



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 9 Deireadh Fómhair 2025

Thursday, 9 October 2025

Chuaigh an Leas-Cheann Comhairle i gceannas ar 10.23 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Legislative Measures

1. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration if he will support the introduction of protection orders for victims of sexual violence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [54195/25]

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Minister may know that I introduced a Bill to the House in June, entitled the Victims of Sexual Violence Civil Protection Orders Bill. It was drafted by my office in response to discussions we held with a number of victims and survivors of sexual violence, who made it clear to me that having a provision to protect them after the release of the perpetrator of their attack would have a profound positive impact. Is the Minister inclined to support the Bill when it comes before the House?

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank Deputy Carthy for his question. I did indeed have an opportunity to read the Victims of Sexual Violence Civil Protection Orders Bill he introduced to the House on 26 June. Deputy Carthy's Bill seeks to provide that at the same time as somebody is convicted of a serious sexual offence on indictment the court would impose an order restraining the person convicted of the offence from approaching the victim. It is legislation I will keep under consideration. Before I make a conclusive decision on it, I have to take into account the legislation that is there at present. I am sure he will agree there is no point in enacting legislation that simply repeats what is there in our statutory framework already.

Under Part 5 of the Criminal Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2023 there is capacity for an order to be granted by the court restraining an individual from approaching or coming within a certain distance of other individuals. This legislation was designed and passed as stalking legislation but it is a statutory mechanism that is in place.

I should also point out we already have in our legal system protection orders in the context of domestic violence, which would cover sexual offences in many respects. Under section 10 of the Domestic Violence Act 2018 there is a provision for the granting of protection orders. Similar to the safety order, it restrains a person, meaning the respondent remains in the home but is ordered not to use violence, threats or molestations. It imposes protections on the victim.

I should also point out the Sex Offenders Act is in place and it provides for specific requirements regarding somebody who has been convicted of one of the offences set out in Deputy Carthy's legislation.

Deputy Matt Carthy: While I welcome the statement by the Minister that he will at least consider the legislation, I can tell him, from speaking to victims and survivors with real-life experience, that there is a legislative gap in place. What this means in reality is that for many survivors of sexual violence their fear intensifies the longer the sentence of the person convicted of the offence goes on. They fear that on the release of the perpetrator they could end up having an encounter. They have told me about the impact this has on their lives and how they feel they are on a countdown to the release. In some cases these are people who have exerted control over them for many years as part of the abuse. In some cases there is genuine fear that a perpetrator would seek retribution.

Does the Minister agree we need to empower victims and survivors of sexual violence and help them as much as possible to have a sense of safety and security to rebuild their lives? At the moment of the court case there is an opportunity to put in place a protection that will last beyond release.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I agree with Deputy Carthy when he says we need to empower victims. One issue I may have in respect of his legislation is that the proposal is that at the time of conviction the protection order would be placed on the individual. If we think about it, under the legislation Deputy Carthy proposes the protection order would be put in place at the same time that an individual is sentenced to ten to 15 years imprisonment for a very serious sexual offence, but it would only come into effect at the time the individual leaves prison, which could be ten, 11 or 12 years later.

Conditional release and terms of release can probably be better set at the time the person is being released. Most victims would be satisfied when somebody gets a lengthy sentence and they know they will spend a lengthy period in prison. The victim has to be informed when the person will be released. As well as this, we should ensure there are conditions placed on the individual from the date of release. I am concerned that imposing these restrictions at the time of conviction may not take into account the full circumstances that apply at the time of release.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Minister is on the record as acknowledging the trauma often involved for victims and survivors going through the judicial process in the first place. The system essentially makes it necessary for them to go through it again to seek a protection order on the release of the perpetrator. This is why this legislation allows the victim and the State to put in place the protections at a much earlier stage. We have had many discussions on this. The committee was dealing with a miscellaneous provisions Bill last week and we heard victims again speak directly about the issue of counselling notes. This is something we need

to deal with. What should happen for a survivor is that conviction is day one of rebuilding their lives. If it is day one in rebuilding their lives but a clock is ticking in the victim's mind counting down to the perpetrator being released, creating genuine fear, the success that might have been is undone. Is the Minister amenable to at least allowing the Bill to pass First Stage and Second Stage so that we can deliberate on the nuances in committee?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I will give consideration to the Bill but I do not want to progress legislation that is unnecessary. In circumstances where a person gets a life sentence for a very serious sexual offence such as rape, when it comes to that person's release many years later, conditions of release will be imposed upon that person. Those conditions can direct that the person shall not go anywhere near the victim or that he or she shall stay away from a town where the victim has resided. I would not like the message to go out that there is no mechanism by which the State can put in place conditions after a person has been released. As I have said, I am concerned that the legislation the Deputy is suggesting imposes an obligation that would probably not kick in until seven, ten or 12 years later. I am happy to look at the imposition of controls on persons convicted of a sexual offence who are subject to immediate release, but such a mechanism already exists in the Sex Offenders Act, which imposes very strict obligations on those convicted of sexual offences.

An Garda Síochána

2. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the reforms of An Garda Síochána he will be encouraging the newly appointed Garda Commissioner to introduce. [54472/25]

Deputy Alan Kelly: What reforms is the Minister going to encourage the new Garda Commissioner to introduce? I will concentrate on financial controls and reform in An Garda Síochána. The Comptroller and Auditor General has issued a report about hundreds of thousands of euro being lost in connection with policing the Europa League final. Later today, my colleague Deputy Eoghan Kenny will meet with the Garda Síochána anti-corruption unit with regard to a senior garda having stayed in a very plush five-star hotel during the Biden visit, which obviously came at a serious cost to the taxpayer. What reforms is the Minister going to encourage the new Commissioner to introduce, particularly with regard to financial management and controls?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy Kelly. I will come to the issue he focused on, which was financial concerns within An Garda Síochána, but his general question was about the reforms I am going to encourage the new Commissioner to operate or continue with. I have had many engagements with him. One of the priorities I have emphasised to him, which is a priority of my own and of Government, is that I want to see greater Garda visibility. That means having more members recruited into the force and ensuring that, when people are recruited as members of An Garda Síochána, they are out in our community and that people get to see them. It is absolutely essential for safety and the perception of safety that there is widespread Garda visibility in our towns and cities. I have also emphasised that an area of reform I want to see is the greater use of technology by An Garda Síochána. I have secured considerable funding in the budget and in the national development plan to ensure that each

member of An Garda Síochána will have access to body cameras. I want to see these rolled out rapidly next year.

The Deputy focused on issues relating to Garda resources and what the Comptroller and Auditor General has correctly presented as a misuse of financial resources by An Garda Síochána. He highlighted how accommodation for the UEFA Europa League final last year was purchased at an excessive cost and that many of the rooms that were acquired at a total cost of up to €250,000 were not used. I have spoken to the Commissioner in respect of this matter. It is absolutely essential that, when significant resources are provided to An Garda Síochána, those resources are used carefully. Money used to acquire resources is precious and we need to ensure the money we provide to An Garda Síochána is used for the purpose of protecting the public and keeping them safe. I was very disappointed at what I saw in the Comptroller and Auditor General's report but I am pleased that the Commissioner and An Garda Síochána have accepted all of the recommendations contained within it. I do not believe we will see such a waste of money again.

Deputy Alan Kelly: On Deputy Kenny's meeting with the anti-corruption unit of An Garda Síochána later, I hope that internal promotions of those who are the subject of the ongoing investigation will not occur until that investigation is concluded. I am sure the Minister will agree. It is not just that, however. There is a culture. There was a contract worth €500,000 for holsters but these were defective and ended up being destroyed. There were other holsters that only had an issue with a strap but these were also destroyed at a cost to the taxpayer. Defective ammunition was also destroyed, at a cost of €160,000. A Walther LP500 air pistol for which An Garda Síochána had no use was bought at a cost of €2,000. Why does An Garda Síochána even have that pistol? It has nothing to do with policing. The Minister might investigate that. There is also a large-scale scanner that cost €44,250. With licence renewals, that cost comes to more than €93,000. It has never been used. There is obviously an issue in An Garda Síochána that needs to be taken up with the Commissioner. Changes need to happen with regard to financial management.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: In respect of the issue the Deputy highlighted regarding his colleague Deputy Kenny's meeting later today, I am obviously not going to get involved in any individual investigations that may be initiated by An Garda Síochána. With regard to the other items the Deputy highlighted, I cannot shy away from the fact that there have been examples of unwise expenditure in the past. I have emphasised to the Commissioner and will emphasise again here publicly that, when Accounting Officers are spending public money, they have to ensure that it is spent carefully on behalf of the people of the country. It is essential that we do not have a situation whereby money, a valuable resource, is provided from the budget to an Accounting Officer who does not spend it carefully and cautiously. The current Commissioner is very aware of the fact that any moneys he receives via Vote of the Oireachtas have to be spent very carefully and cautiously. However, we do need to provide resources to An Garda Síochána to improve technology. The Deputy has identified some instances where he says money has been wasted but there has also been expenditure on items that have been very beneficial to the Garda and to the public at large.

Deputy Alan Kelly: It is quite ironic that the Minister mentions improvements in IT. He will know that our automated fingerprinting system, AFIS, was said to be out of date in 2016. Some 17,000 sets of prints have been lost forever. God knows what impact that has had on policing and crime. That system has been out of date since 2016. At the time, replacing it was quoted at €20 million. It has been renewed every year at a cost of €5 million. Some €40 million has been spent on a system that has to be replaced. How is that a good use of taxpayers' money? How is it a good example of using money to solve crime when 17,000 sets of fingerprints have gone missing? The Minister is right; we need to update our IT system. Gardaí need that. However, how is it acceptable that the misuse of this amount of money, this inefficiency and this loss of potentially crime-solving data is continuously allowed to happen? Why was this not dealt with many years ago?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: When it comes to financial mismanagement in An Garda Síochána, my primary concern is highlighted by what is in the Comptroller and Auditor General's current report. I note the Deputy has referred to issues that took place back in 2016. They are of concern but my primary concern-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: They are still live.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: -----is to ensure that the issues identified in the Comptroller and Auditor General's report are confronted by senior Garda management.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Some 17,000 sets of fingerprints were lost.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The Deputy will have seen the response from the Garda Commissioner and senior Garda management. They accept the recommendations of the Comptroller and Auditor General. That is a very valuable constitutional office because those who are charged with spending public money must be aware that, if they mismanage the spending of that money, it will be exposed, discussed and debated in this House. I have emphasised to the Commissioner and senior management that they have to be extremely careful with moneys provided to them but the main portion of the money going into An Garda Síochána relates to pay, recruitment and numbers of persons within the force. That is money that is well spent. The technological advancements we are giving to the Garda such as body cameras, improvements to the fleet, helicopters and aircraft are all necessary for the people of Ireland to be kept safe by An Garda Síochána.

International Protection

3. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration if, following the issues identified in the annual report of the Comptroller and Auditor General regarding the management of international protection accommodation contracts, he will initiate a full and thorough look back review into the way in which public money has been spent on IPAS accommodation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [54196/25]

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Comptroller and Auditor General's annual report contains a chapter on asylum accommodation that details a litany of issues in respect of the management of contracts for IPAS accommodation. As the Minister of State will know, the State is due to spend approximately €1.2 billion on such accommodation this year. The report is what I would call a damning indictment in terms of due diligence and cost controls. Will the Government now initiate a thorough review of how public money has been spent on IPAS accommodation?

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Colm Brophy): My Department is taking action across all aspects of international protection accommodation to ensure we improve value for money, strengthen governance and compliance, and renegotiate contracts with providers. This forms part of the overall reform of the international protection system that is already working to speed up the processing of applications and move away from commercial provision to more State-owned accommodation. This reform will help to drive down costs. The Minister and I are absolutely committed to driving down the costs in this area.

