, but the term "use it or lose it" was used by the previous speaker. We have a project, which I will not name, that was allocated €2 million back in 2020 or 2019. It has still not been drawn down and the organisation continues to sit on that money while there are other viable projects for that organisation to look at in terms of delivering local sports facilities. In future, I think some kind of a time limit must be placed on these LSSIF grants in particular. They are major projects and involve big money. At the end of the day, people get high expectations when they see these announcements. They want to see the projects delivered. I think this approach is worthy of consideration in the next round of the LSSIF, which will probably be in 2027.

On sports capital, we need to have a major focus in the next round on multisport applications. I think they give us the most bang for our buck. I am dealing with many

organisations now, including in Carrignavar, that will be doing a combined CCIF and, hopefully, LSSIF project in the future to deliver a massive multisport project. The emphasis needs to go on delivering those projects above all others because they have the ability to reach a wider audience.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the debate. Investing in sport and sports infrastructure is one of the wisest choices a state can make. It pays back in terms of public health, safer communities and confidence in young people, a confidence they carry into schools and their working lives. In Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, we are already seeing the benefits. Our area received €1.5 million under the community sports facilities fund in 2024 to improve council facilities at Loughlinstown, Meadowbrook and Stonebridge Road in Shankill. Of course, significant funding was also provided to Monkstown Boxing Club for its wonderful clubhouse in Mounttown. Some clubs, though, are still in need of facilities, like Pearse Rovers FC, Granada FC, Shankill GAA and the Olympic Centre of Excellence in the harbour, which the Minister of State has visited.

Last November, €4.6 million was allocated under the LSSIF for a new facility at Hyde Park in Dalkey, to be shared between Dalkey United and Cuala GAA. That is a flagship project with real local dividends, but success brings pressure and pitches in Dublin are at breaking point. Demand outstrips supply most evenings and weekends, and clubs juggle waiting lists, shorten sessions and undertake long trips across the city and county. If we want participation to grow, we need more playable hours, floodlighting, all-weather upgrades, safer routes to and from facilities and a shared use agreement with schools and colleges on other facilities. Equal access matters too. Girls' teams and disability sports need guaranteed peak time too and not the leftover slots.

Looking ahead, I encourage every club to get ready for the next round of funding under the community sport facility fund call in 2026. Obviously, they should know that shovel-ready projects win all the time. It would help if the Minister of State's Department could publish an indicative timeline and a short guide on how to be ready for smaller clubs so they are not left behind. Can the Minister of State indicate when the next round of the LSSIF will open? We also need a mid-tier stream of grants to bridge the gap between the small grants and funding for stadium-scale projects. With that, we can relieve pitch pressures, widen participation and keep our young people active, connected and thriving.

Deputy John Connolly: A number of Deputies have noted the recent sporting achievements of many Irish athletes. I take the opportunity to congratulate Fiona Murtagh, a Galway native, who was successful in the World Rowing Championships in the single sculls grade. She is an Olympian. I think this may be her second world title, but it is certainly a notable achievement and deserves congratulations.

I echo the sentiments of many speakers about how advantageous and beneficial this programme is to communities in terms of the availability and the significant improvements made in the quality and quantity of sporting facilities in communities across the country. It is money well spent. The fact that the community has to come up with resources itself embellishes the scheme and generates a sense of community surrounding a project. This is also welcome.

Also welcome, of course, is the increased participation in sport and the increase in the variety of sports now available to children. In my youth, what was offered was quite limited. There was football, soccer, and perhaps rugby and hurling. Beyond that, though, sport really was not an option for many people. The variety of sports now available for young people is certainly something I think this scheme has helped to create. It is beneficial for all young people and for people of every age group. I share Deputy Devlin's sentiment: it would be good to know when the next iteration of the process will open and if we can get that information, it would help.

The new primary school curriculum doubles the teaching time provided for PE. While most people will welcome that change, we must recognise that many schools do not have adequate facilities for teaching PE. Certainly, very few schools have indoor facilities of the standard required, and many schools have very limited outdoor facilities. More modern schools have facilities, but older schools do not. I will make a point about the next iteration of this process.

As part of the criteria, it should be an advantage for your project if you will provide access to your local primary schools to use the facility at no charge. If we could include that in the criteria, it would be beneficial.

We need to examine the charging regime the local authorities that have availed of this scheme are employing for the use of those facilities by the community groups who use them. Anecdotally, I have heard that many of those groups are paying a lot of money to use those facilities. Those facilities have been grant-aided by the Government. An examination of that is necessary.

The programme for Government commits the Government to an "audit of sports facilities to address shortages in areas underserved including towns with populations over 1,500." We should progress that. Many people have mentioned where there are certain locations within their constituencies that do not have adequate facilities. We should pinpoint those.

In the past, there used to be a rapid top-up for the sports capital grant. I am not sure if that came from the Minister of State's Department or the Department of community. Of course, that helped to develop facilities in disadvantaged communities. We should look at trying to bring that back.

On a local point, the Minister of State met a group regarding an LSSIF grant in Galway. We might discuss that again. It relates to the aquatic centre in Knocknacarra.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I praise the very considerable investment in sport that has been made by this and the previous Government and commend the Minister of State and his officials on the co-operation with local sports groups on the sports capital scheme and the LSSIF.

In reviewing both the sports capital scheme and the LSSIF, I will make a number of comments. It is essential, as colleagues have said, that where sporting codes are sharing facilities, that will be rewarded. Facilities must have equal access for men and women, for boys and girls, but I would also ask in the next round that particular regard would be had to recognising applications that ensure increased applications by those with a disability or by those who are neurodivergent. It is important within all our communities that sport be inclusive.

It is essential as well that we find mechanisms that will allow clubs and organisations that do not have traditional access to land or facilities ways that they can do that because this is a huge barrier for many clubs. I am particularly thinking about boxing clubs that do not have a home. Like colleagues, I think that partnership with schools and, as Deputy Devlin has mentioned, that mid-tier of funding between sports capital and LSSIF should be considered.

I praise the support that has been given in north Wexford for the development of the east-coast sporting hub, located north of Gorey town. It is a multisport facility. The first phase will fund Gorey Cricket Club, Gorey Hockey Club and Croghan Athletics to have homes there. The second phase, which we hope will be funded under the next round of the LSSIF, will provide facilities for Gorey Cycling Club and basketball. It is a showcase example of a partnership between a local authority and a number of sporting codes to be able to deliver a multisport facility. It is a model.

I want to raise also the question of sporting facilities in Arklow. Wicklow did not receive any funding under the LSSIF. I have been assured by Wicklow County Council that under the next round, it will be prioritising the development of sporting facilities in Arklow, including the Coral indoor sports hall and the facilities around the building. What is critical there is the need for a new running track for St. Benedict's athletics club. As the Minister of State might know, Arklow is the home of Ronnie Delany, who was Ireland's gold-medal winner over 1,500 m in the Melbourne 1956 Olympics. There are many great runners in the community but they do not have an adequate athletics track. In the next round of the LSSIF, as Wicklow did not get any funding, I would hope that could be prioritised.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Dar ndóigh, tá tairbhe iontach dearfach ag baint le hinfeistiú ama, airgid agus fuinnimh in aon spórt. Tá an tairbhe sin le feiscint i saol daoine óga, ina gcuid oideachais, sa tsláinte atá acu agus, go háirithe sa lá atá inniu, ina meabhairshláinte. Tá sé le feiscint chomh maith sa phobal áitiúil i gcoitinne. Tá ardú meanman i gceist chomh maith nuair atá an fhoireann áitiúil nó an fhoireann náisiúnta ag dul chun cinn. Caithfidimid déanamh cinnte de gur féidir linn a bheith san iomaíocht ag an leibhéal sin. Ní tharlaíonn sé sin gan infheistiú ceart agus cuí ag an leibhéal is ísle. Is féidir linn i bhfad Éireann níos mó a dhéanamh leis an bpota airgid atá againn chun a dhéanamh cinnte de go bhfuil an réimse is leithne daoine i gceist agus go bhfuil siadsan ag fáil tairbhe as. Mar shampla, i mo cheantar féin, cén fáth nach bhfuil rian ar an bpáirc imeartha atá geallta do na Saoirsí? Where is the complex for the Sporting Liberties, the umbrella organisation for several local clubs in Dublin 8? The Liberties was declared this week as of the coolest places in the world to live in, but it is still without a pitch for soccer, Gaelic, rugby, hurling, camogie and much more. It is a challenge for the Minister of State and for the local authority and that needs to be overcome.

