



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoín, 2 Deireadh Fómhair 2025

Thursday, 2 October 2025

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan) i gceannas ar 8.47 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Sport and Recreational Development

1. **Deputy Joanna Byrne** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport in view of the global findings report produced from the Double Pass audit into the League of Ireland academy system, which benchmarks Ireland significantly behind other nations, the plans he has initiated to support academy development; if he will commit to the significant funding increase in this area to allow our academies grow to meet the huge potential they hold; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [52248/25]

Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): The operation of the League of Ireland and its academies is fundamentally a matter for the Football Association of Ireland, which, like all other NGBs of sport is an independent, autonomous organisation responsible for the organisation and development of its own sport.

The programme for Government commits to exploring new mechanisms for the creation of football academies and an additional finding grant of €1 million provided by my Department to the FAI enabled it to produce the report referred to by the Deputy. The funding also enabled the appointment by the FAI of an academies administrator to support the development of new academy programmes and track their impact.

The League of Ireland global findings report, produced by the Belgian company Double Pass, benchmarks Irish football academies against international standards based on an audit of existing academy structures and needs. My Department continues to engage with the FAI regarding this report, and a pre-budget submission focusing on academies has recently been submitted to me by the association. This will be given consideration, taking account of the range of request across the sports sector for additional support and, ultimately, the outcome of the current budgetary process.

While the FAI has sought significant State funding to support its academies, it is important to note the sizeable financial support directed to the FAI and to football more generally over the past few years. Over €75 million in State funding was allocated to the FAI between 2019 and 2024, including €30.2 million specifically to support football development and aimed at promoting participation in football by young people, with the balance in funding comprising Covid-specific and energy supports to the FAI and the wider football sector. Furthermore, significant capital funding has been granted to football projects around the country in recent years, including the €48.9 million that has been allocated to FAI endorsed football stadium projects at Finn Harps, Dalymount Park, Sligo Rovers and Wexford FC under the 2024 round of the large scale sports infrastructure fund, LSSIF, and €76 million to support the development of grassroots club football facilities nationwide under the 2020 and 2023 rounds of the community sports facilities fund.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I cannot emphasise enough just how important academies are to the future of Irish football. At the very top of the scale, we just need to see where our national team is right now in the international rankings and look at recent defeats to so-called lesser teams. At grassroots level, the opportunities that were there before Brexit no longer exist. Irish players cannot go across the water to larger academies and learn their trades like how it used to be done. Those young academy players are here. They want to play; they want to learn. They want the opportunity to represent their club and, ultimately, their country to the very best of their abilities. Without football academies up and down this country being adequately resourced, however, they are never going to reach their full potential. Some of the significant moments of modern Irish history have been because of football. Let us think of Euro 88, Italia 90, USA 94; events that unified everybody in every part of this country and lifted the mood of the population and brought joy and belief in ourselves as a people. If we want to see moments like that again, we need to start the process and invest now.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The FAI already receives significant amounts of Government funding, which the Deputy did not reference, nor did she reference anything the Government has been doing for the FAI over the past number of years. The 2023 memorandum of understanding between the Government and the FAI provides €5.8 million per annum to the association via Sport Ireland. In addition, the Government pays the FAI's annual contribution to the Aviva management company for three years, which is €2.54 million, which is now repayable to the State at a rate of €1 million per annum. A new memorandum of understanding was signed on 17 December 2024, which increased the funding to €6 million. The bulk of this funding goes towards the FAI's youth field sports grants, which are aimed at developing the grassroots of the game. I know what the Deputy is saying, but it is a bit unfortunate that she did not reference the things we are doing. The FAI could not function at the moment if it were not for the Government. The Deputy might in her response at least acknowledge that.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: The programme for Government stated that the Government will explore new mechanisms for the creation of football academies with the FAI and the League of Ireland, so I am not going to stand here and give the Minister plaudits for doing what he has committed to doing. The FAI pre-budget submission asks for support for League of Ireland academies, which is what my question this morning is about. This will create a total of 81 new jobs in clubs around the country before a jump to €8 million annually with the hope of creating

340 full-time and part-time jobs to kickstart an industry. If the Government makes the investment now, we could have the days like those I referenced earlier of Euro 88, Italia 90 and USA 94, but it has to make the investment now for Irish football to be self-financing in the future. We need to invest in our academies now.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I remind the Deputy that we actually have fulfilled our programme for Government commitment. We paid for the report and the Deputy did not acknowledge that either. Now we are considering it, and we will consider it in the round with every other field sport that is looking for money, including rugby, Gaelic games and everything else. We have a limited amount. If there are suggestions she has with regard to existing parts of the sports, culture and communications budget that I can cut, I would be delighted to hear them.

Postal Services

2. **Deputy Robert O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport if he will consider transferring certain State services, such as voter registration, motor tax payments, or cash collection, to An Post with a view to supporting its long-term viability, preventing further post office closures, reducing pressure on other public services and allowing people with lower levels of digital literacy skills to still have a place they can do their business. [52487/25]

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Government is committed to a sustainable An Post and post office network as a key component of the economic and social infrastructure throughout Ireland. The programme for Government commits to providing the nationwide network of post offices with funding to ensure their sustainability and enhance the value they bring to local communities. The Department is working to deliver on this commitment, engaging with relevant stakeholders in relation to the securing of a new mandate from the Government to continue funding at an enhanced level, while ensuring an adequate legal basis and compliance with state aid rules.

An amount of €10 million per annum is currently being provided over a three-year fixed term from 2023 to 2025 to An Post. An Post then disperses this funding across the post office network, with all contractor post offices benefiting from Government funding with the objective of securing the stability of the network.

It should be noted that An Post provides important services to its customers and key government services to citizens, including through commercial contracts with the Department of Social Protection and the National Treasury Management Agency, NTMA.

The report of the interdepartmental group, which was established to, among other things, examine the feasibility of additional Government services being contracted through An Post and the post office network, was published in 2022. None of the Departments or agencies involved were in a position to offer additional services for delivery by An Post. It is a matter for each Department or agency with responsibility for a service to consider how best to deliver their services. However, while I have no role in services outside of my remit, and cannot

transfer such services to An Post, my officials and I will be happy to engage with Departments should they wish to transfer services under their remit.

The Government launched Harnessing Digital: The Digital Ireland Framework in 2022 and publishes annual progress reports. One of the aims of the framework is to ensure widespread access and inclusive digital public services, with a target of 90% of services to be consumed online by 2030. As we progress towards the target of 90% of applicable services consumed online, the framework commits to ensuring that those cohorts who are not in a position to engage online will be better served through a clear plan involving focused supports including skills, infrastructure and assisted digital supports, with consideration of the most appropriate service delivery channels and the development of appropriate and clear consents and protocols. There is potential for the post office network to be a key enabler, therefore, in the implementation of the digital Ireland framework.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: Post offices are far more than service providers; they are the beating heart of the community. They bring people together. Therefore, it is not just about posting a letter or paying a bill; it is about human interaction. In rural towns and villages, post offices often serve as the only local retail outlet, frequently integrating with shops and newsagents. This makes them indispensable in providing everyday goods and services that might otherwise be out of reach. Their presence fosters both economic activity and social cohesion, while also creating a mutually beneficial relationship with surrounding businesses. Post offices are more than just part of our infrastructure. They are anchors of community life; keeping people connected, businesses supported and towns alive. They need continued support from the Government. I am happy that the Minister is happy to engage with the postmasters.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: We have engaged with the postmasters. I represent a rural community. I know probably as well as the Deputy the value of post offices. The earlier reply alluded to the fact that there is a digital risk with the growth in the number of services that are moving online. The reality is that mail delivery services have gone down dramatically. That poses a risk to the company and we have to be acutely aware of it. While everybody wants to move their services online, that comes then with a challenge to the organisation. The challenge to the organisation is to make sure it can compete, which it does, in other markets, including in parcel delivery in which it is doing a really great job. I understand, however, the context of what the Deputy is saying around it being a social asset as much as anything else. That is why the Government has over the past three years given €10 million in support, and that is why we have been engaged with the Irish Postmasters' Union, IPU. This is something we are considering in the context of the budget.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: It is good to hear that the Department is seeing this as a challenge to the organisation because that is key in all of this. I urge the Minister to support the IPU in its calls for €15 million in additional funding for budget 2026. This is just to keep them viable. It is to stop them closing their doors. However, what they really need is a long-term plan. As the Minister outlined with physical mail deliveries, that is a challenge. I refer to the 2018 contract. They are paid by their transactions, but their demographic is getting older. That means that even with inflation, what the postmasters are taking in is going down year on

year and, therefore, what they ultimately need is a long-term plan to secure the sector. If the Department is willing to engage with them, that would certainly be a good start.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Any decision on offices and outlets is a matter for the company and has been since the foundation of the company, and they are commercial decisions. That being said, when I meet with An Post, and any time I have met An Post, its representatives are very keen to point out that what it has been doing in the recent past, by virtue of the fact that it has gotten significant financial support, is looking to see if there a viable alternative in the immediate area it is prepared to take on. Unfortunately, we have had situations where there have been closures and there have been alternatives, but those alternatives are not willing to take it on, which is their choice.

9 o'clock

They do not have to take it on but that means if a postmaster is retiring, and an office is closing and nobody else wants to take it on, inevitably, we are looking at closure. The reality is, however, that in the past number of years the number of closures has gone down. This is not just something that is unique to rural areas. We have seen a substantial number of urban offices close as well.

The Deputy is right that post offices do not stay open on the basis of sentiment; they stay open on the basis of transactions. There is no point coming to a public meeting to keep a post office open if you have not been in a post office for the past 12 months. That is the reality. Postmasters cannot operate on the basis of sentiment. They have to operate on the basis of transaction and loyalty from the local community.

Artists' Remuneration

3. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport his plans for the extension or expansion of the basic income for the arts, following the publication of the cost-benefit analysis on the pilot scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [52536/25]

5. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport whether he has had any engagement with other Departments on the basic income for the arts scheme, to share learnings from the scheme and help identify other cohorts who may benefit from a basic income scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [52579/25]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Over 11,000 people have signed a petition to retain, extend and expand the basic income for the arts scheme. A cost-benefit analysis prepared by Alma Economics for the Department has shown that for every €1 invested society receives €1.39 in return, with over €100 million in social and economic benefits. With the budget approaching next week and the pilot due to end in February, will the Minister confirm if the scheme will continue beyond the pilot and what form it will take?

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I echo the words of the Deputy. This scheme has been life-changing for artists. Apologies-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Sorry, I made a mistake. It is the Minister to respond to an Teachta Ó Snodaigh.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Yes, but the questions are grouped. I will give way to Deputy Gibney.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Okay.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Thank you. As I was saying, it has been life-changing for artists but also for the rest of us as we benefit from their art. As the RTE ad says, "Ag tacú leis na healaíona, ag tacú linn." I have heard from many artists of how vital the scheme is. I am keen to ensure it is improved and extended. It is also a chance to explore a new model of how we support work that is a public good.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I propose to take Questions Nos. 3 and 5 together.

I thank both Deputies. The programme for Government commits to assessing the basic income for the arts, BIA, pilot research scheme to maximise its impact. I announced an extension of six months, to February 2026, to allow for further assessment of the pilot data and to engage in stakeholder consultation to provide an evidence base for Government to make decisions on the next steps. I launched an online public consultation which closed on 5 September. Over 17,000 submissions were received, of which 97% were in favour of the BIA continuing. A sectoral stakeholder forum also took place on 10 September with approximately 200 attendees from resource organisations and artists represented.

In order to assess the pilot in the context of the extension and potential preparations for a successor scheme, I instructed officials in the Department to convene a consultative committee, which draws from across Government and includes the Departments of Social Protection, public expenditure and reform, and Finance, along with the Arts Council, Screen Ireland and the County and City Management Association with officials from my Department who have been working on the pilot since the outset. The group met twice this summer. Many reports on the scheme have been published and circulated to members of this committee to keep them fully informed of developments on the BIA as they happen. More recently, the externally commissioned cost-benefit analysis on the scheme was circulated to colleagues in the Department of public expenditure ahead of its publication. Communications with the Department of Social Protection have been ongoing through the pilot. My remit as Minister for the arts is to that sector. The pilot scheme has proven to be an enormous help to the artists receiving it in dealing with the precarious nature of their income, which is work we all benefit from as a society. Other Departments are welcome to view the extensive research that has taken place on the pilot.

Ireland is a global leader in the area of artist supports because of the BIA. Several countries have shown an interest in the policy, with officials from Australia, Wales, South Korea, Canada, Norway, Lithuania, Estonia, northern European arts councils and the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU seeking briefings with regard the policy. Last year, our officials met with Jane Hutt, member of the Welsh Senedd and Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, to discuss the strengths and challenges of the income pilot. Wales is currently piloting a scheme for young

people leaving care. My officials have also been in contact with arts organisations, researchers, academics, organisations representing the area and university students.

The pilot is underpinned by a comprehensive research programme. I recently published a report examining the first 24 months of the scheme, which found that BIA recipients, compared to those not in receipt of the BIA, are: six percentage points more likely to have worked in the arts in the previous six months; spend on average 11 weekly hours more on their creative practice; and are 14 percentage points more likely to have completed new works in the previous six months, on average, completing 3.9 pieces of work more than the control group. They are 15 percentage points less likely to have felt downhearted or depressed; are 16 percentage points less likely to have experienced anxiety; and are more likely to be able to afford basic necessities. Yet, as of October 2024, almost 30% of recipients are experiencing enforced deprivation. The share for the general population in 2024 is 15.7%.

An interview report published earlier this year also found recipients have upskilled and invested in quality materials; the opportunity to focus more on their specific creative interests opened new possibilities; and recipients reported the importance of giving back to the community and engaging in collaborations. An externally commissioned cost-benefit paper has just been published by the Department. It shows that the BIA produced over €100 million in social and economic benefits and for every €1 invested in the pilot, society received a return of €1.39. It also found that recipients' arts-related income increased by over €500 per month on average. Audience engagement with the arts generated an estimated €16.9 million in social value over the three-year pilot.

No decision on a successor scheme has been made yet. A Government decision will be required on a successor to the pilot. I intend to bring forward proposals for a permanent intervention following budget 2026, assuming funding for a successor is secured, but I have made it clear that I am in favour of a permanent scheme being put in place.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: In some ways, I do not know whether it is good or bad that no decision has been made yet, given there is a very short administrative time, between this week and the end of February, for the scheme to continue without interruption. Artists are asking questions, such as whether those who are currently on the scheme can continue on it or a whole new cohort will be involved, or whether there will be increased numbers. The cost-benefit analysis the Minister quoted has shown how effective it has been and that there is that positive significant statistical impact in terms of both the psychological well-being of recipients and the reduction in the likelihood of experiencing mental health challenges, as well as all the other points he raised.

If the Department receives the funding in the budget on Tuesday, is it intended to continue the basic income for the arts scheme?

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: It is wonderful to hear all the analysis and statistics that are proving what a lot of us believe, which is that we have an economy that values a certain type of work. This type of pilot shows us there is other work that happens in society that should be just as valued and, when it is valued, we all benefit from it. It really is wonderful to hear that. I welcome the six-month extension but, like Deputy Ó Snodaigh, the artists I have spoken to live

in this uncertainty right now regarding what will happen. We need some certainty as to what is going to happen.

I would love to hear more detail on the interaction the Minister has had with the Department of Social Protection. The word "pilot" is crucial here. This is a pilot but there are so many other groups in society who would benefit from a basic income. I am thinking of small farmers, for example, carers, lone parents and disabled people. There are lots of ways in which basic income could be applied in different areas. If we want to get the best value out of a pilot, we need to think about that. The Minister needs to connect with all Ministers, particularly the Minister for Social Protection.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I will stick with artists for the moment, if that is okay. On the budgetary discussions, I have made it abundantly clear, even in the last line I read out, that I am in favour of the retention of the scheme. However, as Deputy Ó Snodaigh, who has been around a lot longer in this place than I have, knows, I still have to secure a funding source to make sure we have a scheme that can be implemented in the immediate aftermath of February. I will point out that since I arrived in the Department, we have done a number of things, including extending the scheme beyond the end of 2025. It was to run until the end of Christmas. I did not think that was appropriate, so I made our own resources available out of the Department to make sure we could bring it to February.

We also did quantitative and qualitative data research, which we published, including the cost-benefit analysis. We have had significant engagement with the campaign for the arts as well, all of which is focused on assessing people's views but also drilling home the value of the scheme, not just to the individual artist but, as Deputy Gibney said, to society and the Government as well. We will continue to do that.

Any successor scheme will be predicated, first, on a funding source. The quantum of the funding source will then determine the number of people that will be able to access it, again, having had discussions with the Department of Social Protection and others. I am also of a mind to change the name of the scheme. To be quite honest about it, "the basic income for the arts scheme" is not necessarily a name I would attribute to a scheme where ultimately, people are working on behalf of the State and producing works that can then lessen the precarious nature of their work. I am open to their suggestions. When I raised it with them, they were very positively disposed to a name change. Of course, that is predicated on if we will get funding and the quantum of the funding.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I welcome the confirmation that the Minister's intention is to have a basic income scheme, whatever its new title will be. However, part of the problem for artists at the moment is they are unsure of what the new scheme will look like. Obviously, that will be determined somewhat by budgetary factors but there are some things the Minister may be able to explain at the moment.

Will it be a new scheme? Will it be totally reworked? Will it be an extension of the current scheme? Is it the case that the current 2,000 will continue to receive it, with another cohort added, or will it be a totally new cohort? Will those who currently receive the basic income be allowed to reapply if that is the intention? Will the scheme be based on the current random selection or will it be based on merit or financial need? Finally, will the issues experienced by

those disabled artists and those on social welfare be addressed on this occasion? They were promised that in the initial round of basic income.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I do not think we should confine this to artists; that is my entire point. I also push back on the suggestion of renaming of it. The concept of a "basic income" is something that has been championed for many decades now as a way to provide certainty and a safety net for many people who live with precarious labour. I mentioned farmers. There are seasonal farmers who have to spend months of the year signing on when we could look at a much more concrete way of assisting people in moving between the different contributions they make to society. I could mention caring as an example. We spoke about carers a lot yesterday. My point is that if we want to get the value of it as a pilot, the Minister, who sits at Cabinet, should be working across government to look at ways in which it could be extended to other groups.

I echo Deputy Ó Snodaigh's comments on those with disabilities who have had issues with this scheme in terms of loss of medical cards and disability allowance. I urge that this be addressed in any next iteration of it.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I will go back to Deputy Ó Snodaigh's point with regard to disability. In the discussions I have already had in the Department with the representative groups, I have made clear my intention that if there is a successor scheme, there will be a clear focus on artists who have a disability in order to make sure they have access to the scheme. They should also be assisted in making an application to the scheme because for many of them, that is in itself a difficulty.

To be honest, all of the other questions that have been asked are very laudable but I do not have an answer for them. Whether we will have the same, existing cohort or we will be adding to them, taking away from them or changing the criteria will depend on the amount of money we ultimately have on an annualised basis, assuming a sum of money will be available. We are working on that basis. We still have a week to finalise it.

On Deputy Gibney's point about the name, during the discussions with artists' representatives they were positively disposed to looking at the possibility of changing the name. A lot of people do not like the word "scheme". Personally, I do not like the word "scheme". I am open to suggestions on it.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: It spoke about retaining a reference to the concept of a "basic income".

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: With regard to farmers, carers and everything else, that will be a matter for the line Ministers in each of the individual Departments. At the moment, my focus is on the questions that are before the House.

Arts Funding

4. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport to confirm whether he granted funding to a festival on an exceptional basis outside the normal

application processes for annual departmental or Arts Council schemes; the amounts and the recipients of such exceptional funding outside the normal applications processes provided by his Department in relation to community festivals and summer schools since his appointment; and if he will commit to ensuring in future that any such exceptional funding is separately indexed by his Department. [52539/25]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: My last attempt to ask this question was disallowed and a freedom of information request has yet to receive a response. I will ask it outright: did the new Minister ignore all normal arm's length criteria and competition-based funding processes so he could provide thousands of taxpayers' euro off the books at the request of somebody who was until January of this year a Government Senator?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The short answer is "No", but I will give the Deputy a longer answer now.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: That is okay.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I understand the Deputy is referring to the approval on 30 May of an allocation of support not to exceed €25,000 in respect of the Listowel Writers Festival. My Department has a number of processes for allocating funding to a wide range of artistic and cultural organisations and events. These processes are designed to ensure fairness and, insofar as possible, maximise responsiveness to the needs of the sector. In response to requests for funding for local events each year, individuals and organisations, where possible, are directed to the small-scale local festival and summer school scheme or the Arts Council festival scheme, depending on the size of the event. It should be noted that organisations cannot receive income from both schemes.

There may be instances whereby applicants have made an application to the Arts Council which was refused, and on this basis, the organisations may seek funding from the Department when that scheme is closed. Where such requests are received, the Department will consider them on a case-by-case basis. These are subject to available resources and all allocations are subject to compliance with public financial procedures, the requirements of the grant circular and my approval as Minister. This process has been in place for many years and all such grants are published each year on the Department's website at the page headed "Cultural Projects Funding".

Listowel Writers Week is an internationally acclaimed literary festival, devoted to bringing together writers and audiences at innovative events in the historic and intimate surroundings of Listowel. It was founded in 1970, with the first festival taking place in 1971. Listowel Writers Week is Ireland's oldest literary and arts festival. It is a forum where writers, artists and poets gather to promote writing of all genres and create an environment in which literature can be appreciated by the widest possible audience. It is a festival where writers and readers gather to celebrate the written word together. Support of €25,000 for Listowel Writers Festival was approved alongside allocations to the Phil Murphy Weekend, which received €20,000; Éigse Michael Hartnett, which received €15,000; and Other Voices, which was granted €40,000.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I did not name the festival because I believe it deserves to be funded - I have absolutely no problem with that - but I am interested in the way in which the normal funding process was circumvented in this instance. The question is whether there are other ways for festivals to circumvent the small-scale schemes that the Minister mentioned or the Arts Council schemes. Yes, there are occasions when this happens but the Department does not publish a list of all of the groups that got funding outside of the normal channels and funding methods. The reason those funding methods were put in place was to avoid circumstances like the current one where allegations are made about the Department, the Minister or the person who sought the funding. I wish the festival well and I hope it continues. Hopefully, it will be funded properly so there is no need to try to seek funding outside of the normal channels.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Deputy might say it is "outside of the normal channels" but I wonder if he ran this question by his colleague, Deputy Pa Daly, who represents the constituency of Kerry, before he came into the Chamber. Deputy Daly has used a similar channel for festival in Tralee called Anam. It was approved under that channel and received €7,500. There was no difficulty with that. I do not know what Deputy Ó Snodaigh has against the people of Listowel, and I do not know what he has against Listowel Writers Week, which is a very worthy festival. The last time I answered questions in this House, Deputy Ó Snodaigh and Deputy Doherty tore the place asunder over funding for a musical event in Gaoth Dobhair. Since those parliamentary questions, I was able to allocate funding to that event outside what the Deputy would call "normal" procedures. Does Deputy Ó Snodaigh believe I should take that money back from Gaoth Dobhair? Will he take it up with Deputy Doherty? Will he take up the €7,500 that the Department allocated to a festival in Tralee on foot of a request from Deputy Pa Daly? According to Deputy Ó Snodaigh, this was done "outside of the normal channels"?

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I can answer that directly: no.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Do as I say and not as I do.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: If the Minister would listen, I specifically said that Listowel Writers Week deserves to be properly funded.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: So does Tralee. What is the problem?

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Yes but the Minister did not publish that he was giving this money in this format to Listowel, to-----

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The funding to Tralee was not published either.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: -----Tralee or to any of the other ones.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: So will we look for the money back again?

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Minister should publish it. That is transparency.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: That is grand, okay.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: If he is going to do it this way, the Minister will attract applications well beyond the three he mentioned. That is not the process. He set up a process and that is the way in which people should apply for funding and that funding should be increased. The problem is the Minister and his Department are not being transparent in the way it is funding. Yes, there are exceptions and, yes, there is a need-----

(Interruptions)

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: There are exceptions and those exceptions include Listowel Writers' Week, Tralee and others, but that should be published. The Minister should be open that this funding stream is available to everybody.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I could not be more open about Listowel. If the Deputy's party Deputy from north Kerry had turned up to the opening of Listowel Writers' Week, he would have got a press release on the extent of what the Department was giving. The Deputy does not have an issue with Tralee, because of Deputy Pa Daly, or with Gweedore, because of Deputy Pearse Doherty.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I have no issue with Listowel either.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Forgetting outside-----

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I have absolutely no issue with Listowel.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: What did the people of Listowel ever do to Sinn Féin?

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I have absolutely no problem with Listowel.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: What did the people of Listowel ever do to Sinn Féin?

(Interruptions)

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Why is it that the Deputy is against-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Can we have some order?

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I had not mentioned Listowel. The Minister named it.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Deputy named it in correspondence to my Department. I am clearing up the Dáil record.

(Interruptions)

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Let the Minister respond.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Deputy named it in correspondence to my Department.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Minister brought Listowel into this.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Deputy does not like it now. He named it in correspondence to my Department. I am going to be clear with the Dáil. The Deputy has a problem with Listowel Writers' Week. He has a problem.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Deputy should let me finish. I did not shout him down.

(Interruptions)

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Let the Minister finish.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: This is the Deputy's tactic. He is now adopting the Pearse Doherty tactic. The last day the two Deputies came in here and they attacked me over Gweedore. I subsequently was able to fix it.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I did not.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Okay. Let the Minister-----

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I did not hear the Deputy say today that I had allocated money to Gweedore outside normal practices. I also did not hear him say that I had allocated money to Tralee outside normal practices.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Minister, you are over time.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Deputy should take it up with his own two Deputies.

(Interruptions)

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Minister, you are over time.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Deputy should take it up with his own two Deputies. I hope the people of Listowel-----

(Interruptions)

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I hope the people of Listowel are listening to this on Radio Kerry.

(Interruptions)

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Can the Deputy resume his seat, please?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I hope Jerry O'Sullivan on Radio Kerry is listening to this. I do not know what the Deputy has against the people of Listowel.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I have absolutely no problem.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Deputy did not have the guts to put it down on the Question Paper today - the name of it.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Minister, please.

(Interruptions)

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): We have to move on. We are nearly one minute over time.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I would not have been allowed with the rules of the House. I did not put it down specifically, so that I was not casting aspersions on Listowel.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Deputy cast aspersions on an individual.

(Interruptions)

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Minister, resume your seat.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: It was on the Minister and not on the-----.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: How dare the Deputy cast aspersions on me. On what basis is the Deputy casting aspersions on me?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Minister, will you resume your seat?

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Minister has been doing that for the past ten minutes.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Resume your seat.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: On what basis is the Deputy casting aspersions on me?

(Interruptions)

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Deputy should take it up with his colleague, Deputy Pa Daly. Do not come in here like a hypocrite.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Minister, please resume your seat. Deputy, resume your seat.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Deputy wants to have his cake and to eat it. He has a problem with Listowel Writers' Week.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I have absolutely no problem with Listowel.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Deputy has a problem with the people of Listowel but he has no problem with Gweedore.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I do not have a problem with the people of Listowel.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Deputy is a hypocrite.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Minister, will you please-----

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Deputy is a hypocrite.

(Interruptions)

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Deputy, resume your seat.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The people of Listowel and Deputy Daly will know all about.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Minister, please. We need to move on.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: They will get more next year.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Great. That is what I said. They should be funded properly. I might get an invite next year.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): We might move on.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: There is an open invite to everybody.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Deputy Ó Snodaigh has touched a nerve.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: A very raw nerve.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Because I am in favour of the people of Listowel. I will take Deputy McGuinness on as well.

Deputy Paul Murphy: What problem does Sinn Féin have with the people of Listowel? It is absolutely ridiculous, Minister, to be fair.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Exactly. The decent people of Listowel.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I have not followed the issue but I thought that was a bit ridiculous.

Question No. 5 taken with Question No. 3

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Arts Funding

6. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport if he will increase the payment under the basic income for the arts scheme in budget 2026; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [52583/25]

20. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the number of persons in receipt of the basic income for the arts payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51546/25]

23. **Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport when a decision is expected on plans to extend the basic income for artists scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [52174/25]

26. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport for an update on the development of a permanent successor scheme to the basic income for the arts pilot; his plans to publish the cost benefit analysis paper; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [52574/25]

32. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport if he will make the basic income for the arts scheme permanent in budget 2026; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [52584/25]

Deputy Paul Murphy: My question goes back to the previous grouping in relation to the basic income for the arts, BIA, scheme. What the Minister said earlier was unambiguously positive in terms of the evidence of the cost benefit analysis of the scheme. Will the scheme be made permanent? Will it be expanded to four or five times its current size so that all eligible applicants can benefit from it?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I propose to take Questions No. 6, 20, 23, 26 and 32 together.

The basic income for the arts is a pilot research programme which will inform future Government policy on how best to support Ireland's artists and creative arts workers. The primary objective of the scheme was to help artists deal with precarious incomes and prevent talent from leaving the sector for economic reasons. It is well established that artists suffer from precarious incomes and the benefits of the arts enjoyed by society are often as a result of unpaid and underpaid labour of artists. This is a chronic ongoing problem.

The programme for Government commits to assessing the basic income for the arts pilot research scheme to maximise its impact, which is why I announce an extension of six months to February 2026 to allow further assessment of the pilot data and to engage in stakeholder consultation to provide a clear evidence base for the Government to make decisions on the next steps.

The BIA recognises of the arts and the role of the creative practice in Irish society. The arts positively impact social cohesion, societal well-being, Ireland's global reputation and creativity. The BIA has particularly good regional distribution across the country with every county benefiting from the investment and some counties like Leitrim, Clare and Sligo have more artists than would be expected based on their populations bringing much-needed economic investment to those areas as well.

BIA support is hugely valued by those artists in receipt of it. It has been the subject of much positive commentary at home and in an international context and makes an important statement about the value placed on the arts in Ireland.

I fully appreciate the importance of the BIA and have been clear that I think it should be continued. There has been consistent correspondence to my Department in support of a successor scheme. Much of this support has come through the constituency offices of all colleagues both in government and in opposition. It is therefore clear that there is broad support for a continuation of the BIA. My Department conducted a public consultation which closed on 5 September and over 17,000 submissions were received. Of these, 97% were in favour of the BIA being continued.

Consultation is ongoing, including a consultative committee which draws from across Government Departments. I also held a sectoral stakeholder forum on 10 September with around 200 artists, all of whom were in favour of retaining the scheme.

The BIA has been implemented as a randomised control trial which consists of two groups of randomly selected people, all of who complete a lengthy survey every six months as a condition of a participant being on the scheme. This represents the largest randomised controlled trial undertaken by the Government, the gold standard for research. Some 2,000 recipients were selected to receive a payment of €325 a week, while a further 1,000 control group members were selected to participate in research. Analysis of the results involved the comparison of averages between the two groups across a very broad range of possible impacts.

The same cohorts of recipients have remained on the scheme since 2022 in order to gather accurate comparable data. Due to attrition, the total number now on the scheme is 1,962. The pilot is underpinned by a comprehensive research programme and three impact assessments have been published so far by the Department in addition to independent reports on recipient reviews.

It is clear from all of the evidence collected to date under the scheme that it is having a positive impact for those in receipt of it. The data shows that the BIA is having a consistent positive impact across all indicators affecting practice development, sectoral retention, well-being and deprivation. However, the data also shows that the situation of the control group participants who provide the same data as the recipients but who do not get the weekly payment have significantly deteriorated given the cost-of-living crisis.

According to the data the Department has collected, 51% of those who do not receive the BIA live in enforced deprivation compared to 16% of the general population. The BIA is therefore a means of addressing consistent poverty in the sector.

The data also shows that at the start of the BIA the median income earned by those on the scheme was €19,200, which is 54% lower than the national annual median of €41,823. At the same time, recipients' arts-related income increased by on average over €500 a month, while their income from non-arts work increased by about €280.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The evidence is absolutely clear. As Minister said earlier, the headline from the cost benefit analysis is that society received a benefit of €1.39 for every euro spent on this scheme. The Minister said that he is in favour of this being made permanent, I think, or at least being continued. Does he agree that it should be massively expanded? Just over 8,000 artists applied to this pilot but only 2,000 were selected. It was not a merit-based selection process but instead a lottery. There are another 6,000 artists out there who wanted to participate and contribute in this way. They were not able to because of the limited funds available for the scheme.

Imagine if only one in four workers got paid for their work on the basis of a lottery every three years or only in four eligible applicants received job seeker's payments. Does the Minister agree that the scheme needs to be expanded so that all artists who want to participate and meet the criteria can do so?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I will finish reading the reply for the record.

Last week I published a cost benefit analysis showing the net fiscal cost of the BIA was just under €72 million over the three years compared to gross cost of €105 million over three years. For every €1 of public money invested in the pilot, society received €1.39 in return. The cost-benefit analysis shows that audience engagement with the arts generated an estimated €16.9 million in social value over the three pilot years and improvements in psychological well-being contributed almost €80 million to total benefits. Dependence on social protection declined, with recipients receiving €100 less per month on average and being 38% less likely to receive jobseekers' payments. The findings of the report on two years of the payment shows that compared to those not in receipt of the BIA, recipients benefited in a number of ways in terms of weekly output. The BIA research has developed a strong irrefutable evidence base that the intervention works and has consistent positive impacts for those in receipt of the payment as well as broader society.

No decision on a successor scheme has been made, including potential payment levels, eligibility criteria and so on, but I have made it clear, and am making it clear again this morning in the Dáil, that I am in favour of a permanent scheme being put in place.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Again, it is unambiguously positive. It is positive for the artists who participated and for society as a whole. It provides some sort of halt or counterpressure to the drain of mass emigration of many of our most creative young people who are effectively being driven out of here by the cost-of-living crisis and are going to live in less expensive but creative cities which is sucking the energy and life out of many of our cultural scenes.

Is the Minister in favour of the expansion of this scheme to include all who are eligible to participate? This would mean increasing the funding, perhaps even quadrupling it. Another 6,000 artists were eligible for the scheme, having met the criteria, but they lost out on the lottery. We could be getting the benefit of their work as well. Does the Minister agree that there needs to be a new scheme that is open to new applicants so that those who did not apply previously can do so?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I do not know if the Deputy was here for the Priority Questions, but as I said earlier, no decision has been made with regard to a successor. That decision and any decisions on the details of any successor scheme will only be made once there is acceptance of what I have put before the Dáil this morning, which is that the scheme should be continued. The quantum of money available will also be relevant. There is only a week to go to the budget and ultimately, the numbers of people that will be included will reflect the amount of money the Department gets in the Vote in the budget next week.

Sports Funding

7. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport to set out the level of funding allocated to League of Ireland clubs for academies; if this funding will be increased in budget 2026; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [52515/25]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I ask the Minister to set out the level of funding allocated to League of Ireland clubs for academies and to state whether such funding will be increased in the budget. Sinn Féin very much supports the Global Findings Report recommendations produced by Double Pass as part of its audit of the League of Ireland academy system. We urge the Government to commit significant funding to same, as promised in the programme for Government. Separately, has the Minister had any communication with the FAI or the LMETB in relation to the youth training programme being run out of Oriel Park which is to cease at the end of the month? I do not think this is the-----

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Sorry, what question are we on?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Tá brón orm. Táimid ar Ceist Uimh. 7.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Deputy Ó Murchú is substituting for Deputy Ward on Question No. 7.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Within the context of the question, I will ask a supplementary question about a training programme in Dundalk.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: As outlined in my reply to an earlier question, the operation of the League of Ireland and its academies is fundamentally a matter for the Football Association of Ireland which, like all national governing bodies of sport, is an independent, autonomous body responsible for the organisation and development of its own sport.

At present, no specific funding is allocated for League of Ireland academies. However, the programme for Government commits to exploring new mechanisms for the creation of football academies. An additional funding grant of €1 million, which was provided by my Department to the FAI, enabled it to produce the recently published League of Ireland Global Findings Report. The funding also enabled the appointment by the FAI of an academies administrator to support the development of new academy programmes and to track their impact. The Global Findings Report benchmarks Irish football academies against international standards based on an audit of existing academy structures and needs. My Department continues to engage with the FAI regarding this report. A pre-budget submission focusing on academies has recently been submitted to me by the FAI. This will be given due consideration, taking account of the range of requests across the sports sector for additional support and, ultimately, the outcome of the budget process.

While the FAI has sought significant State funding to support its academies, it is important to note that sizable financial support has been directed to the FAI and to football more generally over recent years. Over €75 million in State funding was allocated to the FAI between 2019 and 2024, including €30.2 million specifically to support football development and promote participation in football by young people, with the balance in funding comprising Covid-specific and energy supports. Furthermore, significant capital funding has been granted to football projects around the country in recent years, including €48.9 million to FAI-endorsed football stadium projects at Finn Harps, Dalymount Park, Sligo Rovers and Wexford FC under the 2024 round of the large-scale sports infrastructure fund, LSSIF, and €76 million to support the development of grassroots football club facilities nationwide under the 2020 and 2023 rounds of the community sports facilities fund.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I accept that we are not going to get an outline of what will be in the budget but I seek reassurance that there is still a commitment there. In fairness, the Department played a major role in the Global Findings Report being conducted. That report found there is an absolute necessity to provide significant funding for academies. We know the scenario in relation to professional football, the possibilities that exist and the need to make sure we have the necessary throughput of players. It is all about contact and professionalism but that can only happen if we have the funding.

I ask the Minister to outline as much as he can in relation to that commitment. I am not taking away from the financial commitment that has already been given in relation to the FAI. Deputy Joanna Byrne has spoken about the fact that we would all like to see the Irish team doing much better. At this moment in time, the League of Ireland is flying but also has some issues in relation to funding.

Has the Minister had contact with LMETB or the FAI in relation to the fact that the youth training programme which is run out of Oriel Park is to cease at the end of the month? There is obviously a lot of worry in relation to that. Indeed, SIPTU and many others have commented on it.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: As I said to Deputy Byrne a while ago, and as Deputy Ó Murchú has acknowledged, the Government has played a role in terms of the supports it has provided to the FAI. We are operating on the basis of a memorandum of understanding, MOU. A significant amount of reform has happened already. Of the 163 recommendations or conditions, 159, or 98%, are either completed or phase 1 of them is completed. The financial situation in the FAI is still challenging. Since the new MOU was signed on 17 December 2024, State funding has been increased to €6 million for the period from 2024 to 2027. The bulk of this will go towards youth field development and grants which are aimed at the grassroots of the game. The MOU also contains 16 recommendations for the FAI, including completion of outstanding recommendations and conditions from the previous MOU, the maintenance of governance reforms introduced under the previous MOU, the provision of information and reports to Sport Ireland to facilitate oversight and a cascading governance reform to affiliates and grassroots. The last recommendation is really important and was also raised by members of the Oireachtas committee last week. We have to have a cascading effect of reform. While there has been quite a considerable amount of reform with regard to numbers at the FAI itself and so on, we now need to see the cascading effect down to into the grassroots, which I know the Deputy will support.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am in complete agreement with the Minister. I do not think there is anyone out there who would not say that there is a need for a huge level of reform and that there is more to do in relation to the FAI, particularly in regard to governance. That goes without saying. In terms of the League of Ireland and grassroots football, we need to ensure the necessary supports are there. I ask the Minister to confirm that the commitment is still there in relation to the academies and the need for significant funding. We also need to see more funding for the LSSIF. Deputy Byrne spoke yesterday about the success of Drogheda United, Louth GAA and many others. The fund needs to be open to the likes of Oriel Park for the changes that are absolutely needed there. I ask the Minister to tell us whether he has had contact with LMETB and the FAI in relation to the absolutely frightening story that the youth training programme in Oriel Park is to cease at the end of the month. I do not think it is the first one. A significant amount of the funding is meant to come from the ETB. It is just a matter of finding this information out. One SIPTU official said that he saw this as pulling up the supports for grassroots football. Will the Minister ensure that engagement happens in order to find out exactly what the story is in this regard and whether it can be rectified in any way?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I have not had any engagement with LMETB. The Department or the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, who unfortunately cannot be here today, may well have had some engagement with it. I am not sure about that but I can check afterwards. I do not disagree with what the Deputy said with regard to investment. Every single person who comes in for these questions on sport has a catalogue of things he or she wants implemented. It is not a couple of hundred million euro I would need, but rather a couple of hundred billion euro, which is not practical.