My Department took over responsibility for international protection accommodation from 1 May last and has worked closely with the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General on carrying out an extensive review of costs and processes within the international protection accommodation system. This was published last week as part of the Comptroller and Auditor General's Report on the Accounts of the Public Services 2024. All recommendations in the report have been accepted and implemented by the Department, with one recommendation to be implemented in 2026.

The report examined overall processes and sampled 20 IPAS contracts. It acknowledges the extensive challenges posed to the State to source accommodation during what was an unprecedented period, namely from 2022 to 2024. During this period, over 45,000 additional international protection applicants arrived in Ireland. Prior to this, a typical three-year period would have seen close to 8,000 or 9,000. Today's standards of pre-contract assessment and negotiation could not be applied to accommodation between 2022 and 2024, basically because of the pace at which people were arriving.

While applications this year have, thankfully, reduced, they remain high compared with pre-2022 norms. This has given sufficient space to put in place greater controls over the IPAS accommodation portfolio. We have put a range of updated and strengthened systems and procedures in place and these are already beginning to have a genuine impact.

IPAS has put improved processes in place for appraisal, validation, contracting and payments. A new rate-card pricing structure is being applied to all new or renewing contracts, which has resulted in savings of over €52 million across 104 contracts since May of this year.

Deputy Matt Carthy: That was a long way of saying the Government does not plan to carry out a full review of every single contract. A full review is required. As the Minister of State rightly said, the Comptroller and Auditor General's report deals only with a sample of contracts. From this, it has found that pre-contract due diligence records were significantly incomplete. In more than a third of the cases examined, invoice rates were not clear and could not be verified as signed contracts were not available. There was clear evidence of substantial

overcharging in some instances, and the pre-payment checklist used by IPAS did not include a check to verify the correct capacity or occupancy.

The Minister of State cannot simply argue we will be doing what is required in the future and that we were under pressure in the past. This is about a substantial amount of public money, taxpayers' money. It has enriched a very small number of individuals and companies to the tune of millions of euro and in the process caused tension and anger across communities. As a result of the damning findings in the Comptroller and Auditor General's report, is anybody going to be held accountable? The only way somebody can be held accountable is if every single contract is examined for flaws. Without that, the public can have no confidence that there will be any transparency.

Deputy Colm Brophy: To outline the position again, we have accepted the recommendations in the Comptroller and Auditor General's report. We absolutely recognise them. We have put in place contract reviews designed to deliver genuine savings. We recognise that due to the surge that took place from 2022 to 2024, we were not in a position to have the relevant structures in place, but we now are and we are actually delivering genuine savings.

The most important point related to this has two aspects: first, we must ensure that, going forward, we have the contracts in place delivering savings; and second, reflecting the position we have taken and on which we are absolutely focused, we must move where possible to having State-owned services that actually deliver substantial savings rather than having commercial providers. These two steps combined will deliver much better value for money in the system, which is what we all want to see. In partnership with doing that, we are also looking at all those contracts as they come up, with a view to putting in place a new contract rate card that also delivers savings.

Deputy Matt Carthy: None of that is good enough. Every single week, we hear about another scandal in respect of an IPAS contract. Huge sums of money were paid to people with no track record and there is no explanation as to why this was the case. We do not get these revelations from the Minister of State's Department, by the way; it is usually journalists who give us information that is in the public interest and that we as a House should have control over. Take, for example, the most recent issue, that of Ryevale House in County Kildare. We found out through the media that the company in question, which has secured a substantial IPAS contract, cannot even provide water. In fact, according to newspaper reports it is alleged the company is actually robbing public water from a fire hydrant. How does that happen? How do we have circumstances in which somebody named by CAB as potentially involved in gangland crime can get an IPAS contract? How do we allow a system that sees a company move from having a café making a profit of €2,000 to paying the directors almost €5 million in wages? We need to ask these questions. If experience tells us anything, it is that if we do not tackle the misuse of public funds at source, with full transparency, mistakes will be repeated time and again.

Deputy Colm Brophy: As I have said to the Deputy, all contracts we are now putting in place have checks and balances in respect of tax clearance certificates.

Deputy Matt Carthy: How is the Ryevale House issue arising now?

Deputy Colm Brophy: We are totally transparent in publishing details of all payments made, and we do that regularly. We believe the contracts we are now putting in place are absolutely clear and deliver on some of the things the Deputy is asking about.

I understand that, in the case the Deputy mentioned, the water provision issue has been completely addressed and what he described is not happening at this point. However, it is important that contractors provide their service in the correct and proper way to the State. Through the contracts we are putting in place now, we are determined to deliver in this regard.

Legal Aid

4. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration when he will review the disposable income threshold of €18,000 for accessing civil legal aid, which has not been updated since 2006; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [54227/25]

Deputy Paul Murphy: The disposable income threshold for civil legal aid is only €18,000. Incredibly, it has not been updated since 2006. Think of all the cost-of-living crises and everything else we have been through since then. How much additional funding is provided for civil legal aid in the budget? Will it allow for the raising of the threshold very significantly and for abolishing it entirely in cases where domestic violence is a factor?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy Murphy for this important question. As he has identified, some additional funding has been provided for legal aid in the budget announced this week. I was very pleased to secure an additional €8 million in funding for the Legal Aid Board. I also managed to secure a 50% increase in funding for free legal advice centres. As the Deputy will be aware, in order for the administration of justice to operate effectively, people must have access to the courts. In many areas, we do provide funding for access to the courts. Individuals who are prosecuted for criminal offences and who do not have means get representation under the criminal legal aid scheme. I am pleased to say I have managed to achieve the full restoration of the fees in that scheme next year, subject to agreeing a number of reforms in the area.

The specific issue identified by Deputy Murphy is the fact that, at present, the income threshold applied in order to gain access to civil legal aid is €18,000. A report I recently received from former Chief Justice Frank Clarke recommends it should be increased to €23,500 in disposable income. I agree with that recommendation and would like to see it implemented. However, there are a number of things I need to do before I can announce its implementation.

In the first instance, I recognise that there has not been a change since 2006. There needs to be. Second, if I raise the threshold, which I hope to do, it will necessarily result in a larger cohort of people eligible to receive legal advice from the Legal Aid Board. I need to ensure, in advance of raising the threshold, that I have the solicitors and legal advice providers available to ensure that, once it is raised, the advice can be provided. I am in the process of getting advice from my Department on what level of further legal expertise will be required to facilitate the raising of the threshold. I want to raise it. This has been on my desk for a couple of months now but I am aware of the urgency because of the fact that the threshold has not been changed since 2006.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I agree this is a question of access to justice. Some people are being denied justice because they are just over the threshold and therefore cannot afford it. A woman has come to me whose daughter is dealing with an abusive ex-partner and is fighting for full custody. She is €50 per week over the current threshold and has therefore had to spend €45,000 on a custody case, which is horrendous. I note the Minister mentioned the figure of €23,500, which obviously comes from the majority report reviewing the whole scheme. I point out to the Minister and ask him to consider the fact that there is a minority report that argues that figure is still not high enough and will continue to exclude people who require the civil legal aid scheme. I have not done the figures, but I presume if we were just to adjust the figure of €18,000 for inflation from 2006 we would end up with more than €23,500.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I am aware of the minority and majority reports. In many respects, it is beneficial to have two reports. Being realistic, though, my best chance of implementing recommendations is to implement those in the majority report. The Deputy has identified an important area. The area of family law and domestic violence which requires civil orders to be granted is one where it is hard to get other elements of funding provided to it. If somebody wants to take a personal injury case or a contractual case, if they have a good case a principle operates in the legal profession of no foal, no fee. Lawyers will represent the individual concerned and if the case succeeds - and their belief is that it will succeed - they will get their costs paid at the end. In family law, that type of arrangement does not really exist, so this is the area where we need to ensure adequate funding is available.

Deputy Paul Murphy: To tease that out a little further, does the Minister agree that a different threshold or abolishing the threshold entirely would be appropriate in cases where domestic violence is a factor or in family law cases like that for precisely the reason he outlined? Can the Minister provide any sort of timeframe for when this consideration is likely to be complete? I underline the point that it is not simply about the thresholds; it is also about the amount of resources and the availability of lawyers. Otherwise, people will be able to qualify, but if no lawyers are available and they end up on waiting lists forever, then it will not be worth a whole lot. The figures are quite striking. Figures from February 2025 show a waiting time of up to 46 weeks for a first consultation in Sligo, 37 in Longford, 34 in Tallaght, 31 in Kilkenny and 30 in Cavan, so this issue also needs to be addressed.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Due to the limitations on resources, I do not think I could find myself in a situation where I would just abolish thresholds. In terms of having different thresholds for family law cases and domestic violence cases, applications to the scheme at present predominantly arise in respect of international protection advice being sought and, indeed, family law advice. Those are the two big cohorts of it. My first priority is to try to get the threshold up to €23,500. That would protect a lot of people in the family law sphere.

In terms of a timeframe, I hope to be in a position to make a decision on this matter next year. I am sorry, perhaps this is not sufficient for the Deputy, but I do not want to set unrealistic expectations. Turning to resources, there is obviously a difficulty in trying to recruit solicitors. They are much in demand in Ireland at present. Many of them are attracted to bigger firms and higher earning areas. It is an issue we need to reflect on regarding what we can do to get solicitors recruited into legal advice boards or aid boards around the country.

Family Law Cases

5. **Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration if there has been progress in removing the *in camera* rule in the family courts, subject to protection of identity, in order that media reports can be carried out in the interests of transparency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [54521/25]

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: The most recent time I raised this matter last June, I criticised the current state of Ireland's family court system and highlighted delays, poor facilities and, in particular, a lack of transparency due to the *in camera* rule. In response, the Minister acknowledged the widespread public frustration with the family law processes. He said that the full removal of the *in camera* rule was unlikely due to the need to protect children's identities, but that reform was on the way via the family law implementation group working on this issue. He also said we need better environments for hearings and to find a way for the child's voice to be properly heard. Can the Minister please outline the progress made?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The primary principle must be that justice should be administered in public. However, there are exceptions to it. The *in camera* rule is one of them, which applies generally in family law proceedings. As the Deputy knows, it does not preclude newspapers or journalists attending in courts where family law disputes are being heard, but it does preclude them from publishing the identities of individuals. I am pleased to say we have seen some progress in the area. Greater reporting is now taking place in respect of what is happening in the family law courts. We frequently see on a Monday in one of the newspapers that there is a weekly report of a family law case proceeding there.