Cén fáth gur tógadh sé pháirc astro sacair i mBaile Átha Cliath 10 agus 12 i bpáirceanna a bhaineann leis an gcomhairle cathrach ach nár tógadh aon cheann ar mhaithe le peil, iomáint ná camógaíocht? Uaireanta, ní gá páirc iomlán a bheith athraithe ó fhéar go astro ach páirc chleachtaidh chun a dhéanamh cinnte de go bhfuil fad curtha leis an bpáirc imeartha. Ag caint faoi sacar, League of Ireland clubs have been calling for funding for academies for years. If we are to continue to see improvements in the local league teams, to see young players progress to the teams in those leagues or to see them go further afield to enhance their sporting careers, and if we are to celebrate the battles, wins and losses of the Irish football team into the future, we need to invest in those academies in the budget next week so that we are not lagging behind

our international competitors. An immediate investment of €9 million over the first two years would ensure that those academies are on a sound footing, and ensure those jobs required to guarantee that young people benefit fully at the age required and that there is a women's under-15s programme for all the clubs and more. That needs to be declared in next week's budget for Ireland to excel in the many sports we have.

We have invested time and effort but if we had invested a lot more money, imagine where the vast undertapped potential would bring us. That is the vision. Hopefully, in the future, it can be realised.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): The next group is the Social Democrats, who are sharing time. The first up is Deputy Gibney.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: The power of sport for inclusion, integration and community in Ireland is undeniable. Our towns, villages, cities and suburbs are all home to sports clubs that have become vital social hubs for people of all ages.

In my constituency of Dublin Rathdown, sports capital funding, in conjunction with the time and dedication of volunteers, has meant that grassroots sport in our area has been able to swell membership across a number of codes and to welcome more people from our communities to share in the joy that sport brings.

This funding to support the work of our clubs and the work of national governing bodies, for everything from equipment to facilities, is crucial. The delivery of this, through the sports capital programme and the large-scale sport infrastructure fund, has benefited over the past number of years our clubs, our councils and the NGBs that govern them.

There is, however, much more that we need to do to support our amateur, professional and social athletes and their supporters and I would like to speak about a couple of great clubs in my constituency by way of example. Rosemount Mulvey FC is a football club in Dundrum. The club caters for all ages and abilities and runs multiple weekend morning academies and social and competitive teams. The club always seeks to keep participation up and prohibitive cost barriers down. Through sports capital funding, Rosemount Mulvey FC has seen huge growth. The funding has been invested in equipment to support increasing numbers and teams across all age groups. While goalposts, equipment, team kits and medical kits are welcome, playing space is in short supply and high demand for teams in the club. This is why the club is seeking the development of a second pitch. Without it, the club will be forced to turn children away, which is something it desperately does not want to do.

Stillorgan-Rathfarnham rugby club is another club in my constituency that is experiencing huge growth and has benefited from the sports capital grant. The club caters for a number of boys and girls and has a thriving adult section also. It is one of the most brilliant community rugby clubs, with great ambition for both the junior and senior sections while retaining a wonderful junior club ethos. Its emphasis on making rugby fun and accessible is evident in every aspect of its work. As a former rugby player myself and a massive rugby fan, I was delighted to visit the grounds a few months ago for a ceremonial turning of the sod on its new clubhouse. The setting is stunning, nestled in the Dublin Mountains, and full of passion for this wonderful sport, one that caters for all different types of athletes. There really is a place

for everyone on a rugby pitch. After decades of uncertainty and pitch leasing, the club now has a permanent home and is building that new clubhouse, which will cater for not only the rugby club but many other groups too.

The value of these bricks-and-mortar homes for our clubs cannot be understated. This really hit home for me when I attended an event celebrating 25 years of the Ballinteer St. John's GAA clubhouse during the summer.

Many other countries have large-scale legacy infrastructure from hosting major tournaments and events, such as the Lee Valley Hockey and Tennis Centre in London after the Olympics. In Ireland, we do not have infrastructure of that nature so we must carefully plan for it to ensure our sports communities are adequately resourced.

The large-scale sport infrastructure fund has started to deliver for our communities. The multisport campus on the Tibbradden Road, which Dundrum South Dublin Athletics Club enjoys, is one fantastic example of this, and many other groups will enjoy as it continues to develop. The Samuel Beckett Civic Campus in Ballyogan is another beneficiary of this fund and represents a real success of what can be achieved in partnership with local councils.

As a member of the culture, communications and sports committee, I intend to be vigilant and attentive to the balance we strike, as a State, between investment in grassroots and elite pathways funding. The kids in our local clubs need heroes to worship but also clubhouses to change in. Of course, for all of the clubs I have mentioned this evening from my area that have been fortunate to access this funding, there are many more that have unfulfilled aspirations and potential because of the lack of funding. Sport fosters community, sheds difference and celebrates the best qualities. Sport is a public good. It is through this lens that we must view these programmes and funds, and continue to push for better delivery for our clubs and centres.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I often stand up here to debate the challenges facing Government Ministers. I am on the record in conversation with the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, and I again commend him and previous Governments on their investment in sports facilities. I know of a number of pockets of County Kildare where the population has doubled in 20 years. The county has one of the youngest populations in the country. We have seen investments coming from the Government in a number of sports facilities. I take the opportunity to thank the Minister of State and the Government for that investment. It is paying off tenfold in the participation rates of children and young people in sports that they previously would not have had the opportunity to engage in. Whether it is in GAA clubs or in Prosperous Lawn Tennis Club, for example, it works. Investment in services like this really pays off.

However, I would be lying to the Minister of State if I did not say it is imperfect. What is happening is that there is a hierarchy in communities whereby some clubs have been on the receiving end of grants and others do not seem able to tap into that service. Prosperous United soccer club is one of those that has a burgeoning population of members and needs to upgrade its facilities. It would be remiss of me not to highlight this. I acknowledge that we need to report and go through the processes. However, quite often, applying for grants in itself requires a workload that many volunteer boards just cannot take. It is worth mentioning. I do not have an answer for the Minister of State. I just want to highlight that this can often be a barrier to accessing this fund.

There have been many contributions today. I ask the Minister of State to take note of the issue of the public swimming pool for north Kildare, which has been promised by many Governments to the communities in Celbridge, Leixlip, Maynooth and Kilcock, as he is aware. Can we get an update in writing at some point in the next couple of weeks as to where he and the Department see this project as currently standing? We are talking about tens of thousands of people without access to a public swimming pool. If the Government can invest, I guarantee that people will participate.

Deputy Gary Gannon: My eagerness to speak on this subject stems from the fact that I understand sport has an incredible impact, not only in our communities and in the lives of the people who get to benefit from it. When we debate the impact of the sports capital programme, the large-scale sport infrastructure fund and the major sporting events programme, it is important that we talk honestly about how we measure success when it comes to sport in this State. Recent discussions have taken place in regard to the NFL, for example. There was a conversation about €10 million being invested, which brought in 30,000 visitors to the city and all that stems from that. I see the logic of this and I do not wish to cast aspersions on it. Those events have an economic impact that is worth acknowledging. The same goes for the Ryder Cup. The Government recently allocated €56 million to the Ryder Cup, which takes place in two years' time. I now see the billionaire J.P. McManus coming out and calling for another €30 million of State investment on top of what has been given.

I get that. We can quantify those types of events in terms of the hotels that are filled and the number of tourists brought in. I absolutely screamed with delight and pride the other day when Shane Lowry scored. I appreciate all of those factors, which can be quantified in terms of hotel rooms and so on. However, the type of investment in sporting infrastructure, football pitches and facilities for young people who will probably never achieve a medal, never play in the Premier League or never see me cheering for them on a Sunday on the television is more difficult to quantify. At the same time, it is infinitely more important because it is about what happens in our communities.

For example, in Dublin Central in the north inner city, which I am proud to represent, and in the south inner city, there is no football pitch or GAA pitch. If someone wants to play rugby on the north side of Dublin, where exactly would they go? The facilities are all over on the south side. There is a dearth that requires examination. Are we expecting people who are probably already struggling to fill out the forms to get the cultural and collaborative capital that is needed for that? We need to see the gap that is there and then seek to fill it. That is where investment really matters - when, as a State, we identify gaps and go in to try to penetrate through them.

We need only look at some of the athletes we have been most proud of in the last couple of weeks. Kate O'Connor said recently that her father would soon have to return to work on a job share arrangement simply to provide a steady income while still coaching her towards the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics. That is one of Ireland's brightest medal hopes talking about the fact that her dad will have to go back to a job share so we can potentially scream with delight for her during the Olympics in a couple of years' time. Investments need to be made across the board. Some require event management, such as what happened over the weekend and will happen in two years, and some just require leadership. We have to invest in top athletes like Kate O'Connor and also in the people who will probably never become athletes but will develop

civic engagement and civic responsibility. They need changing rooms and facilities, and they need the State to take an interest. That also reaps rewards, just in very different ways.

A lot of good work comes from this programme and I believe we can expand on that. I ask the Government to look at where we can make an impact, which would bring its own rewards.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak on this vital issue of sports capital grants and their significance to communities right across the country, in particular in my own constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny. I will focus specifically on the sports capital grants, which play an essential role in promoting healthy lifestyles and community spirit. The investment of €250 million over the last couple of years in over 3,000 groups throughout the country reflects the drive to improve facilities in order to offer everyone an equal chance to participate.