Acknowledgement should be given – at least the Deputy did so – that the report which highlighted the League of Ireland’s potential with regard to academies was funded by the State. At the moment, most of the operating costs are being funded by the State. The State entered into an MOU with the FAI in good faith in order to keep the organisation operable because we need an association that can govern football in Ireland and ensure we have teams that can represent the country at home and abroad with distinction. In recent years, that can has been carried by the State and it will be carried for another while. We cannot just glaze over that and say there is no investment; there is substantial investment in this area.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Will the Minister ensure there is engagement with the FAI and the ETB on this matter? I would appreciate it if he could come back to me on that.

Question No. 8 taken with Written Answers.

Media Sector

9. **Deputy Robert O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the measures he is adopting to ensure that independent radio and broadcasters have fair access to funding in budget 2026, particularly in underserved or rural areas; the means by which he plans to support current affairs and local news provision; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [52422/25]

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: What measures is the Minister adopting to ensure that independent radio stations, such as Live 95, which covers the constituencies of the Chair and the Minister, have fair access to funding in budget 2026, particularly in underserved rural areas? By what means does he plan to support current affairs and local news provision?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The programme for Government acknowledges that local and national independent broadcasters perform a vital public service and that this should be supported. Radio Kerry is probably one of the stations that will be tuning in this morning. This is being achieved through a range of media schemes for which local, regional, independent and community radio stations and broadcasters are eligible to apply.

A total of €6 million was provided in budget 2025 to ensure the continuation of the local democracy and courts reporting schemes, applications for which recently closed and are currently being assessed. Two new schemes have been launched this year. A total of €3 million is being provided for the digital transformation scheme, which was launched in September. It will support media organisations to innovate and transition to the digital information environment. The news reporting scheme will provide €4 million, including a ring-fenced €3 million for the commercial radio sector to support public service content that is underprovided for or at risk of underprovision. This scheme is providing an important avenue of funding in support of the provision of independent and trustworthy news and current affairs content. It will assist in promoting a plurality of voices in our media sector. Applications to the scheme closed last Thursday and are currently being assessed.

As recommended by the Future of Media Commission, Coimisiún na Meán is progressing research into current community media supports. This research will help to determine optimal

supports going forward and establish the foundations on which a new scheme may be devised. The aforementioned measures are in addition to the Sound and Vision scheme operated by Coimisiún na Meán, which provided funding of more than €22.7 million in 2024 for the production of audiovisual works, of which almost €1.7 million went to commercial radio. More than €600,000 has been provided in 2025 to the commercial radio sector through the scheme.

Coimisiún na Meán will monitor the impact of each of these schemes and update them as appropriate in order to ensure they are accessible to the wider media sector and continue to deliver on intended objectives. I understand the importance of ensuring our local and regional radio stations, which are among the most trusted news sources in the country, remain viable and strong and actively contribute to a thriving and diverse media landscape.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I thank the Minister for the response. Independent radio is a trusted voice for 2.5 million people across Ireland. For less than 1.4% of total media funding, we can protect and strengthen that service, with just €4.5 million coming from the budget. It is good to hear €3 million will be kept ring-fenced in order to continue delivering independent, high-quality news and public service content. A total of €1.5 million is needed to safeguard our transmission system, which is a lifeline for communities when broadband or electricity fails, as we saw during Storm Éowyn, as well as a guarantee that 30% of the Sound and Vision fund goes to independent radio, which will come at zero cost to the taxpayer, which we both like, I assume. That will ensure digital funding continues into 2026 so Irish radio stays strong on every dashboard and digital platform. It is about fairness and giving independent radio the tools it needs to keep serving Ireland. With modest support, we will continue to deliver essential public service broadcasting in every county every day.

My surname is O'Donoghue and I have relations in Kerry. The people of Listowel are a great bunch of lads.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Of course, the Chair is no stranger to Live 95 in Limerick. I often come on that radio station on his coat-tails. Deputy O'Donoghue is right about the importance of local commercial radio. It has given a voice to people across the country who would not otherwise have one. Let us be fair about it: until the advent of local commercial radio stations, the only voices heard on the radio in Ireland were Dublin ones. If a regional voice was heard on the radio, it was ordinarily because of bad news, such as something closing down or an atrocity or something. That is not what people want. The misinformation, disinformation and malinformation strategy that we brought to the Government last year is a fundamental plank in protecting our democracy because local radio is trusted. I have a good relationship with the Independent Broadcasters of Ireland. It has met me on a number of occasions and it has a good relationship with the Department. I have outlined the schemes that we have *in situ* already. The Independent Broadcasters of Ireland is working with and very supportive of those schemes. I hope to be in a position to expand those schemes over the lifetime of the Government with the programme for Government.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I thank the Minister.

Commemorative Events

10. **Deputy Edward Timmins** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport for an update on the American Presidents' trail; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [52572/25]

Deputy Edward Timmins: A total of 23 US Presidents have Irish heritage, with many coming from Northern Ireland. As the Minister knows, I first floated the idea of an American Presidents' trail in this country earlier this year in the House. This proposal could be a highly positive North-South project and a massive attraction for US visitors, especially those with Irish links. It could be comparable to the Wild Atlantic Way. Will the Minister provide an update on any progress?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: In the programme for Government, the 250th anniversary of the US Declaration of Independence was identified as an event that could be marked appropriately. This acknowledges Ireland's unique connection to the story. The anniversary will be led on two levels. On the international front, the commemorative programme will be led by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. My Department has been given the responsibility to lead on the programme of national events for America250. Given the contribution of people from the Ulster-Scots tradition on the island to American independence, there is much that can be done on a North-South basis. I have had a number of good conversations with my counterpart Minister, Gordon Lyons MLA, in this regard.

The American Presidents' trail is an initiative that is being considered for inclusion. It is something that I, on the face of it, support. It was brought to my attention by Deputy Timmins along with other examples, including the Ohio Presidential Trail and the Presidential Walking Trail near Mount Rushmore in South Dakota. The trails are being considered as community-led commemorative initiatives that could be delivered in partnership with the local authorities. This would be with support from my Department through the annual local authority commemorations grant funding.

A draft proposal for the American Presidents' trail will shortly be shared with the newly formed commemorations advisory committee, which provides independent and expert advice to the State on commemorative matters. As Minister with responsibility for commemorations, I hope to shortly bring a memorandum for information to the Government that will contain the approved events that will form the national programme for America250.

Across the island of Ireland, there are many communities that have a proud connection to American Presidents. Through the local authority network, the Department will work with these communities to ensure these connections are shared and remembered.

I acknowledge the passing of the deputy chair of the expert advisory group, Dr. Martin Mansergh, in the past ten days. One of his lasting legacies, among so many other contributions to the State, was his dedication, expert guidance and commitment to forging a collaborative path in commemorations that allowed and encouraged everyone to take part, no matter their background, beliefs or standing.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I am pleased to announce that I have developed a roadmap for the potential American Presidents' trail. I have pinpointed several key counties to consider, along with a suggested route. Ultimately, this map would benefit all parts of Ireland, enhance

relations between the two countries and boost tourism. Tourism numbers in this country are down this year. This project should be a part of a national strategy of Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland. Never has it been so important to highlight the close relationship we have with the United States, and this trail would promote closer ties. It is a perfect example of the use of soft power. Soft power is something we have with the US and we need to constantly remind ourselves of this fact. We must develop it and not take it for granted. It has contributed to the massive investment by the US in this country.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I do not disagree with Deputy Timmins. He will be aware that in the case of the vast majority of those United States presidents prior to 1900 who had ancestors from the island of Ireland, their ancestors came from County Antrim, so there is a North-South dimension to this as well. The Department deals with that. I have had discussions with the Minister, Gordon Lyons. It will also include the Department of the Taoiseach through the shared island initiative. I am preparing to bring forward a memorandum on this shortly.

I do not disagree with what the Deputy says about soft power. At the end of the day, people crave an understanding of where they come from. I was at the Ryder Cup at the weekend and it was clearly evident in discussions that every second person I met had some connection to the island of Ireland. It is no coincidence that the vast majority of United States presidents, in particular pre-1900, have had very strong, tangible links to the island of Ireland, with some of their parents born here. That is really important. It is not just the presidents of the United States; three of the signatories to the Declaration of Independence were born on the island of Ireland. That is something the Tánaiste and Minister for foreign affairs is anxious to promote for the events that will take place in the United States in 2026.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I could not agree more. I strongly believe my proposal for an American presidents trail could be a hugely positive North-South project. It would fit the whole purpose of the shared island fund, boost the economy of Northern Ireland and deliver benefits that we cannot predict. It would improve co-operation between both parts of these islands and develop relationships that do not exist. This is the best way to unite our island. If we bring people closer together, then borders will simply melt away.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Deputy's summing-up properly reflect his sentiments and what he is trying to achieve. My Department and I will work with him over the coming months in advance of bringing forward a memorandum to the Government to see how his views can be best represented in that.

Culture Policy

11. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the engagement he has had with museums, universities, institutes, and archives in other countries regarding the restitution and repatriation of cultural heritage; his engagement with the advisory committee on the restitution and repatriation of cultural heritage; whether a national strategy is in place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [35815/25]

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I want to briefly refer to the criminal actions that happened overnight where Israel kidnapped Irish citizens and other humanitarian personnel and illegally seized 14 vessels carrying humanitarian aid to Gaza. The Government must now implement serious sanctions against Israel. There can be no more impunity. Colleagues of ours in this House and in the other House have been kidnapped in international waters. I just wanted to say that.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): The Deputy has only five seconds.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Very briefly, my question relates to the restitution and reparation of cultural heritage, the work of the advisory committee and whether a national strategy is in place.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The issue of repatriation and restitution is an important one, especially in the current global context. While my Department is not engaged directly with institutions in other countries regarding the restitution and repatriation of cultural heritage, it is represented on the advisory committee on the restitution and repatriation of cultural heritage. This committee was established to advise the Government on issues relating to the restitution of historically and culturally sensitive objects in Ireland.

The advisory committee is chaired by Sir Donnell Deeny, an expert in this field of work, and is ably supported by the Heritage Council, as secretariat. The committee comprises a number of independent experts, including representatives from the national cultural institutions, key Departments, the Heritage Council, as well as the wider museum, claimant and academic sectors. Further information about the membership of the advisory committee can be found on the Government's website as well as on the Heritage Council's website.

The advisory committee is tasked with developing policy advice and national guidelines on the restitution of cultural heritage objects in Ireland that may have been illegally or unethically elicited or traded. This approach is grounded in the research and evidence of best practice internationally and the committee has been working hard on reviewing this research and conducting research within our own collecting institutions. Through its work, the advisory committee will also provide guidance on related matters, including provenance research, to cultural institutions and other bodies that have responsibility for managing historic collections.

Progress is well under way on this work. I received a very comprehensive report on the work of the committee from its chair earlier this year. I was greatly impressed at the detailed work programme being undertaken by the committee into this sensitive policy area and its progress across the various programme strands. I also recently met with the director of the Heritage Council, Virginia Teehan, on these matters to assure the committee of my support for its work. I take this opportunity to thank the members of the committee and the Heritage Council for their continued support in this. I look forward to the outcome of the process.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: The Minister will be aware that I have submitted some parliamentary questions on the work of this advisory committee. I am really keen to see the

report. I do not know if the Minister has published it, or if he is willing to publish it or share it with Members. It is really important that we see the fruits of that work.

The minutes of meetings have been published but there does not seem to be any record of a meeting since February. Perhaps meetings have taken place and minutes have not been published. There is a lot of interest in this topic and in the repatriation and restitution of our cultural heritage that is held in museums and educational institutions in other countries. In many cases it was taken without the permission of the Irish State and the Irish people at times of war and oppression and often stored inadequately, not open for researchers from Ireland or any other country to access and certainly not available for the people of Ireland to enjoy, understand, interpret and hold as part of our intangible cultural heritage.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: That is a two-way street, because there may very well be items in Irish institutions, which is something that is also of concern to me, that predate the foundation of the State or may have found their way into State collections by way of benefactors. We have to be conscious of that as well. In my time, for instance, as Minister of State with responsibility for the Office of Public Works, I was very keen to make sure that any of the public buildings under the State's care and managed by the Office of Public Works did not in any way have artistic representation or any sort of presentations that were connected directly to slavery or the trade in human beings. The OPW conducted a very comprehensive body of work at the time and it was able to conclude that none of the State's buildings were in any way involved or had an attachment in any way, for want of a better word, to the remembrance and celebration in some cases, warped and all as that may be, of the trade in human beings.

On the point Deputy McGuinness makes, it is a two-way street and we have to be conscious of what potentially is within our own stores as well. Obviously, the Heritage Council has a role in this and I will engage with it further.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I agree with the Minister that it is a two-way street. In the case of any artefacts or items of cultural heritage held here that are vestiges of the colonial past of this country and its unhappy presence within the British Empire for far too long, they should of course be logged and dialogue should take place for those to be repatriated to their peoples.

I just want to give a very brief anecdote. Recently, a research group from Belfast was in Cambridge and when they visited the archives they were shocked to see the Irish collection in dusty shoeboxes. An astonishing number of Irish historical and cultural artefacts lay undisturbed. They had not been touched. They had never been looked at, but they were kept there. When one of the boxes was opened, an archivist there took out a wooden stick from Gougane Barra in west Cork and said it had obviously been used for counting sheep, such was the ignorance. Of course it was a *bata scóir*, the piece of wood that was tied around a child's neck when they went to school, on which it was recorded how often they spoke Irish. They were beaten in school and they could be beaten again when they went home. These are important artefacts that we should have in Ireland, our country, so our people can interpret them and access them rather than having them stored in dusty shoeboxes in archives in Cambridge University. I ask that that work take place and that the Minister publish the report and circulate it to Members. He might send me a copy.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: In an Irish context, universities are independent entities. As a former Minister for further and higher education, I know they really take pride in their independence. I would encourage them to exercise their independence proportionately and to reflect on what they have in their archives and on display. Universities, including Irish ones, should ask themselves whether the items they have on display are in keeping with the process of repatriation. Ultimately, that will be a matter for the governing authorities of universities, in the same way the issue the Deputy raises is a matter for the governing authority or its equivalent in Cambridge University.

I am not sure if Deputy McGuinness is on the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, but I am a former member of it and it is a very good vehicle to get issues like this raised by him or one of the Deputy's party colleagues who is a member of that assembly. It might also form part of a topic of discussion because there may very well be items in Irish museums and universities that could find themselves being repatriated to somewhere in Wales, Scotland or England. As I say, it has to be a two-way street.

10 o'clock

Postal Services

12. **Deputy Emer Currie** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport for an update on his Department's efforts to fulfil the programme for Government commitment to provide the nationwide network of post offices with funding to ensure their sustainability and enhance the value they bring to local communities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [52247/25]

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Government is committed to a sustainable An Post and post office network as a key component of the economic and social infrastructure throughout Ireland. The programme for Government states that the Government will continue to provide the nationwide network of post offices with funding to ensure their sustainability and enhance the value they bring to local communities. The Department is working to deliver on this and is engaging with relevant stakeholders in relation to future funding, including for securing of a new mandate from the Government to continue funding at an enhanced level while ensuring an adequate legal basis and compliance with state aid rules. In due course, I will seek the Government's approval to progress legislation to affect the funding to provide certainty to the network post 2025.

An amount of €10 million per annum is being provided over a three-year fixed period from 2023 to 2025 to An Post. An Post then disperses this funding across the post office network, with all contractor post offices benefiting from the Government funding with the objective of securing the stability of the network. The funding is being paid monthly for each 12-month period. To date, over €25 million has been claimed by An Post for the network. The current funding provides time and space for An Post to accelerate the transformation and commercialisation of the network to ensure a relevant, commercially viable network delivering more services to citizens and small businesses.

An Post is a commercial semi-State body with a mandate to act commercially. An Post has statutory responsibility for the State's postal service and the post office network. Decisions

relating to the network, including decisions relating to specific post offices are operational matters for the board and management of the company and are not ones in which I, as Minister, have any function. Similarly, the terms of the postmasters' contract with An Post are a matter between the postmasters and An Post. Any negotiations are a matter for both parties directly.

Deputy Emer Currie: I welcome the Government's ongoing commitment to continue to provide the nationwide network of post offices with funding to ensure their sustainability and enhance the value they bring to local communities. As the Minister knows very well, it is not simply about delivering post; it is increasingly about connections and access to the world through a local service. My constituency is one of the largest in the country and is continuously growing, with a total of 4,000 homes built over five years. As the area expands, new estates, such as Kilmartin Grove in the area of Hollywoodrath, have recently faced problems with postal deliveries. The estate has not been logged for regular service by An Post, resulting in irregular deliveries and missed notices. There are the same issues in Carpenterstown and Luttrellstown, where residents have said they have been getting extremely erratic deliveries for several months, including no letter deliveries for several days and parcels sitting in our delivery office for up to one week. The same issues are happening in Castleknock and Clonsilla when people are on holidays.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The issue the Deputy raised regarding urban post offices and mail delivery is not a purely urban phenomenon. Unfortunately, we have interruptions in rural services as well. The Deputy might send me the details. While I do not have any role with An Post, I will certainly forward the details to the company. While the Deputy is not suggesting this, as I said in response to a previous question, An Post does not operate on the basis of sentiment. An awful lot of people are bemoaning the fact that post offices are closing. In many cases, they are closing because of the economic inviability. There could be 300 or 400 people turning up to a public meeting. How many of those people use the post office? Postmasters cannot be paid to hang out over a counter and keep people in chat. They have to make a living. Unless people go in and use a post office, the post office becomes unviable. That is not just a rural phenomenon; it is also an urban one. To echo what the Deputy said, we have a use-it-or-lose it policy. Unfortunately, in the reality that we are in at the moment with EU state aid rules, if people do not use their local post offices, then the post offices in many cases will close.

Deputy Emer Currie: The level of the communication I have received on this shows that people appreciate their postal delivery service. I am fully aware of the period of transformation that An Post has been undergoing in recent years, which is a positive transformation, and the areas of potential growth. Nevertheless, we have to keep the basics working. When issues have been directly raised with An Post and people are told there has been no designated post person for that area for several months, that is quite frustrating. I recognise the changing role of An Post, but we have to get those basics right. I appreciate the Minister raising this directly on my behalf with An Post because these are issues that have been going on for over one year. They are not just affecting one part of the constituency; it is sporadically all parts of the constituency. It is very much areas of new growth and homes that are not being included in the plans.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: If the Deputy sends me those details, I will arrange to do that. One thing I have a concern about, which I have previously raised, is that there is an obvious rush and everyone wants to see this rush around digitisation of public services, and that is a good thing. However, every time we take a letter out of the hands of An Post, there is a gap in where the company has to find that money. Over the past number of years, we have taken millions of letters out of the hands of An Post through various digitisation schemes, which have been looked for and welcomed in this House and pushed by people. That is all very well and good, but it has a knock-on consequence. We are not in a position where we can subsidise the postal service under EU state aid rules, as I outlined. Every letter that comes out of the hands of a postman has a knock-on consequence. While An Post is making great strides in parcel delivery, my hope is that it continues in that vein. Postal services across Europe have changed and they are going to change more, and we also have to accept that reality in Ireland. We have to be prepared to accept it. People cannot have a mail service without there being an increase in the price of stamps at the same time. Those two things do not make sense. I appreciate that the Deputy is trying to inject a bit of honesty into this debate, because for too long the postal services in this country have been politicalised to the point of being dishonest.

Question No. 13 taken with Written Answers.

Irish Language

14. **Deputy Barry Ward** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport his views on the merits of increasing targeted support for independent Irish language productions, for both television and online streaming; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [51126/25]

Deputy Barry Ward: I wish to ask the Minister about the merits of increasing support for independent producers in relation to Irish language productions for television, particularly for online media and streaming services, where there is a real opportunity for us to growth the product that is available through the Irish language.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: The Government is committed under the programme for Government to enhancing supports for the increased use of the Irish language. The provision of content by the independent production sector has been a key element of public service broadcasting in Ireland for many years. In particular TG4, as a publisher broadcaster, commissions the vast majority of its content from the independent sector and, as such, plays a significant role in supporting and nurturing the sector, especially the Irish language creative sector. Government support to TG4 has increased from €37.2 million in 2020 to €60 million this year. This has enabled TG4 to increase the content it commissions and, as a consequence, increase its investment in and support for the independent productions sector, particularly in the Gaeltacht.

The Sound and Vision scheme continues to provide essential support for the independent production sector, including for independent Irish language productions. In 2024, the Sound and Vision scheme awarded over €7 million in funding support to Irish language or bilingual productions, with approximately 30% of the overall funding provided. In 2025 so far, this figure amounts to €5.5 million, or 39%. A total of €6.5 million in funding was awarded in the

latest round of Sound and Vision, with €2.9 million or 46% of this going to support Irish language or bilingual productions. The general scheme of the broadcasting (amendment) Bill provides that funding schemes supporting the production of public service content shall allocate a minimum of 25% of funding in support of Irish language content production. The Future of Media Commission recommended that Coimisiún na Meán conduct a comprehensive review of Irish language media services. The review is being undertaken by Coimisiún na Meán. I await its findings to see how it can inform continued growth in the provision of Irish language content across the media sector. I fundamentally believe in supporting the Irish independent production sector and productions in the Irish language, as is reflected by the many ongoing supports provided to the sector through funding from Coimisiún na Meán and Screen Ireland as well as the section 481 film tax relief.

Deputy Barry Ward: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Mar is eol dó, aontaím go hiomlán leis an ráiteas atá ann sa chlár Rialtais, go háirithe maidir le rudaí trí mheán na Gaeilge. Tá sé sin thar a bheith tábhachtach. We know as well that through the Official Languages Act, there is now an obligation on State agencies to produce at least 20% of their advertising through the Irish language. That is something we hear on the radio and see on the television every day. It has created a tangible improvement for those who wish to live their lives through or experience the Irish language. They can now see it on a day-to-day basis beyond the likes of Raidió na Gaeltachta and TG4. That is important.

Is there specific monitoring of the outputs? The investment is really important and I welcome what the Minister has said and the commitments. I hope there will be more in the budget next week. Is there specific monitoring of how that money is being spent and can we see the corresponding outturn at the end, particularly in respect of streaming services beyond national broadcaster services?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: Tá an ceart ag an Teachta. Beidh an Bille a raibh mé ag caint faoi os comhair na Dála go luath. Coimisiún na Meán has a very important role in this in terms of making sure that ultimately the policy objectives of the Government are going to be adhered to. I have enunciated the responsibilities it has with regard to grant assistance and things like that. We have a very ambitious plan around the Irish language, I think that is fair to say in general terms. The funding to TG4 has almost doubled. It is not just TG4, however. Looking at the screen industry and Screen Ireland in particular, supports were given to "An Cailín Ciúin", for instance, and that is just one. The Film Fleadh in Galway during the summer showed a number of small productions that had been supported under section 481, such as a scale uplift I was recently able to provide for, to make sure the Irish language is not only seen on television through TG4 but also on the large screen. The potential is immense. At the moment, there is a kind of athbheochan na dteangacha éagsúla san Eoraip agus is í an Ghaeilge an ceann is tábhachtaí domsa.

Deputy Barry Ward: I appreciate what the Minister is saying and agree entirely with him. He mentioned "An Cailín Ciúin". It is a fantastic proof positive of the strength of Irish-language productions and the benefit that comes with it. Mar dhuine a d'fhoghlaim a chuid Gaeilge sa Rinn, bhí an-áthas orm an blas sin a fheiceáil agus a chloisteáil sa scannán sin. Mar a dúirt mé, tá sé thar a bheith tábhachtach do dhaoine go mbeidh siad in ann é sin a fheiceáil

agus a chloisteáil. I appreciate what the Minister said about the increased funding for TG4, which is hugely important because it translates into direct funding for the independent production sector, from where they get so much of their content. However, "House of Guinness" for example, which is currently streaming on Netflix, is the first Netflix programme with Irish-language subtitles. How are we plugging into that streaming sector to increase the volume of material that is available trí mheán na Gaeilge do dhaoine atá ag féachaint ar Netflix, Apple TV, Prime agus araile? An bhfuil rudaí ar fáil do dhaoine sa chomhthéacs sin?

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I have met the streamers on a number of occasions now in the United States and online with regard to making sure the infrastructure is appropriate and adequate here in Ireland for production of television, trí mheán an Bhéarla agus na Gaeilge. As the Deputy rightly said, there has been a major uplift in the number of Irish-language productions in the last number of years and we want to continue that. We have a physical infrastructure now in terms of the stages, including in my own and the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach's area with Troy Studios as well as in Wicklow and Dublin, where the number of productions has skyrocketed over recent years, in no small way due to the work of Screen Ireland, the supports that have been put in place through section 481 and the scale uplift recently. We are hoping that through the programme for Government over the next number of years regional uplift will be given. It was given previously, probably at a really bad time in the context of Covid and everything else. It is something I would certainly like to revisit. Is iad na ceantair Ghaeltachta na ceantair ina mbeidh an seans acu an cos seo a chur chun cinn.

Question No. 15 taken with Written Answers.

Departmental Funding

16. **Deputy Keira Keogh** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport following on from the launch of the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030, the means by which disability lead and associated grants are funded; the overall funding provided to such grants; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [52009/25]

Deputy Barry Ward: Tá mé chun an cheist seo a chur ar son an Teachta Keira Keogh as Maigh Eo.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I welcome and support the publication of the new National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030. The Department's obligations, and those of bodies under its aegis, are contained under pillar 3 of the new strategy and include implementing Sport Ireland's disability inclusion in sport statement and commitment to action, encouraging the production of accessible audiovisual content, embedding universal design and accessibility, addressing barriers, providing for an increased and richer participation of disabled audiences and creators in arts and cultural events nationwide, and enabling equal participation in the arts by disabled artists and arts workers.

The disability lead and associated grants are funded through the overall budgetary allocations that my Department provides to the various agencies and bodies under my remit. With regard to the overall funding provided to such grants, my Department provided funding of €1.868 million in 2024 to the Arts Council to support artists and persons with disabilities to access

services. In addition, in 2024, €22.7 million in funding was provided to the Coimisiún na Mean Sound and Vision scheme for the production of audio and audiovisual content. To date in 2025, €13.4 million has been provided. A key objective of the scheme is to encourage inclusivity and accessibility, which is achieved through support for programmes with access services like subtitling, audio description and Irish sign language. With regard to sport, there are a range of funding supports for persons with disabilities. While some funding is direct, most of the funding is part of a wider programme of expenditure and is subject to annual budgetary adjustments.

To complement this strategy, I recently published an overview of supports provided by my Department to persons with disabilities and this is available on my Department's website. This includes supports across the range of Government functions. I am committed to the delivery of goals and actions agreed by my Department for the culture, communications and sport sectors, as outlined in the strategy, and my officials will continue to engage with the Department of Children, Disability and Equality over the lifetime of the strategy.

Deputy Barry Ward: I particularly welcome what the Minister said about liaising with other Departments. The cross-departmental nature of this funding is hugely important. It is not just the Minister's Department but also the Department of Health, the Department of Transport and the Department of Children, Disability and Equality that need to come together to make sure this funding is effective in how it relates to people with disabilities.

I want to specifically address the accessibility retrofit programme for public transport. We opened a new DART station in my constituency, in Woodbrook, with fully accessible platforms, yet the fully accessible trains that will allow wheelchair users, for example, to get onto them will not come for two years. Those trains are important for people like artists, as the Minister mentioned, to get to different venues and places where they are going to work. That has to be part of the scheme as well. The cross-departmental element is crucial to make sure it is effective and gives people with disabilities what they need.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: While I might not be able to give the Deputy an answer with regard to trains, I certainly hope my colleague the Minister for Transport will. Generally with regard to venue accessibility, the Deputy makes a very good point. As somebody who has photosensitivity myself and is precluded from going into a lot of different places because of lighting schemes and the like, I know unfortunately what it is like to have a disability that precludes me from doing things that some people take for granted and just get on with. It can be very debilitating, there is no doubt about it. It means that participating in cultural activities which I would love to be in a position to do, and which I was criticised by *The Irish Times* for not being able to do - thanks, *The Irish Times* - is something I am acutely aware of. In the next round of grants I will be making available, particularly the first round of arts capital grants, I will have a particular emphasis on the issue of disability access, and also in the area of sports capital, which we have done for the last number of years. We have been very keen to bring inclusivity around the area of disability to the fore and will be continuing with that.

Deputy Barry Ward: I appreciate the work that is being done. It is hugely positive and benefits us all, albeit many of us indirectly. One of the issues with grants, particularly where they are means-tested, is that when they work and the person who is a recipient of that grant

makes more money or has more resources available to him or her, they then fall outside the criteria if it is means-tested. This applies across the board in relation to grants for people with disabilities. The reality is that even if they have more money or resources available to them, they still have the same disability, challenge and mountain to overcome. It is counterproductive to have a situation where a means-tested grant is taken away from somebody who has achieved some success in relation to the very challenges they are trying to overcome. I hope the Minister takes that into account in the way the scheme will operate from here.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I certainly will. The point was raised earlier and we had a good discussion on the basic income for the arts. The Deputy will be as familiar with this as myself but one of the groups of people who are particularly hardest hit are disabled artists. We want to make sure that any replacement we bring to the scheme, which is currently on a pilot basis, does take into account - if we get the resources from the budget next week - the severe impediments and severe hurdles that people with disabilities have on top of being an artist. Having a disability and being an artist in this country at the moment is quite difficult and we want to try to be able to recognise that.

Health Promotion

17. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport for an update on the co-ordination between his Department and the Department of Health, in particular in the delivery of community-based and national health promotion programmes assisting people on how they can identify supports in improving their mental health; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [52512/25]

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: In July 2025, the first strategy action plan for creative arts and health was published as a joint policy document by the Department and the Department of Health. This is a key milestone in a policy partnership that began in 2020 in response to Covid. The plan aims to create a framework that can address the intersectoral and structural issues necessary to embed arts and health in a systemic way in Ireland in order to realise the potential of participation in creative and cultural activity as a positive health behaviour. The vision of the plan is that people living in Ireland have access to creative and cultural activity as part of a holistic health journey throughout their lives, supporting better health and well-being outcomes and enriching the creative and artistic landscape. Funding for the arts and health under the plan includes over €2 million from my Department for the creative health and wellbeing in the community scheme to support collaboration between Creative Ireland and healthy Ireland teams in the local authorities.

The key focus of this initiative is supporting better mental health through participation in creative and cultural activities. Under the auspices of the plan, a number of innovative actions are being progressed, including the next iteration of the Traveller health and wellbeing through creativity scheme; the development of arts and health training for medical undergraduates; and support for the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing in Trinity College Dublin to provide further research evidence for the benefits of participation in creative and cultural activity. The Department and the Department of Health have also co-funded a music in nursing homes

scheme, through which local authorities bring professional musicians with musical performances to residents.

The benefits of sport and physical activity to physical and mental health are well proven. In partnership with the Department of Health under the healthy Ireland fund, Sport Ireland delivers a wide range of projects and programmes designed to increase the population's participation in sport and physical activity through the network of local sport's partnerships, recognised national governing bodies for sports and other relevant sporting organisations. Through initiatives such as Get Ireland Active and Get Ireland Walking, the outdoor swimming infrastructure scheme, and the physical activity for health programme, we are addressing key health challenges and breaking down barriers to participation in sport.

Deputy Colm Burke: I thank the Minister. It is accepted that the more people get out of their own homes and are involved in community activities makes a huge difference to their mental health. It is important we continue to promote that but it is important there is co-ordination between Departments as well, especially regarding the cultural area. The Minister mentioned the issue of nursing homes. One example of people getting involved is a group in my own constituency, Mayfield Men's Sheds, whose members visit two different nursing homes every week providing music. They have a very good musical team. A number of them are very talented and they provide entertainment in the nursing homes, which is extremely helpful for the nursing homes. It is projects like that that can be helpful to people, especially in rural communities where people can feel very isolated. I refer to the importance of community activity and making sure we have that support in place for people who may not be involved in sports clubs but want to get involved in cultural events.

Deputy Patrick O'Donovan: I could not agree with the Deputy. It is appropriate that his question has landed just as the Minister for Health has landed to the Chamber because this is an initiative that both Departments work on. The Minister and I are due to visit some nursing homes in the not too distant future to see the work that has taken place between the Department of Health and Creative Ireland. The Deputy is right. It is important that people are given a stimulus regardless of their age. Age should have no bearing on whether they participate in sport or cultural activity. Age should be no impediment or barrier to doing that; neither should someone's place of residence or their mobility or disability. The disability strategy I referred to goes a long way to that but we still have a lot of work to do in this space and in the collaboration between Sport Ireland, Creative Ireland, the HSE, my Department and that of the Minister for Health over the next number of months and years. We have ambition in this space. If Covid taught us anything it is that we cannot just leave our elderly with a radio, to be looked at through a sheet a glass. That is not stimulus and is not what anybody wants for anybody who is in an institution. They might be well looked after but there is more to life than that.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): I thank the Minister. Unfortunately, that concludes questions to the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport as we are out of time.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Public Inquiries

76. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if she will consider an independent public inquiry into scandals at Children's Health Ireland; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [52528/25]

Deputy David Cullinane: My first question relates to the need for a public inquiry into spinal surgeries for children with scoliosis and spina bifida at CHI. I note the Minister met Harvey Morrison Sherratt's family with the Tánaiste recently and it seems a commitment was given to an inquiry. Will the Minister inform the House as to what form that inquiry will take and what her view of the timeframe will be in the terms of reference?

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I thank the Deputy. He is correct. On Monday, the Tánaiste and I met with the parents of Harvey Morrison Sherratt, along with other advocates who were there to support the family. The Tánaiste and I listened carefully to what his parents said. It must have been a particularly difficult time, as all of this period has been for them, but also recognising it has been two months since the death of their little boy. At the meeting, it was agreed that we would work in partnership on the structure of an inquiry into spina bifida and complex scoliosis services at CHI. As the Deputy will be aware, there are a number of different models of inquiry and investigation. I have committed to scoping out the different models that are possible and the pros and cons of each of those models, while recognising that some of them have limitations, and to presenting that back to the parents and the advocates. It is important we would have a follow-up meeting when they have had the opportunity to reflect on that therefore it is my intention to write to them within two weeks and then to meet them a week after that. I have a little bit of work to do on that yet. The inquiry will be part of the wider reflection on paediatric services in CHI. The Deputy and the House will be aware that there is an important audit going on into waiting list equity or equity of access to the waiting lists in some of these services. It is important to say that. There is also the CHI oversight improvement steering group which is working regularly and oversees the implementation of the range of different reports of which the House is already aware, including the HIQA review. It will also oversee upcoming reports, including the Nayagam review, and a range of other measures.

Deputy David Cullinane: There are different models but it is important that this is an inquiry. That is what families are looking for. Obviously, there are different types of inquiries. We have seen in the past where inquiries were promised and they end up being reviews and investigations, very similar to the Nayagam review which is ongoing and still has not been published. This inquiry has to be comprehensive. It has to establish all of the facts. It has to look at the full range of services and it has to achieve accountability, wherever that lands us; whether that is political, within CHI or governance. We know that this is not just about surgeries. They are vital. Children were failed in relation to not getting surgeries on time. We know that. Far too many children were waiting. However, there are also issues regarding urology services, pre-care, aftercare and all of that. That has to form part of any review. It is really important for all of those children in the first instance that that inquiry happens, but it is equally important that we also invest in services and ensure in the here and now that children are getting timely access to care.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Yes, it would be my intention, irrespective of the form of investigation or inquiry, that it would be comprehensive in the way the Deputy has outlined, that it would be transparent and that it would be an inquiry that is also capable of making recommendations, as the parents and advocates have looked for. As he will be aware, in some forms of inquiry where information is presented during the inquiry, it can never be used in other proceedings. I am very conscious, for example, of a comparable model in relation to Limerick where there are disciplinary proceedings happening. That has never happened in the health service before. The Frank Clarke report did not step over that, but a different form of inquiry would have stepped over that and precluded some of those disciplinary proceedings continuing. That is the balance I am trying to strike. Again, this is for a discussion with the advocates and with the person who will, ultimately, be in charge of this. It will be intended to have a senior legal figure and a clinical leader of this inquiry. It is very important that we get their perspectives as well on what is likely to work, what is going to be the right timeframe, what is capable of being comprehensive, and not precluding other proceedings that may be appropriate.

Deputy David Cullinane: Part of the problem here is that we have had almost a decade of failure and broken promises, some of which it must be said were political promises, and in more recent times a lack of transparency from Children's Health Ireland. Those very same families the Minister has met, and those parents and advocates she would meet, have been screaming from the rooftops about governance failures at CHI for many years. Many of their children are part of what is called the Dickson report, and I know that CHI has given a reason as to why it feels that report cannot be published. I have said there is absolutely no reason the contents of that report cannot be shared with the families whose children were part of that. There is a reference to what are called "orphan" children, who are children that fell through the cracks and were not getting the appropriate care. They were not under the appropriate consultant, be it a urologist or orthopaedic surgeon, and they simply fell through the cracks. These are children with spina bifida and scoliosis who at the time were waiting for procedures. I believe that trust is at an all time low. Trust is on the floor for many of these parents and there is an awful lot of work to do to repair and restore that trust. This is why I appeal to the Minister to make sure that whatever inquiry is put in place is the most robust it can be to get answers to the questions that need to be answered and, as important, to actually put the services in so that no other child has to wait as long as Harvey, and far too many other children, did.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Again, I agree with the Deputy. On the Dickson report I will provide a note to Deputies on this. There is a follow-up process with those families. I do not have the details to hand but I would like to provide that information to them.

Deputy Cullinane is absolutely right about developing services now. An inquiry should not prohibit or preclude that. He will be aware that I have strengthened very considerably the board of CHI with appointments most recently, and in particular with Fergus Finlay who is a very strong advocate in this space, and who I know will be a very strong advocate on the board and hold CHI very strongly to account, especially in relation to spinal services. As I said at yesterday's health committee meeting, I am really not satisfied with this year's performance. I cannot account for the reduction in the number of families travelling abroad. It is not clear to me how that is being offered to them, at what stage it is being offered to them or the breadth with which it is being offered. I am pleased that the adolescent complex surgeries have begun

in the Mater. This is after a period when they were being paid for and not being done. Since July it has now been agreed that these will be done, and I am trying to see what options I have, domestically and internationally, that go beyond what we currently have to see how we can do more. I will report back to the House on that. I do not have an answer on that yet.

Cancer Services

77. **Deputy Marie Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health to account for the dramatic drop over the past eight years in breast cancer patients with an identified B5 or C5 receiving surgical intervention within the 20-working day target - with surgery identified as the first treatment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [52489/25]

Deputy Marie Sherlock: From the Department's hospital productivity dashboard, we know that the specialty that has seen the largest increase in waiting times over the past three years has been breast surgery. From parliamentary questions we have asked, we are aware that for breast cancer patients for whom surgery is the first treatment there is a HSE commitment to treatment within 20 days. Over the past eight years there has been a sustained and dramatic drop in meeting that target. In 2017, just over 10% did not get timely treatment but that number is now at 40% of all the women. We want to hear from the Minister how she will account for these failings and what actions are being taken by the Department.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The Government is of course, as is everybody else, committed to improving cancer care, ensuring better prevention, maintaining improvements in cancer survival rates, and timely access to treatments. The national cancer control programme, NCCP, has a number of metrics for breast cancer services. They are consistently reviewed to guide service advancements and to make improvements.