As I said, research was commissioned and published by my Department on the operation of the *in camera* rule in family law proceedings, and that report contains 21 recommendations. A number of the strategies that have arisen on foot of that report include the publication of the review of the role of expert reports in the family law process too. The Deputy may be aware this issue is quite contentious and is one that is coming within my consideration of family law strategy. I would like to see the lifting of some of the *in camera* rule restrictions. Many people who have been before the family law process have expressed their concerns about it. An excellent report was produced by academics recently. It was commissioned by my Department and provided to me. It outlined a lot of general dissatisfaction with the operation of the rule. I have not been able to get recommendations together as to how we should proceed in terms of changing the law. Work is ongoing in the Department in this respect. It does take time, consideration and consultation with parties to assess how we should move on. The work, though, is ongoing and I hope to be in a position to have further information for the House in due course.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: We do need to shine more light on these situations. In family disputes involving children, people will sometimes attempt to alienate the kids. The Minister referred to reports. In relation to section 32 and section 47 reports, we have had cases where people have almost treated parental alienation as a proven case when it is not. It is almost like a cult. Immersion therapy is recommended, where children are taken away from their mother for months on end. This is often used as a form of coercive control by a partner

who has no real desire to spend time with the children but is using it as a way to punish and control their former partner. In some cases, it has been alleged by a number of people I have met that the judges have said expert Y is very good and they have taken their view. There is no scrutiny or transparency in this regard. It needs to be brought out into the open to protect children. Otherwise, they will be the next generation of abuse cases.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The Deputy is right that the term and concept of "parental alienation" is highly contested and contentious. It is the case with virtually all family law disputes that they become very contested and contentious. I want to try to ensure that when it comes to a family law dispute involving a child there is a mechanism in place to ensure the voice of that child is heard. The system at present probably relies too much on the production of the reports we spoke about a few moments ago. There is a level of dissatisfaction in respect of those reports and I think some of that dissatisfaction is understandable. I need to try to identify another mechanism whereby the voice of the child can become apparent or heard by the court. It is obviously easier in circumstances where there is a teenage child who is able to express their own views to the court, but when it comes to children under the age of ten it gets much more difficult and, as the age declines, it is sometimes virtually impossible to decipher what is in the best interests of the child. It is something we have to keep working on.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I believe it is important to keep the pressure on and to keep working on this issue. In many instances, these so-called experts are not actually qualified, and in many instances they are actually being paid by one parent to produce the report because the other parent cannot afford to have a similar report. It is not a fair situation and the more the media are able to shed light on the situation and the more scrutiny put on it, the less likely it will be that these types of cases will occur in future.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Just to let the Deputy know, in terms of the recommendations of the review I referred to a few moments ago, one is that we produce guidelines on the commissioning, content and use of welfare reports. The Chief Justice has established a judicial committee to develop guidelines on the commissioning, content and use of welfare reports. It is being chaired by Ms Justice Nuala Jackson of the High Court and is being supported by my Department. It is expected to conclude its work shortly. We need to ensure, if reports are being produced for a court, that we are satisfied that they are based upon arcane expertise that is of benefit to the court. All courts are dependent upon getting expert evidence. In some cases, it is appropriate that there is expert evidence to assist the court in deciphering what the wishes of the child are, what the voice of the child is, how the child should be heard and what the child is saying. I can understand why that may be necessary in certain circumstances, particularly for younger children. It is absolutely essential that the system retain confidence in that. That is why I am waiting for the proposals from Ms Justice Nuala Jackson.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Cybersecurity Policy

6. **Deputy Catherine Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the progress on developing a new national cybersecurity strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [49231/25]

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy Callaghan for her question. She has identified an area of our national security and national defence that needs to be accentuated and taken much more seriously in light of recent developments in the world. A number of weeks ago, we saw cyberattacks on airports throughout Europe. It had a bit of an impact on Ireland, but what they are indicative of is that cybersecurity is extremely essential in our country at present.

Ireland's second national cybersecurity strategy, for the years 2019 to 2024, set out 20 collaborative measures with the aim of meeting a range of objectives. These included improving the ability of the State to respond to and manage cybersecurity incidents and improving the resilience and security of public sector IT systems to better protect data and the services that our people rely upon. A mid-term review of the strategy published in May 2023 saw the inclusion of a further 18 new measures to be met within its lifetime. An end-of-strategy report is close to completion and I expect to publish it shortly alongside a public consultation.

It is also important to point out that I hope to bring significant legislation before the House in the near future, namely, the national cybersecurity Bill, for which we got permission last year to proceed to drafting. That is going to set out the official statutory basis for our cybersecurity system in Ireland. In a European context, it will seek to transpose the NIS2 directive alongside other national commitments relating to cybersecurity, such as those contained in the programme for Government and the national development plan. Officials in my Department are consulting the National Cyber Security Centre. I had the opportunity to visit the centre recently. It is very advanced in terms of its technology and sophistication. Having met the people there, I am very confident that there are good people in charge of cybersecurity in this country.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I thank the Minister for his answer. As we all know and as he said, cyber-resilience is really critical in this modern world. We need robust cybersecurity to protect our digital systems and data from unauthorised access and misuse and from theft and damage due to the increasingly sophisticated cyberattacks. Cyberattacks are increasing in frequency, complexity and destructiveness and can compromise our critical infrastructure across geographical borders without even being present in this jurisdiction. That is the real threat that we are facing as a nation. The national cybersecurity strategy the Minister outlined is the vision and the roadmap for how to effectively enhance cybersecurity and resilience across public bodies, essential services, businesses and households. I recently had a quick look at the Defence Forces' cyberdefence strategy for 2024 to 2027, and I was very impressed by their ambition to ensure that their strategy delivered cyber capabilities that could prevent, monitor, detect, defend against and recover from cyberattacks. Does the overall national cybersecurity strategy that is being currently developed have the same ambition for collective resilience? Will it be ready by the end of 2025?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: It does have the same ambition. It is important to note that we do not try to divide up Ireland's protections into different spheres, whether it is the Defence Forces or what comes within the ambit of the Department of justice. Huge collaboration is

ongoing across Government. At present, my Department is engaging with key stakeholders, including the Departments of foreign affairs, Defence and enterprise, trade and employment, to ensure alignment with a range of related national strategies such as the digital and AI strategy and the maritime strategy.

As the Deputy identified, these are now significant threats, not just to Departments and Government agencies, but also to the private sector. One of the consequences of the legislation that I will be bringing before the House in the near future is that, when enacted, it will impose obligations, not just on State agencies to be prepared, but on certain types of those in the private sector to be prepared as well. A cyberattack on a State agency can have enormously detrimental consequences. Similarly, a cyberattack on a private enterprise can have devastating consequences for Irish consumers.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: In the Department of justice, we know An Garda Síochána leads the domestic intelligence and national security operations, while the NCSE manages cybersecurity. In the Department of Defence, the Defence Forces handle external and military intelligence. In the Department of the Taoiseach, the national security secretariat provides strategic oversight and co-ordination. Will the Minister please outline the current level of collaboration between these three Departments? Is he confident that their collective cyber-resilience is sufficient to ensure that the proposed new national cybersecurity strategy will effectively protect the State and its agencies from nation state actors, for example, Russian military hackers and cybercriminal adversaries, those groups that are financially motivated to carry out cyberattacks for profit, of which Wizard Spider, which was responsible for the HSE attack, is a prime example.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: In fairness, I think this Government is the first to set up a national security committee that meets frequently in respect of security issues affecting the State. There is collaboration across Government. There is a recognition that, when it comes to national security and protecting ourselves from cyber threats, there has to be an aligned, agreed response from the State. I would not like the impression to be created that there are separate agencies doing their own things such as the Defence Forces, An Garda Síochána and the National Cyber Security Centre. There is collaboration through the Government to ensure that we have a national system of cyberdefence that is effective in protecting the State.

The National Cyber Security Centre was provided with very significant resources in the budget two days ago. I managed to secure a significant increase in the amount of resources for the National Cyber Security Centre. Regrettably, that is necessary. The reason it is necessary is because there are increasing threats to our cyber networks from malign actors.

An Garda Síochána

7. **Deputy Keira Keogh** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration for an update on changes to the Garda vetting system being considered by the Government; the proposed changes to re-vetting requirements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [53675/25]

Deputy Keira Keogh: The Garda vetting review group recently submitted its report to the Minister. Will the Minister provide an update on the changes to the Garda vetting system being considered by the Government, especially the proposed changes to the re-vetting requirements, as we know a lot of people are very frustrated with the delays that have been caused, especially in NGOs and sporting groups?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy. I am aware of the concerns people have in respect of delays in Garda vetting. It is important to emphasise at the outset that the primary purpose of vetting carried out by An Garda Síochána under the national vetting bureau Acts is to ensure the safety of children and vulnerable adults. Many organisations nationwide whose work focuses on the safety, enjoyment and comfort of children and vulnerable people understand that they must take all reasonable steps to ensure that only suitable people are recruited and employed. I know the Garda takes this responsibility very seriously. This requires a robust Garda vetting process that reassures the public, and particularly parents, that appropriate checks are conducted on people taking on positions of trust.

I am aware from talking to TDs, organisations and groups that there are a number of concerns about and issues with the current process, in particular the requirement for multiple re-vettings. My Department is working to consider solutions to these matters. The Garda vetting review group was tasked with ensuring that any changes to the vetting process kept it robust, efficient and effective while improving the service it provided. The membership of the group included gardaí, officials from my Department and Tusla, and other relevant stakeholders. The group's primary focus has been to examine the means of strengthening the vetting legislation in a workable and effective manner, while seeking to balance this with issues that have arisen regarding the re-vetting period and the transfer of vetting across other similar activities, for example, with sports teams. I have been updated on the group's work and have decided that a number of key recommendations should now be implemented, in consultation with all relevant partners. It is my objective to ensure the vetting system is fit for purpose and, to the greatest extent possible, efficient and future-proofed to continue to protect our children.

I have received recommendations and am working on them. The issues require me to engage with An Garda Síochána to ensure that it can process applications in the manner I would like it to.

Deputy Keira Keogh: As Chair of the Joint Committee on Children and Equality, and somebody who has worked with children her whole life, I join the Minister in wanting to ensure that our Garda vetting process is robust and that we are protecting our vulnerable children and adults. At the same time, it is great to hear that the report has made it to the Minister's desk. The review was initiated in 2021. Volunteers are frustrated. If they work with a GAA group one weekend and a drama group the next, they must be vetted repeatedly. I know that multiple Deputies have come in over recent months looking for updates and wondering if we can lean into our technology and come up with a common-sense and streamlined solution, similar to the process for the Passport Office whereby people can apply online once. We could provide a Garda vetting card that would apply for three years. That way, at least people would not be delayed in starting work or working with vulnerable groups.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I agree that many efficiencies could be introduced into the system. I am trying to urge those efficiencies at present. For instance, if people are vetted to train a hurling team, why can they not rely on that vetting when they come to coach a soccer team a year later? We need to ensure that those sensible efficiencies are permissible in the system.

I know there are issues in respect of wet signatures for vetting. There is an issue in that the Garda does not accept digital signatures for national vetting. I am trying to engage with the Garda on that issue. The Garda thinks that the use of digital signatures adds risk to the vetting process such that it becomes susceptible to disputes regarding the signatory's identity or intent, or whether the document was tampered with after signing. If anything goes wrong, the Garda will be responsible if it vetted somebody who turns out to be a threat. I can understand from its perspective the caution with which it is approaching the issue. However, it is a matter I want advanced.

Deputy Keira Keogh: I know it is easy for someone such as me to come in and offer a simple solution. I appreciate that the response is not so simple. At the moment, however, a lot of unnecessary duplication is happening. Multiple checks are being carried out into the same people to verify the same information. One of the key problems is that people who are trying to start a job can come into financial difficulty when that job is delayed. There are times when people who are looking for a new employee cannot wait for the Garda vetting process. They lose the chance to hire someone who may be a key staff member. Anything we can do to speed up the process would be welcome. From 2021 to 2025 is a long period. The frustration has been ongoing for longer than that. I appreciate the Minister's work. I hope we can get an efficient solution sooner rather than later.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The Deputy is right to urge that the process be sped up. Irrespective of any changes that are introduced to the process, it must operate faster. It is unfair that people who are seeking jobs or seeking to be vetted for sporting or recreational purposes must wait for lengthy periods.

The Deputy is also correct to identify that this is progressing quite slowly. The report was commissioned in 2021. We need to make a decision and change the process. We do not want to be talking about the issue another year from now. We must ensure that a faster system is put in place while at the same time ensuring that the fundamental requirement of protecting children is maintained. Those two objectives are compatible. We can have a faster system while ensuring that children's welfare is not threatened. That is something I am working on and would like to see achieved as soon as possible.

Legislative Measures

8. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration if there are targeted measures in place to reduce the prevalence of illegal fireworks both nationally and locally, and particularly in Dublin North-West; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [54149/25]

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Will the Minister of State make a statement to the House on targeted measures that may be put in place to reduce the prevalence of illegal fireworks, locally and nationally?

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Niall Collins): I thank the Deputy for the question. We are well aware of the misery and distress the use of illegal fireworks can cause around this time of year. We also hear and see enough to know that they pose a real risk to the health and safety of young people and to the elderly and vulnerable. They also terrify family pets, service dogs and other animals.