Changes were implemented in the last round, where the maximum grants for local projects increased from €150,000 to €200,000. Given the escalation in costs and the inflation we are experiencing, I believe this figure needs to be increased to a minimum of €300,000 in the next round. For clubs that do not have their own facilities, the previous scheme had equipment grants of up to €70,000. Again, with the increase in costs, I believe this needs to increase to €100,000. This would make a huge difference to clubs across the country.

In my constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny, we have had fantastic success in the sports capital grants. There has been recent funding for clubs like Highview Athletic soccer club in Graiguenamanagh, Carrickshock GAA club and the Young Irelands GAA club, which have gone through phases 1, 2 and 3. The grants have transformed communities and their access to sport. I am talking about sport for all, not just elite sport. For every single person, male or female, young or old, who wants to participate in sport, the facilities need to be there around the country. That is fantastic. Whether someone is an elite athlete or a grassroots participant, the opportunity is there to avail of these facilities.

I urge the Minister of State and the Government to continue to prioritise the sports capital grants in the upcoming budget and to significantly increase funding streams in that regard, with a particular focus on Carlow-Kilkenny. There is a huge sporting history and culture in both of those counties and we will be looking for as much funding as possible. Let us make sure that every single community, regardless of size or location, has access to world-class sports facilities, whatever the sporting interest may be. While it is important that our cities get this, we need to make sure that rural Ireland and rural communities get their fair slice of the pie as well. Investing in our sporting infrastructure is an investment in the future of our young people and our communities. From my perspective, it is an investment in rural Ireland as well.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: Miriam Lord once described sport as the greatest of all Ministries because you get to tour every parish in the country and see best practice. In the last two rounds of sports capital funding, certainly in my own county - I think it is probably the same around the country - every group that had a decent application put together properly got funding of some sort or the other. It is transformative. As other speakers have said, from grassroots level and tiny tots up to people who play sports to an elite level and represent county and country, if you invest in sport, you invest in people's welfare and also their joy.

I thank the Minister of State's predecessors, Deputy Chambers and Deputy Byrne, and I am sure he will do an equally great job. In the last round of funding, clubs like Broadford GAA, Shannon Town United, Cratloe GAA Club and, in my home parish, Parkfield FC and Parteen-Meelick GAA club all benefited. My children cross over the border once a week into Limerick to play for Shannon rugby and the joy that gives them is great.

I will make a couple of quick points. I would like to see dance included in this funding. When I was a primary school teacher, we used to get the children to do an annual fitness test. The children in our classes who danced had an incredible level of fitness. We have classified scouting as a sporting activity and we have brought golf courses in. I think Irish dancing should be brought in and considered to be in the realm of sport fitness and wellness.

As someone who taught physical education for years, I know it is well and good overhauling the curriculum but there are strands in that 1999 curriculum I taught, such as aquatics, outdoor adventures, athletics and all these kinds of things, for which there is no toolset to teach them. When I was teaching and a child was struggling with spelling or reading, we would have certain pathways of intervention. Equally, if they had mathematical problems, we would suspect dyscalculia and intervene, but as a nation we need to start talking about physical literacy. If a child is not able to benchmark certain activities like throwing, the gate of their movement, catching, squatting - basic things - they can come back and cause difficulty later in life, such as joint pain and all sorts of movement issues. There is currently no intervention pathway for those. Anyone who has done a coaching course, be it for GAA or rugby or soccer, will know that one of the fundamental things you will deal with is the fundamental movements of physical literacy. As a country that has a very deep educational policy on physical education and good resourcing of it, it is a point we are a little mute on. I would love to see it embodied into how we fund things. Irish dancing would be a great inclusion in the next round of funding.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: It is always great to have an opportunity to discuss the positive impact of Government investment in sport, particularly in Louth. Nobody can dispute the value of sports capital programmes, the large-scale sports infrastructure fund and the major events programme. They have transformed opportunities and outlooks across the country.

In 2024, nearly €7 million was awarded to clubs and organisations across Louth, improving facilities and opportunities but most of all creating an ambition in our sports people right around the county to achieve and do the best they can. Look at Kate O'Connor, our local trailblazer, and what can be achieved in a sport that is underfunded. However, soon, with sports capital funding, she will have a choice of tracks to train on when she is home in County Louth. She is always welcome to my local club, Glenmuir FC's facilities, which is getting an extra two-lane extension on the track and club development because of sports capital.

I also have to mention the fact Louth has been waiting decades for a county stadium. The Minister of State will know this project very well. This project is not simply a GAA ground; it is a regional infrastructure that will serve schools, clubs and communities right across the north east. It is about a pride of place, our love of sport and providing a place that is fitting not only for our ladies, who are all-Ireland champions, but also our senior men's team, who are Leinster champions. It will be a facility to deliver much more. Louth GAA made a successful application under the large-scale infrastructure fund, yet we will find ourselves in limbo on a reserved list or hopeful list - we do not know what it is. If applicants fail to draw down the

funding, will Louth GAA have the ability and opportunity to draw down that funding, which it deserves because it has made a rightful application?

When can the people of Louth expect the support for the funding? It will be the only stadium built from scratch. The Minister of State witnessed this himself when he was there recently. Our clubs have fundraised and Croke Park supported them. We need the Government funding to get past this critical point in development. The support now would mean it would be delivered in full as opposed to in phases. We have a dream in Louth for our home football and none of us will rest until it is realised.

I also want to ask about the commitment in the programme for Government on access to sport for schools. For example, De La Salle College and St. Louis Secondary School have plans for their sports development and facilities but they are blocked out of the system.

Deputy Paula Butterly: There is no denying the benefits of sport for our mental and physical health. Our boys and girls across Louth, as Deputy McGreehan has said, have benefited from a vast amount of sports capital grants. However, there are two blips in that horizon at present. One is that Louth does not have a county GAA stadium. Deputy McGreehan has rightly pointed out that we are all 100% behind the missing funding that is needed to complete the stadium. It is a place where we can bring communities, young boys and young girls, together. They are missing a small portion after a huge amount of fundraising. I too urge the Minister of State to make up that shortfall for funding so Louth can be a county with its own GAA stadium. It is the only county in Ireland that does not have a stadium.

The second blip, and I am quite sure Deputy Byrne will bring this up if she has not done so before, is that the Drogs need a home. They were the two that were left out, for whatever reason, last year and they must be addressed. We have a Drogheda issue and a Dundalk issue, one soccer and the other GAA, but both bring a huge contribution not just to the children of the town but also to the children of the rural areas. I ask the Minister of State to please address those issues.

While I am on my feet, I have to say we have inspirational sports people in County Louth, such as Eve McCrystal on cycling, Amy Broadhurst in boxing and the fierce Kate O'Connor, who recently was so good to bring home a silver medal. These ladies have struggled when facilities were not there. As my colleague in the Social Democrats pointed out, they have a team behind them who are very often not paid or have to take time off. We were recently approached by a member of Kate O'Connor's team who said they had had to take a leave of absence from work, which was not paid, in order to help Kate in her pursuit of a medal. This also needs to be addressed.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: As we talk about the sporting landscape, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge the tragic passing of a well-known Limerick sports fan, Luke Grimes, who passed away in recent days at the tender age of 24. Luke was an infectious personality and a regular attendee at junior soccer matches across Limerick. It was fitting on Sunday that clubs across the county observed a minute's silence in his memory. I extend my sympathies to Derrick, Noreen, his sister Danielle and the rest of his family and friends. Luke's funeral mass takes place tomorrow. May he rest in peace.

The sports capital programme, in particular, has been beneficial to sports clubs up and down the country. I can verify that it has been of great benefit to sporting clubs in Limerick, including my local soccer club Ballynanty Rovers. Under the leadership of Christian Meehan, Ray O'Halloran, Ger Doherty and others, with sports capital assistance from 2024, they recently launched a fantastic new pitch, Bateman Park, which will serve the community for generations to come.

Staying with soccer, I urge the Government to ensure funding for League of Ireland academies is included in next week's budget. Such funding is crucial to protect the game in this country and for the enhancement and evolution of it. League of Ireland clubs have been waiting on Government funding for their academies for some years.

A recent audit noted that football academies are lagging significantly behind international competitors in terms of full-time staff and player contact hours, requiring significant investment in infrastructure and personnel to meet the required standards. They have outlined what they need, namely, 81 new full-time academy jobs, a women's under-15s programme for all clubs, athletic development testing equipment for all clubs, a centralised playing platform to track all League of Ireland academy players and a quality assurance process for all the clubs.