Since 2017 the total number of patients annually receiving this type of surgery increased by 10% to well over 1,500 in 2023. Over this period the percentage of patients seen within the recommended 20 days has decreased from 84% to 60%. The time to surgery can be influenced by a number of factors, including imaging and inpatient capacity, as well as the individual circumstances of the patient. The HSE is working on several initiatives to improve surgical capacity, including consideration of imaging and inpatient capacity in several cancer centres. Waiting times for radiology and diagnostic services are very seriously recognised as an issue.

The NCCP has produced a range of guidelines aimed at ensuring standardised access to cancer services across the country. These will, I hope, reduce variation in the management of patients and will lead to more appropriate referrals and management of patients within cancer services.

The Deputy will already be aware of the scale of the investment into the national cancer strategy since 2017. Significant improvements have been made with regard to breast cancer in recent years, in line with the overall objectives of the national cancer strategy. We do need to see a good deal more, as the Deputy will be aware.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: For the past two decades we have seen some very significant improvements in cancer care in this country but there is a very real and very well-founded

concern now that cancer care outcomes may regress if the current trend in the delays in care continue. We have an excellent framework in terms of the deadlines that have been set down within the NCCP with a 95% target of ten working days for an urgent referral and 20 days for where surgery is required. We know, however, that this is so patchy, as the Minister herself acknowledged, across hospitals and indeed will be missed by the majority of hospitals. We heard from the Irish Cancer Society this morning that 3,600 women this year are not seen within the ten-day target. All of us here have had people come to us really distressed because they are told they need an urgent appointment and then they are given an appointment, such as in one case that I was dealing with, of seven weeks later. The reality of course is that this is one part of the cancer care process. I understand that the conversion rate breast screening to diagnosis is about 8%.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The five-year net survival rates for breast cancer grew from 71% in the 1990s to 87.5% for the 2019 to 2022 period. We are going in the right direction. The Deputy is absolutely right to highlight it. We have had more people through the system and demand is increasing year on year. More than 56,000 patients were seen in clinics in 2024, up from 50,000 in 2019.

From my analysis, the single biggest issue, although there are many, is the timely access to MRI as a diagnostic tool. From the data I have, the reason for being out of target, say in 2022, was that imaging was at about 30%. It is now at 41%. We need to focus all of our efforts on access to imaging, the way in which our imaging technology is being used, the consistency, the hours that it is being used and the commitment of hospital staff to do that at all times and days of the week. As part of the productivity we were speaking about, this is an example of why that matters so much. Access to imaging, as far as I can see at the moment, really is the most challenging part.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I very much share the Minister's concern but I know, for example, that there is an MRI scanner in a major hospital for which they cannot get access to the post because there has been a suppressed post. I can talk to her afterwards about this.

There is also the reality of the very significant inequality for some women out there. Research published this year by the National Cancer Registry Ireland shows that 41% of women from deprived backgrounds have a much higher risk of death within five years of diagnosis compared with those from more affluent backgrounds and 24% have a higher risk of being diagnosed with late stage disease. We have had 4,000 diagnoses in 2022. One in seven of us women will get breast cancer in our lifetime. These wrinkles within the hospital system are down to the equipment that is not being properly optimised because of suppressed positions, and the delayed response to business cases by the HSE for breast surgeons. These are very real issues.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I would be very grateful for the specifics of what the Deputy is asserting. I will check that out. It is very much the opposite to what we are trying to do. Considering the number of vacancies we are desperately trying to fill, I would be very concerned about that. I would appreciate if the Deputy could help me out with more information on that.

Several cancer centres have plans for additional theatre and inpatient capacity specifically for cancer and inpatient care because the theatre access is so important. Part of what will help with this is completion of the surgical hubs nationally, which will alleviate some pressure on our acute theatre capacity by moving lower complexity procedures, obviously since it is surgical hubs. Aligned to that is the theatre utilisation project, which is changing start times of theatres and maximising the flow and capacity within that. As I said, if there is a particular issue in a hospital I would be very glad to know about it.

Capital Expenditure Programme

78. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if she is confident that sufficient capital funding has been provided for in the national development plan to deliver elective centres, 3,000 additional acute inpatient beds, digital transformation, and the entirety of health infrastructure commitments made by the Government; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [52529/25]

Deputy David Cullinane: Capital funding in health is really important. This capital allocation is one of the most important because it is linked to many of the big projects that are about reform of the health service. It is about more hospital beds and the 3,000 beds that were promised by the Minister's predecessor before the local elections last year. Elective hospitals have to be built, which is really important in following on from those surgical hubs and separating scheduled from unscheduled care. We have the new National Maternity Hospital. We need to develop Galway. I know there are plans for other acute hospitals in my own constituency in Waterford. I will get to those projects as well. I do not believe the capital funding is there to deliver on all of those projects so the question is: which projects are not going to be delivered because of the capital funding that is allocated up to 2030?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy. As he is aware, the programme for Government will set out a review of the national development plan as a key priority. Through the NDP review, we are prioritising critical economic growth but also the health infrastructure we need to have, which the Deputy has articulated.

The substantially enhanced NDP provision for the health sector of €9.25 billion will support the delivery of equitable, accessible and high-quality healthcare across Ireland. We have seen a number of examples of that happening so far but there is quite a lot of work to do, such as the new surgical hub at Mount Carmel, the HSE health app and the 96-bed ward block in UHL. That is what has happened so far. As the Deputy and I both know, we have to drive further ahead.

The NDP settlement recognises that there are certain key programme for Government priorities in health that will progress to statutory approval towards the latter part of the current NDP. In relation to shovel-ready projects, I have assurance from the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation and his Department that they will be priorities for funding in the post-2030 NDP. The basic point is that if we get something to shovel-ready, we will be making the case to central Government for the funding to be enabled for that.

The Minister for public expenditure and reform has also confirmed that should there be underspends evident in the overall NDP allocation, the first allocation for that will go to the Department of Health. We have a programme of funding for the next five years. We have a challenge to meet that and get those to construction phase. Where we get something else to shovel-ready, I will be going to the Minister for public expenditure and reform looking for unspent allocation in other NDP programmes, the first call on that and indeed the first round of funding. My challenge is, frankly, getting things to shovel-ready stage. I am confident of the funding for electronic health and for the infrastructure projects we have. Our bigger difficulty is getting them to shovel-ready.

Deputy David Cullinane: I do not believe that is the biggest challenge at all. It is a challenge, of course, to get projects ready and obviously they have to go through planning processes and there are other processes as well. I met with senior officials in the Department before the last general election. What they set out to us was an ask of about €13.5 billion up to 2030. What was achieved was €9.5 billion. Even looking at some of the costs, we know there is at least €1 billion, at a minimum, needed for digital transformation. We have to finish out the children's hospital which, it is estimated, will require about €300 million in addition to the current €9.5 billion allocated. The surgical hubs have to be paid for. Primary and community care facilities were estimated to be €270 million. On the 3,000 hospital beds, they average out at about €1 million each. That is €3 billion alone for those beds. Half of those beds, in my mind, will not be delivered and we will see who is right and who is wrong as all of this plays out. The new National Maternity Hospital is at a minimum of €900 million, at best, and then we are into the elective hospitals. We know from the preliminary business cases they are about €1 billion at a minimum for those four. When you add all of that up, it is well over €13 billion. It does not add up. Then the question is: what projects are not going to be delivered?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The question is around what is capable of being delivered to absolute completion within the next five years and how we balance and manage that. I do not think it is question of right or wrong. Both the Deputy and I want to see the infrastructure delivered immediately if possible but we both live in the real world where we have to go through planning and procurement processes. There is a slowness in doing that, unfortunately - in the Government and the public sector doing that - which does not challenge the private sector in the same way. It is very frustrating but we both want to see the projects delivered.

I now have a capital envelope the size of which we have not had in health. There was an underspend on capital investment for a very long time in health, with significant additional funding on the current side. That was fine and necessary but there has been an underspend. I have secured a large capital portion of the NDP and the additional programme that is there. I have the assurance that where I get something to shovel-ready, I will get the funding for that and I would welcome the Deputy's support when I get to that point.

Deputy David Cullinane: Despite all of the best efforts of people who will work in this space, even if they get them to shovel-ready, I have already outlined and done the maths. I have met with the Department. I know the money simply is not there to do all of these projects.

It is a case of who is right or who is wrong when it comes to the funding. I would accept that the Minister wants as much as possible to be done, as I do, but it does come down to money. It is a case of "show me the money". If the money is there, we can do these projects. If the money is not there, whether they are shovel-ready or not, they simply will not proceed. We have seen health projects stalled.

We can all give examples in our own constituencies. I have dealt with the bigger State-wide projects. In my own constituency of Waterford, we need to deliver 24-7 cardiology care, which the Minister committed to. We need to invest in the adult mental health unit. There is a need for PET scanner. There are loads of projects right across each individual hospital that will also have to be funded. They have to be taken into account when you look at all the bigger projects as well. I believe - and it is my analysis based on the discussions I have had with the Department and the HSE - that there is a funding shortfall in regard to capital. I fear that some of those big reforms, especially the elective hospitals, simply will not happen as quickly as they should because the money will not be there.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: There is no barrier to them in the context of the funding side of it. The bigger issue is the planning side but we will work through it together.

I had the good fortune to be in Waterford, a really excellently run hospital. I was in the CAT labs and got to see the different theatre configuration, which, of course, has been delivered. It is the case that the cardiologists have been recruited and that was confirmed to me by the hospital management and the IHA management so we will see that commitment delivered. The current funding was put beside it.

Deputy David Cullinane: That is for 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., not 24-7.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: There was a recruitment process, and there you go. I stood, as I am sure the Deputy has done, and his party colleagues were there with me, outside the pretty magnificent surgical hub that is being completed there. We would very much like to see that. If anybody is going to run that well, I am confident that Waterford will do it. Those projects are being delivered and I look forward to seeing the physical transformation of that hospital as much as every other hospital with the ongoing capital investment that has happened and continues to happen, and the major projects, such as the one in the Deputy's own constituency, which is being delivered in front of his constituents' eyes.

Cancer Services

79. **Deputy Pádraig Rice** asked the Minister for Health the steps she is taking to address the serious deficits in staffing and equipment in public radiation therapy services; if she will instruct the HSE to offer all radiation therapy graduates employment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [52861/25]

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I wish to ask the Minister about cancer services. Over 50% of cancer patients require radiation therapy at some point in their care. It is routinely used to treat the most common types of cancer such as breast, cervical and lung cancers. It is the cornerstone of modern cancer treatment and yet, it is neglected. We have ageing machines. In other areas,

newer machines have no staff to operate them. Qualified radiation therapists cannot get jobs and there are shocking levels of outsourcing to the private sector. As of July, €17 million has been spent this year alone contracting-out radiation therapy. What action will the Minister take to address deficits in both staffing and equipment?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy. The Government is obviously committed to improving cancer care generally. As the Deputy is aware, a total of €105 million has been invested in the strategy since 2017, including €23 million in budget 2025.

Under the national plan for radiation oncology, state-of-the-art radiation oncology centres have opened in Cork and Galway in 2019 and 2023, respectively, which was €120 million capital investment. In Dublin, the St. Luke's Radiation Oncology Network, which includes St. James's and Beaumont Hospitals, were developed under phase 1 of the national plan in 2010. The design of the phase 1 facilities made provision for future expansion for phase 2, is now under way at Beaumont Hospital as a priority.

On staffing, I wish to acknowledge the incredibly important role of radiation therapists in the provision of cancer services in this country. There are currently 220 radiation therapists in Ireland, an increase of over 20% since 2020. While recruitment for radiation therapists is challenging globally, radiation therapist staffing vacancies in the HSE have improved from 30% in 2024 to about 15% to 22% at present. It is not fully staffed but it is going in the right direction, notwithstanding a challenging global environment.

There are currently 40 radiation therapy student places available annually across Trinity College, Dublin and University College, Cork. In the last six years, the radiation therapy training programme has grown by 32% and more than 20 additional specialty training posts have been established in the last three years. The national radiation therapist review, completed in 2024, provides a strategic review of the profession in Ireland and recommendations are being progressed by the HSE. The review recommended the development of new advanced practice radiation therapist roles and those posts are expected to be advertised in the coming weeks. To maintain improvements, NSP 2025 included 5.5 radiation therapy posts and six advanced practice radiation therapists.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: First, on machinery, I accept there is a replacement programme under way for St. Luke's but why are machines breaking down before action is taken? The internationally accepted lifespan for a treatment machine is ten years but in St. Luke's, Rathgar, they have two machines that are 15 years old and another two that are almost 17 years old. They are limited to using three machines at a time. This means that a quarter of the capacity in Rathgar is being lost. Why? It is to mitigate breakdowns. These machines need to be replaced every ten years. It is entirely predictable, so why is there not a national programme in place to support a ten-year replacement programme? This *ad hoc* replacement of antiquated machines coming too late in the day is compromising patient safety. Nationally, 35% of machines are already 15 years old, with two more approaching 17 years old. Some 40% of machines will require replacement in the next five years and overall, 75% of the machines will require replacement now or within five years. We need greater investment and we need a programme to replace these machines.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: There are five public radiotherapy treatment centres with a total of 22 linear accelerators across the services. Galway has four, Cork has five and St. Luke's has 14 machines across the three sites in Dublin. The HSE also contracts radiation oncology services for public patients to centres in Waterford and Limerick and has a service-level agreement with the North West Cancer Centre in Altnagelvin to provide radiotherapy services for patients within a 90-minute road journey of Derry.

Under the National Plan for Radiation Oncology, NPRO, Ireland has developed state-of-the-art radiation oncology centres, as the Deputy is aware. I will look into the examples the Deputy has given relating to the management and replacement of different machines. I just need to spend more time doing that. I thank the Deputy for highlighting it.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Regarding staffing, Cork and Galway both have new builds and new machines, but not enough staff. St. Luke's network has a CT scanner with no staff, a skin cancer treatment service operating at reduced capacity because it has insufficient staff, and at the same time, we had 30 graduates in radiation therapy from Trinity College last year. Only ten of them secured posts in Ireland, a further ten left the profession, and ten more have no employment. Radiation therapy graduates need a guarantee of employment from the HSE. At the moment, we are just training them to leave the country, leave the profession or go to the private sector. We also have the ludicrous situation where radiation therapists hired by the HSE do not get incremental credit for previous service in the private sector. How can the Minister justify this policy where radiation therapists are so desperately needed? Why would they move from the private sector to take a pay cut? To address these staffing issues, we need two measures. We need a guarantee of graduate employment for those qualifying and we also need incremental credit for radiation therapists.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: There are a couple of different things. Staffing vacancies have decreased considerably, from 30% in 2024 to 14% in Dublin, 15% in Galway and, I acknowledge, 22% in Cork. CORU has changed some of the registration requirements, which has brought Ireland closer to international standards, providing access to work in Ireland for more radiation therapists generally. We have funding allocated in 2025 for the development of advanced practice roles in radiotherapy, which, again, is an effort to help people to work at the absolute top of their profession, which is really important. Recruitment is ongoing for vacancies in radiotherapy services. We are actively looking for people to come and work in these services. We are trying to enhance the workforce through advanced practice opportunities and to really drive in that direction. We know how much people have to offer. We have the funding for the additional posts. We want people to come and work in this service. We are taking all of the steps we can to try to attract them. We cannot compel people to be in the public health system either.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Graduates are looking for jobs, Minister.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I have jobs.

Hospital Services

81. **Deputy Martin Daly** asked the Minister for Health the reason the recommendations of the Walker report have not been implemented; the current status of their implementation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [52819/25]

Deputy Martin Daly: I acknowledge the Minister's bona fides in the matter of the maternity unit in Portiuncula hospital. She has acted at all times on advice in what she felt is the best interest of the safety of mothers and babies in the region. However, I want to ask her why the Walker report of 2018 was not implemented and if she will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy for his ongoing concern, driven first by patient safety in Portiuncula hospital, which I greatly appreciate. It is an important focus. As the Deputy is aware, the Walker report came from a review commissioned by the then Saolta Group in 2014 following a number of serious maternity cases at Portiuncula maternity services from 2004 to 2014. It covered 18 cases and was published in 2018, making 154 recommendations. The HSE has advised my Department that all 154 recommendations were independently verified as implemented by both HIQA and an independent national HSE team. HIQA has verified that.

One of the recommendations related to the integrated clinical director model, with one clinical director covering Portiuncula hospital and University Hospital Galway. That was in place from November 2021 until June 2024 but was recognised by both sides, I understand, as a challenge from the outset. There were elements of risk due to the distance between the two units and the associated split of the clinical director's time. The model did not lend itself to consistent on-the-ground leadership, and as a result gaps in governance emerged. Following prolonged consideration, the HSE reverted to having a clinical director on both sites from August 2024. All 154 recommendations were implemented and that is one which just did not work and the HSE reverted to having two clinical directors as opposed to one overseeing the complete group.

HSE West and North-West has an established clinical network which includes Portiuncula hospital and University Hospital Galway. The network supports Portiuncula hospital in all aspects of clinical maternity care and joint processes have been in place since 2018. Although changes were made in Portiuncula hospital following the Walker review, frankly, similar issues have emerged in Portiuncula hospital, as the Deputy is aware, which is incredibly disappointing for us, but is of life-changing significance to the women whom it impacts and their babies. Twelve reviews are ongoing, which are at various stages of progress. Seven have been completed. Fifty-two recommendations have arisen from these seven reviews to date. Work to implement many of those recommendations is already in place.

Deputy Martin Daly: I acknowledge the mothers and babies who have experienced, at birth, sometimes catastrophic events. It is a small number of women but that makes it no less. I worked with the Minister on Portiuncula maternity unit on the premise that the Walker report had been delivered, but it manifestly has not been delivered. I do not believe the HIQA report. Last week, at the health committee, the CEO of the HSE, Mr. Bernard Gloster, said that the Walker report had not been fully implemented. That is the reality because all of the same issues that arose in 2018 have arisen in 2025. Professor Sam Coulter-Smith identified that in his report and he has couched it in language that is not obvious, but it is clear what he is saying

and it is nuanced. All the same issues with governance, training and human resources exist. We have a unit that was essentially set up to function at risk. On the idea of one hospital, two sites, I do not agree that it was not working. Who made the decision that it was not working? Many issues seem to have arisen from the time it stopped.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I do not know how else to say it to the Deputy but HIQA has verified that all of the recommendations were implemented. Perhaps we should arrange an opportunity for the Deputy to engage with HIQA about its assessment. It is the independent regulator and HIQA advised that they were implemented. One recommendation of 154 did not work and it was moved backwards. The issues that arose in Portiuncula hospital should not have arisen. They should not have happened, because the recommendations of the Walker report were implemented, yet they arose again. I ask myself the same questions. I have asked that of hospital management and I have asked through the reviews.

How is it that the same issues, which are not of resources but of management, culture, communication and responsiveness to women, frankly, are occurring? I have met many of these women. I have sat with them and heard the particular experiences of their cases and what happened to them and their babies. It is difficult to accept that those cases should have happened in circumstances where the Walker report was implemented. If we are going to have a political dialogue about a report that has been implemented, which the independent regulator has confirmed as having been implemented, with one recommendation having been walked back, and try to place what happened to those women at the foot of that single recommendation being changed, we are not in a good space.

Deputy Martin Daly: We are not in a good space because the maternity unit in Portiuncula hospital is in trouble. For example, it was recommended by the Walker report that there be seven consultant obstetricians. It never happened. There were five at the most: three full-time, one on managed leave and one on managed sick leave. There was never a full complement. Someone second-guessed the Walker report, so it was never implemented. Regarding infrastructure, the recommendation of a theatre in the labour ward did not happen. Who walked back the idea of one hospital, two sites, and why? I want to know why. Does the Minister have confidence in the clinical director regionally and the associate clinical director who was recently appointed? Are they the people who brought us to this juncture? Does the Minister have confidence that they will deliver us from it?

I was at a meeting with GPs last night with the clinical team. All I am seeing is confusion and shambles. One of the clinical directors said there was no evidence base for moving older women and women who were high-risk from Portiuncula hospital. They decided not to move people with diabetes at the last moment. They also decided that GPs would not risk stratify. They do not know what is going on. There is no clinical leadership and I want the Minister to make a statement on that.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The Deputy is aware that an external management team, EMT, was put in place in January precisely to try to supervise, assess and make some of the improvements that are needed. There have been some infrastructural works and changes, some of which should have been done before the external management team arrived, which have now been completed, for example a four-bay maternity day assessment unit, MDAU, and a

dedicated early pregnancy unit. All of that was in train and should have happened before the external management team arrived. It has now happened. The EMT, and nobody else but the EMT, identified a bungalow adjacent to the hospital that has now been converted to a dedicated maternity outpatient department with six dedicated maternity clinical rooms five days a week from the end of September. That bungalow had been acquired before the EMT commenced but it was for a totally different purpose. It has progressed that as a maternity outpatient department.

11 o'clock

It should not be the case that we need an external management team in Portiuncula hospital. The patient safety issues have been very significant. I have acted on clinical advice to me that it is not safe for high-risk women to give birth there until the changes that are necessary have been made and sustained in a way that can give confidence to everybody.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Hospital Procedures

82. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on the scoliosis waiting list for surgery at CHI hospitals at present; and the steps she is taking to reduce waiting lists. [51548/25]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is now eight years since the Minister's predecessor, Simon Harris, said that no child would be left waiting for longer than four months for a scoliosis operation. This time last year I asked him how many children had been taken off operation waiting lists without their parents knowing. He stated he would find out. However, as yet, there is no evidence that he has found out and let us know. Does the Minister know how many children were taken off the waiting lists without parents knowing, in a similar manner as to what happened with Harvey Sherratt?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy. There is an audit going on into equity of access on waiting list management. I expect to have that audit at the end of November. I will have to wait until then to confirm any figures. At the end of August this year, there were 135 patients on the CHI spinal active waiting list, compared with 150 in August 2024. That is a reduction of 10%. Outpatient lists are also down, with a 45% reduction in the number of new spinal outpatients waiting on an appointment. While I recognise this progress, there is an awful lot more work to do to drive improvements in spinal services. I have met with families and advocacy groups, and it is important to listen to them.

The Deputy is more than aware that €30 million was allocated to reduce waiting lists in different areas. There is a ringfenced theatre providing dedicated capacity. There are additional outpatient clinics, in particular this year on Saturdays, which have seen over 800 additional patients, and which has reduced the waiting list for initial assessments. We are trying to maximise capacity through national and international outsourcing. As I said earlier, which I appreciate the Deputy was not here for, there is an awful lot more work to do there. I am trying to explore additional options.

Activity has increased with 342 spinal procedures completed so far this year, compared with 304 for the same period last year. This is a 13% increase, but at the same time we are seeing a growing need for those services. There are 370 spinal patients who have been added to the CHI active waiting list, which is a 10% increase compared with last year. While some of this reflects faster outpatient access and better referral pathways, we are also trying to do further analysis to understand some of the source of that demand, which is really important. The services remain an absolutely top priority and I will do everything I can to actively drive progress to address the challenges children face.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Minister must admit it is quite shocking that it will take 14 months for a question asked in September 2024, about how many children have been taken off waiting lists without their parents knowing, to be answered. It points again to the dysfunction. I welcome that the Minister has met with parents about this. That is a good thing. The Minister mentioned money going into this section. Some €11.6 million was provided to outsource operations abroad for children who need it. As of now, there is no child scheduled for operations abroad. This shows that while money is being provided, it is meaningless if it is not making a practical difference to the lives of these children. The 2024 report of CHI has also not been published. That is scandalous. The 2023 report, in fairness, states that CHI is sitting on approximately €36 million at the moment. My understanding is that it is not spending it because that money has been assigned to fit out the new children's hospital.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: No.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Is that the case? The Minister might answer that.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I do not believe so. There is a separate portion of money to do that, so I do not believe that. I will check, but it is certainly not my understanding. I remain concerned about the number of children referred, or not referred, for international surgery. As I said earlier it is a source of deep frustration to me that those services are not being utilised. Part of the audit is an analysis of equity of access on the waiting lists, which is something we have not done previously. This qualitative assessment involves talking to parents and patients and asking them how they ended up in Blackrock, for example, and what the pathway was. I have spoken to parents who told me that the international option was not provided to them or was provided to them too late in the process. I am not clear on it, but I asked for an audit into spinal services, neurological surgery and another medical area in CHI precisely to try to determine that, such was my concern.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I think the Minister understands this perfectly well. Given that it has been so hard to get information from CHI over the last number of years, anything less than a statutory inquiry into the lack of care for children on scoliosis waiting lists is not going to get to the truth. The fact that there has been no information forthcoming from the individuals involved means that if we cannot compel people and papers to find out the truth on this, we are simply not getting to the facts.

I have been here for a while and I have heard of inquiries being announced in tandem with campaign groups, and it being said that the terms of reference will be agreed by the campaign

groups. However, when it comes to the inquiry being set up there has been a separation from the actual campaigns. Will the Minister ensure there is no such separation from the families, and that the terms of reference of such an inquiry are fully in sympathy with the needs of the families when they are announced?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I updated the House earlier. They should be fully in sympathy. I also recognise that whoever is leading the inquiry will need to clarify the terms and make a final decision on what they need to be. I anticipate a comprehensive and transparent inquiry where the terms of reference are developed in partnership. The Government is one piece. The advocates are another piece, as is the person leading from both a legal and a clinical perspective on how that is best done.

I updated the House on some of my thinking about this. I am conscious that I spoke with regard to other forms of inquiry, where the public nature or the particular model of statutory inquiry precludes the information in that inquiry being used for any other purposes. We look in particular at Limerick, where for the first time ever in the health system, there are a number of serious disciplinary proceedings happening there, particularly in relation to the Aoife Johnston case and the circumstances of that.

There was review done by Frank Clarke, which had significant powers. I have spoken with Mr. Justice Clarke since to ask if powers of compellability would have made a difference to him. He was satisfied with the model he had. It is my responsibility to scope out the different models and express the pros and cons of the different models. We will ultimately have to agree the nature of it in partnership, but I am conscious of the need for whoever is leading it to be able to do a good job and have their appropriate powers, the requisite timeframe, support and all of those different things. We just need to work out what model is going to work best for that.

Primary Care Centres

84. **Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere** asked the Minister for Health for an update on the proposed new primary care centre for Graiguenamanagh; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [52193/25]

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: Primary care centres add huge value to communities across the country, including my own in Carlow-Kilkenny. There is a lot of excitement in my home town of Graiguenamanagh about our new proposed primary care centre. I would like an update on how that is progressing.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy for allowing me to update the house on the new primary care centre in Graiguenamanagh, County Kilkenny. The need for that primary care centre was identified as part of the HSE's overall primary care centre development programme. It is to be delivered via the HSE operational lease mechanism. As the Deputy is aware, the HSE has advertised for and identified a preferred developer for this new centre. I am pleased to advise that an application for planning permission was lodged by the preferred developer in July 2025. In response to this application, Kilkenny County Council requested

further information on 1 September 2025. The HSE has advised me that the developer is in the process of preparing a response to that request.

The preferred developer will issue a construction programme once approvals of the relevant statutory procedures have been secured. Once that programme is available, the HSE will be able to provide further updates on the timeline of the project, including the date of commencement of construction works on the site. When it is opened, it is envisaged that a wide range of primary care therapy services, community nursing services and GP services will be delivered from the centre. It is welcome news that the development of the new primary care centre in Graiguenamanagh is progressing and nationally we are trying to make progress in developing primary care centre infrastructure. There is a total of 180 primary care centres operational across the country with 51 of those opening since 2020. I assure the Deputy that the Department is engaging with the HSE to progress the further development of PCCs throughout the country, including specifically in the Deputy's good county of Kilkenny.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: That is most welcome news. I understand the new centre is planned to be a two-storey facility of approximately 20,000 sq. m, with accommodation for GP practices and community nursing, as well as dental services and therapies. However, the key thing about this primary care centre is its rural location, and the accessibility challenges a lot of people where I am from have in getting access to top-class care. Towns and villages like Skeaghvasteen, The Rower, St. Mullins and Borris will be able to feed into this brand-new primary care centre in Graiguenamanagh. It will be a game changer for the region. It is certainly a game changer for my town. While I know it is in its infancy, I have a concern about when the primary care centre is complete, in terms of getting bodies and roles to work in that centre. There is a challenge in the HSE. I know the funding is there, but getting people to fill a lot of these roles can be a challenge. I want to get the Minister's assurance that she will do everything she can for Graiguenamanagh to ensure that once this facility is complete, those roles will be filled.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Absolutely. When it is operational, it is expected that it will have GP, dental, community nursing, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, speech and language therapy, dietetics and psychology services, as well as diabetic breathanyl screening and outreach for chronic disease help, all of which are so very important. The Deputy is right when he says that recruitment is a challenge. We have vacancies in the system, notwithstanding having the funding for it. I hope the primary care centre model will be a welcome addition to counties Kilkenny and Carlow. The Deputy will be aware of the existing facilities at Kilkenny Ayrfield, Kilkenny city east, Callan, Thomastown, Ballyhale, Ferrybank and Shamrock Plaza in Carlow. There is a further primary care centre in the early stages of development or planning for Tullow. These centres are a really important part of our care network. As I said, we have 51 opened since 2020, with five opening in 2024 and others having opened this year, most recently in Dunfanaghy in north Donegal and in Newcastle West. The facility in Roscrea opened in quarter 1 of 2025. Another seven primary care centres are currently in construction, two of which should become operational before the end of this year. They are an enormous support to the community, and we want to continue to see them driven and staffed.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I thank the Minister. I know from my experience of dealing with other primary care centres around the constituency that there is a really strong, enhanced community and patient experience at such centres. Patients can build long-term relationships with their providers, which can lead to better communication and more personalised care, which is really promising. I am really excited about the various strands of care that are going to be available in my home town. It is absolutely a game-changer and something that is long overdue, and it is going to be a fantastic asset to the town. I seek assurances from the Minister that she will look favourably on two other health centres, in Freshford and Ballyhale, which are in the capital plan and are in the process of being upgraded. While the Graiguenamanagh centre will serve one part of the constituency, facilities in the likes of Ballyhale and Freshford also serve huge pockets of the constituency. I seek assurances from the Minister that they will be dealt with favourably.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy. Clearly, we are trying to have a network serving counties Kilkenny and Carlow, and we need the staff. The vacancies are there. We are desperately trying to recruit and make sure the complete suite of services is there for the people of the county.

Hospital Waiting Lists

83. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health when she anticipates that no child will have to wait longer than three months for spinal surgery; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [52561/25]

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Tánaiste made an infamous promise to parents in 2017 that nobody would be waiting for a scoliosis operation for more than four months. When are we going to reach that point? It seems that 226 children are on the CHI spinal surgery list. In August, 135 were actively waiting, ready to go. The numbers on the spinal outpatient lists are over 461. The CHI spinal surgery management unit said there are delays of months before children can even be seen. When will this promise be kept?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: As the Deputy is aware, the Sláintecare target is 12 weeks for an inpatient procedure. That is how we measure performance across the entire health sector. Some 39% of the children on the active spinal waiting list in CHI were within Sláintecare targets at the end of August 2025, which is an improvement on 28% at the end of August 2024. Additionally, only 7% were waiting over 12 months, which is compared to 24% at the same time last year. There is, therefore, some progress being made in reducing waiting times, especially longer waiting times.

It is supported by a couple of different initiatives. The dedicated GP referral pathway supports the appropriate prioritisation of urgent patients. Children requiring non-complex procedures have pathways to Blackrock and Cappagh to maximise the capacity for the complex procedures that are happening in CHI. International outsourcing has supported 19 patients to have surgery abroad. As I said earlier in the House, I am disappointed with the figures this year and I am unclear as to the referral pathways to maximise that. There is a new orthopaedic surgeon adding some capacity since 11 August.

Crucially, the Mater hospital is now fulfilling its obligations in the adolescent transition spinal service to support seamless transition of care. I am trying to explore what additional measures can be taken. I have asked for a proposal from the Mater to see what more is possible in that regard. We are making some progress, but I acknowledge that it is too slow, and too many children are still waiting. I have met with the HSE and CHI board and executive several times over the past couple of months. I have made new appointments, in particular the appointment of Mr. Fergus Finlay to the CHI board, who will be an excellent advocate on the board working and seriously engaging with spinal services in particular. I have great confidence in him. I have also commissioned an audit of governance and equity in patient access and waiting list management, which has a very important qualitative element to ensure the patient and staff experience is also captured.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: There are three issues. Does the Minister have confidence in the clinical lead of the paediatric spinal surgery management unit? This is the person who took Harvey Sherratt off the waiting list without parental knowledge or consent. How many other children were taken off the lists in that way?

Second, does the Minister have any knowledge of any other medical devices that have been used in an off-label fashion at CHI without parental consent?

Third, to refer as she did in a previous answer to the nature of an inquiry, the Minister mentioned that the person leading the inquiry would have a say. I do not really understand that point. The key people who should have a say on this are obviously the people affected. I urge the Minister to ensure that any inquiry is public and is satisfactory for the parents who have been lobbying and campaigning, especially those, like Gillian and Stephen, who have lost a child and continue to campaign on this issue.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Yes, that is my intention. It is a partnership approach. At the end of the day, some terms of reference are going to have to be settled and it is absolutely our intention to do that in a partnership approach. The person leading it, of course, must have some knowledge of how it is going to be done and some hand in how best it can be delivered as well. That is an important perspective. It should not be coming from me to impose it upon them. We are genuinely trying to deliver a partnership approach. We are some weeks away from trying to get the exact model in relation to that. However, I hear very clearly the Deputy's perspective. Yes, I have a concern in relation to medical devices, which I am referring to HIQA to do an investigation and get its perspective. I have a concern generally in relation to governance, equity in patient access and waiting list management at CHI, which is why in May or possibly June - I would like to confirm that; forgive me, please - I asked the HSE to conduct an internal audit specifically into waiting list management and equity of access. I hope and expect to have that back at the end of November or beginning of December.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: So the Minister has confidence in the clinical lead, or does she not?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I did not make any comment on that. I said there was an audit-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Okay.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: -----so please do not put words with me because I did not say anything in relation to that.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I am sorry; I will clarify. Parents and advocates are asking about three particular issues in this regard. First, they want to know if the Minister has confidence in the clinical lead. Second, which I do not think she referred to either, is she aware of any other devices that have been used in an off-label way - parents have said this - and inserted into children? Third, we all know that it is not the best approach, obviously, for children of this nature to be going abroad. Why is it always that we cannot bring surgeons here or upskill enough and invest enough that the resources and equipment can be available here? It can be very difficult and expensive for children to go abroad in this way.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Yes, I would also like to do that, but we have to recognise that there are some children for whom it is suitable and who have had good outcomes.

I answered the Deputy's question in relation to medical devices. I said I was referring a concern that I had to HIQA.

In relation to the clinical lead, I said that I have commissioned an audit, which is a really important process. I do not wish to step across that. I am very happy to discuss the outcome of the audit with the House once I have it, but I cannot step ahead of that.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Brennan had indicated that he wanted to come in on a previous question; I am sorry.

Deputy Brian Brennan: I need an update on behalf of the people of Gorey on the new ambulance station and the primary healthcare centre. For too long, Gorey has waited on this issue. Gorey is one of the fastest-growing towns in Ireland. Come summertime, an extra 40,000 people move in between Courtown, Castletown, Ballymoney and these areas. We just do not have the medical infrastructure to cater for these people. We really need an update. At the moment, we feel the primary healthcare centre has been pushed down the line. The module at the moment is not fit for purpose. We feel that the money being offered per square foot is not enough for a developer to build. In terms of the ambulance service, the people who are running it are incredible workers, but at the moment, they are working out of a prefab. This is simply not acceptable in 2025. The people of Gorey really deserve an update on both of those issues.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy. I know he has been a very strong advocate for the Gorey primary care centre, the need for which has been well identified. A tender process has been undertaken. As he is aware, a preferred provider had been selected, with a letter of intent issued in 2019. Unfortunately, that selected preferred provider encountered difficulties regarding economic viability resulting in the collapse of the process in 2024. To facilitate the readvertisement of this primary care centre, a full review was taken with relevant stakeholders. A number of stakeholders require accommodation in that centre and a

scope has been established. That review is now complete and a tender process is under way. The stage 1 tender advertisement was published on 24 June 2025. Stage 1 expressions of interest were received and evaluated and letters have now issued to all parties. It is anticipated that stage 2 priced offers will be advertised on the eTenders procurement platform in the final quarter of this year. The readvertisement and retender process for the project are necessary under the procurement rules.

On the ambulance service, HSE capital and estates, in collaboration with the National Ambulance Service, has identified and agreed a suitable facility for use as an NAS ambulance base and is in the process of securing approval to purchase same, subject to planning approval being obtained. The facility will require capital investment to fit it out as a purpose-built ambulance base. The NAS and HSE capital and estates have completed the necessary documentation to facilitate the progression of the project in quarter 4 of 2025, which I hope is a good update for the Deputy. The HSE is working to appoint a design team in this quarter, with the aim of developing and submitting a planning application in early 2026 to progress the project. Those are two important updates for Gorey.

Hospital Investigations

85. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Health for an update on the investigation into unnecessary hip surgeries at CHI; the supports available to those affected; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [51162/25]

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: My immediate priority following the publication of the Thomas audit on 23 May 2025 was to ensure there was clinical follow-up and care for patients who had undergone pelvic osteotomy surgery. This is a once-off review to assess any complications that may exist and to determine the current clinical state. After this, patients then enter the recommended normal follow-up process. These multidisciplinary team, MDT, clinics have been under way since 6 June for clinical reviews of patients who had osteotomy surgery in CHI at Temple Street and Cappagh. As of Tuesday, 21 September, a total of 196 patients have had clinical reviews as part of the MDT clinics in both CHI and Cappagh.

In relation to retrospective reviews of cases to determine the indications for surgery, as the Deputy is aware, the HSE is establishing a separate process involving external experts. Work to establish that external expert panel is advancing. It is expected that panel will be established this month and the review of individual cases will commence in January 2026. These are international clinical experts. We are trying to establish them to have the availability to do the work here - it takes a little time simply to have their availability - and for them to agree a robust and scientific methodological framework for conducting the review, which will be designed by them between September and December this year, by which everything can be measured.

The HSE has also committed to the involvement of parents and patient advocates in the terms of reference for the review. We had a workshop to discuss the external expert panel with them on 14 August. A further workshop took place on 13 September, with a further workshop planned for today.

Separately, it is my intention to communicate with all of the parents who are not necessarily part of the advocacy group representing parents, recognising that they may not wish to be part of it but also to make sure they have the opportunity to feed into perspectives, should they wish.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank the Minister for that update. I have a few follow-up questions. On the initial cohort of 196, does the Minister have an indicative timeline on when that full cohort might be completed? It was a significant number and in excess of 196. Is the Minister close to appointing a lead for the membership of the external review? We are only at the start of the month but there is keen interest in that. There was lots of disappointment that it has taken until January to get the review up and running. Is there a commitment that there will be a six-month timeframe for it to conclude its work?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: We are imminently close to appointing a lead. I would have preferred to be in a position to do that today, but I am not. It is imminent, essentially.

I appreciate what the Deputy said about January. It is for this group of experts to determine their process and not for me to step across that. I expect and hope it would be done within six months but, again, if independent clinical experts tell me differently, then I will take their clinical perspective on it, as I am sure the Deputy would. I remain committed to updating the House, when I have the information, at any stage.

I am sorry that I do not have a timeline for the complete group of patients, but I will look into that to see what is possible and come back to the Deputy. Again, it will be an estimated timeframe. I am somewhat pleased that close to 200 patients have had that clinical review. Of course, that has been prioritised for those who might be expected to have complications, as I understand it, but I will look at that further.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome that the Minister outlined a series of dates for engagement, including today. There is some emerging and serious concern about the scope and potential terms of reference for the external review. One area is how it will specifically relate to Crumlin hospital and surgeons operating there, as well as at Cork, Galway and elsewhere across the State and, related to that, how it will apply to children with complex additional comorbidities or needs. Will the Minister commit to ongoing engagement with advocacy groups and representatives on the development of those terms of reference?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Yes. We are having the third meeting today. I will meet the hip dysplasia advocacy group on Tuesday, 14 October in Leinster House. I will also make clear to all parents who may not wish to be part of an advocacy group, or be connected to that, I am here to hear from them at any stage as well.