Our Department runs an annual awareness campaign that seeks to inform and educate the public about the serious dangers associated with fireworks and the penalties people can face for selling or using them. The Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, was pleased to launch that campaign two weeks ago at the Dublin Fire Brigade Training Centre.

In addition to this awareness raising work in the run up to Hallowe'en, very good work is undertaken by local authorities and community groups to organise safe, fun events for children and young people in our communities around Hallowe'en. The Deputy will be familiar with the Finglas Fright Night and the Otherworld Hallowe'en Festival in Ballymun. I also very much welcome the return of the Big Scream festival in Dublin's north inner city and the Bram Stoker festival supported by Dublin City Council.

An Garda Síochána's Operation Tombola combats the illegal importation, sale and use of fireworks through a nationwide policing plan focused on the prevention and detection of the sale of fireworks and associated public order and antisocial behaviour issues during the Hallowe'en period. The operation encompasses all aspects of the policing of the Hallowe'en period each year. It combats the importation, sale and distribution of illegal fireworks through intelligence-led operations, searches and seizures, as well as focusing on preventing associated public disorder and antisocial behaviour. Over the past decade, under Operation Tombola, the Garda has carried out 1,218 fireworks seizures.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I thank the Minister of State. He is correct that we are heading into the autumn season and Hallowe'en festivities. Increasingly every year, that season opens earlier. I heard reports in late August of this year of fireworks being used in my area.

The Minister of State outlined the impact that fireworks had on animals, family pets, livestock and so on. They have an impact on other children as well, who feel less safe, particularly on Hallowe'en night. There is also a danger to people because, effectively, these are unregulated illegal products. They pose a danger.

Are the penalties in place, particularly for importation and sale, sufficient? They currently stand at €10,000 or up to five years' imprisonment. If one were to go to any part of Dublin in the next couple of weeks, one would not know that fireworks were illegal. I accept it is a complicated matter but I believe we need to review the penalties involved.

Deputy Niall Collins: I accept what the Deputy said about the season starting earlier and earlier each year, which is regrettable. That is true of the community in which I live, which is a rural part of Limerick. Some elderly neighbours were very put out by it.

Under Operation Tombola, the Garda has carried out 1,218 fireworks seizures to an estimated value of €225,000. These seizures have undoubtedly contributed to reducing the harm associated with the illegal use of fireworks. The penalties for importing, selling or using unlicensed fireworks are significant and Part 6 of the Criminal Justice Act 2006 provides the Garda with the power to arrest people found with unlicensed fireworks and sets out significant penalties on conviction, as the Deputy alluded to, including fines up to €10,000 or up to five years' imprisonment for possession with intent to sell or supply.

There is some amount of regulation in the area. I will write to the Deputy after this session to inform him what we have in the area of regulation.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I would welcome that correspondence. I point out the considerable work of Dublin Fire Brigade in trying to dissuade people. I also acknowledge the work of the local authorities, particularly Dublin City Council, in respect of pro-social activity. I encourage anybody in the city to come to either the Finglas Fright Night or the Ballymun Otherworld festival. They are fantastic family-fun events that are packed with culture and lots of local community celebrations. They are very positive. They have effectively eliminated bonfires in our area by providing an alternative.

The issue of fireworks is complex. We do not necessarily want to be displacing significant amounts of Garda time, which we know is under pressure in a range of other areas. It is a difficult situation for people to accept, namely that something is illegal and the law is being broken in such a significant way. Perhaps a review by the Department of this area is required.

Deputy Niall Collins: I would like to make the point to the Deputy that we are in the process of establishing local community safety partnerships throughout the country. That is a step up or ramping up of the former joint policing committees. I know the Deputy is aware that 36 community safety partnerships will be stood up. They are in the process. Some are up and running and some have had their first meeting. Many of the local authorities are in the process of finally pulling together and populating them. They will have broader stakeholder and community representation than the previous joint policing committees, so there will be opportunities for residents' associations, community groups, local authority members and members of An Garda Síochána to all play a meaningful role. They will be supported by full-time administrative staff, funded by the Department of justice and working with our local authorities. That will be another very important forum to deal with this issue.

Visa Applications

9. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration if he will introduce measures to reduce the number of stamp 2 visa permissions granted annually in view of the pressures on student accommodation and housing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [54041/25]

Deputy Matt Carthy: A number of weeks ago I raised with the Minister the Government's approach to stamp 2 residency permits in respect of student visas as they are known and whether or not there are any plans for the Government to examine these types of residency permits as part of the overall management of migration. In particular, given the pressures on

housing and on student accommodation, is it the Government's intention to introduce measures to reduce the number of stamp 2 visas granted annually?

Deputy Colm Brophy: I thank the Deputy. The programme for Government contains a commitment to publish a national migration and integration strategy detailing how the Government will meet the demands and opportunities facing Ireland's society. My Department is currently working on that with other Departments with the aim of having it published in 2026. Looking at the international student sector will obviously form part of that work.

For many years, Ireland has welcomed international students who travel here to pursue courses of study across a wide range of subject areas. This provides economic and other benefits to Ireland, as well as to the students themselves.

It makes sense that our overall strategic approach to migration would take account of this aspect of our immigration arrangements. I can say that this area is already undergoing revised certification arrangements. Currently, for non-EEA students to be eligible for immigration permission here they must be completing a course listed on what is known as the interim list of eligible programmes, ILEP, which is issued by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

The ILEP is being replaced by TrustEd which will be administered by Quality and Qualifications Ireland, a statutory body under the aegis of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. TrustEd is now Ireland's new statutory quality mark and is part of a range of measures designed to protect international students and ensure high standards are met in the provision of education.

My Department will continue to work closely with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, and other relevant Departments in framing policy in this area and will engage with education providers, both public and private, in developing this aspect of our national migration and integration strategy.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Of course international students are an important part of the dynamic within our third level sector. However, as with all areas there needs to be management of it and it seems to me there is none at the moment. The number of these stamp 2 residency permissions more than doubled between 2021 and 2024, with more than 60,000 of them granted.

Then there are anomalies in the system. According to the Economic and Social Research Institute's, ESRI's, most recent report on migration and asylum, 45% of first residency permits issued in 2023 were for education. It is the most common reason for issuing permits to non-EEA nationals while employment accounts for only 27%. When we consider Ireland has 1.25% of the EU's population but allocates 7.15% of all permits for education purposes in the EU, we can be seen how there are anomalies there. The question is: does Government take cognisance of the student accommodation crisis when allocating these visas as to whether or not it will impact on that crisis?

Deputy Colm Brophy: I thank the Deputy for his acknowledgement of the fact that international students do make a contribution. They contribute in so many ways to our country.

The Government is looking at student visas in the context of our national migration and immigration strategy.

For the purpose of clarity with regard to the issue of total registrations, there can be multiple registrations during a year, so the number of total registrations is not entirely indicative of the number of students but it is a reasonable guide.

When looking at the broader framework, it is important that we look at students, namely the number of students coming here, the types of courses they are studying and the benefit people and academic institutions are getting from that and that we take an overall broader look which takes all aspects of this into account. There is no point in saying anything but that the students do make a great contribution in so many ways to Ireland and that is important to recognise.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Absolutely, that point is not in dispute. That is why these visa allocations should be based on educational and societal benefits. I fear that in many cases the international students are being used to make up for the funding shortfall in third level institutions. They are seen as a mechanism by which money can be made - money which the universities are starved of.

Second, there is this new private sector, namely English language schools with very high proportions of students coming from countries outside of the EEA. Anecdotally at least, some of those visas are being used to allow people to work in sectors that would not otherwise be able to get people on employment permits. Has the Department carried out any analysis of that and is that part of what it plans to examine? We need to get the balance right here and we need to be cognisant, particularly of the student accommodation crisis, and the educational value we receive by having international students in our society.

Deputy Colm Brophy: It is important to examine the regulation in this area. There is quite a bit of regulation in this area. There is an allowance of 20 hours that a student can work during term time and that increases to 40 hours. It is very important that is monitored and correctly enforced.

We have changed the requirements for students in terms of the income they would have to have to sustain themselves when they come into the country, so they are able to pursue their courses when they come. It is important that we have monitoring of the private providers in different areas to ensure there is compliance and that students are attending and that if they are not attending courses that it is notified. Students must remain within the conditions under which they have entered Ireland. That includes any work they are allowed legally to do in addition to their studies, and that is monitored.

Court Accommodation

10. **Deputy William Aird** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration further to Parliamentary Question No. 58 of 3 July 2025, if he will commit to ensuring that funding is made available to complete the new courthouse for Portlaoise, County Laois; the expected delivery of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [53872/25]

Deputy William Aird: I thank the Minister for the opportunity to raise the issue of a new courthouse for County Laois. The requirement for a new courthouse has long been recognised. The National Development Plan, NDP, 2018-2027 identified the need for new courthouses in a number of locations with substandard facilities, including in my hometown of Portlaoise. The current facilities in Portlaoise are substandard and require updated, modernised, efficient, accessible courthouse facilities for Laois. They are just not fit for purpose at the moment.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for his question about the courthouse in Portlaoise. At the outset, in the area of provision of funding and services for the courts, it is important to note we secured an increase of €11 million, or 8.3%, in funding, for day-to-day court operations and the development of services in budget 2026.

As the Deputy will also be aware, the Government is supporting the Courts Service to progress its ten year modernisation programme to deliver digitally-enabled services designed make the courts system operate much more effectively. This programme is having significant positive impacts. The Government is also ensuring we have more judges available because courthouses on their own are not of much use unless there are judges to administer justice.

Insofar as capital works are concerned, the courts have benefited over a number of years from investment in new and refurbished courthouses at several locations nationally and this is continuing under the current NDP. The Courts Service purchased a site for a new courthouse in County Laois in 2020. Further progress with the Portlaoise project will depend on ultimate allocations under the revised NDP funding. There are a range of projects to be delivered across the justice sector, not just in the area of courts but also in the area of Garda stations. I am pleased to state that the construction of a new Garda divisional headquarters in Portlaoise is under way.

Within the overall framework, my expectation is that development of the new courthouse in Portlaoise will form part of the latter phase of the current national development plan. The precise details remain to be settled. There is significant demand for the construction of courthouses throughout the country. Deputy Aird very eloquently advanced the cause of Portlaoise. Others have advanced the cause of other places. It is in the national development plan, but in the latter stage.

Deputy William Aird: I thank the Minister for his response and his commitment to meet a group of stakeholders to discuss the urgent need for a courthouse in Portlaoise. The immediate priority is clear. We need funding for the development of the new courthouse in Portlaoise and a clear and definite timeframe for commencement and completion. As the Minister mentioned, an important first step has already been taken. I was a member of Laois County Council when it purchased the site in Kylekiproe almost five years ago to ensure that it would be available to the Department when it gave the green light for the courthouse to be built. The next step must be to secure funding. I acknowledge the strong focus on regenerating Main Street in Portlaoise to create a town where there is a sense that people live and do business there. I tabled this question in order to discover if we could progress matters. Moving the courthouse would open the door to a more accessible, pedestrian-friendly town centre, revitalising the heart of Portlaoise and encouraging new economic growth. I heard from legal professionals and members of the Garda and the Irish Prison Service. They all said the same thing, namely-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy William Aird: -----that the existing courthouse is no longer fit for purpose. It causes congestion, which has a negative effect on businesses and residents in the town. There is a lack of privacy and dignity for those attending the court-----

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

Deputy William Aird: I will conclude by referring to the serious security conditions.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You will get a chance to come back in again.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I agree with Deputy Aird. Courthouses can have a positive impact on a town or city. The Leas-Cheann Comhairle will know the impact a new courthouse can have on a city like Kilkenny. They attract people who come as witnesses and members of the legal profession. There is a buzz around a town in which there is a busy courthouse. I appreciate the economic benefits of a vibrant courthouse although that is not the purpose of the administration of justice. The Deputy believes, as do many people, that Portlaoise requires a new courthouse. I am advised that there are currently 13 staff in Portlaoise courthouse. That relates to district 15, in addition to special courts. Portlaoise court sits 13 days per month. The remaining sittings in district 15 take place in Tullamore. Portlaoise is a vibrant town. I understand why legal practitioners and representatives such as Deputy Aird want a new courthouse there. It is in the plan. I cannot give a commitment as to when the project will start.