Sports can unite people. In some towns it is incredibly important, as a tiny minority seeks to divide us at the moment. In my hometown of Limerick, we have had tremendous growth through sports partnership among young girls in our local clubs. Be it GAA, rugby or soccer, I have seen a huge increase in the number of young girls participating in sports. Our premier division women's team of Treaty United have fought well this year and it has been encouraging to see the growth in their spectators. Since 2023, the numbers attending the home leagues have more than doubled. We must keep participation going beyond the teenage years. I urge the Minister of State to ensure enhanced funding for LSSIF, CSFF and sports capital so that sporting clubs can continue to enhance their facilities and attract more young, and indeed not so young, people back into sport and a lifestyle that benefits them all.

I want to mention specifically Madison McGuane from the Lee Estate in Limerick. Madison is just 15 years of age yet she is already standing out. She has been excelling in her debut season at senior level with Treaty United and recently had her superb form recognised by winning the SSE Airtricity Women's Premier Division player of the month award.

The sports capital grants and other grants have served clubs well, and grassroots funding programmes must be maintained in the upcoming budget. The League of Ireland academies, the large-scale sports infrastructure fund and sports capital grants must be properly funded for the future of grassroots sports. Let us support all these volunteers, who get out and help, do voluntary work, keep all the clubs going and ensure that clubs and societies are funded properly.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I welcome this debate. The one thing I have to say about sports capital funding and the one thing that is heartwarming about it is that it is the most efficiently spent money in the country. When the grant is devolved to our local clubs and teams, we see them go to the ends of the earth to spend the money as efficiently as possible to yield the very best results for their communities. That always needs to be remembered in the context of public spending and how money is being spent. Our local clubs spend it best because they are volunteer organisations. They go through the tender process, they find the best contract and award it and, ultimately, they get incredible results on the ground.

When we talk about sport and its contribution to our communities, we know it is the heartbeat of rural Ireland. The communities I represent in Galway East that have benefited so greatly from sports capital funding are delivering incredible projects right across our constituency.

One thing that is really important is the growth in women's sports, which has been absolutely phenomenal over the past few years. All our clubs now have huge numbers on juvenile boys' and girls' teams and this is putting a strain on space. This is so much so the case for some clubs that there is a lack of space to accommodate everyone at all times. That is really unfortunate because everyone deserves equal access and equal opportunity in sport, regardless of gender. What is really important in this regard is that, in the next round of sports capital funding, consideration should be given to funding the acquisition of training fields or agricultural land for the purpose of developing pitches specifically for ladies' teams. I have seen this in different parts of east Galway where there has been consternation among clubs because there has not been enough space to allow for both teams. As a result, the female sides of certain clubs have decided to purchase their own playing fields. A side should not have to raise the funds for that, however. It should be funded under the sports capital programme. In an ideal world, if the fields can be purchased adjacent to the existing pitches, that would be brilliant, but everyone deserves equal access and equal opportunity.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Is léir go bhfuil a lán feicthe againn cheana féin agus go bhfuil rudaí maithe ag tarlú timpeall na tíre, go háirithe i gCill Dara. We have seen a lot of positive progress around the country, particularly in Kildare. Some examples of successful sports capital programme projects in Kildare are: Clough GAA, which secured a €150,000 grant to install LED floodlights and improve security; Celbridge GAA club, which secured just over €95,000 for its sustainability and inclusivity plan in 2024; and Clane Rugby Football Club, which secured just shy of €26,000 for club pitch development and sports equipment. These are amazing examples of what has been done in Kildare. However, there are also examples where such grants were not made available. Celbridge Town AFC is one. I will work with the club to ensure that it benefits from a grant in the next stream because it looks after so many people, children and adults, in the community.

We have also seen some amazing large-scale sporting infrastructure projects in Kildare. Some €3 million was allocated in respect of Sallins Park in Naas for the development of new pitches. A sum of €1.4 million was allocated for a high-performance golf centre in Kildare. A sum of €1 million was awarded to Kildare for a cross-community development project for the GAA.

One project that is missing is the swimming pool for the north east of the county, specifically for Maynooth. There was an application involving Maynooth University and Kildare County Council that basically disappeared into the ether. In fact, approval for the project was refused. An appeal was subsequently sent in but those involved did not hear anything back about it. There is a new project to try to get it delivered now. I ask that this project be looked on favourably, because there is no public swimming pool in that part of the country, which comprises Maynooth, Leixlip, Celbridge, Kilcock and Clane. A pool is desperately needed. We have a solution here ready to go, namely the redevelopment of Maynooth University swimming pool. I look forward to engaging with the Minister of State on that.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: The last two rounds of sports capital grants, delivered by Fianna Fáil Ministers in the Department, resulted in record levels of funding for north Tipperary. I was particularly delighted in the last round to have worked with Nenagh Hockey Club and BT Harps in Templemore, both of which got regional status for grants. BT Harps now have a full-size AstroTurf pitch in Templemore that is fully operational. Nenagh Hockey Club is progressing with the work on its new facilities on the grounds of Nenagh College. Those facilities are absolutely fantastic.

What I wish to touch on today - it is something I have discussed with the Minister of State and raised on the floor of this House before - is the large-scale infrastructure fund, which was announced last November, prior to my election to this House. Tipperary GAA had applied for a multisport complex on the Technological University of the Shannon campus in Thurles in my constituency. This was done in conjunction with Tennis Ireland and Tipperary County Council. The application was unsuccessful - the Minister of State and I have discussed it - as was Tipperary GAA's application for the development of the Kinane Stand in Semple Stadium. We need to see more funding going into the large-scale infrastructure fund, particularly in the context of the success we need to see in Tipperary in terms of delivering infrastructure.

These statements are on the positive impact on the sporting landscape of this funding. Those in the House who represent Tipperary - I see one or two Members from the Rebel County here - we know the positive impact the outcome of the all-Ireland final had in county this year in encouraging young people to take up hurling and Gaelic football, but we need these facilities. We badly need to get Semple Stadium redeveloped and funding put in place, but we also need to see the multisport complex to which I refer. I want to do as much as I can to emphasise Tipperary GAA's need for funding for the multisport complex on the grounds of TUS and for Kinane Stand in Semple Stadium.

Deputy Joe Neville: We are talking about sports infrastructure. More than many, I, as a coach, and my children have benefited in recent years from different facilities we have been able to develop locally by means of the sports capital grants. As stated by previous speakers, these grants are a very efficient way of spending and receiving money. Who best to spend the money in local areas than people who run clubs efficiently and so well? As I said, in local sports clubs - GAA clubs, soccer clubs, rugby clubs and even athletics clubs - I have seen the huge impact this funding has made.

That said, there are other groups that we need to acknowledge and that need help. For example, basketball has taken off, especially among girls. The cost of basketball facilities is huge. We need to look at how we can help the clubs involved, which might not have easy access and for which renting facilities is core. Obviously, no one likes to rent in the long term. We need to get around that.

We have a significantly growing population all across north Kildare, all the way from Naas to Johnstown and back over to Leixlip through Maynooth and Kilcock. We know there is a huge need for a swimming pool in north-east Kildare, particularly Celbridge. We have put forward a plan for the swimming pool in Maynooth University to be rejuvenated. We will ensure, through the large-scale infrastructure funding, that we will be able to get help towards that with contributions from Kildare County Council.

Ultimately, local authorities need to take a lead role on larger scale local infrastructure projects. I do not see why, with the help of the Government and in light of development levies that are coming in, we cannot ensure that we get the money for facilities to communities that directly need it. This would be really positive, and it is something I am heavily involved in pursuing. I see this as the mechanism through which we could deliver what I have outlined in the short term.

I have not been found wanting as a councillor for my local clubs over the years and we have delivered super facilities. We now need to take the next step and move outside local clubs to larger communities where multiple towns can use larger facilities. As our towns and villages grow, we need multisport facilities. Where land is at a premium, we need to develop pitches where rugby, soccer and GAA clubs can all use the pitch on different nights. There is a facility like that in Kerdiffstown in County Kildare.

I also want to speak about the major events programme. We have been very successful as a Government. The NFL was here over the weekend. It has had a huge impact globally, especially in the US. I thank the Government for its work. I hope the funding will go back to the Exchequer and the local clubs across all sports.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am just after running over from Hodges Figgis from the launch of *The Irish Unity Dividend* by Ben Collins. Everything that should be done from sport right through should be done on the basis that we are one single island, eventually delivering a 32-county unitary state that delivers for its people. Coming from Dundalk, it would be impossible not to mention how proud we are of Kate O'Connor in the heptathlon. Supports must be provided for those like her who can go on to do great things. We have seen great strides in Louth with the athletics track in Dundalk. Everyone is thankful when they finally get the benefits of the LSSIF and sports capital. We know the great addition sport is to people's lives. We need to ensure it happens.

It would also be impossible not to mention the North East Runners and the shocking events that happened in Drumgowna and Mark, Louise and Evan O'Connor. Mark was a far better runner than I am. I used to only see his name much above mine. Our thoughts are with their wider family. Whatever supports are needed should be provided.