It is also important to update the House that a meeting was held with the DDH advocacy group and the HSE on 24 September regarding mental health supports. It has been an enormously traumatic experience for many parents, as well as patients, to learn that surgery on their child may not have been necessary. A business case for funding all of the elements on this issue, including counselling, has been submitted as part of the Estimates process. I do not want to lose sight of that element of it too.

Hospital Facilities

80. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Health if her Department's review of the development control plan and strategic assessment report for the University Hospital Galway campus has been completed to date; if not, the expected timeline for the review to be completed and the documents returned to the HSE; the details of the enabling works underway; the details of any further enabling works planned; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [52567/25]

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Connolly notified us that she might be late. We will take her priority question now.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for exercising his discretion. It is back to the matter of University Hospital Galway. I know the Minister is familiar with it now. I am asking very specific questions in relation to her Department's review of the development control plan and the strategic assessment report for the University Hospital Galway campus. Has it been completed? What is its status, if it has not been completed? When will it be completed? What are the details of the enabling works under way at the moment? What further enabling works are necessary?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy. While we have already invested in the University Hospital Galway campuses, there are significant proposals, as the Deputy is aware, for further investments there. The integrated development control plan, DCP, has been informed by population health needs and clinical demand. That has been developed and now provides a clear masterplan for the sequencing and delivery of new facilities. My Department has received a copy of the DCP and a programme strategic assessment report, SAR, which are currently being reviewed against infrastructure guideline requirements. In parallel, the preliminary business case for the first phase of works is under development. The SAR feedback will be returned to the HSE in the coming weeks for inclusion within it.

A considerable amount of enabling works will be required to deliver the masterplan. The phased transfer of outpatient services from UHG to Merlin Park continues, with phase 1 of the outpatient department block now operational and phase 2 at design stage, which will unlock a portion of the campus. The initial scoping and site investigative works at UHG for various enabling works was recently completed. Site clearance works have already been undertaken to begin to clear the site for the first of the new 150-bed ward block. These include the removal of all above-ground prefab and solid structures on the footprint of the proposed development site and the diversion of a number of underground services. The old neurology building was recently demolished following the relocation of this service to Merlin Park.

Further enabling works are currently at detailed design stage and will proceed to construction in early 2026. Beyond those, there is another tender to appoint an integrated design team for further works, which will conclude by the end of 2025, with further design work starting in early 2026. A tender is under way for construction of a new electrical energy centre to enhance campus resilience and support future developments there.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive reply. I will look at it in detail. When I look back at the history of this, the language keeps changing. There is now a strategic plan, a preliminary business case and the strategic assessment report. I welcome what the Minister has given me and the face we will make progress but in 2014, the then Minister, Leo Varadkar, said a new hospital and a new building was the only solution. I will not go through all of this but the questions and answers over the last five years do not give hope this will be completed. The Minister says the two things I have asked for are with her Department and will be going back to the HSE in the next few weeks. I take it that will happen in the next few weeks. A preliminary business case is under way. Who will carry that out and when will that be completed?

The Minister has given details on the enabling works. When will the plan be implemented? Is there any overall date for when the master plan will be implemented?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: It is a master plan that is developed sequentially. The Deputy can see the complexity of the work that is going on there with the diversion of underground services. It is incredibly complex work. Deputy Connolly knows the site a great deal better than I do, of course, and it is an old site that requires considerable development work. The last thing I will do is place a timeline on it. I just want to see things progressing and I hope that by the time the Deputy asks me this question on the next occasion, unless of course other matters have taken over, I will have a further update on the business cases.

I will make a couple of important points about how Galway hospital is improving in a couple of other areas because it is important. It recently moved the outpatient department to the facility in Merlin Park but it has recently changed its model of delivery to three-hour slots, three sessions a day, from what had been a two-session model, and that is providing an additional 60 clinical sessions every month. That is a really important and significant change for the people of Galway and for the management of the hospital. The Deputy will be better aware than I am that construction of the surgical hub is well under way. It is expected to be completed in quarter 1 of 2026 and to be operational in quarter 2 of 2026.

Deputy Catherine Connolly: I agree with the Minister. I know the hospital very well and I know about the very good services that are provided there. When people get a service, it is absolutely brilliant and I have no problem saying that. I am a committed believer in the public health system. My difficulty is that as we speak, there are 35 people on trolleys, or there was that number yesterday. It has been under enormous pressure for a very long time. I spared the Minister the reading-out of the various comments and all the timelines that were given for different plans to be completed, none of which have been completed. They came forward to the Department of Health, they went back down and they came back up. We then got an oversight management team and many other objectives that were never delivered.

In my opinion, a brand new hospital should have been built in Merlin Park but that did not happen. That was actually the options appraisal that was carried out and it said we should build a brand new one. The Government did not give permission for that so we went back to a congested site with many plans going in lots of directions. That is what we have now. At this stage, all I can do is keep the pressure on to get delivery.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: That seems perfectly reasonable and that is what I would do too. As the Deputy has saved me the background, I will save her reading out all of the trolley figures. I will highlight that unless Galway hospital, and the west and north west generally, start to routinely roster consultants on the public-only consultant contract at the weekends, they will continue to have the trolley difficulties they have had. It is very important. A total of 73% of University Hospital Galway's consultants have taken up the public-only consultant contract but the hospital was not able to confirm to me, at an important meeting on this on 11 September, the percentage of those who are routinely working extended days and at weekends.

I will be meeting the team again in January and I expect it will have an update for me on their weekend rostering. To the extent the Deputy can help me maintain that pressure, nothing will change in Galway with trolleys or across the west and north west until consultants are routinely rostered at weekends, as is happening in other hospitals.

Health Services Staff

86. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health the progress to date in recruiting therapists for primary care in counties Cavan and Monaghan, taking into account the urgent need to reduce waiting times for children with additional needs seeking to access essential supports; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [52459/25]

Deputy Brendan Smith: I have previously had the opportunity to mention to the Minister my serious concern about the ongoing delays for children with additional needs accessing therapies in Cavan and Monaghan. The delays that are occurring are absolutely unacceptable. Some children are assessed and do not get follow-up therapies and there are even delays in getting assessed. We need more clinicians in the Cavan and Monaghan area. I sincerely hope that additional efforts will be made to recruit more clinicians across particular therapy areas for those two counties.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I agree with the Deputy. While in 2024, nearly 1.4 million people accessed therapy services across disciplines including physiotherapy, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, dietetics, psychology, podiatry and all of that, in many cases waiting times are wholly unacceptable. To tackle this, the Department of Health is working closely with the HSE on a targeted, programmatic approach to managing therapy waiting lists in primary care, in particular. As well as looking at the longer term changes that are needed, we are trying to do what is possible right now. I have asked the HSE CEO to now put in place measures to address physiotherapy, occupational therapy and speech and language therapy waiting lists to reduce the waiting times for these three therapies to less than 10 months, which I hope will be achieved. That would be a massive improvement on where we are now. It would remove 60,000 people from the waiting lists across these three therapies and get them therapeutic services. That is a challenge but unless we set a direction and a target, which I have very clearly given to the HSE CEO, I am concerned nothing will change without some direction and the resources and support to do that.

I do acknowledge that we have global workforce challenges, the same as everybody else in healthcare. We are trying to advance initiatives to retain and recruit the skilled professionals

we need. Recruitment efforts include offering permanent roles to all Irish HSCP graduates, streamlined registration with CORU, which has improved enormously over the last number of months, and the introduction of 320 new training places via the CAO. The Deputy will be aware that since January 2020, 5,019 additional therapists have joined the HSE, a 30% increase. In that time, 40 additional therapists have been recruited in the Cavan and Monaghan area, bringing the total to 177. The Deputy will be aware that includes 12 new occupational therapists, 14 physiotherapists, 7 dietitians and 3 speech and language therapists, demonstrating our commitment to strengthening front-line capacity. I still acknowledge the concerns the Deputy raised and remain committed to targeted reform in the way I have given direction to the HSE CEO.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I very much appreciate the Minister's determination to deal with this issue once and for all. At my clinics last Friday night and Saturday, there were a number of young parents with children who have not got assessments or therapies. One parent spoke to me about her son who got a speech and language therapy appointment in June 2021 and has not got one since. That child got an occupational therapy appointment in 2022 and 2025. Another of that young mother's children was assessed and diagnosed 18 months ago and there still have not been any follow-up therapies. There is an opportunity in the Cavan area, in particular, to outsource more therapies. Assessments are being outsourced, although I know that is not the answer to all our concerns.

A few years ago, we discussed with the Minister's predecessor, Stephen Donnelly, in this House one night during Question Time the introduction of development therapy assistance. Speaking to clinicians, I believe that can help speed up the number of people delivering therapies and delivering services. I know some of the colleges of further education offer an initial course that enables students to go on to a university or institute of technology to pursue courses across different disciplines, including occupational therapy and others. That may not be included in the Minister's brief but the area of therapy assistance is an area we should pursue and make more progress in.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy. He might allow me to reflect on that and discuss it with my officials further.

What we are trying to do to build capacity in primary care therapy services is this three-part national programme, which I will lay out for the Deputy. Workstream 1 is an analysis of regional productivity to optimise current therapy care to maximise capacity within existing resources. Frankly, there is variation between regions and we need to understand specifically what that variation is and have a national response that prioritises patients who have been waiting over one year for therapy access. We are developing a primary care therapy waiting list management protocol, the purpose of which is to ensure consistency and transparency during referral, waiting list management and discharge across all primary care in the different regions to improve overall patient experience. We have seen this used in other areas to good effect and it is now time this be properly used for primary care therapies.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I thank the Minister. Another difficulty is that the CDNT in County Cavan is led by Enable Ireland. We know it has difficulties with recruiting and retaining staff

because of the issue around section 38 and section 39 workers. I know that is a broader Government issue but it needs to be addressed.

Have the universities and colleges made enough places available to ensure we have the professionals to deliver healthcare and meet the ongoing and increasing demand for different healthcare services across our country? I understand there is still a shortfall in the numbers graduating compared with those who are retiring. We must also consider the increased demand.

An issue was brought to my attention at the weekend. It may not be absolutely accurate. Apparently, study in speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and other therapies takes the form of an apprenticeship in Britain rather than the traditional university or college route that we take. There may be a financial incentive for some students from our State to go to those colleges in Britain. It is an area that the Minister, the Department, the HSE and our colleges need to keep a close eye on. We do not want students being drawn from our State because of a monetary attraction to pursue a specific course at a British college.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I will follow up on a point made by the Deputy. I have spoken to the representatives of some colleges and they have told me that they have the capacity to deliver more therapists and all the professionals we need. They are saying that if they get the funding and resources, they can meet the challenges. I know UCC is rolling out additional courses. There should be more courses to allow universities to deliver more therapists. Parents tell me they cannot get therapists for their children. They feel their children are regressing. There is nothing more heartbreaking for parents than to see their children not living up to their potential because they are being failed by the State and are not getting the support and therapies they need. Parents are heartbroken because they are looking at their children and know that if they do not get support now, it will have a negative effect for the rest of their lives. That cannot be fair.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank both Deputies. There are an additional 320 new training places via the CAO in the different colleges. That is a significant expansion. I will speak to my good colleague the Minister for further and higher education, Deputy Lawless. My responsibility is, of course, in respect of the clinical training places that must go alongside the academic piece. We moved from a sort of apprenticeship model of nursing to an academic degree model to try to lift standards and expertise as far as possible, and enable the sort of advanced practice we want across the specialisms. We are now trying to do that with health and social care professionals too.

I have met representatives of CORU about its registration processes, which, frankly, were too slow. There has been an enormous improvement to those processes. I have also met the different professions to signal clearly that we will be aligning ourselves with the European standards to enable even greater numbers of people to come from different parts of Europe to work in Ireland. That has not happened in the past at the rate we should have seen. CORU is working hard with the professions to ensure that clinical training places are available not just in acute hospitals but in primary care and other areas as well.

Health Services

87. **Deputy Grace Boland** asked the Minister for Health the steps being taken to reduce the average diagnostic delay for endometriosis; the plans to introduce public awareness campaigns and GP training to support earlier intervention; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [52381/25]

97. **Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí** asked the Minister for Health for an update on the development of the national framework for endometriosis care; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [52187/25]

101. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health her intentions regarding the provision of comprehensive endometriosis services; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [52532/25]

Deputy Grace Boland: Endometriosis is one of the most common women's health issues. Far too many women, including women among my family and friends, often endure chronic pain, fatigue, fertility issues and emotional distress. They often miss time at work and in education. They miss out on life generally. The average diagnostic delay is nine years. I know this is an area on which the Minister is focused. I would like to hear what she is doing to address the diagnostic delay and to ensure that our healthcare workers are fully trained and that our women are getting the healthcare and surgeries they need in a timely way.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I propose to take Questions Nos. 87, 97 and 101 together.

I thank the Deputy. Endometriosis has been under-considered by all of us, including the Department of Health and the HSE, but a significant body of work has happened in recent months. I am pleased to say that the national framework for endometriosis is now ready for publication. I am conscious that the budget is next week and we are trying to find the appropriate moment to publish the framework. It has developed and changed considerably, with significant additional patient voices now included. On 1 September, a patient voice forum was held in the Department of Health with 60 to 70 patients, comprising girls and women who were in difficulty or who had had difficulties and had successful surgeries abroad. I was also in attendance, as were the CEO of the HSE, the chief medical officer, the chief nursing officer, the head of the national women and infants health programme, NWIHP, and all of the senior clinical team. We were not there to participate but simply to listen to the women. We were there for quite a number of hours listening to their experiences. Their voices have directly influenced changes in the completed framework. I am glad we had that interregnum to enable their voices to come into that space and be heard. They have directly changed the language and some of the direction in the framework, as well as the communication of it. I am glad that opportunity arose and I thank each woman who shared her personal experience. Following the forum, I mandated an immediate action plan.

On 5 September, I received an initial plan from the Department and officials from NWIHP. On 15 September, the HSE CEO advised that a working group had been established to develop the plan. On 18 September, I updated those who attended the patient voice forum. On 22 September, I approved the revised national framework for endometriosis and a letter for GPs to go alongside that framework to help advance awareness.

On the details of the plan, the HSE will, crucially, increase the number of surgeries to be done this year. Some 600 surgeries were done in the first part of this year so you would expect 600 to be done in the second half of the year. I have required that an additional 100 surgeries will be made available in quarter 4 of this year and have provided funding for those surgeries. Nevertheless, I am conscious of the quality and nature of surgery, which is an issue we can discuss again, and the need to increase surgical skill everywhere. This condition is misunderstood or too little understood everywhere. The increase to surgical skill must happen internationally and also in Ireland. I have also provided funding for an additional colorectal surgeon. That position has been advertised. The role will be an important part of facilitating more complex surgical treatments.

The HSE is also providing additional support for women within the treatment abroad scheme. It has in the past been too difficult for women to access funding to get effective surgeries internationally. I have a little more work to do in that regard to look at the different international programmes that can be supported. I will update the House as soon as I can.

The HSE has created a different email address specifically to assist women with that service to try to streamline their experience within the HSE, which is important. An endometriosis group, with patient advocates and women's health task force members, has been set up. International endometriosis experts will now be invited to collaborate and engage with our own clinicians for better learning, diagnostics and surgical expertise. I yesterday approved a letter to all GPs, consultants and other relevant healthcare professionals to go alongside the framework, which is an effort to raise awareness of endometriosis. It is affecting many women, perhaps as many as one in seven. By that, I do not mean one in seven people but one in seven women. It is just as prevalent as other very common conditions, and should be as prominent in GP surgeries and should be understood by GPs. The HSE has also planned a GP practice update and a specific endometriosis awareness campaign.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I inform Members that we are taking Questions Nos. 87, 97 and 101.

Deputy Grace Boland: I thank the Minister for that comprehensive update. I mentioned the nine-year average diagnostic delay. Women have felt ghosted by their GPs. They feel like they have not been offered supports and have not been listened to. It seems that women are expected to put up with this intolerable, intense and chronic pain, and are essentially made to feel as if it is all in their heads. It is important that the Minister has taken the step to listen. The patient voice forum was an excellent idea. Women now feel heard by the Minister and the CEO of the HSE. It is important that the HSE continue to listen to these women. In her response, the Minister mentioned that she has written to GPs and there will be a practice update. It is important that existing GPs will be properly trained and will understand. Far too often, women have been told that they have to put up with it, that it is in their heads and is not really happening to them. We have to move away from that outlook.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I thank the Minister for the update. Just to add to what my colleague Deputy Boland said, the patient voice forum is a really good step forward. It is incredible that it has not happened before now. Well done to the Minister for putting it in place.

It is a model that should work in many different areas of the health service and I really welcome it.

I want to mention the area of diagnosis. As has been said, it is estimated that one in seven women has the condition, although it could be a lot higher. We owe it to women to put the systems in place so that we can get a real estimate. I know that will take time and I imagine it is a long-term initiative but how does the Minister see that happening? I presume it will be done through the GP network but that network has to be upskilled. GPs have a huge role to play in this.

The other issue relates to the two big specialist centres and the regional centres that have been set up in support of more moderate cases. What is the ideal pathway into those centres when all of this work is done and we have, hopefully, a well-running system? What is the pathway for a woman to get in there as quickly as possible?

Deputy Thomas Gould: Like the Minister, I have attended meetings and met women who have described how they have suffered. Their lives have been hugely impacted. Endometriosis has completely changed their quality of life. It has just been horrendous for them. It is good to hear that the Minister is listening to the patient and it is good to see that a framework has been put in place. I accept her sincerity in this but what I do not want to see is more suffering. These women have suffered enough. What we do not want to see is the HSE organising meetings and a lot of things being said but nothing happening. What the women have told us is that on the ground the diagnosis, treatment and support is not available in Ireland. That is what these women are looking for now. The Minister has outlined the work she is doing but she must deliver a patient-centred service. These women have suffered for far too long.

Separately, I want to thank the Minister and the Taoiseach. I brought the case of Aisling Thornhill to the attention of the Dáil a couple of weeks ago. Aisling is terminally ill with leukemia. A treatment for her was sought and I want to thank the Minister and the HSE because that treatment is in the process of happening. Aisling has only a short time to live but at least her family knows that everything possible is being done and they asked me to pass on their thanks. Hopefully the treatment will work but if it does not, at least we know that we have all worked together to try to support Aisling and her family. I again thank the Minister for that.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy. Our thoughts are with Aisling as she goes through her treatment programme.

On endometriosis, I want to acknowledge the many different groups that have engaged with endometriosis sufferers and the importance of all of that advocacy work. It was a step change to invite women to come into the Department when many of them feel that the Irish health system has so badly let them down. It was difficult for many women to come in and do that but we had to bring that experience right into the heart of the Department, for it to be heard very loud, very proud and right at the centre of policymaking, and to have the HSE there as well. I acknowledge how many different people have already said that.

Of course, the most important point and what is so important in relation to the GPs is that women are the most reliable narrators of their own experience. I need to say it again: women are the most reliable narrators of their own experience, not just on this but on everything. I

am absolutely sick and tired of women not being listened to and not being heard. Part of the change with regard to GPs is to operate on a presumptive diagnosis piece and to really listen to women about the complexity of symptoms that can be there that are not necessarily menstrual. There can be constipation, UTI and a whole range of things that are not necessarily presenting as a menstrual issue.

All the Deputies are correct in what they say about the quality of diagnostics and surgery. Many women are getting an inadequate service at present. I recognise that and indeed, they have told me that. For many women, because of the complexity of imaging and diagnostics and the complexity of reading MRIs, we do not have sufficient consistent capacity in this State to that reliably. That is an area that I am trying to develop, both in facilitating international experts coming here to provide additional training and longer-term fellowships and pathways for improvements in diagnostics. I also acknowledge the advances in AI that will facilitate this over time. I have been researching that as well but nevertheless, there is a significant body of work to do. I would say the same regarding surgeries and the complexity of same, including in relation to excision over ablation. I recognise that is a clinical issue but we must move to a model where we are capable of doing very complex surgeries. We do not want women to get to the point where endometriosis is right throughout their bodies. It is important to recognise that it is not simply a gynaecological issue. It can present right through the diaphragm. I have met women who have had endometriosis in their shoulders, eyes, brains, right through their colon and it is a very serious, painful condition. The pain management specialists and supports need to be improved, as does the quality of the surgical capacity. I do not say this to be critical of surgeons but it is just simply not there yet. I know that surgeons have leaned in to wanting to have better collaboration and fellowships with the centres of excellence that exist around the world, although there is not enough of that yet. We are certainly not there yet and we need no congratulations of any kind in relation to this. This is a body of work that has begun and that we will sustain and develop over time. We are trying to seriously improve things but there is a long way to go yet and I fully acknowledge that.

Deputy Grace Boland: I thank the Minister. I really appreciate her focus on this and as I said, women are so impressed that they now feel heard having literally been told that it is all in their heads for so long. In terms of public awareness, sometimes women, particularly younger girls and women, do not necessarily know what to be looking out for when they are talking about endometriosis. This is particularly true for teenage girls and it is really important that we see a public awareness campaign as soon as possible.

We know from reports in the media that many women have actually taken themselves abroad for treatment, which is an intolerable situation. In that context, I appreciate the work the Minister is doing on looking into options under the treatment abroad scheme. It would be good to hear more from her on those options, as well as when we might see a public awareness campaign detailing the symptoms.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: The Minister put it really well herself when she said that women are the best narrators of their own lived experience and their own pain. As long as she can keep that in the centre of all of the work that will be done around endometriosis, she will make progress and she will have the support of this House.

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Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It is now close to 12 o'clock. I understand there is a proposal to change our business schedule and I now call on the Government Chief Whip to outline same.

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

Notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders or in Tuesday's Order of Business, the following is proposed in relation to today's business:

- on Leaders' Questions, two members of each party or technical group in Opposition may use their time for Q&A, and the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:-
- Tánaiste - 10 minutes;
- Sinn Féin - 15 minutes; and
- Social Democrats, Independent and Parties Technical Group, Independent Technical Group and the Labour Party – 12 minutes per party or group; and
- Questions on Policy or Legislation shall not be taken today, and the lunchtime SOS shall take place on the conclusion of Other Members' Questions.

This is in order to discuss the situation in relation to the flotilla and the fact that nine Irish people are currently detained involuntarily.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

The Tánaiste: I thank all Members across the House for agreeing to the change to the Dáil schedule and facilitating this debate on the concerning developments regarding the Global Sumud Flotilla. I know that everyone's overriding concern is for the safety and welfare of our Irish citizens who are on a mission of solidarity with the people of Palestine. This House, the Oireachtas and our people across the country are united in this solidarity. Indeed, we are united today in our urgent wish that no harm should come to those who boarded the Sumud Flotilla, to those who still in transit and to all those who have set out on a mission to bring humanitarian assistance to Gaza and highlight the horrific humanitarian catastrophe.

First, I wish to inform the House of the latest developments. This morning, I convened and chaired a special consular co-ordination group within my Department, which includes our consular director, the head of crisis planning, the assistant secretary general for citizen services and the Secretary General of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, to respond in real time to what is a fast evolving situation off the coast of Gaza. The co-ordination group was joined by our ambassador in Tel Aviv via video link, who updated the group on the current status of Irish citizens who have been detained. We now have confirmation that at least 14

Irish citizens are among those intercepted and detained by Israel. There may be two other citizens whose presence is still being verified as I am here now. Our ambassador in Tel Aviv has formally requested consular access to those Irish citizens. I was informed on the call that there are no reports of any injuries currently among our Irish citizens.

I also wish to inform the House that my Department has now established a dedicated point of contact for the families of those detained or on the flotilla in addition to the broader contact point for those co-ordinating the flotilla activity more generally. Our embassy in Tel Aviv assures me it is well resourced to support our citizens, and we continue to monitor this. Our consular team in Dublin is also supporting our efforts on the ground in Israel.

This morning, I have instructed my officials to contact the non-resident Irish ambassador to Israel to register our strong condemnation of the actions of the Israeli authorities and highlight our absolute expectation that the welfare of our citizens is protected in line with international law. I have also requested an urgent call with the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Ms Kaja Kallas. Indeed, shortly before coming to this House, I spoke again with my Spanish counterpart about trying to take a co-ordinated, European approach to ensure the upholding of international law.

As Members will recall, Ireland signed a joined statement that recalls that any violation of international law or the human rights of the participants of the flotilla, including attacks against the vessels in international waters or illegal detention, will lead to accountability. I assure the Dáil and the people of Ireland that this remains our position today. International law matters. It is the cornerstone of our foreign policy and must be upheld. I will consider with counterparts how best to advance this in the time ahead. We will assess what options are available to us with other European countries to uphold international law, seek accountability and hold Israel to account. I will keep the House updated on these next steps.

However, in the first instance, colleagues will understand that my absolute responsibility and priority, and that of the Government and Oireachtas, must be to ensure the welfare and well-being of our citizens. Officials from across my Department, including those in our embassy in Israel, are actively engaged with the situation and providing consular assistance to those affected.

What I have been informed is likely to happen now is that all detainees will be transferred to Ashdod Port for processing. From there, they will likely be taken to a detention facility south of Tel Aviv where they will have access to medical teams. We expect this to take quite a number of hours. This is the latest information we have available. It is my understanding that those who have been detained will be given the option to leave immediately and, if not, they will have a deportation hearing within 72 hours. That is how the Israeli system works. Given the religious holiday of Yom Kippur, however, we expect that processing time to be somewhat impacted. Department officials are also in direct and ongoing contact with the designated point of contact for the flotilla.

Let me be clear: these are Irish men and woman who sought to deliver aid and acted on conscience. They now find themselves in uncertain and potentially dangerous circumstances. A blockade that starves a people of hope and aid is inhumane. Seeing peaceful activists detained while simply seeking to relieve suffering is inhumane. The Government remains deeply and continuously engaged on this issue. We will work across this House tirelessly to

safeguard the welfare of our citizens. We remain in constant contact with our consular team on the ground. They are working to establish the precise whereabouts of every Irish citizen to ensure their safety and dignity and secure their swift release.

Our ambassador and officials in Tel Aviv have been active from the first reports of interception. I thank them for their incredible work and diligence in difficult circumstances. They have made clear Ireland's expectation that our citizens be treated fully in line with international law. I assure family and friends who are following events with understandable anxiety that they are not alone. The entire resources of the State, the Department of foreign affairs, our diplomatic network and European partners are being brought to bear on this issue. We are using every channel available to us.

It is in times like these that the value of maintaining diplomatic relations, even when it may seem to cut against the grain of justice, is most clearly seen. We will speak directly and persistently to those who hold our citizens. We press our case in European and international fora and we remind all parties that Ireland will never be silent when the safety of our people is at stake. We cannot be silent when humanity itself is at stake in Gaza. We will continue to insist calmly and firmly, but without equivocation, that those detained be released without harm, because they are wrongfully detained; humanitarian principles be upheld; and that the right to bring aid to desperate civilians not be criminalised. We will speak out against the outrageous slurs against those on the flotilla. They are decent people who are doing their best to advance the cause of peace.

Our solidarity today must also extend to the people of Gaza amidst a horrific man-made famine and genocide. Ireland has long championed the principles of peace, justice and international law. We will persist in calling for a massive and sustained flow of humanitarian aid, an end to collective punishment and the protection of civilians. Our first priority at this moment, however, is clear and immediate, that is, to safeguard the welfare and well-being of our citizens. That is what we are doing hour by hour, call by call and action by action.

I know this House and the Irish people stand united in that effort. We are united in passion, determination and hope that soon we will welcome our fellow citizens safely home and that the horrific humanitarian blockade and genocide in Gaza will end.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I will divide my time between some comments and questions. I thank the Office of the Ceann Comhairle for facilitating this debate. It is vitally important that we address this issue today on behalf of our colleagues, the Irish citizens and the citizens of the world. For the past number of years, people have monitored and looked at the situation in Gaza in revulsion, fear and disgust. There is a genocide ongoing before our eyes. It is a war on civilians and children like we have not seen in our lifetimes. For a brief period yesterday and previous days, however, people looked towards Gaza, and more particularly to the flotilla, with a degree of hope. They hoped the flotilla might reach its destination and be able to deliver its cargo. What we must bear in mind and not lose sight of is that the flotilla's cargo was aid, such as baby food, food and medical aid, for a starving, beleaguered population.

The flotilla also represented hope for what it said about humanity. Those on the flotilla gave inspiration to people. In many respects, the people on the flotilla represent the very best of us.

Facing nigh-on insurmountable odds, they are standing up for the voiceless where the international community and institutions have failed so profoundly.

Unfortunately, between last night and the early hours of the morning, the flotilla was intercepted illegally in international waters by the Israelis. This includes Irish citizens, including our colleague, Senator Chris Andrews. Reports have emerged of a water cannon being used against small crafts and ships being rammed by the Israelis. Given the horrors they have been responsible for, unfortunately, that would be little surprise.

Léirigh na daoine ar an flotilla cuid mhaith crógachta agus thug siad inspioráid do dhaoine ar fud an domhain ag cur i gcoinne an tslada agus an chinedhíothaithe in iarracht stop a chur leis an mbac ar chúnamh, bia agus ábhair shláinte. Tá muid ag impí go dtabharfar cúnamh dóibh láithreach.

Along with some colleagues, I met family members and loved ones of those on the flotilla on Tuesday. They were anxious. I spoke to Senator Chris Andrews as well. Of course, he was worried. You would have to be mad not to be, I imagine. While they were justifiably very worried, they were also full of pride. They were full of respect for the wishes of the people on the flotilla and their objective in taking part in this. Their feelings mirror the determination of those on the flotilla. They would not be deterred because they understood, as did those on the flotilla, that they did this because of what was happening in Gaza on a daily basis while an international community watches it happen. It is a genocide, the most profound crime in humanity. It is barbarism of the highest order happening in front of our eyes and the international community is doing practically nothing. Their objective was to break the blockade and to break through. It is a noble and high-minded ideal. I salute those Irish people and citizens of the world who stepped in where states and institutions have failed so profoundly. Unfortunately, the slaughter goes on; approximately 73 were killed yesterday alone in Gaza. The Tánaiste and the Government have a responsibility to act, both for our people on the flotilla and for the people of Palestine.

My leader, Deputy McDonald, and I have been in close contact with the Department in recent hours. I appreciate the work of the Department's staff. The Tánaiste gave a bit of an account of what has been confirmed. It seems from what he says that not all Irish citizens have been accounted for. Could he confirm whether the Department has sight of the whereabouts of the 22 Irish citizens – if that is the correct number? Could he give an update on the current health and welfare of those citizens? Do we know if they are safe and well?

The Tánaiste: I too spoke to Senator Andrews, at the Deputy's request, the other day. I have kept in contact with him in recent days. I had the opportunity to meet some of the families here the other day when we had the all-party motion in the Dáil, as did our head of consular services and the Minister of State with responsibility for international aid, Deputy Richmond.

My understanding is that there are 16 Irish citizens in the current part of the flotilla. He is right about the number 22. I was teasing through this - there is a further part of the flotilla to come. To the best of our knowledge, the part of the flotilla that has been intercepted has 16 Irish citizens on board. We have confirmation that 14 of them have been detained. We believe 16 have been detained. I want to give the House very accurate information. I expect all 16 have been detained but to date we have confirmation that only 14 have been detained. Our ambassador, Sonya McGuinness, is doing a very good job. She has already been in touch with

the Israeli foreign ministry and has requested consular access to those citizens. We are continuing to pursue that.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Has the Tánaiste or the Department contacted the families of those who are confirmed to have been detained, or even those who are expected to be detained? Does he have confirmation on when staff on the ground will have access to those who are detained illegally by the Israelis, and when they might have access to lawyers?

The Tánaiste: I am sorry but I forgot to answer the Deputy's specific question about injuries. We have no reports of any injuries to Irish citizens. I am very conscious of the volatile and dangerous environment. We have no information on any injuries. Our head of consular services has been in regular contact with the point of co-ordination for the flotilla – someone familiar to both of us. We have also made a decision to put in place a dedicated contact point for families. That contact point is now in place. I believe the contact is under way for families.

We do not yet have confirmation on the exact time at which we expect to get access to our citizens. We are working on this constantly. Our citizens need to be brought ashore and when they are, I assure the Deputy that the Irish ambassador to Israel has made it very clear that she will expect very urgent access to them. I am keeping a very direct interest in that myself.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Contact with the families is vitally important. It must be of the highest priority. I urge the Tánaiste to be the first to pick up the phone if there is any escalation or downturn in the situation. The families and people generally are concerned about when these Irish citizens can return home. Does he have any sense of a timescale about how long the process is likely to take and when these citizens are likely to be returned home safely?

The Tánaiste: The first priority is the Irish citizens who are detained and the absolute priority alongside that is to keep their families informed about any information we have. We are working closely with the families and trying to keep the lines of communication open. I have shared all of the information we have available and I and my Department will continue to do so. It is an evolving situation.

My understanding, having been briefed again this morning by our ambassador, is that once people are brought to a detention centre, they have to be brought before an Israeli deportation court within 72 hours. They are afforded an opportunity to sign a waiver form to waive that period and ask to leave Israel with immediate effect. I do not yet know the decision individual citizens will make on that, but we will provide all consular advice and assistance to people in that regard. People will be afforded the opportunity to sign a waiver form to say, "I want to leave Israel immediately", or to go before a deportation court. Under Israeli law, my understanding is that is meant to happen within 72 hours.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: On the wider legal international picture, does the Tánaiste agree that what happened in terms of detaining people in international waters is a breach of international law?

The Tánaiste: Yes, I do. I spoke with my Spanish counterpart this morning in relation to this. The full answer I should give is that we are determining all of the facts at the moment in an evolving situation. I am very clear that peace activists trying to highlight a humanitarian catastrophe and bring aid to the people of Gaza were apprehended and detained by Israeli authorities.

As I commented earlier, and in a statement issued with 14 other European countries in recent days, we will consider all actions available under international law to seek, first, information and, second, accountability for this action. Today should not be a day about me or anybody in the Irish Government doing anything provocative, it should be about trying to prioritise the well-being and safety of our citizens. That is my first priority.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: While I would not necessarily advocate that the Government would do something provocative for the sake of it, ultimately the flotilla is a consequence of what is happening internationally. There has to be a firm response from the Irish Government and from the international community.

As a follow-up to the previous question, we rightly recognised the State of Palestine. I welcome that other countries have done so too. That has to mean something in practical terms. Does the Tánaiste accept that even if these ships were not in international waters – if they were in Palestinian waters – that Palestinian waters are sovereign?

The Tánaiste: Yes, we recognise the State of Palestine. We are now one of more than 150 countries globally to do so.

I think Deputy Ó Laoghaire understood me, but I have been very clear in the statements I have issued on behalf of the Irish Government with 14 other European countries that international law matters, it has to be upheld, and there has to be accountability. What I am saying very much mirrors what my Spanish counterpart said in recent hours, which I discussed with him, that there is an important sequencing to this. When Irish citizens are detained abroad, priority number one has to be the welfare and well-being of those citizens. I know the Deputy does not, but nobody should take that as saying I do not believe there should be accountability or the pursuit of this matter under international law; I do.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The Tánaiste will be aware that the next ships that are part of the flotilla are only three or four days away. They contain other Irish citizens, including a colleague of ours, Deputy Barry Heneghan. We are all concerned that the same thing will happen. It is reasonable to ask: what action the Department is taking to prepare for this and what actions will be taken to ensure the welfare of Irish citizens, European citizens and others are safeguarded? If it is a breach of international law for these ships to be intercepted in international or Palestinian waters, what is the international community, including Ireland, going to do to ensure that does not happen?

The Tánaiste: I say this very respectfully: I am very open to hearing suggestions from across this House and from all parliaments about what actions they believe the Government should be taking that we are not. In recent days people suggested that we join the Spanish ship, for example. I do not say this to be in any way disrespectful to Spain, with whom we are working

very closely, but last night the Spanish ship withdrew and Spanish citizens were detained. They have not been treated any differently, better or afforded any degree of greater protection than Irish citizens.

I am concerned that the European Union has made absolutely zero comment to the very best of my knowledge, unless it has happened in the past few minutes when hundreds of European Union citizens are detained. I want to pursue that matter directly with the High Representative, Kaja Kallas, today. I have sought a call with her. I have been in contact with her too. It is really important that the European Union makes it known to Israel that we expect the rights of European citizens, including Irish citizens, to be respected.

I have been in touch with Deputy Heneghan. I spoke to him either yesterday or the day before. I will continue to keep in contact with him. We cannot lose sight of the reason all of these people are on the flotilla, which is there is a humanitarian catastrophe and a genocide. The best way for Israel to stop the flotilla is to end the genocide. The best way to end the genocide is to agree to a peace plan. I have heard the peace plan represented as President Trump's peace plan. I was in the United Nations, meeting with Arab leaders and Arab nations who worked extraordinarily hard on that peace plan. It is a plan that has been endorsed by many countries in the region. I hope that all parties, Israel and Hamas, now accept a peace process, end this horrific genocide and release the hostages.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: We touched on the proposal yesterday. We all want to see peace. Arab countries may have been part of the process but the Palestinians themselves were not. The Tánaiste made a point in relation to the genocide. This is a fundamental point. In lots of respects, the flotilla is a symptom. Ultimately, the disease needs to be cured. As long as there is a genocide that continues in Gaza, there will be people who will do what they can to break the blockade and to stand up where institutions and the international order are failing. That will continue to be the case. Israel has in this instance and many other instances acted with impunity because there are no consequences. While the Tánaiste has said the first priority is in relation to Irish citizens, at a political level Ireland needs to be leading and making it clear that consequences have to follow for breaches of international law. The Tánaiste is meeting with Maroš Šefčovič later this evening. A key tool in ensuring that Israel does bear some responsibility is the EU-Israel trade agreement. Will the Tánaiste be raising directly with Maroš Šefčovič the need to block and halt the EU trade agreement? It is astonishing that Israel is currently benefiting from favourable trade agreements with the EU. It is disgusting; and it needs to be halted.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: Of course I will. As the Deputy knows well, Maroš Šefčovič agrees with that. That is why at the College of Commissioners, President von der Leyen put forward proposals and proposals were adopted. I am not in any way getting involved in politics today on this, but the problem is no longer that the European Commission is not bringing forward proposals; it is that member states are failing to vote in favour of implementing those proposals. We now have significant proposals that would do exactly what the Deputy suggests around trade. I believe they could make a significant difference. I believe they could make a greater difference than any sovereign act any one of our parliaments in the European Union could take. What

needs to happen is that member states, including Ireland, need to have an opportunity to vote on them. I have petitioned this. I am available today to vote on these proposals. There is an absolute onus on the European Council and the institutions of Europe to convene and allow member states to show where they stand and let history show where they stood in relation to these measures that could have a significant economic impact and help Netanyahu to change his calculus in relation to the genocide.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I condemn the attack at the synagogue in Manchester. I express our solidarity with all of those affected.

On behalf of the Social Democrats, I express our horror at the actions of the Israeli military. Last night, they illegally boarded the Sumud flotilla in international waters, and effectively kidnapped humanitarian activists, including at least 14 Irish citizens. They took this action not because the flotilla posed a threat or because anyone on board was dangerous, but to stop humanitarian aid reaching a starving population in Gaza. This is a population that is enduring a genocide being perpetrated by Israel. This is a population that has been relentlessly and mercilessly abused, tortured and murdered for nearly the past two years.