Deputy William Aird: Will the Minister acknowledge that the Midlands Prison is located in Portlaoise? He knows what happens in a courthouse, and the logistics involved in bringing prisoners down from a prison of that size twice a week. That is why I asked if it can be done. As the Minister stated, the site has been secured. The need is obvious and the benefits are evident. I urge the Minister to prioritise the immediate provision of funding in order that the construction of a new courthouse in Portlaoise can commence without delay. We must deliver a courthouse that meets the needs of the 21st century. I emphasise the fact that the Midlands Prison is located in Portlaoise. I thank all the people who work there caring for those in that facility every day of the week. Friends of mine work there. From a logistics point of view, vans, security and gardaí are needed. If there was a new facility, we would need less than a quarter of staff who currently accompany the prisoners from the Midlands Prison. That is why there is an urgent case to make today.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I agree with the Deputy. We need to develop a situation where prison officers are not used frequently throughout the day for the purpose of transporting prisoners from prisons to courts. I will bring forward legislation later this year, in the form of a miscellaneous provisions Bill, in which we will seek to give effect to that for many more remote hearings. People can have their hearings from the prison where they are being held on remand rather than being transferred by prison officers to a courthouse for that purpose. It makes sense if there is a strong prison, like the Midlands Prison in Portlaoise, to ensure that

here is a correspondingly suitable courthouse in the vicinity. There is a courthouse in Portlaoise. The Deputy has urged eloquently that it needs to be upgraded, refurbished or replaced. I will take that on board. When it comes to the national development plan and capital projects relating to courthouses and Garda stations, there are many Deputies who are as eloquent and committed as Deputy Aird in making requests. They say to me that the projects in their areas need to be prioritised. I cannot prioritise them all, but I hear what the Deputy is saying.

Deputy William Aird: No one but us in Portlaoise has anything like the Midlands Prison, in which there are 1,500 prisoners.

Prison Service

11. **Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the plans his Department has to increase prison capacity in line with the country's rising population; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [54032/25]

Deputy Joe Neville: Following Deputy Aird's question about courts, I am looking for more prison spaces for guilty people.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Our population has risen significantly over the past 20 years but our prison capacity has not risen on a corresponding basis. There is a requirement to ensure that we have more prison spaces. This does not mean that I or the Government believe the solution to all antisocial or criminal behaviour is incarceration. We recognise, however, that prisons need a greater number of spaces because of the increased level of detection, the increase in the population and the increase in the type of criminal activities the Houses of the Oireachtas have designated as criminal acts.

Since 2022, capacity across the prison estate has been increased by 380 new spaces. The target is to deliver 1,595 individual prison spaces by 2031. A record capital investment of €495 million is being provided to the Irish Prison Service over the next five years which will provide for the largest investment in the prison estate in the history of the State. This includes a new prison on the site of the old Cork prison, a new block in Wheatfield, both of which I visited, an additional block extension at the Midlands Prison, which I hope to visit soon, and additional spaces at Castlerea, Mountjoy and Dóchas.

It is important to point out that a new mental health therapeutic centre is also planned for Mountjoy. I thank the Minister for Health for her co-operation in that respect.

In consultation with the Minister for Finance, I secured an exemption under the infrastructure guidelines to allow for the delivery of 960 new places to be accelerated. This is expected to speed up delivery timelines by 12 to 18 months. The Prison Service has a very good record when it comes to building on time and on budget. The estate section of the Irish Prison Service is very good.

Deputy Joe Neville: I fully agree that incarceration is not always the answer. At the same time, we need to ensure that there are places in our prisons for those who commit offences. We

also need to ensure that they know this. We have a great body of prison officers. They are some of the best people in our country. They work really hard and diligently on our behalf. I know many of them personally. We need to make sure the places in which they work are the best possible, are upgraded and not overcrowded. A fear people have is that they might see people going in and out of courts and perhaps not getting the sentences they should. That is a different issue. I want to ensure that there are places for those who are found guilty and to whom sentences are handed down. I also want to ensure that they remain in prison and serve out their sentences in full, particularly as they were found guilty, and that they will not be let out because we do not have the space for them.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I agree with the Deputy. There are certain types of offenders who have been convicted and who require incarceration. The justice system has directed that they be incarcerated, and the Irish Prison Service does not have an option. It must take in people on whom the courts have imposed custodial sentences.

Since I became Minister, I have visited seven prisons. I am extremely impressed at the work that goes on in prisons throughout the country. The Irish Prison Service does an excellent job, as does the Probation Service and other services that operate within our prison system. They are challenging visits. I always make sure I have an opportunity to speak to staff and the prisoners as well. A lot of good work is being done to prepare individuals for coming out of prison. Those individuals have already been judged by the justice system. It is not our job to judge them again; the system has judged them, but we want to try to ensure that as well as their penalty being served, they are prepared for release into the community. There is excellent work being done to ensure people are so prepared.

Deputy Joe Neville: I thank the Minister for his response. His colleagues, the two Ministers of State, have been very helpful in dealing with any queries and issues I have with the Department. I thank the Minister for his work since he came in, as well as his diligence, especially on this key issue. When people commit offences we need to ensure there are places for them, but we also need to ensure there is outreach and that when people come out of our prisons they are fully back in as members of our society. As I said, the question I ask pertained specifically to the increase in population and the need for prison spaces in line with that. I do not think anybody would say that would not be required. As the Minister has set out, our national development plan, which is our plan for the country, deals with that. The number of spaces that are to be there by 2031 is 1,595 and I fully welcome that.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The Deputy recognises our population is increasing at such a rate it is inevitable we are going to have to increase the number of prison units available. Last year our population increased by 98,000 and this year it is probably going to somewhere similar. When the population increases we expect there is going to be an increase in the prison population as well because there is going to be an increase in criminal activity and in detection and conviction. On the prisons themselves, the big challenge I and my colleagues face is the prisons suffer from overcapacity. There is approximately 117% capacity in prisons at present. That means there are many prisoners who are sleeping on mattresses on floors. I am committed to ending that. The way to end that though is not releasing prisoners, but building more units

so they can have more dignified places in which they are accommodated when in the prison system. That is something we need to expedite and we are committed to do so.

Question No. 12 taken with Written Answers.

An Garda Síochána

13. **Deputy Catherine Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration for the progress that has been made on the national roll-out of the See Something, Say Something initiative; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [54168/25]

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I ask the Minister to offer a report on the progress that has been made on the national roll-out of the See Something, Say Something initiative, as outlined in the programme for Government.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy for her question. As colleagues are aware, the Garda National Community Engagement Bureau operates See Something, Say Something. It is an initiative that uses a text messaging system to allow members of the public to alert the Garda to any issue that might be of concern. It is a very positive development. Technology can be used very effectively for the purpose of keeping communities safe. We all see, maybe, WhatsApp groups in communities. That sharing of information is beneficial to ensure there is greater awareness of any safety issue in an area. Pursuant to this scheme, members of the public can use any mobile phone to immediately report a crime or any incident of anti-social behaviour by simply texting a brief account of the incident and the location to a short code number. This is a free text message which will be received by the sergeant on duty in the local station and the report acted upon. It also allows for the public to report incidents anonymously. It is a very positive measure because it enables gardaí to be provided with information spontaneously and on a very immediate basis. It is impossible for us to ensure we have a garda on every street corner or in every village, but using communication methods in this way is very helpful to ensuring gardaí are informed of threats in the area.

The Deputy may be aware a successful pilot scheme was operated in Kerry in 2019. An Garda Síochána purchased the rights to the system, as well as the short code that is the number used by the public. The initiative has since been replicated in Swords in 2020 and in Drogheda and Longford town since 2023.

Decisions related to the expansion of the initiative will be for the Garda Commissioner. I understand that the feasibility of scaling the initiative to other areas is being explored. This will be subject to an evaluation of the operation of the existing schemes.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I thank the Minister very much for his answer. As he says, See Something, Say Something is a really good initiative. The national roll-out of it is committed to in the programme for Government. It is a community initiative which enables the public to text details of illegal dumping, antisocial behaviour and other incidents directly to the authorities, as the Minister said. It is designed to support crime prevention and community safety. The initiative has been warmly received in all the locations it has been introduced in so far, with An Garda Síochána in Louth in particular noting that the service

provided a welcome means of communicating with the public and with enhancing the services ongoing community engagement. The Minister can therefore imagine why I would like to see this initiative effectively rolled out to my constituents, and indeed to the Leas-Cheann Comhairle's as well, in Carlow and Kilkenny. According to the Meath experience of the initiative, it seems the local community safety partnerships are seen as the best way to roll out the initiative at present. The LCSPs in Carlow and Kilkenny should be coming online at the end of the month and I wonder whether the Minister would support a call to see this initiative being made an early priority for all local community safety partnerships.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy. I certainly think this is the type of initiative local community safety partnerships should be considering. As she will be aware, they are being rolled out. I approved the membership of a whole series of them over a week ago and I want to see those local community safety partnerships up and running in communities as quickly as possible. The type of technology we are talking about with this initiative is very simple. It is just providing information to An Garda Síochána in respect of incidents around the country. I am very pleased the scheme is operating in each of the four Garda regions. I understand the feasibility of scaling the initiative to other areas is being explored by the Garda. It will be subject to an evaluation of the existing schemes with a view to informing future policy and a possible expanded roll-out. However, we can all agree the more information provided to An Garda Síochána and indeed the general public in respect of threatening or antisocial behaviour, the easier it will be to combat that because Garda resources can then be focused on it.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I thank the Minister. As already outlined, the initiative has been enormously successful. While I commend the Minister's ambition in expanding community policing across the country it is important to note there is still a real need for more community gardaí in our rural towns and villages who are as visible and contactable as possible, as far as the people they serve are concerned. Of the most recent graduate class from Templemore, only one has been stationed in Carlow, with zero new graduates coming to Kilkenny. That said, I accept there is another class graduating from Templemore next week and Garda numbers are being built up across the country and it is important to acknowledge that. It is really important links to An Garda Síochána such as the See Something, Say Something initiative provide a means of ensuring the Garda and local communities feel connected. Many people in Carlow and Kilkenny will recall a time where practically every village had a local garda. We know that time has passed, but using a service such as this we can re-establish the presence of An Garda Síochána in the day-to-day rhythms of rural life in Ireland. Even if people never use this service, knowing it is there provides significant comfort, security agus síocháin to our citizens. What steps will the Minister be able to take to ensure See Something, Say Something is rolled out as soon as possible to constituents in Carlow and Kilkenny?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I will certainly speak to the Garda Commissioner in respect of it. I am aware of the point the Deputy makes about community gardaí. Obviously this type of technology is no replacement for them, but it is of great assistance to them and complements the work being done by them. I assure the Deputy that the Leas-Cheann Comhairle, Deputy Cleere and the Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor, have also been on to me about

wanting more Garda resources in Carlow-Kilkenny. As Deputy Callaghan indicated, there was a large group of individuals who came out of Templemore recently. It is not for me to determine where new recruits are allocated, but it has been made loud and clear in respect of all constituencies that all TDs want to see as many new recruits coming into areas as possible. I believe when we are down in Templemore again in November we will be close to seeing approximately 200, or maybe just less than 200, new recruits coming out. That is going to be very positive. If we can get a constant stream of approximately 200 new recruits from each intake, we will be in a strong position to ensure more community gardaí around the country.