The whole point is the importance of sports. I have spoken to the Minister of State many times, particularly about the LSSIF and the necessity that Louth GAA be at the top of the table in the next round. We have already seen the stadium which is not very far from my house. It is flying on at the minute. It is not a major thing that is very close to my house but it is a major issue for Louth GAA, which has had huge success. Drogheda United was mentioned by my colleague. If I did not mention it I do not know if I would get out of my seat. This needs to happen. The League of Ireland needs support. While we are happy Dundalk FC seems to be going in the right direction in going back to the premiership, Oriel Park will need major LSSIF funding in the future. Everybody welcomes the huge interest but if we are serious about the League of Ireland and the great opportunities it offers, academies are needed. There are opportunities in the changes post Brexit for younger players. It is about ensuring they get the contact play and that it is run as a professional business. It is about stadiums but also making sure players are looked after. We have many other sports. There is significant work to do. I ask that the LSSIF be opened more regularly to ensure continuity of funding in sports capital.

Deputy Michael Collins: West Cork is home to some of Ireland's most extraordinary sporting talent, from the Olympic gold of Paul and Gary O'Donovan and Fintan McCarthy in Skibbereen to the blistering speed of Phil Healy from Ballineen. Our athletes continue to inspire the nation. We have seen Nicola Tuthill from Kilbrittain rise as one of Ireland's brightest stars in the hammer throw, breaking records and representing us on the world stage. Evan Collins, a young kickboxer from west Cork who has trained for over a decade with Ian Kingston, has competed internationally since the age of nine, bringing home medals from Turkey, Italy and Hungary. Behind these achievements lies a troubling reality. Evan and others have had to rely on GoFundMe campaigns just to represent Ireland. There is no structured supports for athletes like him despite their dedication and success. These champions are not sporting icons, they are ambassadors for our communities, role models for our youth and proof that rural Ireland can produce world-class talent, but talent alone is not enough. Investment is needed in facilities, coaching and travel support. Funding is needed that matches the ambition and potential of our athletes. While I welcome the funding we have received for different clubs in west Cork, I ask the Minister of State to look at the likes of Evan Collins and ask why he has to set up a GoFundMe page. Can more be done for the likes of him and other athletes who deserve that extra bit of a push which will get them across the line? I would appreciate if the Minister of State looked into that.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I am delighted to welcome the Ryder Cup to Ireland and that it will be in Limerick, the real capital of Ireland, as I call it. We now have a world-class golf tournament in Ireland. I have to thank the McManus family for what they have done not only for Limerick but the rest of the country and for what they have invested in this country and in Adare, Country Limerick. I am delighted for the people of Adare that it will host the Ryder Cup. I am also thankful for what the McManus family has done for sports in Ireland. It has given every county in Ireland €1 million and to UK clubs affiliated with Ireland because they love Ireland, Limerick and sport.

The World Rally Championship wanted to come here and we wanted to bid for 2025, 2026 and 2027. From Malin to Mizen Head would have had funding. The Government turned its back on the World Rally Championship. We could have had two world events in Ireland that would have benefited the whole country, like the Ryder Cup. People from Dublin rang me this evening to thank us for having the Ryder Cup. Their bed and breakfast accommodation is booked out. People are coming for two weeks and travelling down to Limerick for one or two days of the Ryder Cup. I thank the people of Limerick for what they have done but I am disappointed with the Government that it forgot to invest in the World Rally Championship.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Sports capital grants have done great things in small communities right around the country. I remember playing football and togging out in places they would not tog out in nowadays. It is incredible what it has done. With the population increasing and different sports coming into play, more money should be put in to attract young people to get more of them involved in sport. The budgets must be available to help small clubs. The Government should put aside a budget for a loan scheme. Some clubs struggle to match the money. They would pay the loan back for the piece they have to pay themselves along with the sports capital grant. That should be looked at to help those small clubs. In Munster, there is Thurles, Limerick and Cork stadiums where concerts and different things go

on as well as sports. In Leinster, there is the same. In Connacht, from Donegal down, we need a centre of excellence and, on top of that, a place for sports and to bring the west and north west together to host events. The airport in Galway would be a perfect site. It is near the motorway. That would help to facilitate it and give equal participation to all parts of the country.

Deputy Paul Lawless: It is good to be able to speak on the sports capital today. It has been a tremendous scheme for many rural communities across Mayo and the country. I recently attended the opening of my own club, Aghamore, which received sports capital to develop a gym and dressing rooms, etc. Parke Keelogue's Crimlin recently opened a floodlit pitch and a walkway around its facilities. It will be hugely valuable for that club, and Westport Athletics Club.

One of the key things that struck me over recent months and years is the value for money and efficiency achieved by the sports capital funding. The reason for that is it is given to local communities, many of them engaged in fundraising, that want the best for their facilities. When we see such a level of waste from the Government as set out in the most recent report by the Comptroller and Auditor General on the lack of regulation and the void of accountability in respect of IPAS centres, we can compare it with the money spent in local communities and see the value of that. It is really important that we continue to invest in sport and in our young people. It is an investment in the future and in the next generation. When we consider the many issues in terms of drug and alcohol misuse and screen use, we see the value of investment in sport and the fun, joy and satisfaction it brings to people. We also see the traits it imparts to participants. The competitive nature of sports and the teamwork aspect are fundamentally important.

It is really important that we invest in swimming facilities. There are large parts of County Mayo that have no such facilities. Ballinrobe in south Mayo, for example, had a pop-up swimming pool this summer. I look forward to working with the Minister of State to see whether we can develop a swimming pool in that area in the years ahead.

Athletics is becoming a really fast-growing sport in Ireland. It is important that it be prioritised.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: One cannot say much in two minutes but the point I will make is that funding is welcome but we need more of it. Capital projects have a huge return, especially, as others have noted, in terms of working with sports clubs. I support what my colleague Deputy Fitzmaurice said about a loan scheme to top up funding.

We also need to look to more creative thinking. In my constituency, Clonburris strategic development zone, SDZ, will be home to 11,000 houses and 20,000 people but it does not have a fraction of the pitch capacity it needs. There is a case for building up in the inner city and in rapidly growing suburban areas like Clonburris. Five-a-side pitches can be put on rooftops. The City Edge initiative by Dublin City Council and South Dublin County Council is seeing development on old industrial land. Why not put five-a-side pitches on top and leave room down on the ground for GAA, rugby and cricket pitches? With climate change, we will need more all-weather pitches, whether grass or synthetic.

We need to look more at multi-use funding. Years ago, I called for schools to function also as community hubs, subject to child protection, with different rooms suitable for different groups at different hours of the day and with solar panels installed. Every new school should have a full-size pitch on which soccer can be played. It could be used by the school during the day and could operate as a community hub in the evening. That has never been done. We are wasting money when we could be creative if we had some more cross-departmental co-operation.

Funding must be increased. We are still spending too much on horses and greyhounds, as I have mentioned many times. We also need to think smarter about how we spend our money. We must think laterally and outside the box.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Michael Healy-Rae): I most sincerely thank the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, and his Department for the excellent work they are doing in distributing this very important money. The positive effects of the funding on the sporting landscape throughout the country are extremely important. The same applies to the large-scale sport infrastructure fund and the major events programme. The sports capital grants are delivered to sporting clubs of all types in all parts of the country, including rural Ireland. Those clubs are the heartbeat of our countryside. I have seen at first hand the positive effects this funding has had on my county of Kerry.

With regard to the LSSIF funding, I will highlight one project. The Department has put more than €2 million into the Derreen project in Killarney, which the Minister of State has visited. It is a state-of-the-art project and it is disability inclusive. A total of 15 clubs will benefit from that funding, from basketball to judo to everything else in the middle.

One must spend money to make money. With the major events funding, we see the impact of the American National Football League, NFL, game last weekend. It involved €10 million of State expenditure but the game was watched by more than 7.9 million people and tens of thousands came here to attend it.

The positive spin-off from that type of investment when it comes to sport means the funding is like fertiliser. If we do not spread it, there will be no growth. Grass cannot be grown without fertiliser and we cannot grow our rural communities and keep people living there unless we invest in them. I thank the Minister of State so much for the work he is doing. Consider what the hosting of the Ryder Cup in 2027 will mean to us. Ireland can host massive events.

I must contradict in a friendly way my colleague across the floor who said we should not spend money on horses and dogs. I say to him we must not neglect the horses and dogs. People in Kerry want to keep the dogs and horses running and we want to keep the young people in sport. We definitely must not forget dogs and horses because they are very important. They are part of the heartbeat of Ireland as well, particularly rural Ireland. I thank the Minister of State again for the work he is doing.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: As a colleague just noted, one can say very little in two minutes. I will start by saying something very easy, which is to thank the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, for the investment my constituency has seen, in hurling, football, soccer, tennis

and so many different areas, through the sports capital grant. It has made a real difference to clubs in my area. He will be pleased to hear we are already preparing for the next round of funding. I have met with several groups about it. The Minister of State might come to the constituency to visit some of the projects that have been funded and to meet with the groups that will be putting in applications.