Not only did Israeli forces illegally board the vessels in the flotilla, but they aggressively targeted them and put them in harm's way. According to reports, one vessel was deliberately rammed. The vessel's communications were jammed, and passengers were ordered to throw their phones into the sea. This was all to ensure that peaceful humanitarian volunteers could not be contacted. This happened before they were rounded up, manhandled, detained and treated like criminals. This Government was asked to do something to support the flotilla. A simple request was made to send personnel to observe it, to bear witness to what was being done and to deter Israel from further action. However, there was no action by the Government despite the fact that so many Irish citizens were being endangered and threatened by Israel for taking a stand against a brutal occupation, against an apartheid state and against 24 months of genocide.

The Israeli Government has acted with brutal impunity in Gaza for nearly two years. Every day we hear reports of dozens of people in Gaza being killed or starved to death, but virtually no sanctions have been imposed on Israel. Israel is so emboldened by this lack of sanction that it feels it can get away with anything, even kidnapping citizens of this country and dozens more from a humanitarian mission on the high seas. What is the Government going to do about it? I am not hearing from what the Tánaiste has said that sufficient is being done. There are strong words of condemnation and I support the Tánaiste on that, but nothing indicates that those strong words are being followed up with concrete actions. I know the Tánaiste is personally disgusted by what Israel is doing, and so are others in the Cabinet and Government backbench TDs, but I cannot understand why these feelings of disgust and horror are not spurring the Government on to more concrete actions. I cannot understand why the Government's action in response to the citizens on the humanitarian flotilla, who have been threatened and now kidnapped, has not been sufficiently strong. I cannot understand why this Government is slow walking the occupied territories Bill. I cannot understand why the Israeli settlements divestment Bill has not been enacted. I cannot understand why munitions destined for Israel are being allowed to go through Irish airspace.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I cannot understand why tens of millions of euro worth of dual-use products are still being exported to Israel. I cannot understand why Ireland's sovereign wealth fund is still investing in companies that are trading in illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied territories. I cannot understand why the Central Bank had been facilitating the sale of Israeli war bonds to fund the genocide. I cannot understand why Ireland and the EU are still trading normally with this murderous regime. I cannot understand any of this, and the Irish people cannot understand any of this. When Irish citizens were coming under attack on the flotilla last week, why did the Government not send personnel to observe what was happening and try to help to safeguard those citizens? Why did the Government not act at that point?

The Tánaiste: I join the Deputy in expressing my sincere sympathy and absolute condemnation in relation to what has happened at the synagogue in Manchester. The information is still developing as we are in this House, but I understand that two people have now died. Today is the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur. That adds to the horror of an attack and brutal murder outside of a synagogue. I send the solidarity of everyone in this House and across the country to all of those impacted and to the Jewish community.

In relation to the issue of the observer situation, we looked at this. However, a number of things came to pass. First, there was a Spanish boat in the region. The Spanish were clear that our Irish citizens would be treated the same as theirs if there was a need to have access to that boat. We very much appreciated that solidarity from Spain. Second, and I do not say this to be anyway disrespectful to our Spanish counterparts, but they had a boat observing in the region and all their citizens have been detained in no different way from our citizens. It was always the ship's intention to withdraw. My understanding from reports this morning is that the Spanish and Italian Governments called for their citizens to desist and come back on the flotilla. I do not believe it would have made any material difference. However, I wish to say, not in the defence of myself or the Government but out of respect for the people in question, that a team of people have been working on this matter extraordinarily intensively on behalf of Ireland and our diplomatic corps. I refer to our team in Tel Aviv and in the region more generally, and to our consular services. I am satisfied they have been doing a very good job.

On sanctions, I agree with the Deputy on trading, but it is an EU competency. I am ready to vote. I am ready to vote in favour on the Deputy's behalf and behalf of the people of Ireland for the measures put forward by the European Commission that I believe would have a significant effect. I personally led a diplomatic effort to seek an early meeting so we could have that vote. Four other European countries have joined us in that. After the events of the past number of hours, I will be intensifying those efforts further.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Given that Irish citizens were engaged in this humanitarian mission with massive support from the Irish people, and in light of the fact that a flotilla had already been attacked in international waters, does the Tánaiste not agree that sending some personnel would have shown the support of the Government, would have put additional pressure on Israel and would have been warranted?

The Tánaiste: I truthfully do not. The facts bear that out. Türkiye, Italy and Spain sent boats. It was not as though their citizens were treated in any way better or preferentially in relation this. European boats were present and available to our Irish citizens in the same way they were available to other citizens of the European Union. We have been working in lockstep with European counterparts in relation to that. That is my genuine view on it.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: It would have sent a message. It would have been important and I think the Tánaiste knows that.

The Tánaiste: They would not have arrived in time. Other countries had boats in the region. I welcome the new interest in investing in our defence and security capacities but other countries had boats in the region that were willing to treat our citizens as their citizens. That is European solidarity.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: When is the occupied territories Bill going to be enacted?

The Tánaiste: That is a fair question. I am meeting the sponsor of the original Bill, Senator Frances Black, next week. I hope to bring it forward very shortly thereafter.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The Tánaiste has been telling us for quite some time that he will be bringing the Bill forward very shortly and that he will be meeting the sponsor of the Bill. He has met with the sponsor of the Bill several time and that is welcome. When is it actually going to be brought forward? Surely at this stage, given everything that has happened, the Tánaiste can actually give us a firm commitment and timeline on when he is going to bring it forward.

The Tánaiste: It is on the Government's priority publication list for this term. It will be brought forward in this term. I do not want anyone to misinterpret what I am saying here. I am committed to passing the occupied territories Bill, to working with the committee and on an all-party basis, and to considering the pre-legislative scrutiny report which my officials have been doing. I am telling the Deputy, hand on heart, if alongside that we can get these European trading measures passed, which is where the bulk of my effort is, it will be much more significant in ending the genocide in Gaza. That is not a reason not to do the Bill - we will - but it is where the focus also has to be.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: When will the Tánaiste take action to stop munitions destined for Israel going through Irish airspace?

The Tánaiste: My colleague, the Minister for Transport, is currently investigating a number of issues and reports that were brought to his attention in relation to that. There is a very significant logistical issue in terms of what happens in skies well above our territory. The Minister has received a number of issues that were brought to his attention. He is pursuing that and I will ask him to provide an urgent update to the Deputy.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: With respect, that is the same answer we have been getting all year. We are told that the Minister is investigating, has gotten reports and is looking into it. Munitions that are being used in a genocide are going through our Irish airspace and the Tánaiste needs to act to stop that from happening. Enough of the excuses about looking at reports, investigating and so forth; when is he actually going to act to do something about this?

The Tánaiste: When is the Deputy going to outline what proposal he thinks the Irish Government should put in place in relation to this?

Deputy Paul Murphy: Prosecute them.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Prosecute them.

The Tánaiste: The Minister is looking at all the various legal options that are there. I hope that when I next come to this House to set out the need to invest more in defence, security, radar and sonar, we will not be accused of militarisation but will be accused of actually having a better understanding of what happens in our skies and seas.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: When is the Tánaiste going to stop our sovereign wealth fund from investing in companies that are trading illegally in occupied Palestinian territories?

The Tánaiste: These are matters for the individual funds. I am not aware of any current proposals in relation to those.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The Minister for Finance in a recent reply to me stated that €5.6 million of taxpayers' money is still being invested in companies operating in the occupied territories. The Tánaiste has absolutely no mandate - none whatsoever - to use our public money to invest in these companies. How can he justify this? Will he put an immediate end to this gross misuse of public funds? Will he instruct the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund to stop using our money to invest in these companies?

The Tánaiste: I certainly do not want to see investment in the illegally occupied Palestinian territories, much like I do not want to see trade with them. My understanding is that the Minister has set out the legal position in relation to how that fund operates. I will ask him to provide the Deputy with further information because he has policy responsibility in this area. The Minister for Finance has outlined to the House the commercial position in relation to this on many occasions.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I am not looking for more information about this. We have information from the Minister for Finance. I want the Government to act. Our public money is being invested against the wishes of the Irish people in companies operating illegally in the occupied territories. You are the Tánaiste of the Government. Will you pick up the phone to the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund and tell them to stop using our money in this way? Nobody supports it, and nobody wants it. Will you act?

The Tánaiste: The Minister for Finance has outlined the position in relation to that. It is always open to the Opposition to also bring forward policy and legislative proposals in relation to these matters.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: You will not act.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy can bring forward a Bill himself.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please. I did allow the Deputy to stray way beyond what the statements are about. I ask Members to stick with the stated purpose of these statements.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: On a point of order----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: There is no point of order.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: -----I just want to take the opportunity to make it clear that I was not aware when I rose to my feet of the appalling attack on the Heaton Park synagogue. I add our party's condemnation of an appalling attack on a holy day for the Jewish community. If it emerges that the motive is antisemitic, antisemitism is a scourge that must be rejected by all. Our thoughts go to those affected.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Okay. We will move on to the Independent and Parties technical group.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I will take nine minutes and Deputy Healy will take three. I will start by adding our condemnation of the horrendous attack on the synagogue in Britain.

We should be very clear about what we saw last night. It was an act of piracy in international waters. The Israeli special forces unit Shayetet 13 surrounded 40-something flotilla boats, sprayed a whole number of them with heavy water cannons, rammed a number of small boats and then boarded them with armed soldiers. These boats were in international waters carrying baby formula, food and medicine to a people who are being deliberately starved and having famine imposed on them by Israel. These people have been kidnapped. They have not been detained; they have been kidnapped in international waters and are being taken against their will to Ashdod, probably, which is the usual spot.

I was in here last night and watching the live feed like millions of people around the world. I felt that in those pictures we had the best of humanity - ordinary people - on display. I had the pleasure of spending two weeks with hundreds of them in Tunis. They are extraordinary people in many ways but ordinary people in terms of the lives they lead as nurses, civil servants, a Senator, a poet. These people are driven to do what they can and put their lives on the line to try to stop a genocide. We saw the best of humanity, combined with the worst of humanity as these Israeli soldiers boarded their boats in order to stop aid getting through to a starving population.

It was very similar to the experience we had in 2011 on the flotilla I participated in. Senator Chris Andrews and many others were part of that. It is a terrifying experience for Israeli soldiers to board your boat. They are clearly hyped up. They have got big guns, they are pointing them at you and you are highly aware they have been told you are Hamas terrorists or whatever else. This is David and Goliath stuff. Israel is armed by the world's richest countries and has one of the richest, most armed militaries, with support from the most powerful countries in the world to inflict this genocide on ordinary people armed with nothing other than baby formula, food and medicine. It says everything about the nature of this Israeli State, the nature of this genocide and the nature of this apartheid State that they engage in military action to stop people bringing in humanitarian aid.

I want to say one thing to the participants in the flotilla. When we were in Tunis, we spoke about two key parts of our mission. One was to break the siege and open a people's humanitarian corridor to allow aid to flow. It is clear that is not going to be achieved. An obligation goes back onto states to bring aid and ensure the blockade is broken. The other aim was to highlight the complicity of Western states or their failure to act, and to bring pressure to bear on Governments around the world. That aim of the mission has been achieved. A new impetus has been given to the global movement of resistance. We saw last night huge protests breaking out spontaneously at midnight, in a whole number of countries, of people saying since they have blocked the flotilla getting through, let us block everything. Italian unions have called a general strike for tomorrow. All of us need to now redouble our efforts to stop the support, arming and enabling of genocide. Saturday's national protest called by the IPSC, at 12.30 p.m. at the Garden of Remembrance, can be absolutely enormous now as people flood onto the streets. There are people outside the Dáil right now protesting. Just like the Italian workers, we need to put workers' action on the agenda. I know Irish Healthcare Workers for Palestine has called a day of workers' action on 16 October.

I wish to focus in on some questions. The Tánaiste mentioned earlier about the ambassador making clear our expectation that our citizens would be treated fully in line with international law. To clarify, does the Tánaiste agree that already our citizens have not been treated in line with international law? The other thing I would say to him is that we cannot trust the Israeli state about anything. We know that on a much bigger scale. I can tell about our experience when we were brought to Ashdod. The Irish ambassador was there. All sorts of commitments were made to us. We were told we would get everything back and we would be back on a plane within 24 hours if we got off the boat now and there would be no strip searching, no mistreatment, etc. Once the ambassador was gone, all of that was gone. We were strip searched and then detained. Our books were taken away from us. We were not given anything for a week. I know there are limits to what the Irish ambassador can do in Israel but all pressure needs to be added to ensure these people are properly treated.

I will move on because a lot of the details in terms of the flotilla and the treatment have been questioned. If the flotilla participants were here, I think they would want me to ask about the broader issues because that is what they are engaged about. It is all eyes on Gaza, not just the flotilla. To pursue the question about the use of Irish airspace, the Tánaiste went on "The Late Late Show" and said he did not think Irish airspace was being used. I asked a Leaders' Question and gave him a dossier to prove that. I got a letter after that from the Minister for Transport stating that an examination was ongoing. We know that examination has been ongoing for more than a year now. I got an answer to a parliamentary question back last week. I asked

when the examination commenced and when it would be completed. The answer I got was: "My Department has been engaged in the examination of this matter. This work is still ongoing at the present time." That is really a joke. Is the Government going to take seriously the issue of the overflights? It is not a question of beefing up our military. It is a question of prosecuting the companies that have it on their waybills. The Minister can prosecute the companies. The companies have admitted that they are doing this. It is clearly illegal. Why is the examination taking so long and is the Government going to act on it?

The Tánaiste: I am very happy to answer questions on broader issues than the flotilla but the Deputy can be assured that the entire night and day has been dedicated to trying to protect Irish citizens who are currently detained in the State of Israel and get them home as quickly as possible. That is where my focus is today and has been right throughout the night.

Regarding the airspace issue, the Minister for Transport has made the Government's position clear. That remains the Government's position and I will seek an urgent update from him in relation to that. There are complexities regarding these things but they are issues of legitimate public concern in our country and they are issues of concern to Government. If there is an ability to take action, we are very happy to take that action. Deputy Murphy and I do not agree on lots of things but I do acknowledge he has joined flotillas and has a lot of experience in relation to these things. I welcome those insights he has shared with me and I assure him I will support not only our ambassador and our team on the ground in Tel Aviv but in providing any resources or assistance they need to keep the pressure on for the well-being of our citizens. Considering there are now likely to be hundreds of citizens, and, indeed, citizens from the European Union, detained, it is really important in the hours ahead that we work together to maximise that pressure in terms of the welfare of our citizens. Yes, I agree that they have been illegally detained.

Deputy Seamus Healy: For almost two years, we have seen the Israeli state deliberately attempting to exterminate the Palestinian people by bomb, bullet and starvation. Gaza is now one big concentration camp and 2.3 million people are facing annihilation and starvation. Some 65,000 people have been murdered, included 25,000 children. Every international agency of note has condemned Israel, including the international courts. Last week, the United Nations deemed what is going on in Gaza as genocide. The prime minister of Israel is subject to an arrest warrant. The latest outrage last night is piracy and the kidnapping in international waters of Irish citizens, including a Member of the Oireachtas. This is absolutely outrageous. There have been many emergency sittings of this Oireachtas to pass legislation for much less serious matters than what we are facing in Gaza and on the international stage. Surely it is now time to call an emergency sitting of this Oireachtas, of Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann, to pass the occupied territories Bill, to impose sanctions and to stop military flights through Shannon Airport. Surely the situation we see in Gaza demands such a response. The Irish people have a particular bond with the Palestinian people through our colonial past, our famine - An Gorta Mór - and through our neutrality. It is time that the Government called an emergency session of this Oireachtas to impose sanctions, to pass the occupied territories Bill and to stop military planes going through Shannon.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Healy. I would hazard a guess that there is not been a parliament in Europe that has dedicated more time this week to the issue in the Middle East, though the Chief Whip can correct me. We had a debate on the Middle East for many hours yesterday. We have had the all-party motion and debate regarding the flotilla. We have changed Standing Orders today in a very rare step to suspend normal Leaders' Questions and Questions on Policy or Legislation, QPL, to discuss the situation. All of that is appropriate considering the gravity of the situation. The Government will work with the Opposition, of course, to ensure we expeditiously pass any legislation that we bring forward in relation to the occupied Palestinian territories. On the issues regarding sanctions or measures on trade, I do not believe they will require primary domestic legislation if we can get a qualified majority vote at a European level and my priority will be to secure that in the days ahead.

Deputy Michael Collins: I have both statements and questions. To start with, I just spoke to Councillor Ger Curley who is an Independent councillor. The worries and concerns of the people of Cobh are for Paddy O'Donovan and the other Irish citizens who have been detained. There are serious concerns in Cobh in regard to Paddy O'Donovan, including among his family. I hope that we convey those concerns to the relevant people. On Tuesday, during my contributions in the Dáil on the flotilla, I stated that all of us in the Independent Ireland party publicly support the humanitarian nature of the global Sumud Flotilla. All of us in the Independent Ireland party call for safe and unhindered passage for all humanitarian aid vessels. All of us in the Independent Ireland party reaffirm Ireland's unwavering commitment to international humanitarian law and the protection of civilians in conflict zones. Yesterday evening Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice asked: where is world order, where is respect and where are people coming together for peace?

I want to speak plainly about the developments around the global flotilla. Overnight, we saw, not just manoeuvres at sea, but manoeuvrers that carry a terrible human cost. While ships are blocked, men, women and children are going hungry. Ireland knows that pain. We carry it from our history in our bones from the time of the Great Irish Famine. Ships laden with food passed our shores while our people starved on the roadsides. That memory is not just history. It is a warning. When we see supplies prevented from reaching starving people when international law is cast aside in the name of power, we have a duty to speak not just for ourselves but for those who have no voice.

I accept that diplomacy is complex. I accept that nations act in their own interests. However, there comes a point when humanitarian needs must be placed above politics, strategy and every other consideration. Children cannot eat words. They need food. Ireland, of all countries, should not stand silently by. We must insist that humanitarian supplies are allowed safe passage and that the flotilla is not turned into a weapon of starvation. It is not enough to make statements of concern. We must raise our voice at the highest levels, in Brussels, in the UN and in every forum on which we sit. If food is being blocked, it is not only immoral but is a breach of international law that cannot be tolerated.

I appeal to the Tánaiste to remember our own history. He should remember our own Famine and make sure Ireland is not complicit in silence. Let us be the voice that says clearly: never again should food be blocked while people starve. If the flotilla means anything, it should mean hope and relief, not hunger and not despair. Ireland must use its place to make that clear. I for one will continue to call for it. Will the Tánaiste confirm whether our supplies that are

bound for starving civilians have been delayed or obstructed by the interception of the flotilla and what steps Ireland as a neutral country has taken to demand the detainees' immediate release?

The Tánaiste: I know that Deputy Collins is one of the people who suggested, with Independent Ireland, that we should have a debate on the all-party flotilla motion this week. It proved to be very constructive in being able to tease through some of the issues. That was raised at the Business Committee.

I agree with the Deputy in relation to famine. There is something in our DNA and in our gut in this country. Through our history of an Gorta Mór we know what that is like. It is in the DNA of the people in this country and that is why we feel particularly repulsed in Ireland when we see famine conditions. It is now not just our words, the Deputy's words or my words. It is now an international finding of fact that there is famine in Gaza. The most disgusting and despicable thing is that the famine is happening when, as the Deputy alluded to, there is food nearby. I heard from a UN agency last week that children are having amputations without anaesthetics. It is hard to say that, let alone think about it. There are amputations without anaesthetics because Israel will not let the medicines and anaesthetics into Gaza. Mary Robinson, our former President, told me at the UN last week that she had visited the Rafah crossing and seen warehouse loads of food, a lot of it funded by the Irish taxpayer and other European taxpayers, and the only reason it cannot get in is Netanyahu.

Yes, we will not stand idly by and we have used our voice at the UN and the EU. We have also invested in the UNRWA and the World Food Programme with additional funding. They are getting trickles, nowhere near enough, with that additional funding to try to get food into a starving people. While the flotilla had a relatively small amount of aid, and I do not say that to be flippant, the symbolism of trying to get aid in and showing the blockade is hugely important and I believe it is something that people right across this country support.

Deputy Michael Collins: As I said, given our own experience in the Famine, where food was exported while our people starved, does the Tánaiste agree that Ireland carries a special moral duty to stand against the use of hunger as a weapon?

The Tánaiste: Yes, I do. It is one of the reasons Ireland has tried to be proactive on the issue of the genocide in Palestine. There is always more that can be done. I accept that. The international community in general has been far too slow and far too negligent. That would be the view in this House. I take the point that there is more we can do and I engage in that constructively. It is the reason Ireland moved ahead and recognised the State of Palestine a year ahead of many other European countries, which did it last week. It is the reason we have provided additional funding to UNRWA and the World Food Programme. It is the reason we have been leading the call for the review of the Israel-EU association agreement. It is the reason we are looking for an early European meeting to go through those sanctions. We will continue those actions in the hours and days ahead.

Deputy Michael Collins: In my final 20 seconds, I will ask the remainder my questions together and see how I get on. What concrete actions will Ireland as a neutral country take at the UN and in the EU, and bilaterally, to insist on safe passage for humanitarian supplies and

to hold to account those responsible for the blockage? Will the Tánaiste assure the House that Ireland as a neutral country will not be silent or complicit but will use diplomatic channels available to ensure that the starving population receives the supplies it desperately needs? In reality, what can we as a neutral country do to help the people of Gaza and to help to end this devastating war?

The Tánaiste: I absolutely assure the Deputy that we will do that. We will work with our European counterparts, as I said in the statement issued by Ireland and 14 other countries, to see what options are available internationally in seeking accountability in relation to this flotilla.

Deputy Peadar Kirby: I add my condemnation to the horrendous attacks that have happened outside the synagogue in Manchester.

As the Tánaiste knows, the world has looked on at the horror that has happened for the last two years in Gaza and the fact that over 60,000 men, women and children have been murdered. Dozens of men, women and children are being murdered daily. Bombs are being dropped on schools, tents, religious locations and churches, hospitals and asylum centres. The level of destruction and murder that has been happening in Gaza for the last two years is absolutely horrendous.

This flotilla is a significant tool for focusing light on that horrendous situation. Israel has been at pains to tell us that there is no genocide, that there is no blockade of food and that they are not stopping aid getting into the region. Those lies were never credible but they are certainly not credible after today. We express our solidarity with all those who have been detained. The idea that 500 lawyers, activists and parliamentarians have been involved in this is an incredible feat. The flotilla was intercepted in international waters. That is a clear breach of international law. It is another example of Israel operating as a rogue state. It is an act of aggression against the countries under which flags those boats were travelling. It is incredible that we have had such a serious act of aggression against Ireland.

There are 15 Irish citizens in the custody of the Israel Defense Forces, IDF, at the moment. It is incredible that the Israeli foreign minister, in a post on Twitter, labelled those involved in the flotilla as Hamas, announcing that the IDF had intercepted Hamas vessels. This is a dark and dangerous surrealism that the Israeli Government would accuse Irish citizens of being members of Hamas. It is absolutely incredible that names like Kelly, Sheehy, O'Donovan and Clancy could ever be associated with Hamas by an actual government.

Protests are happening in Greece, Italy, Germany, Tunisia and Türkiye. Governments around the world have been ramping up the criticism and pressure. South African President Cyril Ramaphosa has increased that pressure. Türkiye's foreign minister has condemned these interceptions as an act of terrorism. The Colombian President has expelled the remaining Israeli diplomats and Colombia has also terminated its free trade agreement with Israel. I appreciate the information the Tánaiste has given us in the Chamber today. It is important information. I appreciate also that the Tánaiste is in contact with the families and that is important too. However, what practical actions are we taking to protect the rights of our citizens, to make sure their well-being is protected and to get them home as soon as possible?

The Tánaiste: I join with Deputy Tóibín in condemning the outrageous slurs on our citizens in relation to any reference to Hamas. Our Irish citizens are people in the pursuit of peace and on a humanitarian mission to try to bring food and medicine to a starving population. I agree with the Deputy in condemning that horrific slur on our citizens. That should not be stood for.

I appreciate what the Deputy said about the work of my Department. Our priority today, tomorrow and in the period ahead has to be the well-being of our citizens who are currently in detention in Israel. That has to be our priority. It always has to be the priority of the Department of foreign affairs, when our citizens are detained wrongly abroad, to try to help and assist them and support their families. I do not want to go further than this currently, but in the statement I issued with 14 other countries, I said that there does have to be accountability under international law for the actions that have been taken by Israel. I have begun conversations with counterparts and will have further conversations to detect if there is an appetite, which I hope and believe there is, to consider how a number of countries could pursue this. I will keep the House informed on this as I develop a policy and as I engage further with Government colleagues here in Ireland too.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I have a couple of questions. Will the Tánaiste give a date for the occupied territories Bill? He mentioned the complexities in relation to Israeli arms flights over Ireland. There is a danger that people can hide behind complexities. *The Ditch* has reported that the Irish State authorities in the last two months have assisted FedEx flights flying through Irish territory as they illegally carried F-35 combat jet parts to an Israel Defense Forces air base. The F-35 fighter jets have dropped 900 kg bombs on Gaza. It is a significant issue that our Defence Forces and our territory would facilitate these flights happening. If *The Ditch* can get to the heart of the contents of those flights, it is very hard to see that the Irish Government cannot actually put a stop to this or at least use the current law. There is a law currently that states that the carriage of munitions of war through Irish airspace without permission from the Minister for Transport is a criminal offence punishable by up to three years' imprisonment. We should be pulling every single lever to make sure we have an immediate response to actual events that are leading to the deaths of men, women and children in Gaza, yet we are not seeing that immediacy. We are seeing prevarication in relation to actual steps that we could take now.

The Tánaiste: While there is not a specific date for the Bill, because obviously that is not how our legislative programme works, it is on the legislative programme for now. I am eager to move it forward as quickly as possible. I will meet with the sponsor of the original Bill next week and then I will revert to the House.

1 o'clock

I can tell the Deputy we are open to considering all legal avenues that currently exist in relation to any wrongful use of Irish airspace. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has been pursuing that matter.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: First, like others, I acknowledge the horrific attack on a synagogue in Manchester. I send me deepest sympathies to the families of the two deceased. I understand there are a number of other people injured. It is horrific. I condemn outright what appears to have been a blatantly antisemitic attack on Yom Kippur.

I also acknowledge the importance of having made time for this debate today. This is unprecedented. The circumstances are extraordinary, as we see a rapidly evolving situation and a number of Irish citizens put at risk. All of our thoughts and concerns are with those citizens on the Global Sumud Flotilla, who have been part of a humanitarian and who have endured a great deal of intimidation from Israel over recent days, even before the awful events of last night.

We were all following what was going on. We were watching the deployment of water cannon against them, the use of intimidating and frightening tactics by Israel against them and then, of course, most recently and dramatically last night, the illegal detention - abduction, really - of, we think, 15 Irish citizens. I think the Tánaiste said 15 or 16 Irish citizens, among them our colleague in the Oireachtas Senator Chris Andrews, my own constituency colleague. I want to send a particular message to Chris. We know that another Member of the Oireachtas, Deputy Barry Heneghan, is in the broader flotilla. A number of other Irish citizens have also been abducted by Israel. We have had some of their families in this Chamber just recently. I again express our enormous sympathy and solidarity with the families, who must be undergoing enormous distress and concern as they are unable to watch what is going on because so little communication has been possible as a result of the Israeli action.

On behalf of Labour, I condemn Israel for this latest flagrant breach of international law - intercepting a flotilla of ships whose only mission was to draw attention to the horrific genocide being perpetrated by Israel upon the people of Gaza and to seek to bring aid to the civilians in Gaza, who are enduring such unimaginable suffering.

My colleague Deputy Duncan Smith will take on the asking of questions to the Tánaiste and I know the Tánaiste has outlined the efforts being made at diplomatic level by our ambassador, by the Tánaiste himself and by our Department of foreign affairs at the highest level to secure the safety of Irish citizens on the flotilla and, more broadly, an end to the horrific genocide in Gaza. The Tánaiste has already articulated this, as have I. All of us hope there will be a sustainable peace in Gaza. All of us have enormous concerns about the peace proposals that have been put forward but, certainly, we want to see an end to the genocide, the bringing about of a sustainable ceasefire and a sustainable two-state solution for the people of Palestine. We have been watching with horror as over 60,000 civilians in Gaza have been killed under bombardment and man-made famine. We have watched children being killed and maimed. We have watched medics and journalists being killed. A doctor interviewed this week spoke about the horror of standing by a small girl's bedside as she died from bombardment. Her entire family had been wiped out by a bombardment. These are unimaginable horrors and we have to do all we can.

Before I hand to Deputy Duncan Smith, I want to finish by saying again that we have always welcomed what the Government has done. We recognise the Irish Government has been to the fore, along with our colleagues in the Spanish Government, led by our socialist colleague Pedro Sánchez. They have been to the fore in calling out Israel and standing in solidarity with Gaza. We can and should do more because we are a powerful voice on the international stage, and a powerful voice for the people of Palestine. We need to progress the occupied territories Bill with much greater speed and to cover both goods and services. We need to ensure we have no trade with Israel as it commits genocide, and that we are pushing at the strongest level, a

European level, to ensure that at EU level too there is an end to trade and effective sanctions on Israel.

Deputy Duncan Smith: It cannot be lost on us what we have done here today, in terms of adapting Leaders' Questions to deal with this issue. I commend the Government Chief Whip on allowing this today. I cannot remember a precedent for this, given all the crises we have had before. It was right to do it but it shows that this House can act, adapt and be flexible.

I have to bring the Tánaiste back to the occupied territories Bill. In my time in this House, I have often had promises that Bills are going to be brought about in a particular term. We wait and wait, we get to the last week of the term and maybe Second Stage begins. Then we go into a recess. Then we come back and it takes two or three weeks for Second Stage to be resumed. I have to ask the Tánaiste about the occupied territories Bill. I was on the committee. We dealt expeditiously with pre-legislative scrutiny and we got a report to the Tánaiste well before the summer recess. Will the occupied territories Bill be brought to this House before the end of October?

Simon Harris: I will answer the question but first, Deputy Bacik asked a question about the number of Irish citizens. I want to give the House the best information I have. When I came into this House, we had confirmed that 14 Irish citizens have been detained. I am aware that there are 16 Irish citizens in total but one of them may be a dual citizen so I think that might be where the 15-16 issue arises.

I am reluctant to give that commitment to Deputy Smith but not out of a lack of urgency around the occupied territories Bill. I am just conscious that the House goes into recess. I am conscious of budget week and that it is now October but I will work with Opposition parties and spokespeople to try to agree a timetable to advance this Bill. I am happy to do that with the Government Chief Whip. We do want to move this forward.

Deputy Duncan Smith: In light of that, would the Tánaiste be confident it will be before the end of November?

Simon Harris: Yes.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Okay. We will have it before the end of November.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I thank the Tánaiste.

Deputy Duncan Smith: At least that is something.

Is there any update on the potential suite of measures the Taoiseach announced at the UN General Assembly, to include sanctions on the travel of Israeli Ministers? Has anything new been put in place? If not, when will they be put in place and what exactly is the full extent of such new sanctioning measures?

Simon Harris: The Taoiseach made the point at the UN General Assembly, in delivering the national statement, that we want to make sure Ireland also puts in place exclusionary measures

from our country for extremist Israeli ministers. Obviously, we are not in the Schengen area so there is a different way we have to do it compared with how many other European countries did it. My understanding is the Department of justice is leading on this and that there are advanced discussions between my own Department, foreign affairs, and the Department of justice. A solution or a way forward is imminent. What the Taoiseach rightly said is that we want to make sure the same restrictions on travel apply in this country as will in other countries.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I do not want to go over the answer with regard to vessels, observational vessels and individuals, in terms of going as far and being turned back, but we have the flotilla continuing. This could happen again and again. Is the Tánaiste open to engaging with like-minded EU states to come up with contingency plans for the protection, observation - whatever you want to call it - or engagement for humanitarian aid flotillas, or something that might continue into the future? Is he open to coming up with something a bit more permanent?

Simon Harris: Yes, I am. It should be done in a way that is European in the sense that sometimes, it just makes more sense if there are a number of European countries. Certain countries can have vessels in the area, etc., and speed can sometimes be of the essence, so yes, I am.

I do not wish to speak for other countries at all but my understanding of the purpose for the presence of some of those vehicles was in case the need for evacuation became real. God forbid, had something happened in terms of the well-being of citizens from attacks on the vehicles, it was about having that evacuation capacity. I was given an assurance that should that requirement be there, our citizens would be treated the same as any other European citizens as regards access to those vessels. I was satisfied, beyond doubt, that our citizens had the same access as Spanish citizens would have, for example, to what was effectively a European ship.

The Deputy's point is fair. I have already spoken to my Spanish counterpart this morning and I intend to speak to many more counterparts during the course of today and tomorrow. I will take the Deputy's idea away and see if we can build on it.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I was in the defence committee this morning discussing the maritime security strategy. Within that came our capabilities, and we know the issues in relation to naval vessels. We do have legacy expertise in the Mediterranean neighbourhood through Operation Pontus and working with EU partner states on that. We can act and we do have expertise in our Defence Forces and Naval Service to do that.

On the piracy and the kidnapping and detention of Irish citizens, the Tánaiste says he is open to practical solutions or ideas. Would he request that his officials investigate the possibility of referring this latest action to the ICJ, for example, for investigation at the least?

Simon Harris: As the Deputy can imagine, because this is an evolving situation, I have not had the chance to discuss this with Government colleagues and the likes. I also want to take this sequentially. Step one is the well-being of our citizens, seeking their freedom and to get them back home, and the very intensive work my Department and our individuals on the ground are undertaking in the here and now. I have said in the statement last month with 14 other

countries that there should be accountability for any illegal actions taken against the flotilla. I very much value international law. I am already actively exploring, with other European counterparts, if there is an appetite for a number of European countries to seek accountability for this under international law. I do not think it would be useful today for me to go further in relation to this. I do not wish to engage in any act of provocation. My priority in the here and now is the well-being and safety of our citizens. I am happy to come back to the House and engage. Once I further develop my thoughts, I will come back on it.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Would it be fair to say that the Tánaiste and Government have an appetite?

The Tánaiste: It would be fair to say that I have an open mind and do not rule anything out at this stage.

Deputy Duncan Smith: In the spirit of the worker's voice on this, we have seen the action in Italy with workers' solidarity, which has been called for for a couple of weeks. The Labour Party has the Occupying Power (Securities and Handling of Settlement Goods) Bill 2025. Would the Tánaiste support, at least in principle, the idea that workers in this country who refuse to handle, store or provide carriage of settlement goods - I have kept it at goods for this particular Bill - would be protected under the Unfair Dismissals Act from handling goods from occupied territories?

The Tánaiste: I very much get what the Deputy is endeavouring to do here. I say that in a constructive sense. He is trying to reflect the genuine concerns that people have across our country and the wish that everybody has to play every possible role they can in using every lever at their disposal. I am not against the principle of that at all but I have not truthfully considered or read the Bill in full. It is the responsibility of my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Burke. I will ask the Minister to engage with Deputy Smith about the purpose of the Bill.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Finally, on the transport of weapons through Irish airspace, we know, as Deputy Murphy said in his contribution earlier, that these end up going into the Department of Transport investigations black hole. Will the Tánaiste please commit to this House, and this is small, that he will ask the Department of Transport to expedite these investigations, to publish results, and to change and improve how it conducts these investigations, because they are a matter of the utmost seriousness with regard to the integrity of our skies and our airspace, and they cannot just go into that Department and never seem to come out?

The Tánaiste: Yes. I will talk to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, about that too.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Can I bring to the Tánaiste's attention something that he would be interested and concerned by? It has been confirmed to me that those Irish citizens detained have been denied access to lawyers. Adalah, which is a legal firm and civil society human rights organisation that represents people in these situations, stated:

Adalah has received phone calls from participants reporting that immigration authorities have already begun conducting hearings on their deportation and detention orders, in the Ashdod port. These proceedings were initiated without prior notice to their lawyers and while denying participants access to legal counsel. This constitutes a grave violation of due process and a denial of the participants' fundamental rights. Adalah will continue to seek access and will take legal action as necessary.

Will the Tánaiste briefly respond? It is unacceptable for Irish citizens or any citizens to be denied access to legal representation and it has to be condemned.

The Tánaiste: Yes, it is. The Deputy has the benefit of having slightly more information than I do since I have come into this House. Irish citizens having absolute access to legal representation is important. My understanding from my earlier call with our ambassador and others was that a number of our citizens had already identified potential sources of legal representation on the ground.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Very likely.

The Tánaiste: I think that is what the Deputy is bringing me up to speed on. I will take that up as soon as I leave here.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I am conscious of the discussion we have just had. I want to put on the record of the House my support, the same as the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste today, for the fact that there was an attempted focus on humanitarian aid that is necessary for Gaza, and thank the Tánaiste and his officials for all the work they are doing in delivering consular assistance for Irish citizens and for drawing broader international attention to what is happening in those waters at present.

As well as that, I put on the record of the House my condemnation of the absolute horror that has unfolded in the Manchester synagogue this morning and the loss of life there. As has been said, if antisemitism is the motive behind this attack, that should be roundly condemned.

I turn, with the indulgence of the House, towards a topic that has been raised by me as a constituency TD but also as someone who is a public representative. That is the need to ensure that no people are left behind as we move towards digital first service delivery. This is especially with regard to our older citizens and those who face barriers to accessing online services. Over the past two months alone, in my constituency office, we have seen real examples of exclusion. A major telecom provider now insists on charging €5.50 a month for paper bills for pensioners, which is a financial penalty for simply not being online. One constituent struggled for weeks to cancel a TV service because the support channels were not open and available to them. They had to contact my office to get assistance in cancelling that TV service. Others contact us frequently to say they are waiting for long times on phone chats or phone lines with chat bots without necessarily getting the support and understanding that

they need. Even with things like housing adaptation grant applications, there are complex forms with very little understanding or insight about how to complete them properly.

This is not about saying that the digital advance must be slowed or that we should not be looking to improve digital skills among older people, but it is about independence, securing dignity and fairness for all our citizens. Many older people are proud of their independence and might not necessarily want to ask for help, but when services only go online, they face an immediate barrier. We know that we face challenges with the prevalence of digital skills among older people. The prevalence of basic digital literacy skills among over-65s in Ireland is at 19%, below the EU average of 25%. In Ireland, six out of ten adults over 60 are ones who do not consider themselves to ordinarily use the Internet or have basic digital skills.

I am sure the Tánaiste would agree that technology should open doors, not necessarily close them, but we need to combine digital innovation with inclusive, respectful support. By backing initiatives like Age Action's getting started, or ALONE's digital champion workshops, we can make sure that these are available in every community, and also ensure that we put a safety net in place for those older citizens who may not necessarily feel comfortable with an increasingly online world. In the absence of the skills that they need to engage with those services, companies in the private sector and the public sector should show compassion in dealing with those older people and ensure there is support for them so that they are able to access the services that they need and, in many cases, the services that they rely on.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Moynihan for his kind words about the officials in my Department and the work that they are endeavouring to carry out, particularly those in Israel, Ramallah and in the region, and indeed our consular services here in Dublin. I am grateful for all they do and appreciate the Deputy's words. I join him in expressing our sincere sympathies and condolences to those affected by the most horrific murder and killings outside a synagogue in Manchester. It is a horrific situation and we all deplore and condemn it. We think of all those affected.

I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue, as we see more and more things move online, that we do not lose sight of the fact that we need to bring everybody with us. It can be quite a scary and frightening time of transition for people if they do not feel they have the skills to transition, or indeed the option, if they do not wish to transition, to continue to access their services in a way that is convenient and works for them.

We are planning to update the national digital and AI strategy. A new, refreshed version of that is due by the end of the year. I will ask the relevant Ministers, Deputies Burke and Niamh Smyth, to take on board the Deputy's suggestions about that and the good work that has been done by Age Action Ireland, which the Deputy referred to as well. I know this is an issue that faces so many of our citizens. It is vital that, as we shape Ireland's digital future, we do not leave people behind. The Government is encouraging a digital first, but not a digital only, approach from businesses, as some citizens like to have different options. It is important even in my Department, with our passport service. So much is now done online but there will always be some people, certainly for the time ahead, who may not wish to do it online. That is okay too and we need to support them in that.