International Protection

14. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration the action he will take in relation profiteering in the international protection accommodation sector, including in the context of significant concerns raised in the Comptroller and Auditor General's annual report about the spending of public money; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [53889/25]

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Will the Minister of State outline actions he is going to take in relation to profiteering in the international protection accommodation sector, especially in the aftermath of significant concerns raised in the Comptroller and Auditor General's report about the spending of public money?

Deputy Colm Brophy: I thank the Deputy. My Department is taking action across all aspects of international protection accommodation to provide value for money, strengthen governance and compliance, and renegotiate contracts with providers. This forms part of the overall reform of the international protection system that is already working to speed up processing of applications and move from commercial provision to State provision. These reforms will help to drive down costs and curtail the growth seen over recent years in the accommodation system.

The Department has worked closely with the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General in carrying out an extensive review of costs and processes within the international protection accommodation system. A report on this matter was published last week as part of the C and AG's annual report for 2024. All recommendations in the report have been accepted and implemented by the Department, with implementation of one recommendation being further developed into early 2026. The report looked at overall processes and sampled 20 IPAS contracts. It acknowledged the extensive challenges posed to the State in sourcing accommodation during the unprecedented surge in applications from 2022 to 2024. During that period, over 45,000 international protection applicants arrived in Ireland. Prior to this, there were 8,000 or 9,000 in a typical three-year period. Today's standards of pre-contract assessments and negotiations could not be applied to accommodation that had to be sourced during the period from 2022 to 2024.

While applications this year have decreased, they remain high compared to pre-2022 norms. However, they have given us sufficient space to put in place greater controls over IPAS and the accommodation portfolio. A range of updated systems and procedures have been put in place and are already having an impact. IPAS has improved its processes for appraisal, validation, contracting and payments. A new rate-card pricing structure is being applied to all new and

renewing contracts, which has led to savings of over €52 million on 104 contracts. This reform within the accommodation system is on track for continued process improvement and costs savings as we move into 2026.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: This review is a damning indictment of the Government's failure to address profiteering and cost overruns within the IPAS system. The report outlines evidence of private operators overcharging for the provision of accommodation, including companies charging for beds that were not provided and charging VAT in circumstances where accommodation is exempt from VAT, signed contracts and proof of ownership going missing and no copies of leases. There seem to have been no records kept whatsoever in many cases. One operator overcharged the State to the tune of €7.4 million in respect of VAT, yet still has a Government contract. The report outlined that in this case the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration has stated recovery of the remaining VAT overcharged is under review. Does the Minister of State take responsibility for this blatant abuse of taxpayers' money? What actions has he taken to ensure that this money is returned to the State? Will there be a review of all IPAS accommodation contracts?

Deputy Colm Brophy: The Department has accepted the recommendations of the Comptroller and Auditor General's report and has put in place a set of updated processes and standards which will appraise offers and manage and oversee contracts. Extensive new checks and balances have been put in place to ensure high standards of oversight on invoicing. Queries and irregularities have been identified through a checklist process. These have been reviewed and recouped to the Department.

Treatment of VAT is a matter between the relevant providers and Revenue. As discussed in the report, there is variance in how different aspects of IPAS may have applied that.

In relation to food accommodation and other subheadings, within payments to one provider group issues relating to VAT charges arose and were reviewed. My officials understand that this provider has completed a self-correction exercise with the Revenue on the matter and that no funds are outstanding to the State. The Department continues to conduct ongoing process improvements in relation to management and oversight of invoices and all related tax matters.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: The Minister of State has thrown around a lot of blame instead of accepting that he and his Department are responsible for this waste of taxpayers' money. Where is the oversight on the part of the Department? I fear the report has revealed only a fraction of what has been happening. The Minister of State needs to get to grips with the issue and put an end to the squandering of public money.

The Minister of State stated that contracts are reviewed when they have concluded. Why is there no review during the lifetime of the contracts, especially when the Minister of State has been provided with this kind of evidence? It should be obvious that where there is evidence of mismanagement of taxpayers' money, contracts should be ended. Given the level of mismanagement revealed, does the Department intend to review all IPAS accommodation contracts to ensure there is no further abuse of taxpayers' money?

Deputy Colm Brophy: The Department is always vigilant about taxpayers' money and it is important to note we have achieved €52 million in savings in terms of contracts this year. There is a new rate card in place delivering real savings. One of the most important things we are doing is moving to State-owned, which will bring a real saving in terms of taxpayers' money. When the migration pact comes in, we will be moving to a shorter timeframe in terms of processing people, which will also save money. We are determined to reduce the overall number coming in and that, again, will help save taxpayers' money.

Legislative Measures

15. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration if he has raised the implications of the proposed EU legislation on hate speech at an EU level; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37589/25]

Deputy Paul Lawless: Is it the Minister's intention to reintroduce the hate speech legislation brought forward by his predecessor in the previous Dáil that was a such dramatic failure?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: No, but I will give the Deputy an overview of why that is the answer. I am fairly satisfied that Ireland has transposed the European Council framework decision on combating certain forms and expressions of racism and xenophobia in a manner appropriate and tailored to the domestic system of law in Ireland. I assure Members of the House that Ireland's position has been communicated to the European Commission. That position is that the framework decision is fully transposed in Irish legislation in a manner appropriate and tailored to the domestic system of criminal law and procedure, and is in line with Article 40.6 of the Constitution, which expressly respects and protects the right to freedom of expression and of people to express their views freely.

The Deputy will be aware that last year the House enacted legislation to provide for tougher sentences for crimes motivated by hate. That was the Criminal Justice (Hate Offences) Act 2024. This was sensible legislation that provided for increased prison sentences for certain crimes where they are proven to be motivated by hatred or where hatred is demonstrated. For approximately 36 years, we have had the Prohibition of Incitement To Hatred Act 1989. That provides general protections in respect of those who seek to incite violence and hatred against others because of their inherent characteristics. Combining those two statutory provisions and taking into account the common law operating in Ireland, particularly the common law principles in respect of aiding and abetting, I am satisfied the Council framework decision has been fully transposed into Irish law. Notwithstanding the fact that it is transposed into Irish law, there is a responsibility on all of us to ensure the type of hate-filled messages we hear, regrettably frequently, are challenged and called out. We do not always need a guard or court available to challenge somebody on their behaviour.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I welcome the Minister's response and the sea change in the Government's approach to the hate speech legislation. His predecessor, Deputy McEntee, was a big proponent and driver of this hate speech legislation, so I commend the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, on what he is doing. This House should always protect freedom of speech. We saw in Germany recently that pro-Palestinian protesters were treated in the harshest way

possible. In this country, people's views of and sympathies towards the Palestinian people are very different.

In relation to the movements from the European Union, is the message from this Government that it is in compliance and will not be co-operating with any diktat in relation to hate speech legislation?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I want to dispute the Deputy's categorisation of my colleague, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, in terms of her role in the previous Government. It was the policy of the previous Government and the previous Government made a decision to change that policy. It is unfair of the Deputy to focus on her individually.

In regard to challenging hate speech, it is important to point out that, as I said earlier, simply because there is not new legislation being put in place does not mean there is not legislation in place. Since 1989 we have had the Prohibition of Incitement To Hatred Act. It exists in our law. We have a common law that provides for circumstances where aiding and abetting of criminal offences is also a criminal offence. The law covers this area.

I also make the point that there is a responsibility on all of us to try to challenge hate speech. Although hate speech may not result in everyone being brought before the courts, we should be able to ensure that we do not tolerate people engaging in hate speech which is designed to undermine or upset others. There are two ways of looking at this. We can look at it from the strict legal point of view or from a societal point of view. From the latter point of view, we should certainly all be challenging hate speech.

Deputy Paul Lawless: We abhor hate and I firmly believe that we should all speak respectfully. However, the previous Government set out essentially to define what hate would be. That is obviously a dangerous road to go down. There is movement throughout the European Union to push hate speech laws. Is the Minister saying today that is not going to happen and we are in compliance and we are going to say "No" to Europe on this matter?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I have answered that already. I said we have fully transposed the Council decision. It is part of Irish law. We fully transposed it. There are no further steps for Ireland to take. However, I believe we all have a responsibility to ensure we challenge hate speech. Irrespective of whether it is challenged in the courts or by the Garda, we have a responsibility to challenge it.

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Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Before I begin, I want to mention the developments overnight which have raised the prospects of a ceasefire and an end to the Israeli genocide in Gaza. I hope for a peace that is lasting and brings justice and freedom to the Palestinian people.

Tá stampa Fhine Gael ar gach leathanach den bhuiséad seo a bhí foilsithe Dé Máirt, buiséad a thréigeann daoine atá ag obair chun aire a thabhairt dóibh siúd atá ar an bharr. Cuireann briseadh na ngealltanais mór a rinne an Tánaiste ó thaobh cáin ioncaim, táillí mac léinn agus cúram leanaí é seo i gcuimhne dúinn. Some 48 hours have passed since the introduction of the budget. I hope that the real shock and anger of working people and families is starting to register with the Government. They have spent the past two days shaking their heads in disbelief at what the Government served up on Tuesday. It was a budget that abandoned workers in order to look after those at the top. This budget has Fine Gael's stamp on every page. It is a budget that shows up for developers, landlords and investors, but leaves workers behind. It is as though the Government sat down before the budget and asked, "How many of these election promises we made can we break in this budget?" That is what it did.

I want to address some of the broken promises the Tánaiste himself made. The first one is on income tax. He said: "[I] believe we can do about €1.4 billion each year in tax measures over the next five years. And that will be made up of both the changes to the income thresholds ...[and] also changing the entry points to the various USC bands". That is what the Tánaiste said to *The Irish Times* in November last year, one week before the general election. He broke that promise on Tuesday. In one of the largest tax-cutting packages in the history of the State, at a time when it was never more needed, he could not even give ordinary workers a single cent in an income tax boost. The Tánaiste betrayed more than 2.5 million workers. That is on him. However, he found the money for big tax breaks for developers and landlords. It says everything about his priorities.

The second broken promise that he delivered on Tuesday was on student fees. Speaking on social media in November last year, just two weeks before the general election, he said: "I think we need to really phase out third-level fees. I've strong views on that." What happened? How can student fees be phased out while parents and students are being asked to pay €500 more this year than they paid last year?

Deputy Matt Carthy: Hear, hear.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is what the Government did in this budget. No matter how hard the Tánaiste tries to spin - no doubt he will try to do it again - he said he had the backs of the students of Ireland. He has double-crossed them. It is another broken promise.

The third one is on childcare costs. Speaking to the *Irish Independent* in October last year, just a month before the general election, he pledged to deliver €200 per month childcare and to do so quickly. Here is what he said: "I actually believe the cost bit we can deliver quite quickly. I believe it can be delivered in the early time of the government." Fine Gael pledged to produce an action plan on childcare costs within the first 100 days of Government. We are now on day 259. Where is the plan? Where is the urgency he had in the run-up to the general election to deliver €200 a month childcare? It is not in the budget. Families are again shortchanged.

The broken promises have caused a lot of hurt out there. You do not get to raise people's expectation when you need their support and then come back empty-handed when they need yours.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Hear, hear.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is not good enough, but it is what the Tánaiste did. Does he get why so many workers out there are so angry with what the Government has delivered in the budget? Does he understand that they feel really let down by the litany of broken promises?