I was particularly pleased with the regional funding that was given to a local school to make its facilities available to a regional sports body, Olympic Handball Ireland. There will be a fantastic new facility there that will benefit the entire region. I would like to see something similar being done in the area to provide a regional basketball facility.

There are two issues I want to raise. Mention was made previously of funding for League of Ireland academies. They are really important and I will be emphasising whatever can be done in that regard, particularly in this budget and as we go forward.

The second point concerns the Gaelic Players Association Indecon report. The value Gaelic players provide to the economy is very clear. People who box or play hockey can qualify for the elite athletes programme and avail of a stipend or podium funding of up to €30,000 or €40,000. Gaelic players are amateurs and they accept that. However, they are looking for their funding to go from €1,500 to €2,500 per person to cover the basic costs. Whatever influence the Minister of State has over our colleague, the Minister, Deputy Chambers, I ask him to exert it. The Gaelic Players Association does fantastic work right across the country and Gaelic players contribute in the same way as do many other sportspeople. We should be investing in them. I appreciate the Minister of State's support.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank the Minister of State for facilitating this debate. In this House, there often are very different opinions on matters discussed. The one thing we can all agree on is the positive benefits of sport, which are vast. I always make the point that sport is a great character-building hobby for young people and individuals. It helps them tremendously through their self-development and teaches them many good-quality life skills in terms of the importance of hard work, discipline, commitment and giving something your all. It also teaches them that we do not always win in life and must try again, redouble our efforts and do everything we can to succeed. Sport teaches us of all those qualities.

I always make the point that every euro the Government spends on sport is a euro very well spent. In many cases, it can divert young people away from antisocial behaviour and give them a positive outlet for their energies. It really is so positive. The €0.25 billion-plus allocated last year through the various sports grants was extremely positive news for many local clubs and organisations. The large-scale sport infrastructure fund diverted funds through the national governing bodies and the sports partnerships. All of this funding percolated its way down into communities and they are seeing the extremely positive benefits of it.

We must ensure we continue to have funding set aside to enable us to open up these grants as often as possible. Every Member of this House will be inundated with requests from various clubs and organisations seeking sports funding in the next round.

The clubs are extremely ambitious. They want to continue to develop and enhance their facilities and to make them better. That is something the Government has been very supportive of and it is important that we keep the support going.

If I may, I want to mention one local project. I warn the Minister of State that there will be an application coming in at some point through Cork County Council for a sports complex in Carrigaline, which is my area. It is an extremely important project. Carrigaline is a town with more than 20,000 people and a hinterland of more than 35,000 but does not have a good sports complex. I know the county council and the local community are very determined to try to develop a sports complex. I hope we will be able to make an application for it in the near future. I will discuss it in more detail with the Minister of State in future course.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Sport is essential to Irish life. It would be hard to find a household that was not tuned in to watch Tipperary lash Cork in the all-Ireland or to see Shane Lowry make that final hole last weekend. That spirit and such huge excitement and interest brings a real sense of belonging and identity to communities. It is so important. The previous Government recognised that with its funding paths in terms of previous rounds.

The Minister of State kindly visited Raheny Shamrocks this year. It was a very positive visit. It is a typical example of a club that needs access to funding to develop an important facility. We hope it will be a regional facility in that location. It is very important that we can continue to provide funding channels. This is one of those channels, which is important.

Manor House is a school in my area. This is a totally different angle. We have many schools working away, but they do not have access to funding channels to renew facilities. Manor House has an AstroTurf pitch, which has been there for a long time but it is not really usable now and they do not have access to a source of funding to upgrade it. Schools should be considered to be part of this system in due course.

In terms of municipal facilities, we have clubs like Mid Sutton AC and Marino AC, which are both junior clubs looking for access to athletics facilities. The local authorities have a hugely positive role to play in providing facilities and co-ordinating construction, with the support of the Government. The projects of local authorities should be prioritised in partnership with the Department. The Government should give them very strong support.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I welcome the chance to speak in this debate in the statements on the sports capital programme, the large-scale sporting infrastructure fund and the major events programme.

I want to highlight four examples that show both the power of sport in our communities and the urgent need for further Government action and investment.

The Government often speaks about participation in sport but the reality on the ground is very different. Tramore, the largest town by population in County Waterford, has one of the youngest populations in the south east and yet its sporting facilities have not kept pace with that growth.

The facts are stark: Tramore has just 5.5 sq. m of pitch space per person. If we compare it to its nearest comparator town, my own town of Dungarvan has 15.3 sq. m of pitch space. Despite its population having almost trebled since the 1980s, not a single new playing field has been developed in Tramore in 35 years.

Tramore Rugby Football Club has no home ground. Teenagers leave once they outgrow mini rugby, undermining the work of volunteers. Last year the club even lost its training base, putting its future at risk. It depends on the goodwill and generosity of other sports clubs in Tramore, including Tramore GAA, yet this is a vibrant and successful club in its own right, with more than 100 active players, 200 members, one of the largest minis clubs in east Munster. Last year, its under-14s reached the Pan Munster cup final at Thomond Park, defeating Garryowen. What they need is simple – 7 acres to 10 acres to call their own. Without it, their growth is capped. Young people drift away from sport. I ask the Minister of State and his colleagues to engage directly with Waterford council and Tramore's sporting bodies to secure land and funding. The young rugby players of Tramore deserve a proper sporting home.

Tá obair iontach ar siúl faoi láthair i nGaeltacht na nDéise. Chríochnaigh Fiontair Pobail páirc ildánach faoi sholas saorga i bPáirc Uí Shíothcháin sa Rinn, ag tabhairt le chéile clubanna spóirt éagsúla, ina measc an cumann camógaíochta, an cumann peil na mban, an cumann reathaíochta agus an Cumann Lúthchleas Gael áitiúil. Níl siad críochnaithe fós lena pleananna. Tá breis obair uailmhianach do thuilleadh áiseanna sa phobal idir lámha acu. Bhí an togra seo bunaithe ar mhaoiniú éagsúil, ach thar aon rud eile ar obair dheonach agus ar bhailiúcháin coistí leanúnacha sa phobal. Tá sé an-éasca neamhaird a dhéanamh den obair mhór atá i gceist, ach is é seo croílár an phobail. Ní mór don Rialtas an iarracht seo a mheaitseáil. Caithfidh sé córas níos inrochtana a chur ar fáil do chlubanna agus do phobail ionas go mbeidh siad in ann an maoiniú ceart a aithint agus a fháil, agus pleanáil fhadtéarmach a dhéanamh.

The work under way in Gaeltacht na nDéise is remarkable. Fiontair Pobail has delivered a multi-use, floodlit all-weather pitch at Páirc Uí Shíothcháin, An Rinn, bringing together local sports clubs, and it is not finished yet. It has ambitious plans for further facilities in this community. This success was built on a mix of funding sources, but above all on a relentless voluntary effort and sustained community fundraising. It is easy to underestimate the scale of work involved but it is the beating heart of this community and many others besides. The Government must match that effort. It must make the funding system more accessible, so that clubs and communities can identify, secure, and plan around the supports they need for long-term development.

For years, there has been a clear and sustained campaign for a public swimming pool in Dungarvan and west Waterford. The council's own feasibility study confirmed the demand. Clubs, schools, families, tourism operators, care facilities, medical professionals and community groups all see the value this would bring to a town the size of Dungarvan and the wider hinterland of west Waterford but the council has not as yet advanced design, costing or funding applications.

Other towns of similar size have secured pools because their councils showed leadership. There is no reason Dungarvan should be left behind. The large-scale sports infrastructure fund is key to developing facilities of this scale and nature. I reiterate my call to management in the local authority in Waterford - the chief executive of Waterford City and County Council – to show leadership and to identify this as a project worth advancing and to engage with the Department about funding for same. I do not need to explain to the Minister of State about the importance of having a swimming pool in Dungarvan. There are many fine swimming pools in his own constituency of Donegal. A swimming pool would be used year-round for health, water safety, sport and tourism. It would serve schools, clubs and families across west

Waterford. This is not a passing campaign. It is something on which I would like to work with the Minister of State.

A recent Government-funded audit found that League of Ireland academies are lagging far behind international standards in terms of staff, facilities, and player-contact hours. The FAI has now submitted a detailed proposal for €4.45 million per year, over two years, to deliver 81 new academy jobs, a women's under-15 programme for every club, development equipment and a centralised player tracking system. This is not abstract policy, it is about young players in places like Waterford. It is about ensuring that Waterford FC and every League of Ireland club has the structures needed to nurture talent and to give young people real opportunities – men and women, boys and girls, ensuring participation and continued, sustained participation in sport.

This funding must be delivered in next week's budget. I urge the Minister of State to make all the representations he can in the coming week. It is about protecting and enhancing the game, and unlocking the untapped potential of football in Ireland for generations to come.