Having said that, there is growing consumer demand for digital accessibility. Companies and public services are responding to those customer and citizen demands. Digitalisation has

played a major role, as the Deputy says, in driving efficiencies for business, improving productivity, for marketing, selling online, and accessing new markets, but equally important is customer service and meeting customer and citizen expectations. There is a balance. Getting that feedback and listening to our citizens, and from a company's point of view, listening to its customers, is important.

The Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment has introduced a new charter focused on AI and digital literacy and SME digitalisation. This represents the implementation of a key measure under what we call the digital for good initiative, which emphasises the importance of access and affordability and ensuring that all citizens can have equitable access to digital technologies and the opportunities they bring.

When we talk about digital exclusion, what we are hearing more and more from people is that it is not about a lack of devices or a lack of access to the Internet, though that can sometimes be the issue, but that it is about lacking the skills to use them effectively. The charter for digital inclusion commits to a number of actions to try to make progress there. I suggest that we take this and the suggestions from Deputy Moynihan forward in our new, refreshed national digital and AI strategy. I will ask the Minister, Deputy Burke, and the Minister of State, Deputy Niamh Smyth, to engage with the Deputy on the framing of that.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I welcome the Tánaiste's utterance that it will be a digital first as opposed to a digital only approach. It is important to acknowledge that for many older people, these barriers they perceive to entering a digital world can be ones they do not feel comfortable expressing. That is why any services we design to embrace those people and bring them in should be designed to be proactive and offer that help in a way that feels respectful, discreet and empowering. I encourage the reframing of the strategy with the Minister, Deputy Burke, and the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, on which I would welcome engagement, around the option of maintaining the option of paper billing for those who might not have access to a computer or who may not have the digital skills they need to access the online services. There should also be clear guidance from ComReg in particular with regard to telecoms providers. In many services, as the Tánaiste states, there is a consumer demand. There are also many services, which are essential for older people. Especially in an older population where we know loneliness is a real issue, communications is an important service they rely on. There needs to be proactive guidance from ComReg on that, and on ensuring that where available, face to face and human phone-based supports can remain essential access routes.

The Tánaiste: I agree with all of that, and I will ask the Minister for communications to make the point Deputy Moynihan to ComReg. I can say, as a relatively young person that there is a place for technology, but sometimes you just want to be able to talk to a human being. There are some things that AI and other technologies cannot do yet at least. Emotional intelligence is quite important as well. Sometimes it can be a hell of a lot quicker to have a conversation with someone and sort it, rather than half a dozen messages to a chatbot. There is definitely a balance with regard to this. There is a direction of travel. We are living through a major time of evolution and some good will come from that. However, we need to not lose the essence of who we are and what public service means, in particularly, but also that businesses do not deprive themselves of customers who want to still be able to access services in a way that works for them. I look forward to the new refreshed national digital and AI

strategy. I will also, as per Deputy Moynihan's suggestion, ask that ComReg take a look at this from a telecom providers point of view.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Talking to one another might become a popular thing to do again.

The Tánaiste: It is always a pleasure to talk to you.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.22 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.02 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.22 p.m. and resumed at 2.02 p.m.

Community Pharmacy Agreement: Statements

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I am happy to update the House on the recently reached community pharmacy agreement and to take an opportunity in this House to recognise the very significant role that pharmacists play in delivering a more accessible and integrated health service across the country.

Shortly after becoming Minister for Health in January, I began engaging with the Irish Pharmacy Union, IPU. It was the first representative body I met, and we clearly set out an ambition together for the future of community pharmacy. When I spoke at the IPU conference in Kilkenny, again, we set out my vision for sustainable reform and expansion of services to future-proof pharmacists' role in health services through diversification and service expansion. We in the Dáil have already seen that in areas like vaccination, when we ask our community pharmacists to get involved, they step up and the result is increased access for patients and the alleviation of pressure in other areas of our health services.

Budget 2025 provided for free hormone replacement therapy, HRT, medicines and related products for women for the treatment of menopause and also a separate allocation of €50 million - the full year cost in 2026; *pro rata* in 2025 - to support investment in community pharmacy and the commencement of fee negotiations with the IPU. In this context, in May of this year, I secured an agreement with the IPU to deliver the HRT initiative, alongside free dispensing fees, along with an agreed framework of engagement to commence contract talks with the IPU.

That is why on Friday 12 September, I and officials in my Department were really pleased to complete the community pharmacy agreement 2025 with the IPU and the HSE recently. On that same date, the union's governing committees endorsed the community pharmacy agreement 2025, and on Thursday 18 September, I published the agreement. This is the first national agreement with community pharmacists since the original contract was established in the early 2000s. It follows intense negotiations throughout the summer, between the Department of Health, HSE and IPU. I thank all of the parties that were involved and that engaged so intensively to enable the conclusion of this agreement. It built on the work done by my officials and by the IPU through a series of ongoing engagements and meetings since mid-2023, addressing themes such as the role of community pharmacists, pharmacy funding, service expansion, administrative complexity and digital enablement.

This agreement supports commitments to expand pharmacy services, provides new investment in the sector and supports value for money and modernisation and digital reform. It will support investment of €25 million in 2025 for fee adjustments and service establishment; €50 million in 2026 for full-year implementation, training optimisation programmes and new services; and €20 million in repurposed existing community pharmacy funding. This agreement marks a new chapter for community pharmacy in Ireland, and I thank the IPU for its collaborative approach to these negotiations. Its officials have been strong advocates for their profession, and this agreement demonstrates what can be achieved when we work together in partnership.

We know patients want timely access to care in their own communities. That is why, particularly at an acute hospital and community level, I am putting such an emphasis on productivity and the importance of consistency for our patients as they engage with our services. We must do better, and we can do better. Strategic shifts in approach, like the community pharmacy agreement, will mean that we are better utilising our existing network and freeing up capacity in other pressured areas of our healthcare services.

The programme for Government set out our commitments and ambitions for community pharmacy. It recognises the significant potential for the enhancement of the role of community pharmacists in providing accessible health services. The community pharmacy agreement 2025, in various ways, materially contributes to the delivery of these commitments and our vision for a sector that can grow and expand its services to support patients and build capacity in our health services. The agreement is comprehensive and extensive. It covers a wide variety of key issues in community pharmacy and provides for the participation of community pharmacy in new services, including bowel screening; immunisation programmes; common conditions service; oral contraception prescription continuation; national condom distribution service; medicines optimisation, commencing with point of care testing; and unused medicines return and disposal. I will speak about each of these issues in turn.

On bowel screening, community pharmacists and their teams, as really, genuinely trusted healthcare professionals, can play an important role in supporting increased uptake of the BowelScreen programme, which is an area where we have a concern. They will do this through promoting the programme at population level as well as enhancing access by supporting individuals to participate in the programme. It is, therefore, another point of contact for the programme, which we want people to take up. Pharmacies will be enabled to identify eligible patients, based on age, proactively invite the person to participate in the programme, register them on the programme and order the faecal immunochemical test, FIT, kit. A model of service and ICT upgrades are required before this service can be launched in the second half of 2026. It has been agreed that pharmacies will be paid €5 for each person registered by them for the BowelScreen programme. In addition, an annual €500 allowance will be given to each pharmacy that supports BowelScreen promotion. This is really important. As Deputies will be aware, we have a screening programme and we do not have sufficient uptake within the existing cohort, so we have to look at every mechanism we can to expand uptake. I hope that this will be a measure that makes it more convenient for people to engage in the programme and get the bowel screening that they need.

On the immunisation programme, the training and competence of community pharmacy as medicines experts must be fully utilised. Community pharmacists administer one in every three

vaccinations under the influenza and Covid-19 vaccination programmes. The opportunity for an expanded pharmacy role in immunisation has been an important stream of dialogue within the talks. Pneumococcal disease is a bacterial infection that can lead to significant morbidity and mortality, particularly amongst the very young, the very old, those with impaired immunity and those with anatomic or functional asplenia. Prevention of disease through vaccination is now more important than ever. To support increased vaccination, it has been agreed that community pharmacists can administer the PPV23 vaccine to healthy over 65-year-olds. For medical card holders, pharmacists will be paid the same fee as GPs.

It has also been agreed that the IPU will positively engage with the HSE, exploring how community pharmacy could take on a substantive role in schools' immunisation. A programme of work will be developed to explore the scope and nature of this. There is a substantial opportunity for the State to improve the delivery of schools' immunisation and its efficiency through the support of community pharmacy. Service models, fees, legislation and data protection matters need to be addressed as part of this programme of exploration. An enhanced immunisation fund, with a dedicated annual funding of €2 million, has been ring-fenced from 2026 onward. This will be used, in the first instance, to facilitate the participation of community pharmacy in the school immunisation programme and to scope out their potential participation in other national vaccination programmes, as appropriate.

On the common conditions service, which is the area of real excitement and real opportunity for people, since the publication of the final report of the expert task force to support the expansion of the role of pharmacy, my Department has been engaging with a range of stakeholders to implement the recommended common conditions service. This service will enable community pharmacists to manage common conditions by offering self-care advice, safety-netting and, when appropriate, supplying certain over-the-counter medicines and prescribing prescription-only medicines through established protocols. Pharmacies will be enabled to establish the common conditions service from late 2025. Pharmacies will be entitled to charge their patients a consultation fee. However, medicines will be reimbursed by the State in accordance with a person's eligibility under the community drugs schemes. Patients, including medical card holders, who choose to access the common conditions service, will pay a consultation fee at the rate charged by the pharmacy. Patients, including medical card holders, who choose to access the common conditions service, will pay a consultation fee at the rate charged by the pharmacy. To incentivise its establishment, a once-off grant of €2,000 will be provided to pharmacies that commit before 1 December 2025 to establish the service by the end of quarter 1 2026.

The huge advantage is medical card patients can continue to go to their GPs as normal, or they may choose to go to the pharmacy and pay a consultation fee. Private patients may continue to go to their GP as normal or choose to attend the pharmacy and pay a consultation fee, which I expect will be of a lower order than the GP fee. It means much faster access for prescribing, where appropriate, for basic common conditions, including basic bacterial infections such as urinary tract infections or conjunctivitis. By enabling people to choose to use the pharmacy instead of their GP, should they wish, we hope to expand access to this primary form of healthcare in this very basic way making life slightly more convenient when accessing the basic prescriptions we all need from time to time. I very much hope it will be in place by the end of quarter 1 2026.

On oral contraception prescription continuation, the continued supply of short-acting reversible contraception by community pharmacists is being progressed in parallel with the common conditions service. That will allow pharmacists to continue a prescription for oral contraception meaning patients can, in effect, have their prescription renewed by a pharmacist rather than reattending a GP. Pharmacists will be required to do various health checks as part of the protocol. Operational guidance will be provided to pharmacists shortly and information will be provided to the public in due course. For those within the eligible age range, this service will be integrated into the free contraception scheme and pharmacists will be paid a fee by the State for this service. That will be implemented following the necessary training and various changes to legislation.

The national condom distribution service distributes free condoms and lubricant sachets to services working directly with population groups who may be at increased risk of unplanned pregnancy, HIV or STIs. As part of this agreement, the service is now extended to community pharmacists who will identify potentially at-risk patients and provide them with relevant products.

It has been agreed to establish a rolling annual medicines optimisation programme, with a dedicated annual funding allowance of €4.5 million from 2026. This yearly budgetary allocation is ring-fenced for community pharmacy delivered optimisation programmes. This fund will support the establishment of a proof of concept for the use of point of care testing, POCT, in community pharmacy for respiratory illness. It is anticipated that this would evaluate the role of POCT in reducing GP attendances and, importantly, unnecessary prescribing of antibiotics. It will be a control measure.

On unused medicines return and disposal, enabling patients to safely return their unused medicines to their local community pharmacy restricts access to unused medicines, thereby reducing harms to the environment, the risk of accidental poisoning in children and the risk of suicide or self-harm. A new national service will be established, which will enable people to return their unused medicines to their local community pharmacy. A sum of €4.5 million is being allocated for this. The HSE will commission the service with each pharmacy being required to participate. This service will commence in the second half of 2026.

I will speak about the emergency medicine administration preparedness allowance. To recognise that community pharmacists are authorised to administer emergency medicines, that this service is provided on an *ad hoc* basis at the moment requiring pharmacists to be trained and ready to respond, and the disruption this may cause to pharmacy practices when they administer emergency medicines, we have provided an annual recurring allowance of €525 that will be made available from 2026.

On training, education and development, as the scope of practice of community pharmacists widens, so too does the need to develop and empower pharmacy support staff to ensure the success and sustainability of these changes. This shift requires upskilling and formal recognition of support staff roles to maintain safety and efficiency. To support improved training capacity, the annual training grant for pharmacies will be doubled from 2026 onward. The grant will increase from €1,270 to €2,540 per pharmacy. Additionally, a contribution of €500 per pharmacy will be made available to support the purchase of mandatory reference texts.

It has also been agreed that the core dispensing fees across the community drug schemes will increase by 10% overall. That change will apply to the following schemes: the general medical scheme; the drugs payment scheme; the long-term illness scheme; the European Economic Area scheme; and the Health (Amendment) Act. Currently, the dispensing fee is a tiered structure when fees are paid based on the number of items dispensed in a month. The top tier will increase from €5 to €5.60 for the first 1,667 items dispensed, which is an increase of 12%, the middle tier will remain at €4.50 for the next 833 items and the final tier will increase from €3.50 to €4.10 for any further items, which is an increase of 17%. This new dispensing fee structure will be backdated from 1 September for all community pharmacy contractors who sign up to the new agreement. My Department is progressing the necessary legislative changes to enable this.

In the context of the overall agreement and settlement package, the State has also secured key commitments from community pharmacy relating to reform, modernisation and the digital agenda, which is something we spoke a good deal about at a health committee meeting yesterday. This is imperative as the full participation of community pharmacy is a critical factor, as we all know, in the successful delivery of these State-sponsored reforms. The agreement will provide the basis for community pharmacy and IPU co-operation with the full ehealth agenda, including the national eprescribing programme, shared care record, HSE app, electronic health record, etc. As these programmes advance and roll out, the co-operation of community pharmacy will be a critical success factor. The Department will progress a number of regulatory reforms over the coming months to improve efficiency and free up capacity in community pharmacy.

The community pharmacy agreement marks a significant milestone in strategic collaboration between the Government, the Department of Health, the HSE and the IPU. It sets out a comprehensive and ongoing pathway to modernise and expand the role of community pharmacy, to enable community pharmacists to work at the top of their expertise and to increase accessibility within our healthcare system more broadly. The agreement will support the delivery of safe, equitable and efficient healthcare, and ensure that community pharmacists are better equipped to contribute to national health priorities through engagement, sustainable funding and integrated service delivery.

We are trying to build a service that not only responds to those who need it most, but does so in a way that puts the patient at the centre because pharmacists are trusted and rooted in every community they serve. We are trying to expand their role in healthcare generally to provide for better accessibility, safer, quicker prescribing and, obviously, the management of drugs, particularly through the unused drugs scheme, as is necessary and appropriate. I am pleased to provide the details of the agreement to the House.

Deputy David Cullinane: I welcome the agreement. The Minister's predecessor admitted a number of years ago that the engagement with the Irish Pharmacy Union was not what it should have been and the State was not making the best use of community pharmacies. A number of years ago, I published a very comprehensive plan that set out a lot of what is in this agreement, and more, in relation to what we could do. It included many of the important schemes, such as the common conditions scheme, which is very important, provides a lot of potential and can be built on. My plan also included more prescribing, on which there was pushback from the Department at the time. It had some concerns about it but I am glad those issues have been

resolved. All of that is important, as is pharmacies playing a larger role in vaccination. Everything we can do to take pressure away from our acute hospitals and GPs, is of value to the health service.

Looking at the volume of community pharmacists we have, it should be accepted that we are simply not making best use of them. They are available, they want to do it, and they can and will do more, but they will say they have to be resourced. As part of discussions I had with them previously, the issue of fees was something they wanted to discuss. I always made the point, in a very honest conversation with them, that whatever discussion needed to be had on fees, there had to be a *quid pro quo*, a return for the health service and for citizens and better use of community pharmacies. There is still more that can be done. I ask the Minister to see this as a start. This is the beginning and a foundation. It is really good and a step forward, but much more can and should be done over the time ahead. We can build on this and on the agreement that is in place.

I will raise one issue on vaccinations. I strongly believe we should be looking at RSV and shingles vaccination. An application is going through the system at the moment to provide shingles vaccination to those over 65 years of age. There is an issue with the funding and costs of that, but it is very important and should be supported. I always agree that there has to be value for money. I know there is a process but, at the same time, we have to look at what the best way is to protect older people, particularly in an ageing population, where that population needs greater supports during the winter months. It is actually through prevention, such as the flu vaccine, which is already available, but it should also be through other vaccines where people are at risk and older people at risk. I ask the Minister to look at that issue in the context shingles. It may be complicated by the fact it is not off-patent and there is only one provider. That may be the issue but that should not be a block. The Department and the Minister should look at that.

More can be done by pharmacists on health checks. It was something I put in the plan I published a number of years ago for cardiovascular checks. Unfortunately, it is one of the illnesses that is one of the big killers, along with cancer. We have a lot to do with cardiovascular care. There is a need for a more comprehensive cardiovascular strategy. To park that to one side, there is a lot more community pharmacists can do to help, particularly with health checks and monitoring cholesterol levels for those at risk. They can be tell tale signs there is a problem.

I ask the Minister not to do what her predecessor did, which was take a piecemeal approach to this and make announcements that pharmacists would do wonderful things but not have any of the i's dotted and t's crossed. We saw that with the free HRT and other areas where messes had to be cleaned up as well. Very simply, they had to be cleaned up because the Minister went out and made an announcement without having any engagement with the pharmacists or having any agreement in place. That was the wrong approach. The best approach is to engage with pharmacists and have collaboration and partnership and then have a framework in place that actually works. That is the model I certainly support and the model under which more should be done.

This is welcome. I support it and I called for almost everything that is in this but there is more to be done. We can build on it and hopefully, that is what will be done in the time ahead.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as seo a chur chun críche. It is good news for community pharmacists but in particular, it is good news for the community. That is one of the key points. For far too long, highly qualified medical practitioners were not allowed practise to the best of their abilities. These are some of the small changes that can be taken to recognise how highly qualified, informed and vital they are to the community. Each of us will know from our own family of people who have gone to the pharmacists and identified a problem of which they were not aware or they have helped them in emergencies and pointed them in the right direction or to the need for a change in medication.

This is a recognition of their vital role in the future. My colleague and the Minister mentioned GPs. This will hopefully relieve some of the pressure on GPs but a lot more can happen in this regard and there needs to be greater synergy between the two professions to ensure that it works better than it has. At the moment, a GP will prescribe medication but patients have to keep going back if it is a repeat prescription. The pharmacist can now take that on board but patients still have to get the agreement of the GP. When they ring the GP, there is a cost to them and that is one of the blockages as it can be hugely costly. Even for just a phone call to a GP practice, it is still €20 or €25 to send the prescription to the pharmacist. It is a press of a button for a repeat prescription and there is no need to see the doctor in most cases. The doctor will call patients in once a year or once every two years, depending on what the medication is. That type of blockage and cost to those who need medication needs to be lifted.

I welcome the change that was announced, although I do not have the exact details, to deal with unwanted and unused medication. We have all dealt with family members who have passed and you go into the cupboard and there are hundreds of pieces of medicine that have never been used. The worst thing is we still have not found a way of utilising those thousands of euro worth of medication. It just sits in the press when a person has passed and it is of no use. Even now, if it is brought back to the community pharmacy but it will go to landfill, incineration or whatever will happen. The problem is that some of this has not been touched and the seals are in place along with everything else. There has to be a way to use them because of the cost, most of which is to the Exchequer and to the patient themselves. This is a waste of money. It might address the issue of overprescribing but it is not just that. Sometimes people forget to take their medicine on a regular basis.

I welcome the agreement. Hopefully, over the next while, we will be able to address the small, practical changes that can happen to make life easier for those who have that interaction with either the GP or the pharmacist. Pharmacists are one of the most trusted medical professions there are. They are always very jolly in any of the pharmacies I go into and happy to help and direct me to the right place. They are happy to share their advice at no cost most of the time because people just go in to have a chat. I wish all the GPs could do the same but they are run off their feet, in most cases. Well done on introducing it at long last but now we have to do all the rest of the work.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Before I get to my contribution, I would like to outline my solidarity with those who have been illegally kidnapped from the Global Sumud Flotilla by the Israelis. I ask the Government to fulfil its obligations to ensue safe passage. There were promises made earlier. We think of Senator Chris Andrews and I believe Barry Heneghan may be taken in the next number of days. We need to make sure we do absolutely everything we can from our point of view to protect the Irish citizens and those who are not.

On the community pharmacy agreement, there is nobody who, if they were asked a number of years ago, would not want it to be the case where they did not necessarily have to go to the GP for X, Y and Z and they could make a journey to the pharmacy to deal with small ailments, particularly colds and flus and on behalf of young children and the multiple issues they deal with. While I welcome many of the changes with the introduction of the CPA, like my two colleagues, this should only be the start of putting a full framework in place and that we can deal with all the services that communities pharmacies should be able to employ. That relates to everything, including emergency medicines or cardiac checks. We all know people who have been incredibly lucky to get in hospital at the right time when they had such a check - others have not been - whether it related to anything from a small procedure right through to quadruple bypasses. However, we could increase the number of people detected before we are dealing with a disaster scenario if we could have those sort of checks done in community pharmacies, which could be very simple, cheap and a lot cheaper for the State in the long run, not to mention much better it would be for society and for that person and their wider family.

There is nobody who will not talk about the high cost of medicines, which is something that needs to be addressed. While trying to provide community pharmacies with greater power to deliver for all the citizens, the fact is that hospitals can be overrun, particularly at this time of year. We all know the issues there have been. With regard to UHL, not a week goes by without a significant number of cases. Even when it comes to Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda, people rarely say anything bad about staff but they talk about staff who are under severe pressure due to the number and nature of complaints. There are a lot of people who end up going to the accident and emergency department because they cannot get a GP appointment. Even though we have all called for this not to happen, we have even seen cases in which people unfortunately believed that because of these difficulties, their best bet was to ring an ambulance. Such practices do not improve the situation but they definitely put services under more pressure. Obviously, everything that can be advanced needs to be advanced in relation to community pharmacists to take that pressure off.

If we are talking about common conditions, minor illnesses and ailments, that is one thing, but when we are talking about chronic disease management and medicines management, there is definitely a greater role for community pharmacists in delivery. It is like what I said previously in relation to cardiac care, but it probably has a much wider application in this instance. We have to get into the idea of preventative healthcare. I am talking about screening, blood pressure, diabetes, cholesterol checks, and making sure we do this in a proper way. When you speak to your family and your wider circle, you become aware of people who caught things early. Regardless of whether serious medical attention was needed or it was something pretty small, it was definitely a lot less than it could have been. We have all seen the horror cases of those who did not have screening done or did not have checks done, or did not have them done in time, and had to suffer. When we are talking about anything right through from cancer care to cardiac care, we must emphasise that anything that can be done from the point of view of improving circumstances is good.

Deputy Ó Snodaigh spoke about the idea of waste in relation to blister packs, etc. There are many means by which this whole thing can be streamlined, but it is straightforward. This is a very good thing to do. It is vital that the community pharmacy agreement was introduced, but it is just a starting point. We are literally building the foundations. We need to ensure we empower pharmacists to the greatest degree possible to deliver for those out there. If healthcare

can be taken away from hospitals and from GPs who are under pressure, and if those preventative pieces can be advanced, it will improve everything across the board for these people and for society in general.

Deputy Colm Burke: I thank the Minister. I welcome the development that has occurred. The collaboration between the HSE, the Department of Health and the IPU is a welcome development. The agreement that has been reached shows that providing healthcare in the community is extremely important. Progress is being made in this area. Over recent years, pharmacies have been playing a greater role in providing healthcare. It is important for that to continue to grow. What has been agreed is safe, it is equitable and it is about efficient delivery of healthcare.

There is a number of areas in the agreement about digitalisation. We are far behind in that whole area. Compared to the rest of Europe, we are behind most other EU countries in digitalisation. I keep mentioning that in other countries there is one card which allows your GP, your pharmacy or your hospital to access and see your medical records where required. When you go into the pharmacy with the card, they can access your records to see what medication you are on to make sure there will not be a problem with any new medication you are given. The other area where it is important is with regard to non-prescriptive medicine. At present, you can go to ten different pharmacists in a day and get the same drug, even if that drug is addictive. We have no system for controlling that. Digitalisation is so important in such circumstances because it means you cannot get medication from a pharmacy unless you have your own card. That controls it. It is something that we should move to.

Another issue raised in relation to this agreement is about trying to encourage people to get involved in the bowel screening programme. That is extremely important as well.

Another aspect of the common condition service, whereby a pharmacy can provide a consultation and identify the suitable medication if it is a non-prescriptive medication, is that the care is provided at a local level rather than the person having to wait for a period of time to get access to their GP. This service means that the pharmacy can provide the support the person needs.

I wish to raise with the Minister a concern that has been expressed to me in relation to blister packaging, which is very much available. My office is in Blackpool, where a large number of elderly people rely very much on blister packaging. This service, which involves items being put into a blister package for the particular day on which it is used, is only available on a once-a-week basis. I have spoken to people in a pharmacy that has over 60 customers who rely on that service. They get €4.10 for doing the packaging. It can take up to 45 minutes, which is quite a lot of time, to put the package together for each customer. I understand that under this agreement, the fee for this service is being abolished. Pharmacists are concerned because this will affect certain areas. It is fine if you are in an area where you do not have a population that relies on the level of support that these people require. I wonder if this could be looked at. The pharmacies are certainly concerned that the fee is to be phased out from January and will be restricted to a small number of medical items. I ask that this be looked at. I can come back to the Minister with further details on it if she wishes.

There is now a lot more co-operation and co-ordination of medical services, including GP, pharmacy and hospital services, than ever before. It is important that we continue to further

develop that. The area of digitalisation is important because we need to make sure the people who are working in the pharmacy behind the counter can access the information they need to make sure the right medication is being provided. We need to ensure that a person cannot go to a lot of pharmacies on one day to get large quantities of non-prescriptive medicines. That is a big issue we need to deal with.

Overall, this is a welcome development from the Department, the HSE and the IPU. It will be of assistance. We have a growing population. We are training more GPs than ever before but people do not necessarily need to go to a GP for a lot of the care they require. That is why this agreement is giving support to pharmacies and the people involved, every one of whom is highly trained and highly specialised and can provide the care that is required by the person who calls to them to get advice. It is important that we, from a Government point of view, support those people who provide that service to the community and the people who live in it.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Before I start, I would like to put on the record again my concerns about the amount of Dáil time that is given over to statements. Since the Government was formed, we have dealt with only two pieces of health legislation on the floor of the Dáil, and only one of those was new legislation. The other Bill, the Mental Health Bill, was restored from the previous Dáil. This is not good enough. We need law reform in a host of areas and I would like to see some of those progressed. In fact, only last week I published a Private Members' Bill. I would be happy to work with the Minister to use Government time to progress that legislation, if necessary.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): It is a matter for the committee.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Absolutely. We talk a lot about productivity in healthcare. We also need productivity in Parliament.

Returning to the topic at hand, the community pharmacy agreement, first I want to say that I welcome the investment in community pharmacies. In recent years, we have seen a real and tangible expansion of the services on offer in community pharmacies and that should be acknowledged. The Minister and her predecessor are to be commended on their work to date in progressing the recommendations of the expert task force, which was established in 2023. It was not too long ago that such changes were extremely difficult to get over the line. A prime example of that was the introduction of the pharmacy-provided flu vaccine over a decade ago. At that time, there was considerable pushback from the sector but thankfully it is now standard practice for community pharmacists to deliver the flu vaccine as well as Covid vaccines. In fact, community pharmacists now administer one in every three vaccines in the flu and Covid vaccine programmes.

I welcome the news that community pharmacists will begin administering the PPV23 vaccine under this agreement. However, my understanding is that this vaccine will only be provided free of charge to medical card patients over 65, unlike the flu vaccine which is free to anybody over 60. Is this the case? One dose of the PPV23 vaccine is recommended for all people aged 65 and over but uptake is low, at below 36%, according to the HSE. Prevention of pneumococcal infection through vaccination should be a priority. According to the HSE such

infections are responsible for 50% of community-acquired pneumonia, with an overall mortality rate as high as 25%. It should be a no-brainer to offer this vaccine to all those over 65 and high-risk groups free of charge. The expansion of the PPV23 vaccine into pharmacies is welcome but it should not come with a means test.

Speaking of charges, I have concerns about the arrangements for common condition service, primarily the consultation fee. Just last week I asked about this by way of a parliamentary question to the Minister. In her response she said that the common condition service will be a fee-paying service with pharmacies entitled to charge a consultation fee which will not be reimbursed by the State. There are two issues here. First, there appears to be no agreed maximum rate for consultations and second, the fee will not be reimbursed by the State. I cannot understand why medical card holders, at the very least, are not covered by this new service. The common conditions service is a positive development but to realise its full potential and to maximise the potential of the entire pharmacy sector, medical card patients should have access to this new service free of charge. I accept that for eligible patients under the HSE drugs scheme, the medication dispensed will be reimbursed. However, one of the main arguments for the common conditions service was to divert medical card holders away from overstretched GPs, where possible. Why would medical card holders with a common condition go to a pharmacy at a cost when they could go to their GP for free? When the Irish Pharmacy Union first proposed this scheme, it estimated that nearly 1 million GP consultations with medical card patients could be dealt with more appropriately by pharmacists. I cannot see how this will be the case under this scheme because although it may no longer be necessary for medical card patients to go to their GP surgery with common conditions, that will still be the only place where they can do so free of charge.

Another major issue with this agreement is the ending of phased dispensing for certain groups and the limiting of eligible medicines, as reported in the *Irish Examiner* last week. Phased dispensing was put in place in 1996 and is now being discontinued to cut costs, seemingly. This will impact some of the most vulnerable patients who should not have been used as a bargaining chip. We are talking about patients who need help to safely manage their medication such as those with reading difficulties, mobility issues, the very elderly and those living with addiction. This cost-cutting measure risks patient safety. The Minister needs to go back to the drawing board if this is the case.

There are so many aspects of this agreement that I would like to speak about but I want to prioritise the issue of access to the free HRT scheme. It is completely unacceptable that trans women are being excluded from the scheme. There can be no excuse or justification for this decision. I and others have been raising this with the Minister for a couple of weeks now and I am disappointed with the response. Instead of accepting that the exclusion of trans women is wrong and changing course, the Minister has dug in, further disadvantaging one of the most marginalised groups in society. It really is simple. Trans women should be included in the scheme. To employ one interpretation of the scheme for trans women and another for cis women is wrong. It is particularly galling this week when we had representatives of the trans community in the Oireachtas to celebrate the tenth anniversary of Gender Recognition Act. Free HRT should mean free HRT and I urge the Minister to do the right thing and reverse that decision.

Another issue I want to speak about is free contraception. The role of pharmacists in providing free contraception could be expanded. Great progress has been made in recent years and I hope this momentum continues. The IPU has been making a compelling case for prescription-free contraceptives and pharmacies have been providing emergency contraception without prescription since 2011. There is no clinical reason for not extending this to oral contraception, as recommended by the World Health Organization. We should be making contraception more accessible, particularly for hard-to-reach groups. We should be streamlining the free contraception scheme so that patients can visit a pharmacy for oral contraception without having to go to their GP first. This new agreement was an opportunity to remove that barrier to prescription-free contraception and ease operations.

As I said, overall, great progress has been made and I hope this momentum continues. With continued political will, we can further enhance the role of community pharmacists and maximise their potential across every village, town and city. This would be in keeping with the principles underpinning Sláintecare and the Minister will have my support in advancing these aims.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: The relationship that many of us have with our pharmacists is often a very important one. To demonstrate that, there is only a handful of people on my Christmas baking list beyond my family, but my pharmacist is right up there at the top. I really welcome that in recent years we have seen the expansion of the role that pharmacies play in communities. They can be such a hub for support for many people and communities.

In preparation for today's statements, I spoke with a local pharmacist, Ms Rebecca Goodwin from Roebuck Pharmacy, who was very helpful to me in explaining to me her feelings on this agreement. As we have heard from many Deputies today, this is a really positive step. It is a first step and is absolutely the right thing to do. We need to make sure that we have that two-way conversation between the Department and the Minister and the pharmacies themselves. I thank the Minister and the Department for the work they have done to get to this point. I also want to acknowledge the work of the IPU. Obviously, as a representative body, it has a tricky job in representing both independent pharmacists as well as the larger chain pharmacists. It has done a good job in getting us to this point.

My colleague, Deputy Rice, has outlined a lot of the details in this agreement that need to be examined further. I would echo Deputy Ó Snodaigh's points around waste. I have been very frustrated by this at times. When one has medication and one's dosages go up and down, there is nothing one can do with medication that has not been used. Pharmacists are not able to take it back. It is really important that we examine the issue of waste within the pharmaceutical sector and make sure that is not happening.

In terms of the points raised by Deputy Rice, I would emphasise the access piece. Obviously, the Social Democrats are very proud of Sláintecare and the work done on it by our co-founder, former Deputy Róisín Shortall. The ethos of making healthcare as accessible as possible is absolutely at the forefront for us and must be at the forefront in this kind of work. For too long we have had disjointed relationships across our healthcare system. Community pharmacies do really vital work in giving advice, providing vaccinations and simply keeping us all well. That work needs to be further supported and integrated into the healthcare system. We have heard details of the HRT scheme and the kinds of difficulties that arose earlier in the year when the

Department attempted to roll it out. There were many issues but the work done by way of this agreement will prevent those kinds of difficulties from arising in the future.

Finally, I want to raise an issue that I have not heard mentioned today in this debate, namely the place of origin of pharmaceuticals. A number of people in my constituency have raised with me that they want to choose where their pharmaceuticals are from. In particular, there are certain products on the market that are from Israel and they would like to be in a position to refuse to take those. I appreciate that this is not simple and that some pharmaceutical products and medications cannot not be replaced with others. That said, is this agreement a place where we could potentially look at promoting Irish pharmaceutical products above those from other companies and making sure that consumers have the option of accessing the best medication to suit their medical needs while also matching their ethical concerns?

Overall, I welcome this agreement and thank the Minister for her work on it.

Deputy John Lahart: First, if I may, I want to mention two constituents of mine, Thomas McHugh and Louise Heaney, at least one of whom has been taken by Israel Defense Forces, following the actions of the IDF against the flotilla. Our minds are very much with them. Their families and a lot of constituents have been in touch with my office this afternoon. I wanted to put their names on the record and say that we will do whatever we can to support them and their families through this. This is not the appropriate debate, however. I raised it. It was also raised with the European Union Commissioner, Maroš Šefčovič, who was before the trade and foreign affairs committee this morning.

Moving on to the pharmacy agreement, I welcome it. Previous speakers spoke about pharmacies. Certainly, I grew up with pharmacies in my parish and area. The relationship people had with their pharmacies was often akin to the relationships they had with the local postmaster or postmistress. Indeed, in my home parish of Ballyroan, where I am originally from, Mr. Michael Shannon, who has passed away, was the local pharmacist. His son, Criofan, continues that pharmacy in Ballyroan and Templeogue. The pharmacist who turns up at family funerals is the kind of connection a lot of pharmacies have with the people who come to their shops.

On several occasions when I have called into a pharmacy with a small ailment – thankfully not too often - I know the pharmacist knows what the answer is, but he or she does not have the legal right to either prescribe or dispense. A kind of generic over-the-counter response is given instead because they cannot use those qualifications, even though they have a fair idea of what it is.

I asked a local community pharmacist in my constituency for their thoughts on the agreement. They said the new changes around service provision are excellent and that the expansion of the role of pharmacists is brilliant. It allows for increased timely access to care for easily resolved health complaints, like thrush and cold sores. It will result in a reduced burden on GP appointments, which is really important in the city, given the number of people, particularly in expanding areas in my constituency, who cannot access or become part of a GP's patient list. This pharmacist said that it actually empowers pharmacists and maximises the use of their qualifications, which is all in line with the Government, the Minister and Sláintecare's vision for pharmacy. It makes every contact count.

With regard to some of the new initiatives like the stool screening, this pharmacist would have described that as a sub-optimal health incentive and it is great that this will see improved uptake through pharmacies. That is positive reaction from the ground.

There were pharmacists in this House from both my party and the Minister for Health's party who made points in the past two Dáil terms about not using and maximising, as the pharmacists put it, the qualifications of pharmacists, which would take the strain off some of the other parts of the GP system. I commend the Minister on following through on this in a way that is going to have an impact.

Clearly, this agreement has been welcomed by the Irish Pharmacy Union. It has been in and around the Houses. I was a member of the health committee. Over the years, it may have felt like a poor relation in the health sector. This enhances its role and visibility.

I live in Dublin 16 and represent Dublin 16, 24 and 6W. While there was a time when there were late-night pharmacies out as far as Terenure, it is difficult enough now. Sometimes, people have to drive into the city. There are very few late-night pharmacies. I do not know whether this aspect is built into the agreement, but it would be nice to see. When people go to their GPs to get a prescription, it is often in the evening. The latest pharmacy locally for me opens until 8 p.m. I had to travel to Leonard's Corner Pharmacy in the Chair's constituency once or twice. There used to be late-night pharmacies, however. Will the Minister speak to the IPU about that? It has to be looked at because not everyone works a nine-to-five job and not every prescription is dispensed between 9 a.m. and 8 p.m.

This agreement represents a landmark development in our healthcare landscape. It is to be commended. The real thing that pharmacies have - and I notice it abroad - is that they are everywhere. In every little village and town where other services have been lost, the pharmacies still remain. While that is clearly in part because they prescribe medicine, they offer some other services as well. Pharmacists themselves would be interested in this.

One of the criticisms of this agreement that the same pharmacist to whom I spoke made was about the proposed fee obliteration. They see this as possibly leading to increased hospital admissions and hospitalisation. That is just some feedback from someone who is otherwise very positive on the agreement. We might get some justification and rationale as to why they think that.

To look at some of the features of the agreement, I commend the pharmacy union and all the pharmacists involved in it. I highlight the strategic collaboration that is contained in the agreement. The €75 million investment by the Government across this year and next year is significant in order to support pharmacists with those fee adjustments, develop the services they are going to offer and train pharmacists and upskill their teams.

I have mentioned the expansion of the clinical role, which is a really positive move. Community pharmacists will be able to contribute more actively to contraception services, immunisation programmes and that bowel screening initiative I spoke about. They will also help with the safe return and disposal of unused medicine. I agree with the previous speaker in that regard. All of us over the years have been given ointments, antiseptic creams or whatever from time to time for various things. They may sometimes have had an antibiotic element. Even the smallest tubes could satisfy the needs of a ten-person family for a decade

with the volumes of creams contained in these. They sit in presses for years and years and there is nowhere to bring them back to safely dispose of them.

I also welcome that pharmacies will integrate with the National ePrescribing Project. Anything that joins the dots and maximises the use of data is very welcome, as is the national electronic health record. It makes a huge amount of sense. From people I dealt with in the last Dáil term, I know that if we are admitted, we want to get to the point where people have a card - cards are probably out of date - or some kind of contact with a phone that lets first responders know what kind of medications they are on, who their GPs are and, if applicable, who their consultants are and what operations they have had, as well as any medical devices they are carrying. The national electronic health record forms part of that, as well as enhancing the broader digital health record.

Rather than going on at length, I welcome the agreement. The Minister is not in office for a long time and she has delivered on commitments made by the past two Governments and the work done by her predecessor. I very much welcome the work involved and look forward to availing of and promoting it among my constituents so that they can avail of these enhanced services and facilities that will be available in their pharmacies.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I welcome this new community pharmacy agreement. We have a particular problem in Ireland whereby allied health professionals have not been able to operate to the top of their licence for many decades, whether that is a physiotherapist within a hospital setting or indeed a pharmacist within the community setting. While this agreement makes progress in this regard, it could go much further.