Deputy Matt Carthy: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: Before I answer that question, I too want to take an opportunity to welcome the developments in relation to the Middle East overnight. I welcome the announcement that Israel and Hamas have now agreed on the first phase of a ceasefire and a peace deal for Gaza. We are now at a critical moment where we all hope and pray that we can see an end to this brutal, horrific humanitarian catastrophe, an end to the bloodshed, the killing and the famine. I also hope all the hostages are released. It is a day of hope for the people of Gaza after the darkest of times. This morning I directed my own officials to prepare for a substantial contribution and effort to Gaza to assist in the humanitarian effort that is going to be required immediately. Right now, a consignment of 1,500 tents is being loaded by the International Organization for Migration, IOM, in Amman today for delivery into Gaza in the coming days, including indeed 750 tents from Ireland's humanitarian stocks. We will not be found wanting in doing more as well.

I thank the Deputy for raising the issue of the budget and of course completely reject the way in which he framed the budget. What he does not tell the people at home is that his alternative plan proposed 23 new taxes at a cost of €3.3 billion. In terms of economic impact - not in my view but in the view of anybody who can understand economics - that would have increased inflation in this country by spending €4 billion more. What happens when you increase inflation? You increase everybody's cost of living. In Sinn Féin's economically illiterate way of assisting people with the cost of living, it actually would have hurt people with the cost of living. That is why, when we had a general election, people rejected Sinn Féin's economic philosophy.

Deputy Neale Richmond: Hear, hear.

Deputy Simon Harris: They said, "No, thank you very much." They also heard what we said and what Deputy Paschal Donohoe said during the general election as well, when we said, "Yes, we want to do measures on income tax", but we put in black and white in the programme for Government that if it was a choice between doing certain things or doing income tax we would choose the other things because we have to keep this country safe. The Deputy only asked me about tariffs once at Leaders' Questions. He never wants to discuss the economy or the global headwinds that the country faces. We have to keep our country safe. There are people watching in on this programme today who remember what it was like wrong choices were made in budgets. They remember what it was like when too much money was spent. They remember what it was like when people did not manage the country prudently.

What we did in this budget was set out to deliver a five-year programme for Government, and it is a five-year programme for Government. The Deputy is conveniently picking up our programme for Government and saying, "Why have you not done in one year everything that

you said you would do in five?" That is not how it works. We need to be honest here. What we have done is we have taken steps to help those most in need.

To take the issue of fuel poverty, we extended the fuel allowance to 50,000 more people. We regularly discuss that issue. I am sure the Deputy welcomes that fact. We embedded a reduction in college fees permanently so that students will not have to wonder what the fees will be next year. It is now on a downward trajectory and that is embedded, and it has been extended to apprentices.

We are going to deliver on the €200 per month per child commitment in the lifetime of this Government. That is what we said we would do; it is what Sinn Féin said it would do. It is what we all said we would do. However, we also have to make sure we deliver the capacity and that we have the places. That is why there are 21 commitments in the programme for Government and we are working through them already. In this budget, we actually delivered funding to significantly increase the number of childcare places. That is really important. I regret Sinn Féin did not do that in its alternative budget. Reducing the cost of childcare but not having childcare places is not much use to anybody. This budget is being completely misrepresented by Sinn Féin. It should look at what the CEO of Inclusion Ireland said yesterday morning when she welcomed the significant uplift in funding. There is over €680 million extra for disability services, €1.5 billion more for our health services, and more than €800 million more for our education system. The budget is investing in public services, targeting the resources at those who most need them, particularly at the issue of child poverty. I was disappointed at Sinn Féin's lack of ambition on the issue of child poverty. It would have done a hell of a lot less than we did. Let us look at what it said it would do on child support payments. It promised the people it would do €12.50 for under-12s. Its pre-budget submission only did €6. We delivered €8, so let us get real.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Seriously? Does the Tánaiste really believe that?

Deputy John Cummins: Yes, we do.

(Interruptions)

The Tánaiste: Try to be serious.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Sinn Féin is proposing 23 new taxes.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Tánaiste speaks about honesty. I will read back his words from before the election-----

The Tánaiste: Yes, when Sinn Féin thought it would win.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----so maybe he does not put much credence in it.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Sinn Féin proposed 23 new taxes.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Wait until he hears what Fine Gael promised the people. It was to increase the higher tax-band threshold, raise the point at which a worker enters the higher tax-band by at least €2,000 each year.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Every year.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is what Fine Gael promised.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy should read the next bit.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It promised a plan-----

The Tánaiste: The Deputy should read the next bit.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: ----on childcare costs within 100 days.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy should read the next bit.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Government has no plan. Fine Gael has broken promise after promise because that is what Simon does.

Deputy Martin Heydon: The Deputy did not finish the first bit.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: He says what needs to be said at a point in time-----

Deputy Martin Heydon: The Deputy has not read it.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----and then forgets all about it. The families of scoliosis know that and now the workers right across the State know what he is all about.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Hear, hear.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Two and half million workers have been abandoned in this budget. I put it to the Tánaiste, at a time when the Government made tax breaks available to investors, banks, developers and landlords, why did it consciously decide to leave workers worse off in this budget? That is shameful.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy Doherty.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: What it has done is shameful. It has broken its promise. Can the Tánaiste explain-----

Deputy John Cummins: The Deputy's time is up.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----why he made a pledge that it would lift the burden on workers and decided consciously to favour developers-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----investors and landlords over the people who are out working and building our economy?

Deputy Matt Carthy: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: I am delighted that Sinn Féin is now in favour of reducing tax on work.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: My party found that to be a lonely journey in the past several years-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Fine Gael promised to abolish the USC. Does the Tánaiste remember that?

The Tánaiste: -----as Sinn Féin opposed it every time we did it.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It was to abolish the USC.

The Tánaiste: Deputy Doherty might read the programme for Government, where it specifically says that if it comes to a choice between investment in public services or tax, we know which we will do.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Matt Carthy: The choice was to tax developers.

The Tánaiste: Now, Deputy Doherty talks about-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Government made a choice on tax to give €2.5 million of taxpayers' money-----

Deputy John Cummins: Settle down, settle down.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Doherty.

The Tánaiste: I will use my time, if that is okay.

Did the Deputy hear the town planner yesterday on "Morning Ireland" talk about how the measures we have taken will help more apartments to be built? Sinn Féin wants more homes to be built, but spends half its time objecting to them. It says it wants to treat housing as an emergency.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Answer the question.

The Tánaiste: We treat it as an emergency, using the tax code to stimulate viability.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Why did you break your promise?

The Tánaiste: Sinn Féin proposed 23 new taxes, €3.3 billion more-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Yes, on banks and developers.

The Tánaiste: It would be a failure.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: You gave them your sweetheart deals.

The Tánaiste: It is an alternative budget that would blow our economy. The people rejected it.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Why did you break your promises?

The Tánaiste: Thank you very much. We will keep this country safe.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Why did you break your promises?

The Tánaiste: We will develop and invest in our public services-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Why did you break your promises?

The Tánaiste: ----- and deliver homes, and we will deliver our promises-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Why are you breaking your promises?

The Tánaiste: -----in the programme for Government over five years.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Alan Kelly.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Answer the question.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy saying it is so, does not make it so.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Alan Kelly.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I will briefly break a tradition. I am holding a sign I have up in my office, which says "Vote No to the Hanly Report". It is there as a reminder to me that 25 years ago, I marched through the streets of Nenagh holding that sign, to protest against the downgrading of my local hospital, the one in Ennis and St. John's Hospital. People can blame that report for me coming into Dáil Éireann. I jest, but it was an inspiration for me.

The mid-west - Limerick, Clare and north Tipperary - has been discriminated against when it comes to hospital services. The south east has a model 4 hospital and two model 3 hospitals. We have one model 4 hospital.

I speak about this from personal experience. On 22 October last year, I stood here giving live evidence of why elderly people are afraid to go into University Hospital Limerick, UHL. It was about my father. I had to convince him while I was here to get into an ambulance at his house. He said, "Alan, I will never come out" and he never did. He came home to die, despite receiving the best care. What is on my conscience is that he went in there afraid.

My mother is in Nenagh Hospital at the moment. She will not be put into UHL because, at this moment, I will not allow it. It has nothing to do with the workers or the management. It has to do with the circumstances. We have been discriminated against in the mid-west. I stand here with lived experiences. A few months ago, my wife got very sick. It was 4 a.m. I rang someone who works in the HSE to ask for advice. I was told to go to Portlaoise. I live about 25 minutes from UHL. I went to Portlaoise. That is what all of us in the mid-west are facing.

Now we have a HIQA report. It is beyond me why HIQA is even doing this report on hospital services. What needs to happen is as clear as the nose on my face. Deputy Sheehan and I, and all the other mid-west politicians, cannot be another generation that lets down our area. We need a new model 3 hospital with a full emergency theatre and intensive care unit in the mid-west. Full stop. If that means we will build a unit of 100 beds to deal with capacity at the moment and then wrap a hospital around it, that is what we need to do. I stand here today speaking from personal experience, but also as one of this generation of politicians. Will the Government and the Tánaiste personally, be the brave people to say they will deliver another model 3 hospital to stop the discrimination in our region?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Kelly for highlighting this issue. I know he is using his personal experiences as an example but I want to extend my sympathy and that of everyone in the House for the bereavement his wife experienced recently and indeed the loss of his father. I also wish his mother our best.

The generation of politicians who went before us gave an example of how to botch health reconfiguration. I genuinely believe the people of the mid-west were badly served by a reconfiguration that tried to change services on the promise of a better tomorrow, but did not put the better tomorrow in first. It is an example or case study of how not to do healthcare reconfiguration. If we are honest, since then, successive Governments have been trying to play catch-up on a variety of issues in the mid-west, particularly and acutely on the issue of bed capacity, but also on the issue of how to properly utilise Nenagh and Ennis hospitals, which are excellent hospitals that are eager to do more and are now beginning to do more.

The Deputy has been a vocal advocate on this issue and will continue to be. I accept the collective challenge we face is to address this once and for all together. The Minister for Health takes this seriously. She will be in Limerick next week for the opening of a new 96-bed block at UHL. I acknowledge the roles the Deputy and others played in that. There are also plans to significantly increase capacity further in the hospital. We all welcome that, but what the Deputy is saying is that, in itself, is not enough. I accept that too.

The HIQA report was commissioned, regardless of the Deputy's view on it. The Government was briefed on it by the Minister on 30 September. It outlines three potential options for consideration. One is to continue to expand the capacity at UHL's Dooradoyle site. I think we should do that anyway, to be honest. It is not either-or. The second is to extend the UHL hospital campus to comprise the existing Dooradoyle site and another site. The third is to develop a model 3 hospital in the HSE mid-west. Alongside these options, HIQA presented an extensive number of additional considerations. In fairness to HIQA, it did not just lob out three options. It went through, in quite a bit of detail, the pros and cons of each of the options. There are extensive findings. Quite a lot of work was done behind each of the potential options and the Minister will now fully consider them and report back to the Government. However, I will share the Deputy's recommendation with the Minister. There is a lot of logic in it.

We need to drive on quickly with extra capacity. The 96 beds are great, but we need to drive on the next bit and the bit after that and so on and then we need to recognise that in itself will not be enough. There is a compelling case in relation to the option identified in the report around a new level 3 hospital for the mid-west. That needs to be looked into. We all know that will not happen today or tomorrow so how do we make sure we put the capacity in in the meantime? I will ask the Minister to keep the Deputy and colleagues from the mid-west informed on this issue as she deliberates.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I appreciate the Tánaiste's reply but we need more certainty. This has gone on way too long. His Government needs to make a decision now to have a model 3 hospital. The idea of sending everybody through the UHL emergency room is downright bananas. It is crazy. It is criminal. We need to upgrade the model 2 hospitals in Nenagh and Ennis, 100%. However, a decision has to be made on the principle that the mid-west would have one model 3 hospital. The mid-west has a growing population and a population that is larger than that in the south east which has two model three and one model four hospitals. I accept the Tánaiste has gone far but I urge him to confirm that he will do this because we need it. It may mean identifying a site, putting a 100-bed unit on it and wrapping a hospital around it, because I know that will take more years, or using Nenagh or Ennis. We will debate all that again. Will the Tánaiste confirm the principle that the mid-west will have a future, that there will be ambition for it and that we will be able to address these issues for the people and that in the future they will not be frightened of going into just one access point through UHL?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. I accept the Government needs to make a timely decision on this and I accept it is an issue that has gone on for many years. In fairness to the Minister for Health, she is proactively engaging on this issue. The point the Deputy makes about population is really key. He is correct that the population of the mid-west region is growing faster than the population of many other regions, including other regions that have a greater hospital capacity. That is absolutely factually correct.