I thank my colleague, Deputy Joanna Byrne, for her leadership. She is Sinn Féin's spokesperson on sport. She has been making this case very strongly and engaging with the FAI.

I have given the Minister of State four examples from my constituency but I could give him many more to show how important these funding streams are. I urge the Minister of State to ensure we see the political will and a greater effort to bring along sports clubs and empowering them to access funding.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: We all know how important participation in sport is for young and old, and how it brings communities together. Adequate funding should be in place for sports clubs and organisations in all our towns and villages and clubs constantly have to fundraise, which puts parents and fundraisers under financial pressure to support them.

The funding provided through the sports capital funds has had a very positive impact through the years on the areas that benefitted from it in the provision of sports facilities that otherwise clubs in local areas would have needed to fund and they might never have achieved building them at all.

Where a club or organisation has been successful in applications for capital funding in recent times, additional funding should be made available in the event of costs rising. It is the case that building costs are rising.

Funding for large-scale sporting infrastructure is an investment in our future sportsmen and women. These larger projects will ensure increased participation and encourage the younger generations to get involved. It is important that the required facilities for all kinds of sport, such as large stadiums like the Fitzgerald Stadium in Killarney, swimming pools and training facilities be funded in all these areas throughout the country to ensure those from rural areas have as much of a chance to pursue their sporting dreams as those coming from Dublin. Sport is such an important aspect for young people, people with disabilities and people with mental health issues, as it keeps people involved with their teammates and keeps them active in their communities. They make friends and it keeps them going. As much as possible should be

done to ensure that teenagers and young adults stay involved, as many young girls in particular tend to drop out during their teenage years.

I especially want to thank the Minister of State. He will remember me from the last Dáil for being here on this side giving out about him a lot of days, about what was not being done and whatever, but it was nothing personal. I thank him very much for coming to Kerry in the summer months during the holidays and visiting the Kerry GAA Centre of Excellence in Currans and visiting Derreen. We are now seeking funding for Fitzgerald Stadium. We are looking forward in anticipation, hoping that the Minister of State will look after it. It is a massive stadium, but it is gone out of date, and it needs a lot of attention and to be redeveloped. I want to thank the Minister of State for the money that the Government has been given to Kerry, including to Glenflesk in recent times as well as Tuosist, where they are trying to move a mountain to build a football field in the heart of the Beara Peninsula. The Currans centre of excellence is of massive benefit to the people and players of Kerry. We think of the massive team that performed in Croke Park this summer. We must keep them going. The Fitzgerald Stadium is central to them, and it is where the Munster Final has always been played when in Kerry, but it needs to be revamped. Patrick O'Sullivan and his team - Pat the Tatler, we call him - have a massive plan in place to renovate and build this place like new. I am asking the Minister of State to look favourably upon it.

We welcome all the events that are coming to Adare in two years' time. There is also going to be a big event played in Doonbeg next year. Other members of the Trump family are looking forward to funding, and seeking funding, to ensure the smooth operation of that event. There is still a water main to be connected going down there. It is greatly in need of being replaced. I am asking the Government to ensure Irish Water has that done in a timely fashion. It is very important. We need to keep bringing visitors and events to this country and our counties to ensure the vitality and economic future of our country is safe.

I am asking that we look favourably on the rural clubs and, especially, rowing clubs that have made applications for funding in the next round. I appeal again to the Government to look very favourably on those.

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I thank everyone for the many contributions this evening. A significant number of Deputies came to the Chamber, and while we had almost two and a half hours of time, many people only had two minutes each. That shows the massive interest, recognition and respect there is for the role that sport plays in everyone's life and communities. It also shows the respect that everyone has for those who contribute to that at local community level. It is very timely that we are having this debate a week before the budget. It allows people to outline what they see as important and as key priorities. I thank everyone for their contributions and for coming in. I thank everyone for the ongoing support of sport and funding in sport throughout the course of the year, and for the many different representations I get on behalf of clubs and individuals involved in sport around the country.

I will start by touching on what is most recent and fresh in our minds coming out of the most recent weekend of large-scale events. The NFL game was a great success this weekend. I thank all who were involved in that. I acknowledge the role of my team, because it was put together in just under a year of organisation. Mr. Cian Ó Lionáin is assistant secretary in the

Department. Also, I thank the major events team, which is a small team based in the Department in Killarney. Until last week, it was led by Mr. Donal Hannigan, who has now retired, and I wish him well in his retirement. Ms Collette O'Leary and Ms Mary Gallivan put massive work into organising and co-ordinating that event. I want to recognise the many agencies of the State that contributed to it being a successful event, namely, Dublin City Council, Sport Ireland, the National Transport Authority, Dublin Airport Authority, An Garda Síochána, Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland, the GAA and Croke Park. The event greatly showcased the country, and it was really good from a sport point of view, a cultural point of view, an international relations point of view and also from an economic point of view. I also saw a tweet from the journalist, Mr. Larry Donnelly, saying that on a wet, soggy night in Galway, he was swearing that almost half the people who had been in Dublin at the match must have transferred to Galway last night, given the level of tourists in the country. It is great to see people staying and spreading out across the country. Well done to everyone involved.

We have just come out of the Ryder Cup. I am looking forward to seeing that event in two years' time coming to Adare. It was great to see the branding of Ireland at the final, with Shane Lowry running into the crowd with the Irish flag around him, and being very much at the forefront once again, with Irish golfers being pivotal in the final analysis in securing the Ryder Cup. His great celebration, which gave everyone joy across the country, was reminiscent, many said, of Séamus Darby after scoring that famous goal for County Offaly and, for once, denying Deputy Danny Healy-Rae's team in an All-Ireland. I am sure Shane Lowry will not mind that comparison considering his own father, Brendan, had been a member of that famous Offaly team as well. We really look forward to seeing that event transfer to Adare in two years' time, which should be a wonderful occasion for the country again.

To correct something from earlier on, it was mentioned that the McManus family had made a request for funding. That was totally incorrect. I want to recognise the contribution that J.P. McManus and his family have made in terms of developing a world-class facility in Adare Manor and putting their investment into that, which has been central and pivotal to seeing the Ryder Cup tournament coming to the country. The State, like with the NFL event, will be working with its agencies in terms of investment outside of that to facilitate the tournament, which will be great for the country and bring great benefits.

That is at the very top end in terms of showcasing sport at the very top level. However, we have top level people performing to the best of their ability, whatever that ability might be, every day across the country. That participation is what is most important to us as a Government and most important to all of us here in the Chamber. That very much came through in all of the contributions today, particularly the importance of investing in facilities. Many recognise the transformation we have seen since many of us would have been toting out as young people to what is available today. That is a continuing journey, and one we all have to continue to make sure we are investing in. The success of that journey brings its own pressures as well. More and more people are participating now. How great it is to see participation in all sports across the genders as well as the really important effort that has gone into making sure that people of all abilities, including those with disabilities, have the potential to participate. That brings challenges. A sign of the success but also the challenges we have to meet is that there is not a club I attend across the country that is not under pressure for capacity, space, or more facilities. That is why it is important we work to support them. That has been

the case in recent years. As acknowledged by Deputies, we have seen really significant investment through the sports capital programme.

Let us look at the last few years. In the most recent funding round, almost 3,000 clubs received funding of almost €270 million. Two years before that, the funding round amounted to approximately €156 million. That is a massive jump. If we go back another two years, the funding round was €60 million and before that it was about €50 million. That shows the trajectory of the investment and the emphasis being put on the sports capital programme. It is important to do that.

In the last few years, the LSSIF was also put in place, as a result of the national sports policy of 2018. Prior to that, there was no category that could provide for the State to invest in larger scale sporting projects. We have it now for the first time, but there is massive demand for it. Approximately €300 million has been committed between the two rounds we have had so far - in the most recent round, it was just under €170 million - but there was €660 million worth of applications. That shows the level of demand and that is why it is important that we work to try to ensure, as I will in this budget work with the Ministers, Deputies O'Donovan and Chambers, we are providing for it and that we work to continue to provide more facilities.

Many Deputies raised individual projects that are important to their constituencies, which again shows the level of demand and potential. Facilities are key and we will be working to continue to invest in them. Making the best use of those facilities is also important. We are fortunate to have a good structure in the governance of sport now and in how it is managed and organised, particularly the infrastructure that was put in place between 20 and 25 years ago when Sport Ireland was established, which now works with all the national governing bodies to provide oversight and support. There is a good support structure through Sport Ireland to make sure that, with the support available to volunteers, we maximise the capacity to deliver public good and outcomes for people through local sporting clubs so people can avail of them and enjoy sport. That has not always been the case. Governance was not always as co-ordinated and coherent as it has become. There will always be challenges, but from the point of view of the State there is a good structure in place to provide support. That is why it is important that through this and previous budgets we work to support the national governing bodies with the funding they receive through Sport Ireland and support Sport Ireland in the work it does in supporting high performance athletes.