A second issue with regard to healthcare is that we have a lack of timely access to GPs in our community. It is no surprise that some of the greatest shortages are in rural communities or the most socially disadvantaged communities in urban settings. In the context of GP care becoming increasingly complex, and while we have fewer GPs *per capita*, there is a real need for pharmacists to be facilitated to operate to a much higher level. Although they have been trained to that level, those skills have not been utilised for a long period of time. The broadened scope of their functions now with regard to vaccination, the prescribing of contraception and the safe return of unused medicines is very much to be welcomed.

3 o'clock

It has been a particular bugbear of mine for a number of years, having had to deal with unused medications following the passing of family members. Some pharmacists have been good enough to take medications but others have not. Because of the inconsistency, there is enormous waste and inappropriate disposal of medication, so I very much welcome the change.

We know that the uptake rate for bowel screening is below what it should be. The target is about 50%. The response to a parliamentary question last week stated it is about 46%. Nonetheless, we need to see a much greater level of bowel screening and an increase in the age range of people undergoing screening.

There is a real issue with free contraception. For most healthy women, having to return to their GP every six months is a cost they should not have to bear. The service is now going to be available from within the pharmacy in terms of clinical consultation on the prescription. That is very welcome. However, we are concerned that there is nothing in the agreement about

expanding the free contraception scheme. At the moment it is for women from 17 to 35 years. We believe it should go up to 45 years. The cost of that would be only €10 million, yet it would provide crucial access to contraceptive services.

We know that some pharmacists have done an excellent job in recent years with immunisation and flu vaccination, but I welcome the commitment to pharmacists participating in a catch-up scheme. We would push strongly for the Laura Brennan HPV catch-up programme to be rolled out within community pharmacies. Unfortunately, the Government made a decision to suspend that well over 12 months ago and we very much want to see it up and running.

The downside of the agreement is that we will see a very real and tangible impact on the most vulnerable, arising from the ending of phased dispensing for reasons 1 and 4 in the agreement. I am conscious the HSE has wanted to end phased dispensing for a considerable period, as there was an abuse of it by certain pharmacy groups. The reality is that it is going to have an impact in particular on those who are being cared for at home and who are trying to live independently - people who have a carer coming to the home. Carers cannot physically dispense the medication. They can just hand over the blister pack. Those with a visual impairment are also impacted. One pharmacist told me he only started to use phased dispensing some years ago when a person with a visual impairment came to him and said they wanted their medication to come in a blister pack. Phased dispensing could facilitate that arrangement.

I do not propose to go backwards, but what we need to do is ensure that there is a new support service for vulnerable persons within the pharmacy system so that vulnerable individuals, in particular those with mental health conditions, can access their medication on either a daily or a weekly basis and are not given heaps of boxes once a month or whenever the prescription is dispensed, as that can be dangerous. If we are truly serious about trying to keep people at home and prevent greater hospitalisation, then we have to think very carefully about phased dispensing.

While it is related to phased dispensing, it was the pharmacist's own decision to use the blister pack service. What pharmacists have been doing for a number of years is using the money from phased dispensing to effectively employ somebody to put the blister pack service together for their patients, again, for the reasons I outlined, for those very vulnerable patients. Those patients are now going to be asked to pay for that very valuable service. As somebody said, it is the Jurassic Park of medical technology and yet it works in terms of allowing people to know that they are taking their medication the right way every day. It also allows families to know that their loved ones are taking their medication in the right way every day. I am concerned that some people will not sign up to pay because they cannot afford it or they will not see the benefit of paying for it. I know savings are specifically allocated within the agreement, arising from the ending of phased dispensing. My appeal to the Minister and to officials in the Department is that we would have a support service for vulnerable persons.

A related issue is the hardship scheme. My experience is that its application has been very inconsistent across areas because it is a discretionary scheme. It is for medical card patients whose item is not on the PCRS list, but it is for the network health offices to make the determination and only if they have the funds to do so. We need to change that and make sure that there is a much more consistent hardship scheme in place and that the criteria are much more apparent, which ultimately makes life easier for pharmacists, by giving them clarity, and

most particularly for GPs and crucially for patients themselves, so that they will be able to avail of it. It is not good enough if somebody who is prescribed medication then finds out that they cannot get it after a pharmacist and GP have sent off the forms to see if the patient can get it, and then to have to go back to the GP to get other medication. That is a huge inefficiency that we need to do away with.

One of the final two issues I want to raise is the cost of the drugs payment scheme. The budget is coming up next week and we very much believe that in a cost-of-living crisis, the State can play a key role for those families who are relying on the drugs payment scheme and reduce their prescription costs. It needs to go lower, to €50. The reality is that if it costs €78 million, it would have a very real and tangible impact on those families who are suffering from the cost of living. Those with a disability and people who are not able to work full-time hours because of chronic conditions are most reliant on medication and if they do not qualify for a medical card, they end up forking out a lot of money every month, €80, through the drugs payment scheme, so we want to see it reduced.

The final point I want to make in the remaining minute relates to the shortage of certain medications. We understand there are currently 335 notified shortages. There is a very well-flagged shortage of the Estradot patches, the HRT medication. Ultimately, there is much frustration on the part of women. I have heard pharmacists and women describe all sorts of ingenious and creative ways they have had to come up with to try and make the medication stretch, and to find substitutes. My sense is that there is a lack of co-ordination within the Department in this regard. I know there has been a call for some time for the establishment of a chief pharmaceutical officer role in the Department. Obviously, there is no magic wand for any of these issues, but we need greater leadership to provide certainty to patients regarding product shortages. At the moment, too many women in particular are being failed because of the shortage of HRT, as well as people relying on other medication as well.

Deputy Michael Collins: I welcome the Government's new community pharmacy agreement but, to be very clear, our independent pharmacists and communities have waited far too long for this kind of recognition. This agreement has good intentions but we in the Independent Ireland Party will not stand by and let it become another glossy plan that gathers dust while patients and pharmacists on the ground continue to struggle.

There are positives. Expanding the role of pharmacists to treat common conditions is just common sense. Allowing pharmacies to deliver more vaccinations and to support screening programmes brings care closer to the people. We welcome the increased training grants and the overdue commitment to digital prescribing and shared records. These steps will help ease the pressure on GPs and hospitals, something we have been calling for from day one.

The agreement falls short in key areas. The timelines are simply too slow. Pharmacists can prescribe for just eight conditions in 2025 and must then wait until 2027 or even 2030 for full authority. Patients do not have the time to wait. The Government boasts of fee uplifts, but what about independent rural pharmacies that are barely surviving? We saw this with the free HRT scheme. Pharmacies were left out of pocket and there was uncertainty for patients while the Department was scrambling at the last minute. We need sustainability guaranteed. Pharmacists must at least break even on every State scheme or services will collapse. Rural GPs are closing. Out-of-hours services are stretched and hospitals are under siege. Pharmacies

are often the last health service standing in a town or village. If the Government does not back them properly, it condemns rural patients to endless travel, higher costs and longer waits. I ask the Minister to build in stronger supports for rural pharmacies, which are doing an incredible job for so many communities. Do not make them an afterthought. What about medicine shortages? Families are going from pharmacy to pharmacy, desperate for essential medicines. The agreement mentions better stock visibility and substitution protocols. That is good, but these must be fast-tracked and not buried in working groups.

On accountability, there is no point in signing glossy agreements if the HSE is left unaccountable. The Independent Ireland Party has called for a watchdog with teeth, not another layer of bureaucracy. If the Minister signs off on commitments, she must personally ensure they are delivered on the ground. The Independent Ireland Party will support what is good in the agreement but we will push for faster delivery, fair funding and special protection for rural services because at the end of the day this is not about reports or strategies. It is about patients in west Cork, Limerick or Roscommon being able to walk into their local pharmacy and get the care they need.

On another health issue while I have the floor, I would like the Minister to please ensure Ava's protocol will be developed as a national policy, as recommended by the jury at Ava Barry's inquest. I wrote to the Minister about this earlier. I would appreciate her action and assistance in getting Ava's protocol up and running.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I welcome this move, which is positive. Expanding the role of healthcare professionals in our community is fundamentally important. Let us be honest: this should have been done a long time ago. Offering, for example, screening programmes is a positive move, as is offering immunisations. The integration in the ehealth system is obviously positive and will help pharmacists deliver in their communities. I wish to be clear that it is important that this be delivered upon because too often we see the Government delivering flashy documents announcing positive things but its delivery is lacking. Recently, the Government announced the HRT scheme to much fanfare, many TikTok videos and many press releases, etc., and just a few weeks later, we see significant issues with the supply of those medications. It is important that this long-overdue initiative happen.

A particular issue is the strain on our healthcare system. In Mayo University Hospital, the emergency department is experiencing peak presentations. One of the reasons and drivers behind this is the fact that GP access has gone into freefall. That is what is happening. GP availability and primary care was one the key functioning aspects in our health service. It was one aspect of the health system that was working well, but in recent years we have seen that collapse. That has pushed a significant burden onto emergency departments across the country. A total of 40% of GPs across the country are over the age of 60. This problem will present itself in the most acute way in rural areas. Expanding the role of pharmacies across the country is fundamentally important. I urge the Minister to make sure this agreement is delivered upon and does not become just a flashy document that sits in a filing cabinet like so many other Government announcements. On the topic of GPs, we need to train more of them. I ask the Minister to consider also expanding the role of pharmacists, similar to the role in Britain.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this. I agree with the agreement. It is a step forward. Pharmacists are highly qualified people. Doctors around the

country are under pressure. An awful lot of people, especially those who do not have medical cards, cannot get an appointment for weeks. If a person has a chest infection or something simple that can be diagnosed quickly, they still have to go to a doctor first, get the prescription and go to the pharmacy. We need to eliminate a lot of that where possible. I am not saying it is for everything. Doctors are needed for their job as well. A person might have a sore ear or a bit of flu. There is an awful lot of stuff that we can trust pharmacists with. We should be moving forward and doing that. It will take pressure off doctors, who are under ferocious pressure. There is a shortage of local GPs, with new patients looking for them. In many parts of Ireland at the moment, if someone wants to see a doctor, they may have to wait a week or two.

We need to do something like we did whereby people can now go to a level 2 hospital and urgent care centre rather than having to go to the likes of an accident and emergency department. If we can do the same with pharmacies for the more simplified cases rather than making people go to the doctor, that would be a great idea. It might get people seen more quickly for certain cases. It will also help doctors see more urgent cases quicker.

I support the agreement. As previous speakers said, there is no point in us announcing something or saying that an agreement will be this, that or other. We need to do it rapidly, get it going, move on and facilitate this as quickly as possible because it is a step in the right direction.

Deputy Gillian Toole: I wish to convey my most sincere thanks to the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, to the officials at the Department of Health, in the Health Service Executive, and in particular my former colleagues, as I am no longer practising, in the Irish Pharmacy Union, in particular Kathy Maher, the contractors committee and the executive, who have done sterling work over the years, which is now being recognised. This is a case of *tús maith leath na hoibre*. I take on board suggestions that colleagues made. I assure them that they are embedded in this agreement, and in conjunction with the soon-to-be formed strategic collaboration group, all the suggestions that have not been addressed will be through that structured format, which did not exist prior to this.

It is an excellent start, 16 years since the financial emergency measures in the public interest, FEMPI, adjustments after the 2009 contract. There is massive potential here. This is a case of community pharmacy moving forward in conjunction with the medical profession. That is across the board. It is not one or the other; this is a collaborative effort. This will ease pressure on general practitioners and accident and emergency departments. It is all about getting the right medicine to the right person at the right time. Community pharmacists are medicine experts. There is a medicine optimisation process with a commensurate fund. Members have expressed a fear of phasing, and that phasing may be scaled out. That is not at all the case. Under the medicine optimisation process, for patients at high risk or medicines that have the potential for misuse, phasing will be continuing but it will be limited to a defined set of medications.

If issues develop where patients are considered to be unsafe or where their care has to be reviewed, that will be possible to review under the strategic collaboration group. There are a huge number of opportunities, such as medicine usage reviews, and the issue of waste was addressed. On medicine usage reviews, I carried out a pilot with Dr. Martin Henman from

Trinity College Dublin, TCD, 30 years ago. It was a paper-based effort but it was fantastic. We would sit down every three to six months with patients and review their medicines, including even things they had at home. It was called a brown bag and it was on an *ad hoc* basis. Again, there is potential to bring this forward and have that as an actual process. The disposal of unwanted medicines properly has a beneficial cost impact, but also a positive environmental impact relating to water quality and human health in general. It is something I called for at county council level in the past. I am delighted to see it coming forward. On chronic disease management, a Sláintecare initiative, many of my colleagues in County Meath were involved in a Healthy Meath chronic disease management programme, which produced fantastic results. There were calls for cardiovascular screening and other initiatives. The sky is the limit, starting from this agreement, assessing patients' needs and factoring that into future projects. On the management of common diseases, this will be a game changer in reducing delays in access to general practice and accident and emergency departments. That is to be welcomed.

There is one query that I have which is relevant to medicines availability and also future services, reviewing and analysis the early stages of this agreement. It is the issue of the chief pharmaceutical officer. What is the timeline for the appointment of a CPO to the Department of Health? Are there any plans to appoint a chief pharmaceutical officer to the Health Service Executive? These personnel will be key to the collaboration and co-operation piece under the strategic plan. I am no longer practising but having practised for 35 years it is in my heart. The impact in communities, the accessibility with on average 54 hours a week without an appointment must be maximised, and the profession is willing and able.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Keira Keogh): I welcome our guests from America in the Visitors Gallery.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): They must have been over for the Steelers game.

To answer Deputy Toole's question at the outset, the chief pharmaceutical officer commitment will be fulfilled. I do not have a timeline on that but it is absolutely a commitment that we will follow through and fulfil.

I would like to thank the Deputies for their contributions today, especially those who spoke in support of community pharmacists and the work they do in delivering a more accessible and integrated health service in Ireland. The community pharmacy agreement marks a significant milestone in the strategic collaboration between the Department of Health, the HSE, and the IPU. It sets out a comprehensive and ongoing pathway to modernise and expand the role of community pharmacy in Ireland's healthcare system. The agreement will support the delivery of safe, equitable, and efficient healthcare, and ensure that community pharmacists are better equipped to contribute to national health priorities through engagement, sustainable funding, and integrated service delivery.

The agreement will be implemented on a phased basis and will be supported by ongoing, regular structured engagements between the Department, HSE and the IPU. Under the agreement a strategic collaboration group will be established which will provide a structured forum for dialogue and joint consideration of strategic issues shaping the future of community

pharmacy in Ireland. The agreement is comprehensive and extensive, covering a wider variety of key issues in community pharmacy. Key achievements of the agreement which the Minister for Health outlined earlier include expanded services. Community pharmacies will play a greater role in the management of common conditions, immunisation, bowel screening, and the safe return and disposal of unused medicines. There is a fee for this for all patients, but of course medical card holders can still go to their GP for free, as they do today. The introduction of this scheme means that anyone can go the pharmacy instead, for a fee. Anticipating that many private patients might go to a pharmacist instead, it may make more appointments possible at the GP, enabling a quicker free appointment for medical card holders. This agreement makes it cheaper for some but increases access for all for a prescription for a common condition. On digital integration, pharmacies will actively support national eHealth reforms, including the national e-prescription service and national electronic health record. There will be new funding, and €25 million in 2025 and €50 million in 2026 will support fee adjustments, service development, and training. On strategic collaboration, a new collaborative framework will be established to support the shaping and implementation of community pharmacy's role in a more integrated, efficient, and patient-centred health system.

The agreement also introduces new fees and allowances for participating pharmacies, supports training and development of pharmacy teams, and a programme of work aimed at reducing the community pharmacy administrative burden. Fundamentally, this is a forward-looking agreement that will make it easier for people to access care in their communities. It reflects our shared commitment to innovation, public health, and sustainable investment. It will further support community pharmacies in diversifying their health service offerings, business models and revenue streams.

On phased dispensing, there is one important element of the agreement, changes being made to the rule set around phased dispensing, which I would like to outline to the House. This agreement does not remove phased dispensing. Phased dispensing was introduced in 1996 for patient safety reasons. The supply of medication in instalments can support patients prescribed certain high-risk medications who are at risk of medication misadventure if these medications were to be supplied on a monthly basis, as is the norm under the community drug schemes. Where a phased dispensing claim is submitted, the current requirement is that an item must be dispensed across multiple supply occasions. Community pharmacies receive additional payments in respect of phased dispensing.

Monitored dosing systems are systems that enable the individual medicine doses to be organised according to the prescribed dose schedule. These are sometimes referred to as blister packs. The State has never agreed to fund monitored dosing systems. However, a practice has built up whereby the use of monitored dosing systems is charged as if for phased dispensing. The State has never agreed to this. Phased claiming was never intended to be used to submit claims in lieu of the provision of monitored dosing systems. While monitored dosing systems may have a role for some patients there is significant uncertainty around the robustness of the evidence supporting their use. The National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics carried out an evidence assessment which indicated that the evidence was, at best, equivocal to support such a programme. Significant expenditure is therefore being incurred where it was never intended by the State. It has been agreed to introduce improved controls in this regard and to limit the use of phased dispensing to specified high-risk drugs, where a patient safety concern may exist.

Phased dispensing support is currently available under the GMS medical card scheme for the following reasons: reason 1 - at the request of a patient's physician; reason 2 - due to the inherent nature of a medicinal product, that is, product stability and shelf life; reason 3 - where a patient is commencing new drug therapy with a view to establishing patient tolerance and acceptability before continuing on a full treatment regime; and reason 4 - in exceptional circumstances where the patient is incapable of safely and effectively managing the medication regimen. Under the community pharmacy agreement, from January 2026, phased dispensing under reasons 1 and 4 will be limited to a defined set of high-risk medication classes. These are psychotropics; opioids; codeine; and pregabalin and gabapentin. The approved list of medications will be provided by the HSE in due course. For reason codes 1 and 4, by focusing phased dispensing reimbursement on the medication categories on the approved list, phased dispensing payments can be targeted to medications with the highest risk or potential for misuse. Phased dispensing fees will remain payable as per current arrangements under reason codes 2 and 3 and will not be subject to the approved list. The HSE estimates that this will free up over €20 million in funding within community pharmacy. This funding will be primarily redirected towards valued added services.

The salient point here is that appropriate phased dispensing is not being removed in this agreement. The current funding of blister packs when claimed as phased dispensing, which the State has never supported, will be suspended. This is being done in a way which puts patient safety first and allows the State to repurpose €20 million of funding to be used to implement new patient-centred services. It remains open to pharmacies to charge patients for the use of monitored dosing systems as a private service.

In the context of the overall agreement and settlement package, the State has also secured key commitments from community pharmacy in relation to reform, modernisation and the digital agenda. The agreement will provide the basis for community pharmacy and IPU co-operation with the full ehealth agenda, including national eprescribing programme, shared care record, HSE app, electronic health recording, etc. As these programmes advance and roll out, the co-operation of community pharmacies will be crucial to the success. The Department will also progress a number of regulatory reforms over the coming months to improve efficiency and free up capacity in community pharmacy. The Department, the HSE and the Irish Pharmacy Union are committed to a process of ongoing structured engagement to support the future development of community pharmacy. The continuation of a high-level, enduring, strategic relationship is designed to support the shaping and implementation of the role of pharmacies in a more integrated, efficient and patient-centred health system.

It is recognised that ongoing collaborations, some already under way, on key operational-related matters will also continue. Furthermore, it is recognised that, from time to time and as required, specific programmes of work will be established with their own governance arrangements as appropriate. This multiyear pathway will focus on specific measurable deliverables that ensure service sustainability, expand patient care and enable community pharmacists to practice to their full scope. This landmark agreement sets a pathway forward for a strategic approach to shaping the future of community pharmacy in Ireland, all with the intent of improving healthcare service delivery and patient outcomes.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Keira Keogh): 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 Mark Wall - To discuss the provision of an hourly train service for Athy.

Deputy Paula Butterly - To discuss the rule preventing widows, widowers and surviving civil partners from receiving illness benefit.

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 plus.

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

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss the national planning framework and the sustainable rural housing guidelines.

The matters raised by Deputies Kenny, Butterly, Cahill, Wall and O'Sullivan have been selected for discussion

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Educational Disadvantage

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, for being here and I also acknowledge the communication from the Minister, Deputy McEntee, on my Topical Issue. I wish to raise the roll-out of DEIS plus, which is a significant development in education across this country. It is something of keen focus for the Labour Party. I know the Government has announced, following the general election this year, that DEIS plus would be rolled out across many schools in the country but my firm belief is that we still do not have a timeline or a budget for this.

Last week, I had the great privilege to meet three school principals. One of these, Mr. Kieran Golden, was my former boss in Mayfield Community School. I was absolutely honoured to teach in Mayfield Community School with such fantastic students and colleagues. The school is a DEIS school. The school principals outlined to us the significant challenges they face. The job of a school principal now has significantly changed over many years. Their job, particularly in a DEIS school where you are dealing with serious, different needs as opposed to just academic needs, is quite significant. I will take Mayfield Community School as one example. The deputy principal in the school is a fantastic woman. She is not a full-time deputy principal. She is on 0.75 hours of a deputy principal's role. That is extremely difficult to comprehend because the level of need in the school is quite significant.

Today, the Labour Party launched its alternative budget for 2026 and the party is fully committed to investing in the roll-out of DEIS plus across band 1 schools in this country. It is quite a significant step to take because we must ensure there are absolutely no barriers for any child in this country to accessing the appropriate school that is needed for that child, be it in primary or post-primary. We must also ensure that they have the relevant special educational needs teachers, SNAs and absolutely any other special educational teacher they need to progress in their academic life. Alongside this, we need to promote in all post-primary schools across this country the opportunity to progress in academic life or the opportunity to progress into apprenticeships. We did not have that across the island for many years. As a former secondary school teacher, I can attest that we need to see far more of it. I spent a lot of my time while I was teaching trying to encourage all students, particularly those in fifth and sixth year of the schools I taught in, to progress after they finished school into whatever career they wanted. The rolling out of DEIS plus would be a serious advantage to giving these children the opportunity to progress in life after they finished school. It is extremely important that we acknowledge the fantastic role that SNAs, special educational teachers, guidance counsellors, mainstream teachers, school principals and deputy principals play in our education system. I also want to acknowledge the fantastic students we have in this country. A lot of the time for many years we focused particularly on how good the child was academically. However, right now, we also have significant focus on what other brilliant achievements other children have, be it in academia, sport, arts or whatever it may be. I ask the Government now to produce a timeline and a budget for the rolling out of DEIS plus to benefit not just schools but most importantly students in this country.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I thank the Deputy for speaking on this issue with such passion. He has a lot of knowledge in this area. He has seen the benefits that DEIS has provided with those extra supports in terms of schools where there are a variety of challenges. There are disadvantages areas and students from all different backgrounds. I have also seen first-hand in my own constituency the benefits those extra DEIS supports can bring. This is why, in the previous Government, we committed to the roll-out of DEIS plus to increase those supports and increase the number of students who would benefit from them. Fair play to the Deputy; he has quite accurately highlighted the benefits of it and also the incredible work that teachers, SNAs, principals and staff do right across the board.

The Department spends over €180 million annually, providing additional supports to almost 1,200 schools in the DEIS programme and reaching approximately 250,000 children. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, is committed to narrowing the performance gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools and introducing innovative solutions to address disadvantage. Recent research, including the OECD Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland have highlighted the role of the DEIS programme in providing an education system that consistently outperforms many other OECD countries but also exhibits relative socioeconomic fairness, making it one of the stronger performers globally. This research has also highlighted, however, important differences in outcomes persist for students who experience very high levels of deprivation. That is why the Government is committed to providing a DEIS plus scheme to support schools with the highest levels of disadvantage. To meet this commitment, the DEIS plus scheme will provide additional support to schools with the highest levels of educational disadvantage and seek to improve education outcomes for

children and young people in these schools. The scheme will provide very targeted supports to those who most need it, to tackle the impact of intergenerational disadvantage and to empower them to achieve their potential through education.

Work to develop the scheme is well advanced and the Minister is engaging with Cabinet colleagues to secure the necessary funding for the scheme through the budgetary process. A DEIS plus design advisory group worked with the Department officials to develop the proposal for the scheme. The needs of the children and young people drove the development work. The group includes school principals, home school community liaison officers, and school completion programme co-ordinators. These are professionals who work directly with children experiencing high intergenerational disadvantage. The Department has also engaged directly with children and young people to inform this work. The focus is on shaping a DEIS plus scheme that will support schools with the highest concentrations of children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage to meet the needs of the children.

The Department is also actively engaging with other Departments and agencies, education partners, and stakeholders across the education sector to develop the DEIS plus scheme and aims to integrate and build on existing whole-of-government supports. The culmination of all this work will see the achievement of the programme for Government commitment to deliver a new DEIS plus scheme, to provide targeted support for schools with the highest levels of educational disadvantage, and improve outcomes for children and young people.

As Deputy Kenny can see from this response, a whole lot of work and effort has already gone into designing DEIS plus. It is well advanced and there has been significant stakeholder engagement. The Deputy asked specifically when it can be rolled out. We do not have an answer to that right now but, in fairness, by the Deputy highlighting it and highlighting the importance of it this does accelerate and put the spotlight on the need to roll out DEIS plus as quickly as possible.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I appreciate the response by the Minister of State. It is extremely important that we continue to highlight the significant issues faced by children across this country and the barriers before them in education. Today the Labour Party launched our Alternative Budget 2026. A significant part of this relates to disadvantage in our school communities and in education. In our alternative budget we want to begin the phasing in of all DEIS plus with identified clusters, which would cost €3 million. We want to expand the City Connects programme to all DEIS band 1 schools, beginning with schools in DEIS plus clusters. The first year costs would be €7.2 million. We want to cut the DEIS schools class size ratio to 15:1. The phased first year costs would be €5.5 million. We want an additional 100% increase in capitation for DEIS schools. The first year cost to cover increased energy and operational costs would be €18.2 million. We want to extend the summer school meals pilot to all DEIS schools, which would be €3.2 million. We want a 10% increase in school completion programme funding, which would be €3.7 million. We want to appoint 20 additional home school community liaison positions, which would be €1.7 million. We have a significant costed plan in the Labour Party to introduce DEIS plus. That is the energy and dedication we need from this Government now to tackle disadvantaged children in this country.

I am absolutely fully aware of and appreciate the work that has been done by the Government on this, but with the announcement having been so long ago, we must make sure of this next

week. I am hoping for this for the Department of Education and Youth and that when the Ministers, Deputies Donohoe and Chambers stand here next Tuesday, they will give us a clear outline as to what budget will be given towards the advancement of DEIS plus in this country. I appreciate the Minister of State's response.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I reiterate that the Government is committed to tackling child poverty and it sees education as a key enabler to achieve that. The development of the DEIS plus scheme will be a further positive step in this commitment to lifting more children out of poverty to give them the futures they deserve. Since its introduction the DEIS programme has tackled the impact of poverty through supporting the improved attendance and progression of children and young people experiencing poverty. It has also improved education attainment levels, which create greater opportunities for employment and enhanced career pathways. The development of the new DEIS plus scheme will be a key part of a new DEIS plan, which will be published this year. The new DEIS plan will set the long-term direction on supporting children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage and on empowering them to achieve their potential. The plan will focus on improving the opportunities and achievement levels of children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage in all schools. It will also look to develop more innovative approaches to tackling educational disadvantage and to work towards a more flexible system of supports to ensure that a school can receive the right support at the right time.

The DEIS plan will be published this year. I completely appreciate the efforts of the Labour Party in publishing a costed budget with a focus on education, on trying to remove those gaps within education, and on the supports for disadvantage areas while also continuing a lot of the supports that were introduced by the previous Government, including the hot meals scheme. I appreciate that.

It is really important we are having this discussion. We are all behind the establishment of DEIS plus and the expansion of those DEIS services. As the Deputy and the Minister have said, education is the key tool in addressing any of those socioeconomic issues that we have.

Social Welfare Eligibility

Deputy Paula Butterly: I wish to discuss the rule that excludes widows and widowers from receiving illness benefit solely because they are in receipt of a widower's pension, notwithstanding the fact that they have returned to work and are paying all of their PRSI contributions. The Minister of State will be aware that illness benefit is a contribution-based process. If somebody has returned to work and has made their PRSI payments, and then through unfortunate circumstances has to leave work because of an illness, I do not see any reason they should not be entitled to an illness benefit.

There is nothing like a cold, hard case to drive home a point so let me underline a case in my constituency. There was a young woman who at the age of 30 lost her husband through tragic circumstances. After a period of having to deal with everything that is involved in those circumstances and having to tend to her children's needs, she went back to work. Unfortunately, after a number of months the same woman fell ill herself and had to take time off work to take care of herself. Because she was in receipt of a widow's pension, she was not

entitled to illness benefit. I find this grossly unfair and it is a gap that we need to resolve. If it is not traumatic enough that a family has to go through the death of a partner and in the event that the surviving partner falls ill, which while it might be uncommon, is not rare, that partner is now putting their own family circumstances into fierce financial hardship. This woman in particular, having done everything right and despite all the odds, goes back to work tries to provide for her family is left in circumstances where she is clearly falling below the poverty line, yet is not entitled to anything. Surely in a system that is fair and proportionate we can revise that rule and ensure that when this happens we as a Government are there for people in these circumstances.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I thank the Deputy for addressing this. She has certainly outlined a hardship case. It is hard to disagree with her description of it as a gap in the system that needs to be addressed. I will just outline the current situation and then perhaps from there we can bring this back to the Minister for Social Protection to ensure he is aware of anomalies.

I will first provide an overview of the supports available to widows, widowers, surviving civil partners and qualified cohabitants, and the Illness benefit scheme. The widow's, widower's, and surviving civil partner's pension was renamed as the bereaved partner's pension on 21 July 2025, the date of enactment of the Social Welfare (Bereaved Partner's Pension and Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025. This Act extends eligibility to a qualified cohabitant of the deceased person. The bereaved partner's pension is a weekly payment to those who have lost their spouse, civil partner or qualified cohabitant and are covered by social insurance. To qualify for this pension, either the person claiming or their late spouse, civil partner or qualified cohabitant must have a certain number of PRSI contributions and they must not be in a cohabiting relationship. As of August 2025, there were approximately 127,400 people on the scheme. The estimated expenditure for 2025 is approximately €1.9 billion.

The bereaved partner's non-contributory pension is a means-tested payment payable to a person who does not qualify for the contributory version of the scheme. As of August 2025, there were approximately 1,000 people on the scheme. The estimated expenditure for 2025 is approximately €12 million.

The bereaved parent grant is a once-off payment designed to assist with the income support needs of a bereaved partner with dependent children immediately following the death of his or her spouse or partner. The current rate of payment is €8,000.

Illness benefit is the primary short-term income support provided by the Department of Social Protection to those who are unable to work due to illness of any type and who are covered by social insurance. Eligibility for illness benefit depends on the person's PRSI record and class. As of August 2025, approximately 52,600 people were in receipt of illness benefit. The estimated expenditure for 2025 is approximately €700 million.

With regard to persons in receipt of the bereaved partner's pension being also able to access illness benefit, there is a general principle of one person, one payment, which applies across the social welfare system. Given the contingency-based nature of this system, it can happen that a person may experience more than one contingency at the same time but, generally, they can receive only one payment. This principle is common to social security systems across the world. Therefore, in general, illness benefit is not payable concurrently with these pensions. However, if a person is getting a reduced rate of the bereaved partner's pension, they may also

get a reduced rate of illness benefit so that the combined amount of both payments reaches the maximum rate of illness benefit to which they would otherwise be entitled.

The supplementary welfare allowance is a means-tested payment for persons struggling financially and can be accessed by customers through their local Intreo office. An exceptional needs payment may also be available to help meet essential, once-off expenditure a person could not reasonably be expected to meet from their weekly income.

There is also statutory sick leave for persons in employment. Workers have an entitlement to five statutory sick pay days in a year. Under the scheme, sick pay may be paid by an employer at 70% of a person's normal pay, up to a maximum of €110 a day.

The Department of Social Protection will continue to keep its range of supports under review to ensure that they meet their overall objectives. I guess that is the chink of light Deputy Butterly might take from that. The Department will keep its schemes under review. As the Deputy can see, there is a principle of one payment per person, a principle that has long existed. In fairness, the Deputy has highlighted a situation very few would find themselves in. I would imagine it would not be a significant or massive cost to the Exchequer to expand it for those types of situations, especially considering the hardship someone like the Deputy's constituent has been through. I will certainly bring that feedback to the Minister for Social Protection.

Deputy Paula Butterly: I thank the Minister of State. In fact, I welcome the widening of the eligibility in regard to who does and does not qualify for a widow's pension. That, in itself, was an anomaly that was highlighted through a campaign in the press due to that widower. Let us reflect for a moment on the fact that, as the Minister of State said, if somebody is in receipt of a reduced widow's pension, they may also be entitled to a reduced illness benefit so that the combined sum reaches the maximum rate of illness benefit they would otherwise be entitled to. That, in itself, is not sufficient. It does not address the fact that due to tragic circumstances, be it illness or whatever, a household often goes from earning two incomes to earning only one. Very often in those circumstances, even though the widow's or widower's pension is welcome, it does not sufficiently fill the gap that was not there when there were two household incomes. We need to fill that gap because if we are giving half of one and half of the other, we are still back to square one. I see no reason why, if somebody is back at work making their PRSI contributions, they are not entitled to the illness benefit. I am delighted to hear that the Minister, Deputy Calleary, will look into this and review it. I firmly hope he will address and resolve it.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: As I referred to in my opening statement, the social system operates on the general principle of one person, one payment. This approach is a standard feature of social security systems throughout the world. It means that, generally, the bereaved partner's pension cannot be received at the same time as illness benefit. I know it is probably no comfort, but my earlier contribution also referred to the option of the supplementary welfare allowance. If an individual is struggling to make mortgage repayments or if the cost of rent or other household goods exceeds income, there is that option, but I get the point. That is very much a last resort, which we should be trying to avoid in all cases, and there should be some safety net in place.

I emphasise that I fully recognise the challenges that widows, widowers, surviving civil partners and qualified cohabitants, especially those with children, face. As I have said, and this is the important point we need to take away from this discussion, the Department of Social Protection will continue to keep its range of supports under review. Any changes to the current system would need to be considered in an overall policy and budgetary context, taking account of the social insurance contribution rates and the overall sustainability of the Social Insurance Fund.

That being said, I outlined in the earlier statement the overall costs of a lot of these schemes, with the bigger scheme costing about €1.9 billion. I am not the Minister but I will certainly bring this feedback to the Minister, Deputy Calleary. However, on amendments like this, where we are trying to cater for someone who is very vulnerable or has experienced extreme loss, I do not believe the cost and significance would be detrimental to the overall State coffers. That, again, is a message I will bring back to the Minister and, as the Deputy said, a lot of these schemes are always under review.

Rail Network

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Minister of State for coming into the Chamber this evening and the Ceann Comhairle for selecting this very important topic. I want to talk about services in my home town of Athy in Kildare South. The population of Athy, in the recent census, was over 11,000 people. That is a growth of 82% since the 2002 census. Every morning, almost 50% of the working population of the town leaves it to avail of work elsewhere. That is a figure that grows year on year as more and more families make the town their home.

We have a wonderful train station. Considerable work has been done by Irish Rail on the train station, particularly around access, over the last number of months and that will benefit a lot of people. The problem we have in the town is that the 12 services that are there each morning are full, and a lot of people are finding it more and more difficult to avail of train times and get a seat on the trains that are there. In Kildare town, which is just a bit further up the track and has a couple of hundred fewer people than the town of Athy, there are 38 services per day versus the 12 that operate from Athy.

I have raised this with the Minister, who has sent that request on to Irish Rail, which has come back to me. In its reply, it said Iarnród Éireann aspires to increase the frequency of intercity services across the network over the coming years, including the Waterford-Dublin Heuston route, which includes the town of Athy. It went on to say that as the new DART+ fleet enters service in the greater Dublin area in 2027, this will free up intercity and commuter carriages for use elsewhere on the network, and that including any necessary infrastructure works, the precise order of the introduction of extra services will be subject to demand and the approval of the NTA.

Since I received that letter, we have launched a petition in Athy. As I speak to the Minister of State this evening, there are almost 4,000 signatures on that petition. It is 3,867, to be precise. They are from people who live in Athy and the greater Athy area and use the train service day in, day out but have problems with it. They are confined to hours they can work in Dublin, Newbridge, Naas and other places where they may get work. That is causing a serious problem for the social infrastructure of the town. There are also a lot of students who,

unfortunately, cannot get accommodation in the colleges in Dublin and are still living at home in Athy. They are also suffering because of the times and restrictions in times that are on the line at the moment, so much so that a lot of them, myself included, will get a phone call late at night asking them to go to Kildare or Portlaoise train stations to collect somebody who has either missed a train or had to stay late for whatever reason, be that work or study.

4 o'clock

I am asking the Minister for Transport to support the call by the people of Athy to include that train service, and by extension Carlow town, in additional services. What we really need is an hourly service from the town, because it is a growing town. Over 11,000 people live in the town at the moment. We need additional services. We need to ensure that a person can get a seat on the train but also that it does not discriminate against work or study for those who have chosen Athy, the great town that it is, as their place to live in.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I thank Deputy Wall for raising this issue. I have taken a couple of Topical Issue matters from him and Athy seems to feature fairly prominently. Fair play. He is representing the place well. It is interesting that he is providing a bit of a taxi service for anybody who misses a train. That is the right thing to do. Fair play to him.

Funding and policymaking for public transport is down to the Minister of State, Deputy Séan Canney, but as the Deputy knows, the day-to-day operation is for the NTA, in conjunction with Irish Rail and so on. I reassure the Deputy that, as outlined in the programme for Government, Securing Ireland's Future, the Government is strongly committed to enhancing transportation networks and infrastructure development, and public transport plays a key role in the delivery of this goal. To support this objective, under budget 2025, the Department of Transport secured over €658 million of funding for public service obligation and TFI Local Link services, an increase from over €613 million in 2024.

This package included funding for the continuation of the various fare initiatives, such as the young adult card and the 90-minute fare until the end of 2025. Funding has also been provided to extend free child fares on public service obligation, PSO, services to include those aged five to eight years old and to support the roll-out of new and enhanced bus and rail services under programmes such as BusConnects and Connecting Ireland. As is the case with all such measures, all funding matters are being considered as part of the ongoing budget 2026 discussions.

In relation to the Dublin to Waterford line, Iarnród Éireann has informed the Department of Transport that all services on this line stop at Athy Station. I understand that there are ten weekday services daily serving Athy, Waterford and Heuston, with additional services on Fridays and Saturdays. Athy has a typically reduced Sunday offering of five services on the Waterford-Heuston line.

In 2024, 154,449 passengers boarded the train at Athy station and 117,067 alighted, for a total of 271,516 trips to or from Athy last year. Iarnród Éireann is working towards a strategy for enhancement of services on InterCity routes in the short to medium term. However, it must be noted that these enhancements will be subject to agreement and funding by the NTA, as well as the completion of other projects in order to release rolling stock to realise these service enhancements. To meet growing demand, Iarnród Éireann is deploying all available fleet

during peak times. In 2024, 41 additional InterCity railcar carriages were introduced, boosting capacity on key routes, including Sligo, Galway, Westport and Belfast.

As part of DART+, two fleet orders have been placed, for 185 carriages, largely battery electric with some electric units. The first order for the purchase of 95 additional DART carriages, comprising 65 battery electric carriages and 30 electric carriages, has started arriving and is undergoing certification and safety testing. It is intended that the new battery electric sets will be initially deployed on the northern commuter line, serving Dublin from Drogheda, which does not necessarily help Deputy Wall's situation. The point is that efforts are being made to expand services. The Minister of State, Deputy Canney, is making every effort to increase available funding. Every time that a Deputy comes in here and looks for extra public transport services, that has to be taken seriously and delivering that should be encouraged as much as possible.

It is incredible to see the demand for train services. I am noticing lately that there is more and more demand for even the big intercounty train services. We need to accommodate that. It should be a given that public transport is available. There should be situations where people have to get into their own car to pick people up. I know that Deputy Canney will take this request seriously. He is not involved in the day-to-day running but I know that he can certainly relay messages to the NTA.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Minister of State for his comprehensive reply. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, too. It is good news that the DART+ fleets are being rolled out, albeit on the Drogheda line, because that will free up carriages on the Drogheda line, which is what we want. We are first up, best dressed in Athy looking for those additional carriages that come as part of the new DART+ carriages that the Government has already welcomed and that will be part of the northern commuter line, serving Dublin to Drogheda. That is the part that I want to highlight with the Minister of State and, by extension, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney. Once those carriages are put on the Drogheda line, it will free up the additional carriages. The people of Athy, through their petition and their public representatives, are asking that those carriages that were on the Dublin to Drogheda line would come and provide additional services on the Athy and, by extension, as I said, Carlow line.

The figures speak for themselves when you see that 271,000 people used the train station in Athy in 2024. That number is only growing. Thankfully, a number of new housing estates are being built in Athy and in various villages and towns in the locality. The Athy train station services an area extending into County Laois so a large cohort of people use that station each morning. There is adequate car parking and so on for an expansion at the station.

It is positive news that the new carriages are on the way for DART+. That is what the reply from the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and Iarnród Éireann actually said. It was that once those were in place, it would free up the other carriages. I am making a plea to both Ministers of State that the people of Athy are seeking those freed-up carriages to be put on the Waterford to Heuston line, because when that number of people are using public transport, it is always good and we should encourage more people to use public transport and save those car journeys late at night for those people who cannot get a train home to the town of Athy.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: That is a point well made. Athy is obviously a growing town. It is an important commuter town, not just for people to work and commute but also for people to study and commute, so it is important that we facilitate that, take cars off the road and provide as much public transport as possible. The investment in the extra carriages, as outlined, on the Drogheda line will free up carriages. Deputy Wall has made the case well that much of that should be put on the Waterford to Heuston line, thereby enabling greater capacity for Athy. He is right that the numbers speak for themselves. An impressive number of journeys are taken on that line, in that area. We have to support that. If we are serious about reducing emissions and about climate action, wherever possible and where we have demand we need to facilitate this type of journey. I appreciate the Deputy bringing it up. If there is positivity to be taken from the response, it is that Iarnród Éireann is working towards a strategy of enhancement of services on InterCity routes in the short to medium term, but this will all be dependent on funding. I know that Deputy Canney is fighting hard for extra funding for public transport.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Minister of State.

Hospice Services

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: We are moving to health now. I think the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, has covered education and transport this evening and I am not sure what else. Fair play to him. I want to talk about the LauraLynn Foundation. I recently met the chief executive and head of communications in advance of the budget. To give the Minister of State a bit of background, the LauraLynn Foundation was established after the loss of two sisters, Laura and Lynn McKenna, to illnesses in 1999 and 2001. This tragedy inspired their parents, Jane and Brendan McKenna, to found the LauraLynn Hospice, Ireland's first dedicated children's palliative care unit. They had witnessed at first hand the need for specialised home-like support and, of course, palliative care. The work that this hospice does is phenomenal.

When I met the CEO, she acknowledged the recent changes in the programme for Government, where there is a commitment to deliver a new national policy for palliative care for children and to increase funding for children's hospice care. The hospice is asking for these programme for Government commitments to be prioritised urgently in the upcoming budget. Time is precious for these children and their families, as the Minister of State knows. To ensure children have timely access to hospice care, the LauraLynn Foundation urgently needs that funding. Statutory funding has not kept pace with the growth in demand for the service and it will run a deficit of €1.9 million in 2025, rising to €2 million in 2026.

I will give the Minister of State an idea of the demand that the hospice experiences. In 2021, 203 children were receiving palliative care in the hospice. For 2026 that is predicted to rise to 440. The number of families receiving bereavement care was 119 in 2021. That will more or less double by 2026 to 230. The number of community visits the hospice conducts has risen from 380 in 2021 to a predicted 4,500 in 2026.

There are estimates that 2,000 children in this country require palliative care. As I have just demonstrated, the hospice is providing care for approximately 440. There is clearly an unmet need here. The work it does is phenomenal and needs to be supported by the HSE and the

Department of Health in the coming budget. To keep pace with demand, the foundation continues to actively fundraise. I again refer to its pre-budget submission. The amount it fundraised in 2021 was €3.2 million. By 2026 it estimates it has to fundraise €5.7 million. The service this group is providing is clearly increasing. It has increased by 180% since its inception. The demand is clearly there. I understand we are not going to negotiate the budget tonight on the floor of the Dáil. However, I would like the Deputy to take a message back to the Department of Health and the Minister, that of all the budgetary asks she is going to have, this is one of the most worthy.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I know the LauraLynn foundation is something he has always advocated for and fought for. I agree with him 100%. The merit and support provided by organisations and foundations like the LauraLynn children's hospice represent unbelievable value for money. The service they provide is incredible. I liken it to Cancer Connect or ARC house, which are organisations we should really be supporting financially.

Children's palliative care is provided through a shared care approach involving GPs, paediatricians, community specialist palliative care teams, clinical nurse co-ordinators and the Children's Health Ireland specialist palliative care team. All these teams work collaboratively in caring for the child and their family. A key enabler of this model of care is the remote support provided by the consultants in paediatric palliative medicine at Children's Health Ireland at Crumlin and Temple Street. The voluntary sector, including organisations such as LauraLynn children's hospice and the Jack and Jill Foundation, provides essential support to the statutory services with additional in-home nursing and respite supports for families. LauraLynn also provides inpatient hospice care at its eight-bed facility in Leopardstown, south County Dublin, along with a bereavement service.

In 2024, 340 children were supported at home by clinical nurse co-ordinators for children with life-limiting conditions each month. Some 78 children received specialist palliative care in Children's Health Ireland at Crumlin and Temple Street each month and 49 children were admitted each month to LauraLynn children's hospice. LauraLynn receives core funding from the Health Service Executive under a section 39 service agreement. Recurring core statutory funding for LauraLynn children's hospice was allocated for the first time in budget 2021. In 2022, an additional €800,000 was provided in once-off funding. In 2023, €800,000 was provided in additional recurrent funding to LauraLynn, increasing its base funding to €2.3 million per year. In 2025, State funding increased further to €3.3 million, representing over 30% of LauraLynn's total operating costs. This funding has been used to provide a sustainable financial base to the organisation. It has increased LauraLynn's hospice in the home service across Leinster, Munster and Connacht. LauraLynn's pre-budget submission request is to be funded to the tune of €5.3 million, or 50% of its total operational costs, in 2026. This request will be considered as part of the overall budgetary and Estimates process.

LauraLynn plays a significant role in the overall delivery of children's palliative care services nationally. The Department of Health, HSE, and LauraLynn children's hospice have all worked together to develop children's palliative care services in accordance with the national children's palliative care policy. The Department of Health and the HSE are both project sponsors of work currently under way in Trinity College Dublin on enhancing children's palliative care in Ireland. The Department of Health is also commissioning an evaluation of the 2009 national

policy on children's palliative care. The evaluation will review and assess the implementation of the 2019 children's palliative care policy and identify the areas of progress along with any gaps which may need to be considered in future policy development. Findings from both these studies will inform evidence-based policy decisions in the development of the national children's palliative care policy and assist with national service planning.

The Deputy has highlighted what the LauraLynn hospice does. It is an incredible foundation and organisation. It provides a service that can never be replaced, certainly on behalf of the State, to families and children right across Ireland. If there is positivity to be taken from that response, it is that the Deputy has seen how the spending profile has gone year on year. It has increased significantly year on year as per that response. The submission LauraLynn has made this year is being taken seriously and is being considered. I would be pushing with the Minister for Health that it would get all it is asking for, with the hope it would get a significant increase in funding again.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I thank the Minister of State for acknowledging the great work the hospice does. I should have led by saying I remember that a few years ago, I heavily lobbied the then Minister for public expenditure - I think it was Michael McGrath at the time - about Marymount hospice, which does phenomenal work in Cork. It is now fully funded in the area of staff. An arrangement was done with section 38 and section 39 workers. It is now fully funded as an adult hospice. Going forward, the care delivered by the LauraLynn foundation deserves the same treatment that the Marymount hospice received a number of years ago when that agreement was made. I reiterate that generally, when it comes to illnesses in children, they tend to be rare diseases and conditions. They appear to be more complex. There are effects on siblings and the family, and life must go on while all of this is happening. They must continue to attend school and do the normal day-to-day things we all take for granted. The care they provide is in many ways more acute than other comparatives. I reiterate my call for the funding. It is one of the genuine asks that will be made. I also mention the children's palliative care policy, which the Minister of State referenced in his response. The only thing that gives me concern is that they are on about reviewing the 2009 children's palliative care document. The programme for Government commits to a new care policy, and not a review of an old one. I hope that will be reflected in the Minister's work ahead.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: We will get clarity on whether it will be a review or a brand-new policy. The Deputy mentioned some good examples. He has been an advocate for all of the organisations he mentioned. We know he has been championing the highlighting of rare diseases, especially among children, over this term and the previous term. I refer again to Cancer Connect. A number of years ago it received no funding from the State, and now it does. He mentioned Marymount, which is now completely funded by the State. All of these are going in the right direction. The current funding for LauraLynn is €3.3 million. The ask is €5.3 million. It is a significant increase, but the amazing comfort, care and attention it gives to families and children who find themselves in these situations is extraordinary. Therefore, any ask should be taken seriously, and the Deputy has put the case well today.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 4.19 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 4.24 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 4.19 p.m. and resumed at 4.24 p.m.

Developer Profits Transparency Bill 2023: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Rory Hearne: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am delighted to move this Bill. I will start by thanking Deputy Cian O'Callaghan and his parliamentary assistant, Jack Sweeney, and my own parliamentary assistant, Ellen O'Doherty, for their work on this Bill. It is a privilege to bring this Bill before the House on Second Stage; it is my first Bill before the Dáil. It is very apt that it is the Developer Profits Transparency Bill.

The issue that is to hand and why we are bringing forward this Bill is that house prices are completely out of control. We have seen house prices rise year after year. We have seen a double-digit increase in prices whereby house prices are now completely out of reach for most ordinary people in this country. What we are proposing in the Bill is something very straightforward. It is that developers and private builders who are building homes and receive a State subsidy, specifically in relation to the shared equity scheme, are required to publish profit and loss accounts. It is a very straightforward request, and a very straightforward piece of legislation. It is a very common-sense Bill because the State is giving significant funding to private builders, private developers and private investors, and when the State is using public money - taxpayers' money - we need to ensure there is absolute value for money achieved with that investment.

The context of this, of course, is that we have a huge debate ongoing about the viability of the delivery of housing and whether it is viable to build housing in this country for the private market and the private sector. We have seen the argument made by the various construction interests, developer interests and investor interests that there is this very significant viability gap. Figures have been put on it of between €100,000, €150,000 and €200,000 depending on how high the apartment development is going to go. However, if we are really honest here, there is no actual clarity about what the viability gap is because we have not seen the evidence even from those who are putting forward the claims. We have seen estimates depending on certain projects, but we have seen no real independent analysis of what this viability gap is. We can deconstruct the argument around viability even further when we question what viability means. If we are honest again, what viability means is profitability because the question that the developers in the private sector are asking is this: are they making sufficient profit to deliver housing? Then, we have to peel that back further and ask why we are making policy that uses public money essentially to increase the profits of the private market. This is the fundamental question. We are not necessarily achieving value for money, and we are certainly not achieving genuinely affordable housing.

What we are trying to do with this Bill is bring transparency. We are trying to bring transparency to the housing market, particularly where the State is playing a significant role in that market by subsidising development, contributing to the ability of people to buy a home and providing funds to developers who are building homes. While the Bill is restricted to the shared equity scheme, we are bringing it forward in the hope that this is extended further in time. Wherever public subsidies are going to the private sector, there should be transparency. In this Bill, we are not arguing against private development or, in this instance, the role of State subsidies to the private sector. While we are opposed to that in principle, in this case, we are putting forward a very straightforward Bill that provides for transparency in the amount of

profit private developers are making, where they are receiving a State subsidy in the shared equity scheme and that contribution is being made to the viability of their development.

The Government has said it is all in favour of transparency, for example, in the grocery sector and food. When it comes to the economy generally, or the cost-of-living crisis, the Government has supported the arguments around transparency and the need for it. Our simple question is: why do we not then have transparency in relation to the State contributing to and subsidising the building of homes by the private sector? It seems a very reasonable, common-sense request in the legislation that is being put forward.

The reason we think it is very important is the evidence shows that in the limited amount of information we get from developers, for example, the public accounts of the two large developers Cairn and Glenveagh, shows they are making hundreds of millions of profit every year. Hundreds of millions of profit is being made. If just two companies are making that much, how much is being made across this country in house sales? We know significant amounts of money must be added to the cost of housing by profit being taken out. Surely, we should know how much that is to make an assessment and to discuss as a society whether it is right that people trying to buy a home are being squeezed more and more, are being told the State has to put in more money and that people have to pay more money because it is not viable to build a home. In actual fact, what is happening is an increase. That money is going to increasing profits to shareholders, including those of the two companies I named, some of which are international. These profits are going to international wealth funds. The money the State is putting in to build homes is being channelled into international funds and not necessarily to delivering affordable housing. There is a real, fundamental problem in this approach to housing and its delivery.

The other reason we need transparency is there is an issue around what Dr. Lorcan Sirr again set out in *The Irish Times* today, which is regulatory capture and who is making our housing policy. It appears that developers and investor funds, and their lobbyists, are making our housing policy. They are the ones who are being listened to. I tried to dig into this. I put in a freedom of information request specifically relating to IRES REIT, the Irish real estate investment trust, which is now one of Ireland's biggest corporate landlords, on, for example, how many times it had met officials, or members of the Department of housing or the Government. The lobbying register states that this year, IRES REIT met an adviser in the Department of housing. Yet, the freedom of information request states there are no records of any such meeting. I would like the Minister, and his representative here today, to answer that question. How on the one hand is IRES REIT putting on the lobbying register that it is meeting advisers from the Department of housing and when I requested that under freedom of information, it comes back and states there are no records of any such meeting? It does not make sense to me because there are lots of records on the lobbying register of IRES REIT meeting officials. There are lots of records on the lobbying register of Pat Farrell, on behalf of Irish Institutional Property, meeting various Government Ministers and the Taoiseach. Why are we hiding? Why is the level of lobbying that is going on being hidden by this Government? That is why we need transparency.

People have a right to know who is making our housing policy and who is influencing it. That is the whole point. We are supposed to be moving away from a politics that was driven by developers. We know that corruption, which went back to Charlie Haughey and Bertie

Ahern, resulted in crashing the economy. Now, we are seeing that lobbying and influence being hidden. What has happened is we see the changes to apartment sizes, the increase in rents, a tax break for developers, potentially, and huge amounts of public money being funnelled into the private market to investors and developer funds - for what? This is what we need to know. Is it going to more and more profits? I believe it is. Why are house prices so high? They are high because of the profit gouging going on within the private market.

This comes back to the fundamental problem in our approach to housing, which is we do not deliver it as a public good and a human right. The State outsourced it and handed it over to the private market, hence we are completely dependent on the private market to tell us what it costs to build a home. The State has not got a clue how much it is being overcharged and how much it is costing. We have this constant debate about a viability gap that is in actual fact a profitability claim and demand by developers and investor funds, which have us over a barrel and are essentially bankrolling the State and the public because we do not have our own State capacity to deliver housing. That is what we should have. At a minimum, we should have transparency. We should know how much profit is being made by State funding of private market homes. That will help us understand more how much of house prices are profits and how much are genuinely rising costs overall.

There is a fundamental problem and the Minister of State knows this. The housing market is completely out of whack. It is going to drive us into another crash. It is not sustainable. Who can afford these house prices? There is also what is being built in terms of rental. The Government will funnel more money into investor funds and allow them increase rents to market rents, so they build more build-to-rent property, but we do not need more build-to-rents. We need affordable homes that people can buy. That is what public money should be used for. We need transparency around that and the amount of lobbying and regulatory capture is going on. That is why we have brought this Bill forward.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): The Government will oppose this Bill, but I welcome the opportunity to speak about the role of Government measures to support access to affordable housing and assist those aspiring to buy their own home. We continue to deliver the first affordable homes in a generation and are supporting increasing supply in this area. Quarter 1 of 2025 has seen the continued strong performance of the various affordable housing pathways, with affordable delivery increasing by over 49% over levels achieved in the same quarter of 2024.

This Bill proposes to put additional financial reporting requirements in place for contractors who receive funds from the first home scheme by amending section 41 of the Affordable Housing Act 2021. The description of the Bill refers to property developers who are in receipt of State subsidies, while the proposed amendment to the legislation refers specifically to the first home scheme. It remains unclear whether the intention is to apply the reporting requirements to developers who sell new homes to home buyers availing of the first home scheme, or to the wider array of State supports, but I think Deputy Hearne clarified that it would start with the first home scheme and the intention is to broaden it to the wider affordable housing scope.

Either way, the Government strongly opposes the Bill for several reasons. First, the Bill seems to misunderstand the nature of the first home scheme. The first home scheme is a commercial and independent designated activity company. Section 41 provides the statutory basis for the Minister for housing to contribute funds to this special purpose vehicle for the purpose of operating and administering the equity scheme. The scheme aims to bridge the gap for first-time buyers and other eligible households between their deposit and mortgage and the price of a new home. It does so by providing an equity share payment directly to the eligible household to support their purchase of a home in exchange for a percentage ownership in the property. This equity share can then be purchased by the household based on their preferences for buying back the equity share over time. The first home scheme holds a stake in the home until the home buyer buys it back or the home is sold. The value of the payment is up to 30% of the value of the new home or 20% if used in conjunction with help to buy. There are maximum price ceilings of between €350,000 and €500,000, depending on the dwelling type and location, with the aim of targeting the support at the most suitable dwellings. The first home scheme is also available for self-builds and for tenant-in-situ properties where the tenant has received a notice of termination because the landlord is putting the property on the market. The equity payment is paid directly to the home buyer to pool with their deposit, their mortgage, and the use of the help to buy scheme, if applicable, to pay the seller of the new home. The scheme does not make a direct payment to the developer but rather supports the home buyer in the purchase of the house on the private market.

Seeking to track developers who sell new homes to home buyers availing of the first home scheme, and mandating these developers to publish annual financial information in order to be allowed to sell homes to users of the scheme, makes no sense. In addition, this could disincentivise developers from selling homes to users of the first home scheme to avoid triggering onerous additional reporting requirements. The Government is in the business of promoting the use of the first home scheme to support the delivery of affordable housing - not putting in place new barriers to its use.

Second, the proposed Bill would be extremely complex to legislate for and implement. The Bill refers to a "contractor" which is not currently a specific legal entity. A contractor could be a sole trader, a small private company or a large public company. While these specific types of entities are defined in legislation for purposes such as tax, financial reporting and so on, there is no such definition for a contractor. Creating such a legal definition would be extremely challenging and difficult to implement.

Third, there is already adequate provision under company law regarding the financial information that companies are required to disclose on an annual basis. While some "contractors" may not be legally classified as companies which are obliged to provide financial information, there is a good reason these onerous financial reporting requirements have not been applied to other smaller enterprises in our economy. So far, I have referred to the application of the Bill to the first home scheme, to which the proposed amendment would apply in practice.

Government also opposes the principle of mandating new financial reporting requirements for developers who are drawing on an array of Government supports aiming to stimulate the supply of housing. We remain fully committed to the successful implementation of the suite

of housing measures and reforms set out in the programme for Government and under Housing for All. The forthcoming national housing plan will reaffirm and strengthen this commitment.

Many developers producing housing at scale are likely companies registered under the Companies Act 2014. Such companies are already obliged to submit annual financial data to the Companies Registration Office, and Deputy Hearn alluded to that. These financial statements are publicly available through the Companies Registration Office open data platform free of charge. As with the first home scheme, creating barriers to the private sector's engagement with Government schemes which aim to increase the supply of affordable homes or increase the viability of apartments for sale would be detrimental to the supply of new housing and to the interests of those seeking to purchase or rent it.

Homeownership is very clearly positioned in Housing for All as being at the heart of Government's housing policy. That plan included a comprehensive suite of measures which are both legislatively underpinned and fully funded, to better support first-time buyers to purchase homes on the private market more affordably, two of which are the help to buy and the first home scheme. Use of the first home scheme has been growing steadily after the initial bedding in period. Under this scheme, more than 7,600 buyers have been approved, and nearly 3,700 homes have been bought to the end of quarter 2 of 2025. In May of this year, Government approved an additional €30 million State commitment to the scheme, extending it to June 2027, bringing the total State commitment to the scheme to €370 million, matched 50:50 by the participating banks. The total commitment across all participants is, as such, €740 million. There is a programme for Government commitment to work with the participating banks to extend the scheme to 2030. The scheme will be key in supporting the ambitious delivery target of an average of 15,000 starter home supports per year over the next five years.

The help to buy scheme has seen more than 58,800 claims approved since the scheme began in 2017. The scheme refunds income tax and deposit interest retention tax paid by first-time new house purchasers with up to €30,000 payable to support the accumulation of a deposit and the purchase of a new home. Local authorities are delivering affordable homes with funding of €560 million from the affordable housing fund to support the delivery of more than 6,200 affordable purchase and cost rental homes by 22 local authorities. The affordable purchase scheme is based on an equity share model, similar to the first home scheme. The local authority held stake can be brought back at any point over a 40 year period after purchase or redeemed on sale if the property is sold.

The impact of these supports on first-time buyers can be observed in the data. More than 122,800 first-time buyer mortgages have been drawn down in the five years to end quarter 2 of 2025. Some 6,488 first-time buyer mortgages were drawn down in quarter 2 of 2025, up 3% year-on-year, while rolling 12-month drawdowns for first-time buyers increased almost 6% year-on-year to almost 26,900.

Our programme for Government commitment to deliver an average of 15,000 starter homes per year will be reflected in the upcoming national housing plan and will further drive the availability of affordable housing options for first-time buyers. The croí cónaithe cities scheme supports the building of apartments for sale to owner-occupiers. It aims to bridge the current viability gap between the cost of building apartments and the market sale price in Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford. It allows for a subsidy of up to €120,000 per apartment or €144,000 in certain cases in regional cities where lower market prices results in a larger

viability gap. These subsidies render the development viable and the subsidy is then passed on to the purchaser in the form of fair market price for the apartment. With apartments already being delivered with the support of the scheme, and more apartments approved for support in construction, the Minister, Deputy Browne, issued a new call for applications in June of this year. The Government has committed to continuing the scheme to support the construction of apartments for owner-occupiers.

We have made a lot of progress in the past five years with the delivery of some 140,000 new homes since July 2020. Government is acutely aware of the need to build on this progress and act urgently to create the conditions to more than double this output to 300,000 over the next five years. We have been clear that, while the State will continue to direct unprecedented levels of public resources at housing, it is also essential that the right environment is created for greater levels of private investment to flow to support the step change in housing supply which this country needs. The environment for the private sector to invest in and efficiently deliver new housing is complex. It requires certainty, stability and predictability. It involves the supply of zoned serviced land, an efficient planning system, the timely delivery of infrastructure, the availability of adequate development funding at a reasonable price, the cost of construction and the adoption of the most efficient technologies and practices, and the additional charges levied by the State on the activity. Improving the environment for the development of new houses has benefits for both the delivery of public and private housing in terms of costs, efficiency and output. For the private sector to deliver, it needs to have a viable product where dwellings can be delivered at a cost in line with what people can afford with the expectation of a reasonable profit for the developer. Over time, an improved environment and healthy competition should result in improved affordability in the private market for renters and owner-occupiers.

There is substantial activity already under way aiming to improve the environment for housing delivery. The revised national housing plan set out the increase in zoned land necessary to support the increased housing targets. The ongoing implementation of the Planning and Development Act 2024 will ensure delays currently constraining supply will be reduced and more timely decisions on planning applications. The housing activation office will bring a critical focus to the provision of enabling infrastructure while the national development plan has provided significant additional funding for infrastructure investment to unlock more housing supply. The recently announced changes to apartment guidelines will help to reduce the delivery cost for apartments, which are a strategically critical component for the private rental sector.

The rental sector reforms announced earlier this year are envisaged to stimulate investment as well as extending protections for renters. The upcoming national housing plan will present the renewed environment for housing delivery which the Government is putting in place, including additional supports to complement the ones I have mentioned today. This will be the environment in which all stakeholders will then work towards delivering the step change in housing supply which the country needs over the next period. I therefore urge colleagues from across the House to oppose this Bill. It makes no sense in the context of promoting the use of the first home scheme by first-time buyers and other eligible households to support them in the purchase of a home. Creating barriers to the private sector's engagement with such schemes would be detrimental to the supply of new housing and to the interests of those seeking to purchase or rent it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I call Deputy Rice, I welcome our visitors in the Visitors Gallery. I give a special welcome to Mrs. Hearne, mother of Deputy Rory Hearne, and his three beautiful children Aisling, Keelan and Erin. They are most welcome to see their daddy introduce legislation. Well done and I wish everybody a good afternoon.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I, too, welcome the visitors in the Gallery. I congratulate my colleague Deputy Ahern on introducing his first of legislation in the House. It is a significant achievement and great to see.

As we all know, housing is the biggest challenge facing the country. We need to consider all measures possible to address this challenge. Part of that involves increased transparency and accountability, better data and more information. That is what we are try to achieve here. I am disappointed but not surprised that the Government is opposing this legislation and an increase in transparency. It has never had an interest in greater transparency in this area.

I have to dispute some of the arguments put forward. The Minister of State stated that it is legally challenging. Maybe he should engage with the Attorney General's office. I am sure some of the lawyers who work for the Department could overcome the challenges - if the Minister of State thinks they exist - and draft legislation

On the broader issues relating to housing, none of the Department's housing schemes are working. There are affordable houses in Cork city that cost €400,000. On what planet is a house costing €400,000 deemed to be affordable by the State? The Minister needs to reconsider the position. We need greater transparency in the costs around housing and around the profits made by developers. Tat is what we are trying to achieve here.

Sometimes when I hear Government representatives talk about housing, I wonder whether they have the same type of constituents that I have. Do they get the same emails that I get? We have record levels of homelessness, people in desperate situations and house prices and rents are soaring, When measures are put forward to improve things, those in government oppose them and present matters in a way to make it look as if things are going great. The narrative from the Government needs to change. It needs to be more reflective of what is happening for citizens and reflect the desperate situations people are in. The Government would do well to engage with the Opposition on our proposals and suggestions on how we can progress matters because that is the only way we will get to solutions.

Two weeks ago, the Minister for Justice, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, stated that if the Social Democrats bring forward legislation, the Government would give it serious consideration and would engage with it. I would like to see a mentality of actually engaging on legislation, of us trying to progress it together and of trying to put forward solutions, because what happens every time we bring something forward at present is that it is shot down by the Government. It opposes everything across the board. Whether it is a motion or a Bill, the Government opposes it and does not try to work with us to bring forward real solutions for people and improve things.

As I stated earlier today, there is real lack of Government legislation. We have statements after statements but no legislation. More Government time could be devoted to bringing forward legislation and to progressing some of Bills of this nature that are put forward. I published a Bill last week. I would like to work with the Government to get it over the line.

We need to work together on solutions for the people of Ireland. As stated at the outset, housing is the biggest issue facing the country. We need to put forward solutions. Greater transparency is part of that.

I again commend my colleague on bringing forward this legislation.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I very much welcome the Bill and thank our colleagues in the Social Democrats for bringing forward an interesting approach to ensuring transparency. It is an understatement to say it is a real pity that the Government is opposing the Bill.

The reality is that the State is handing over billions of euro every year to developers in this State in respect of Part V housing, affordable purchase houses, cost rental and acquisitions. However, yet we have no clear oversight as to whom we are engaging with or, indeed, an ability to understand the astronomical figures that are charged to the State by developers for these desperately needed homes.

I would like to see this Bill form part of a wider framework of ensuring a commitment to decent working standards and a lack of gouging on the part of those who deal with the State in terms of procurement and how it spends its money. We do not have good transparency in certain sectors of the State. That is the reality. For many years, my party has talked about the problem of unlimited liability. The Company Law Review Group looked at this matter many years ago. People are selling goods and services to the State but we have no idea of who really we are dealing with or their profit margins. We also do not have a level playing field when it comes to negotiating on cost because we cannot see what kind of money those to whom I refer are making. That needs to change.

With regards to housing specifically, I mentioned the various ways in which the State has to deal with developers week in, week out. I see it in my constituency of Dublin Central. I welcome that it seems as if the housing units at O'Devaney Gardens may all be social, affordable or cost rental but, of course, the State is paying an absolute fortune for that. Part of the cost in this regard is passed on in terms of the prices those who will be going through the affordable purchase scheme will pay.

On Part V, the city councils are routinely paying well in excess of €500,000 of houses. In one instance, €717,000 was paid by Dublin City Council for a two-bedroom unit under Part V. There is a fundamental problem in that the State effectively has no choice in desperate circumstances but to hand over the money. At a time when we talk so much about efficiency and value for money in respect of the public finances and of trying to battle waste, there is a large amount of waste in the context of what the State is spending. We are caught in a bind whereby we have to hand this money over in order to provide homes and put a roof over people's heads. That comes at a king's ransom to the State.

The other key part is that progress on the development of parts of our city has been hugely held up as a result of land hoarding by developers over the past decade. That is partly because of a collapse in international finance coming in to developers in this country; it is also partly because of greed and the massive return on investment for doing no work in the context of purchasing a site, sitting on it and being able to sell it on at a later date. When we look at the significant number of planning permissions in Dublin and across the country that have not been commenced, we can see that there is a real issue. In the first quarter of this year in the Dublin

City Council area, of the 25,905 units for which planning permission had been obtained, work on 14,701 had not been commenced. The Planning and Development Act gives developers the opportunity to get their act together and extend planning permissions for up to three additional years provided an environmental impact assessment is not required. The reality is, however, that sufficient force has not been used by the Government to deal with those who are hoarding land in our city and forcing prices up. The Government's mantra has been that if there is more supply, prices are going to go down. Yet, we on these benches all know that is not the case because of the way that supply is drip fed into the market, because of the way in which units are developed and because of the lack of transparency in developers' dealings with a State that is desperate to try to provide more housing.

The other key issue here is that the croí cónaithe scheme has failed. When you look at the Government plan to try to develop units to date, what has been an effective handout to developers via croí cónaithe has not worked. Only one fifth of what was promised in 2022 has been delivered. There has to be a rethink about how housing is delivered. Of course, those of us on these benches are clear that we need a State-led approach to housing as opposed to being in the thrall of developers and having developer-led housing. The Land Development Agency has been underutilised. We have approximately 33 acres across Dublin Central on which, potentially, approximately 4,500 homes could be built. However, we are seeing very little progress in that space. It needs political will, and we are not seeing that from Government. When the Minister of State's party leader responds to us in respect of housing, we hear little from him with regard to how the Land Development Agency and local authorities are being pushed to progress work on sites.

5 o'clock

This is a very welcome Bill. It is obviously just one of the many actions required to ensure that the State is much more informed when it comes to engaging with developers. We are very clear that developers are part of the landscape of how housing is developed in this country. However, it needs to be to a much lesser extent and in a much more even and balanced way. Right now, the State is effectively being forced to hand over money for units in circumstances where it has very little insight into or oversight of the true cost involved in developing those units.

An Ceann Comhairle: As there are no other speakers indicating, I call on the Minister of State to make his summation.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I also welcome Deputy Hearne's family to the Public Gallery, although I am not sure if they are still up there. I had a sense that he was a lot more measured in his approach today. He was a lot more tempered. Usually, he does not hold back and gives it both barrels. He is clearly on his best behaviour, although I had better not speak too soon. I appreciate that this is his first time introducing legislation in the House. It is an important day for him in that regard. I welcome everyone who is in the Gallery.

I thank all Members for their contributions. Housing is a cross-sectoral societal challenge that has a real impact on people's lives. Solving this challenge is one of the Government's top priorities. Within that, we are placing a special emphasis on supporting home ownership and

affordability for those seeking to buy or rent homes. As I outlined earlier, the Government has put several measures in place to support access to affordable housing and assist those aspiring to buy their own homes. On the ownership side, much of what is happening involves providing financial support directly to prospective home buyers through a payment or by means of the State taking an equity stake in the property that can be redeemed by the buyer in the future. This support can be coupled with a home buyer's deposit and mortgage to enable them to achieve the price of their new home. On the rental side, these measures are about addressing the viability challenges of producing developments which can provide cost rental accommodation and rents below the market value. In the programme for Government, we committed to embedding cost rental as a permanent fixture in the housing system.

Putting in place barriers to the private sector engaging in these schemes would be totally counter to the goal of these supports, which is to increase the supply of affordable housing for sale or rent. In any event, a company registered under the Companies Act 2014 is obliged to submit an annual return and financial statement to the Companies Registration Office, CRO. These financial statements are available through the CRO's open data portal free of charge. Most developers of scale are likely to fall under the Act's definition of a company. The Government's longer term ambition is to create an environment for housing supply where greater affordability arises naturally from a greater supply of housing and greater efficiency in the development of that housing.

I will now address some of the comments of Deputies during the course of the debate. In response to Deputy Rice, we see the exact same challenges in Cork South-West. We understand the difficulties with affordability and access to housing. We are not turning a blind eye to those issues. We are completely aware of them, which is why we are trying to deliver at scale.

Deputy Sherlock seems to think that it is only those on the Opposition benches who believe that the State should lead on the supply of housing, but that is absolutely not the case. The Government is by far the biggest investor in the delivery of housing in this State, with up to €7 billion spent.

The Bill misinterprets the purpose of the first home scheme. We must remember that this is a support that goes directly to the buyer. It goes to the buyer in order to facilitate the purchase of a home; it does not go directly to the developer. In this House, we constantly hear about barriers to delivery in housing. One of those barriers is red tape. Members talk about the onerous red tape that all sectors are required to deal with and we are constantly called on to reduce that red tape. Another level of onerous accounting or reporting would disincentivise the uptake and use of the first home scheme which we absolutely do not want to see. As already stated, there is a requirement for larger developers to publish their accounts with the Companies Registration Office. As a result, the transparency that is being called for is already there.

Deputy Hearne suggested that we could simply consult with the Attorney General about contractors. First, it is not defined as an entity. Then we have to think about the ramifications. There are contractors involved right across everything to do with the delivery of housing. Does what is being suggested refer to subcontractors such as, for example, those who bring plant onto a site or carpenters? Where does it end? I could see a situation where the introduction of a requirement for additional onerous paperwork would completely stall the delivery of housing at scale. For all of those reasons, the Government will be opposing this legislation.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I am not sure if the Minister of State was baiting me in order to try to get me to go further, but I will try to remain on my best behaviour. Seriously, though, I am very disappointed with the Government's opposition to the Bill. What is particularly disappointing is the lack of serious engagement on the legislation. As my colleague outlined, we have put forward solutions. While the Government might not completely agree with the Bill, the core idea and proposal it contains is that there would be transparency in the housing market where the State is intervening and subsidising directly using taxpayers' money. That is a very reasonable proposal, which is why it is deeply disappointing to see the immediate opposition to the legislation.

The Minister of State said that the Government opposes the principle of mandating new financial reporting requirements for developers who are drawing on an array of State supports. Why is the Government opposing that principle? The Minister of State set out different reasons but they do not really stand up. Why would it be significant red tape for developers and investors who are receiving State supports, regardless of whether the money is going to the home purchase or themselves, and benefiting from them? Why is there an issue as to transparency around their accounts? The Government opposing such a minor request for transparency is deeply disappointing.

When we look at the scale of the housing crisis, one of the big issues is the profits that are being extracted and the scale at which they are being extracted. It is the latter that is contributing to higher house prices. Why should we not at least have transparency around it? Why does transparency have to be a barrier? It does not have to be a barrier. Surely it is reasonable to request that developers and investors who are making tens if not hundreds of millions of euro in profits provide open-book accounts. In fact, one developer has said that he is willing to provide such accounts. What is the problem here? What is the issue? What is the Government afraid of? What is wrong with requiring private sector developers to provide open-book accounts when they are in receipt of State subsidies? It seems a very reasonable request.

The Minister of State said that home ownership is positioned at the heart of the Housing for All policy, but what is the reality? A total of 3,300 new houses were built in Dublin city last year but only 155 were bought by households. In Cork, the situation is similar. Last year, nine out of the 313 new apartments that were built in Cork city were sold to households. Of 856 new houses built under the various schemes, just 44 were bought by households. Investor funds and the State are buying up a lot, if not the majority, of the new homes being built in our cities. There is a fundamental problem with or dysfunction in our housing market in the context of how it is operating and the role of the State within it. If we are going to solve this crisis, surely we need to know what is going on. It was my understanding that a commitment to transparency was something that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael were behind. Unfortunately, it seems that is not the case.

I want to draw attention to one of the schemes that was mentioned. The aim behind *croí cónaithe* city scheme is to activate the 80,000 planning permissions that have not proceeded to construction. To date, there have been 11 developments under the scheme and 1,100 apartments approved. This low take-up really calls into question the viability-gap narrative, particularly in light of what is available under the scheme. Developers can get €120,000 per apartment or €144,000 in certain cases. The developer gets €120,000 or €144,000 per

apartment with no requirement for affordability. Rather, there is just this statement of a fair market price, whatever that means. We know there are no fair market prices in the housing market at the moment. There are real questions here that are not being answered by the Government. If the croí cónaithe scheme is not working, which it is clearly not, then why are we pumping more money into it? Why are we talking about tax breaks? Why should there not be, at a minimum, accountability and transparency over how much money our developers and investors are making when the State is giving them €120,000 per apartment? It seems to me a very reasonable request.

The Government's housing plan, with these demand-side subsidies for developers being implemented, is utterly failing to get to grips with the housing crisis, which is now a social catastrophe. The cases we hear that come to both mine and my colleagues' office, as well as to the Minister of State's office, are absolutely heartbreaking. We are absolutely failing to give our young people in this country a future in Ireland. Many of those who would be involved in building homes, teaching our children and working in our hospitals are leaving the country. It is absolutely unacceptable and we do not accept it.

There is still a lack of ambition and correct policies within the Government to solve this crisis. We have put forward solutions. The Social Democrats' homes for Ireland State savings scheme would provide additional funding for both builders and the private sector by leveraging the billions of euro that are in savings accounts and channelling them into an affordable housing fund. In our alternative budget, we set out a State construction company that would directly hire the builders and all the trades we need to build homes. We would set up modular factories around the country to accelerate the delivery of homes. These are ideas and solutions we could implement to add capacity.

In the context of active land management, we could use the Land Development Agency to compulsory purchase. All this land the Government is going to zone will be flipped and speculated upon. Why do we not do what the Netherlands does? The state buys that land, develops and masterplans it, puts in the infrastructure and then allows builders to come in and contract. It would radically reduce the cost and prices of housing.

These are radical ideas we need to actually solve the housing crisis and build affordable housing, which is still missing in the housing plan. The Government talks about 15,000 starter homes as being its key affordable housing measure. What is a starter home? Surely, we should be looking for genuinely affordable housing. This is why we need transparency. It is deeply disappointing that the Government is opposing this Bill, but we will continue to push this and other solutions to get transparency and affordable housing.

An Ceann Comhairle: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta Hearne. Cuirim críoch leis an díospóireacht.

Question put.

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 8 October 2025.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 5.14 p.m. go dtí 1 p.m. Dé Máirt, an 7 Deireadh Fómhair 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 5.14 p.m. until 1 p.m. on Tuesday, 7 October 2025.