We want to empower people at all levels to be the best they can when it comes to being able to participate in international competitions. We have seen some wonderful examples of that in the past few days, weeks and years and we will continue to support it because while it is important in its own right, it also provides inspiration for people to get involved in sport, including in coaching and developing people's potential.

In summary, I thank everyone. We look forward to doing the best we can in this year's budget. I acknowledge the role of local sports partnerships which do good work at local level in trying to make sure people who have challenges as regards participating in activities are supported in doing so. We are seeing collectively, through the work everyone is doing, increases in participation. Now up to 49% of people participate regularly in sport. That excludes walking, which would bring the percentage higher. Also important is that the gender gap that has traditionally been in place has narrowed to its narrowest percentage ever. There is just a 3% gap, with 46% of women participating regularly in sport. I thank Deputies for their

collective efforts on behalf of local sports clubs and communities. The Government looks forward to collaborating with them and continuing to do the best we possibly can to support this important activity.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage: Motion

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne): I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

(1) approves the terms of the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage done at Paris on the 6th November, 2001, a copy of which was laid before Dáil Éireann on 13th August, 2025,

(2) approves the making of a Declaration under Article 28 of the said Convention that the Rules of the Annex to the Convention will apply to activities directed at Underwater Cultural Heritage carried out in non-maritime inland waters, and

(3) approves the making of a Declaration under Article 9(2) of the Convention that the reports referred to in Article 9(1)(b) shall be transmitted by the State in accordance with Article 9(1)(b)(ii).

Question put and agreed to.

Industrial Relations (Boycott of Joint Labour Committees) Bill 2025: Second Stage (Resumed) [Private Members]

Deputy An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to Second Stage of the Industrial Relations (Boycott of Joint Labour Committees) Bill 2025, taken on Thursday 25 September 2025. On the question, "That the Bill be now read a Second Time", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Question put: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 61; Níl, 81; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Aird, William.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Brady, John.	Boland, Grace.	
Buckley, Pat.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brennan, Brian.	
Carthy, Matt.	Brophy, Colm.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Browne, James.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Burke, Colm.	
Cronin, Réada.	Burke, Peter.	
Crowe, Seán.	Butler, Mary.	

Cullinane, David.	Butterly, Paula.	
Cummins, Jen.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Daly, Pa.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Devine, Máire.	Cahill, Michael.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Calleary, Dara.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Canney, Seán.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Fitzmaurice, Michael.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Gannon, Gary.	Chambers, Jack.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Gould, Thomas.	Clendennen, John.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Collins, Niall.	
Healy, Seamus.	Connolly, John.	
Hearne, Rory.	Cooney, Joe.	
Kelly, Alan.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Kenny, Eoghan.	Cummins, John.	
Kenny, Martin.	Currie, Emer.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Daly, Martin.	
Lawless, Paul.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Devlin, Cormac.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Dillon, Alan.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Dolan, Albert.	
Mitchell, Denise.	Donohoe, Paschal.	
Murphy, Paul.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Fleming, Seán.	
Nash, Ged.	Foley, Norma.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Geoghegan, James.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Grealish, Noel.	
Nolan, Carol.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	Heydon, Martin.	
O'Flynn, Ken.	Higgins, Emer.	
O'Hara, Louis.	Keogh, Keira.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	Lahart, John.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	Lawless, James.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	Lowry, Michael.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	McAuliffe, Paul.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	McCarthy, Noel.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	McConalogue, Charlie.	
Quaide, Liam.	McCormack, Tony.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	McEntee, Helen.	
Rice, Pádraig.	McGrath, Séamus.	
Sheehan, Conor.	McGreehan, Erin.	
Sherlock, Marie.	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
Smith, Duncan.	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
Stanley, Brian.	Moynihan, Michael.	
Wall, Mark.	Moynihan, Shane.	

Ward, Charles.	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
Ward, Mark.	Murphy, Michael.	
Whitmore, Jennifer.	Naughton, Hildegarde.	
	Neville, Joe.	
	O'Brien, Darragh.	
	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
	O'Connell, Maeve.	
	O'Dea, Willie.	
	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Feargháil, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Richmond, Neale.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Ward, Barry.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Ivana Bacik and Conor Sheehan; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Question declared lost.

Insurance Costs: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

Debate resumed on the following motion:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

- the Government have failed to end the rip-off when it comes to insurance costs;
- the increasing cost of motor insurance is putting many people under severe pressure in a cost-of-living crisis;
- the cost of motor insurance has increased at more than four times the general rate of inflation;
- people are now facing health insurance costs of roughly €2,000 every year, affecting almost 2.5 million people in this State, many of whom were already struggling to afford to keep their coverage;

— there has been a substantial decrease in median award value among motor, employer and public liability claims; and

— despite a drop in claim related costs, a survey of businesses and civil society organisations, conducted by the Alliance for Insurance Reform, found that the vast majority reported premium increases in the past two years and faced higher excesses, new exclusions, or both, meaning they are paying more for less cover;

regrets that:

— the Government have failed to get insurance costs under control;

— customers have not benefited in the form of reduced premiums as a result of reduced claims-related costs for insurance companies in the way they should;

— the Government has taken no meaningful action, despite extensive evidence that previous reforms have not been passed on; and

— insurance companies in this State are making profits far in excess of industry norms, at the expense of workers, families, businesses and community groups; and

calls on the Government to:

— address the disproportionate profits being made in the insurance sector;

— stand up to insurance companies to ensure fair and stable insurance prices;

— recognise the role that high insurance costs play in driving the cost-of-living crisis, both directly through higher premiums and indirectly by driving up the costs of businesses, public bodies, and civil society organisations;

— progress and enact the Judicial Council (Amendment) Bill 2021, to ensure the benefits of reforms are passed onto customers in the form of lower premiums, rather than captured as higher profits for insurance companies;

— ensure meaningful Oireachtas oversight in relation to Personal Injury Guidelines, to ensure adequate scrutiny prior to Government decisions; and

— confirm that any future policy change in relation to insurance must be conditional on benefits of both new and past reforms being passed on to customers through lower premiums.

- [Deputy Pearse Doherty]

Deputy An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding insurance costs. On Tuesday, 30 September 2025, on the question, "That the motion be agreed to", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Question put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 60; Níl, 82; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Stاون
Ahern, Ciarán.	Aird, William.	

Bacik, Ivana.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Brady, John.	Boland, Grace.	
Buckley, Pat.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brennan, Brian.	
Carthy, Matt.	Brophy, Colm.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Browne, James.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Burke, Colm.	
Cronin, Réada.	Burke, Peter.	
Crowe, Seán.	Butler, Mary.	
Cullinane, David.	Butterly, Paula.	
Cummins, Jen.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Daly, Pa.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Devine, Máire.	Cahill, Michael.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Calleary, Dara.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Canney, Seán.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Fitzmaurice, Michael.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Gannon, Gary.	Chambers, Jack.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Gould, Thomas.	Clendennen, John.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Collins, Niall.	
Healy, Seamus.	Connolly, John.	
Hearne, Rory.	Cooney, Joe.	
Kelly, Alan.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Kenny, Martin.	Cummins, John.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Currie, Emer.	
Lawless, Paul.	Daly, Martin.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Devlin, Cormac.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Dillon, Alan.	
Mitchell, Denise.	Dolan, Albert.	
Murphy, Paul.	Donohoe, Paschal.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Nash, Ged.	Fleming, Seán.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Foley, Norma.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Geoghegan, James.	
Nolan, Carol.	Grealish, Noel.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Harris, Simon.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
O'Flynn, Ken.	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
O'Hara, Louis.	Heydon, Martin.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	Higgins, Emer.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	Keogh, Keira.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	Lahart, John.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	Lawless, James.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Lowry, Michael.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	McAuliffe, Paul.	

Quaide, Liam.	McCarthy, Noel.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	McConalogue, Charlie.	
Rice, Pádraig.	McCormack, Tony.	
Sheehan, Conor.	McEntee, Helen.	
Sherlock, Marie.	McGrath, Séamus.	
Smith, Duncan.	McGreehan, Erin.	
Stanley, Brian.	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
Wall, Mark.	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
Ward, Charles.	Moynihan, Michael.	
Ward, Mark.	Moynihan, Shane.	
Whitmore, Jennifer.	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
	Murphy, Michael.	
	Naughton, Hildegarde.	
	Neville, Joe.	
	O'Brien, Darragh.	
	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
	O'Connell, Maeve.	
	O'Dea, Willie.	
	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Feargháil, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Richmond, Neale.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Ward, Barry.	

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

Question declared lost.

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

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 8.15 p.m. go dtí 8.47 a.m., Déardaoin, an 2 Deireadh Fómhair 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 8.15 p.m. until 8.47 a.m. on Thursday, 2 October 2025.