When one looks at the three options, I do not really think there are three. There is to do one obvious thing, which is to expand capacity and then there is a choice between two others. That is how I read it.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Agreed.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: All three.

The Tánaiste: We all agree with expanding capacity. Then there is the question of whether we further expand the UHL campus but also develop it on another site - that is what it says - or, for want of a less colloquial phrase, do we start from scratch and develop a new model 3 hospital? Both options recognise that there will have to be significant new healthcare capacity above and beyond the current Dooradoyle site. How quickly we can narrow down the pros and cons of each of them is very important.

The Minister will be in UHL with the HSE and local public representatives next week and she will have the opportunity to speak with the Deputy then. I take the point about the need to make a decision in principle as quickly as we possibly can.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The news of a ceasefire and hostage deal in Gaza is very welcome. At the same time the kidnapping of five Irish citizens on Wednesday night by Israeli forces in international waters is utterly unacceptable. They include an elected Member of this Dáil, Barry Heneghan. Will there be any repercussions for Israel for kidnapping Irish citizens?

The Tánaiste bought the election with a litany of promises that he has broken. He promised students and their families that he would reduce college fees. They have gone up by €500. He promised that 40,000 homes would be built last year. That proved to be a complete fabrication. He promised tax cuts and spending increases, a combination we warned was not sustainable. He never once told people that the tax cuts would be for developers and that ordinary people would be forgotten. He promised a cost of disability payment, which would finally recognise the enormous costs of having a disability. Not only did he fail to do this but disabled people will be €1,400 worse off because of this budget according to the Disability Federation of Ireland. The Tánaiste promised to tackle child poverty yet according to the Parliamentary Budget Office, this week's budget will push even more children and more older people into poverty.

During the TV election debate the Tánaiste said the Fine Gael manifesto was proposing that within 100 days of being in Government capping monthly childcare costs per child at €200 per month. He has completely and utterly broken that promise. His promises on childcare have left parents feeling betrayed. He made putting costs for childcare one of the central planks of his election campaign. He has just published his first budget and childcare costs were not reduced by a single cent. I have been contacted by parents who are at breaking point trying to pay these enormous childcare fees. One mother told me she is paying €20,000 a year for her two children. It is simply not sustainable. She was expecting this budget would take some of that pressure off and reduce costs. She feels deeply betrayed by Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil.

There are parents who, as we speak, are asking themselves whether they can afford to go back to work. There are couples all over the country who are wondering if they can afford to

have another child because paying thousands in childcare costs is just impossible. They cannot do it. These families feel betrayed by the Tánaiste and his budget. Does he understand why they feel let down? What happened to his promise to cap childcare fees at €200 a month within 100 days of taking office?

The Tánaiste: First, I share the Deputy's condemnation of what happened to our five Irish citizens. I have just received confirmation that Deputy Heneghan is back in Ireland. I had a brief message from him to that effect. It seems Israel released parliamentarians first. I know he is Deputy O'Callaghan's constituency colleague. He is back in Ireland but the remaining Irish citizens will be engaging with our embassy team today. Obviously we are calling for their swift release. We believe it was illegal in terms of how they were detained and I do intend to consider how to pursue that with counterparts.

I join the Deputy in welcoming the very real live prospect of a ceasefire and the fact the United Nations has talked about there being enough food in the region to feed the people of Gaza for three months if we can just get that in and do so urgently. Our aid people will be endeavouring to assist in that.

On college fees and many issues, we were very clear during the election campaign that we were moving back to a one annual budget process. That meant that the one-off measures between September and Christmas were going to be replaced with an annual budget and that we would seek to embed permanent, sustainable, affordable cuts to a number of areas, including education, the cost for business and a variety of other areas. The measure we have taken on student fees is the first instalment of five. I remain committed to the very strong views I have in relation to the cost of education and college fees. We intend to build on that further in the time ahead. Other decisions we made, like extending the renters tax credit which was due to expire this year at a cost of €350 million a year, will directly benefit and help students.

I appreciate we have different views on the measures we have taken around apartments and tax but I believe it is an important viability measure. We will see who is right in time. We have listened to a lot of people in terms of the viability gap. We have taken a number of measures to try to close that gap because there are tens of thousands of apartments with active planning permission today that are not being built and we need them built. We all want more housing supply.

On disability, the Minister for Social Protection has been clear he is working on developing a cost of disability payment. We would like to see that in place for the next budget. However, this year's budget did see objectively a step change in the investment in disability services. That has been recognised by the likes of Inclusion Ireland. The extra funding of €628 million for disability services from the Minister, Deputy Foley and the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, is an important step forward and will make a real difference.

On childcare, we have taken a number of measures. The commitment was to produce a plan within 100 days. All these things were going to be done as part of the budget.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: That is not what the Tánaiste said on the TV debate.

The Tánaiste: It is absolutely what I said in the manifesto and I talked about it an awful lot. Every party in this Dáil gave that commitment and we stand by that commitment. However, we have outlined a record budget for childcare of €1.5 billion. The national childcare scheme is now funded for an additional 35,000 children next year. There is a 14% increase in the number of children benefitting. In the coming months, the Minister will set out plans for a new maximum fee-cap set from next September. That will benefit people with the costs. This will reduce costs for families paying the highest fees. That is where we should start. The Minister and Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, have signed off on a 10% increase in the minimum rate of pay for educators that takes effect next Monday. That is helping to ensure we have people working in childcare facilities to mind our children and educate them. There is also funding for further pay increases for their staff next year as well and we extended the back to school clothing and footwear payment to preschool for the first time ever, benefitting the children most in need along with a range of childcare measures. The commitment remains and the commitment will be delivered on.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I think the Tánaiste knows well that most people do not read every word in a manifesto. However, they do listen to what the Tánaiste says in an election TV debate. This is exactly what he told the nation in the TV election debate. I will quote it for him again. He said the Fine Gael manifesto is proposing within 100 days of being in government capping monthly childcare costs per child at €200 per month. Then he went on to talk about what he was going to do on college fees. He did not talk about roadmaps or anything else. That is what he told the people. Anyone listening to that would realistically expect that, at least in the first budget, the Government would do meaningful things to reduce childcare fees, if not what he actually said in the TV debate. However, the Tánaiste did neither what he promised people in the TV debate nor has he done anything to reduce childcare fees. Can he not understand why people are really disappointed and feel betrayed by him now? During that election debate, they were given the very clear impression that, within 100 days of being in office, the Tánaiste was going to act to get their childcare fees down. Will he apologise to them? When is he going to act to reduce childcare fees and actually not break his election promises, which he has just done?

The Tánaiste: We are already acting. That is why it is important that parents know. If the Deputy is saying that parents do not follow this, then I completely disagree. Let parents watching know this: the budget we just delivered provided funding for 35,000-----

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: That is not what I said.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy said that people do not read election manifestoes in detail but I think people watch these things very closely.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: They also watch the TV debates.

The Tánaiste: The Irish electorate are sophisticated. Funding for an additional 35,000 places has been provided. A cap will be put in place for next September for those with the highest fees. We are extending the footwear and clothing allowance for the first time to children in

preschool. I am sure this is something that the Social Democrats must support but did not fund in their alternative budget. The electorate do listen to what people say in elections.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The Tánaiste promised to cut childcare fees.

The Tánaiste: They listened when the leader of the Social Democrats promised that VAT for the hospitality sector would be set at 9% and then walked away from it.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The Government has decided to give €20 million to McDonald's

The Tánaiste: This is because the Social Democrats do not believe that cafés in my constituency - in Greystones, Delgany or Bray - deserve the VAT cut that they promised during the election and which they are now walking away from. There is a pub-----

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The Tánaiste has broken promises on fees, childcare, child poverty-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: McDonald's do not deserve it and I know that the cafés in Wicklow will agree that McDonald's does not deserve millions of euros of their money.

The Tánaiste: I can produce the image. The Social Democrats are going to vote against a measure to help with jobs in towns and villages across Ireland and I do not think that was very good thing to do.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I respectfully ask the Tánaiste to reflect on the decision to reduce the VAT rate for the hospitality industry. On mature reflection, the Government might reverse this totally baseless and unbelievable decision. The State is proposing to gift millions of euro to a very small number of very large and very profitable businesses. I suggest that the Government fell for a fierce lobbying campaign that was effectively a scam. There is no crisis in the hospitality industry. Small local cafés and restaurants have a legitimate case for support but the main industry is thriving. The facts speak for themselves: as profits in this country between 2019 and 2025 are up by 72%; 73% of small and medium enterprises have reported making a profit higher than pre-Covid years; employment is up; and hospitality is up by 6.8%, while the national figure is 3.5%. It does not look like a crisis. There are 15,370 businesses in food and beverage services. Of these, 99.8% employ fewer than 250 people, making up 85% of the turnover. What we have is the State subsidising a very small number of very large, very profitable businesses. To give a few examples: McDonald's, profits up 17% to €42.4 million, a gain of €20 million; Supermac's, profits up 28% to €43.6 million, a gain of €12.5 million; Domino's, €280 million Irish turnover, a gain of €12.5 million; Krispy Kreme, a gain of €635,000; Compass Catering, €130.4 million turnover, a €5.8 million, and Sodexo, profits up by 44%, a gain of €5 million. These six large companies share €54 million of a windfall gift

from the Government, in a country where we have 640,000 people living below the poverty line, including 190,000 children. Will the Tánaiste accept that the Government has, let us say, made an error in judgment or a miscalculation, or even that the Government was misled, and reverse this totally unnecessary decision and bring forward a targeted proposal to support small, local cafés and restaurants with moderate turnover?

The Tánaiste: I will not accept that at all. I will accept that we will do what we promised the people we were going to do to in the general election. Not too many of us in here, including myself, have had to lie awake at night wondering how we are going to pay the wage bill. Not many of us have to wonder that if we get sick and cannot run the café where our income is going to come from. Not too many of us have had to worry about the insurance cost of running a small business. In general, people come in here with good ideas about how they are going to come up with new policies that will increase costs for small- and medium-sized businesses. That is fine if that is what they want to do, but it is not the politics we practice. The services in this country - education, health, social welfare, pensions, carers, our salaries - are all funded on the back of people who run businesses. Breaking news: enterprise and creating profits are good things. Employing people is a really good thing.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Huge profits.

The Tánaiste: We have very different economic ideology and I will not debate that in the two minutes available to me. As the Deputy rightly said, 75% of the businesses in the hospitality sector employ fewer than ten people. If I walked around the Deputy's constituency with him, which I would be happy to do some time, it would be a brave politician who stood on the floor of the shop, café, restaurant or pub that is opening to do a bit of lunch for the local community and tell it that everything is flaithiúlach and grand and that it does not need the bit of assistance. The Deputy knows how European VAT-----

Deputy Seamus Healy: Bring in a targeted measure.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: That would be too much work for them.

The Tánaiste: No, it would not. To be clear in case Deputy Newsome Drennan has not read her own party's alternative budget, Sinn Féin proposed this as well, so Sinn Féin is in favour of this and agrees with us on this one. The rate of 9% is supported by Sinn Féin as well, so I thank her for that support.

Deputy Healy does not support it and that is his right. On balance, we think this is the right thing to do. Some 191,000 people are employed in this sector directly in 20,000 businesses. The Deputy is right, some of them are large businesses and that is the same when any measure is introduced. Seventy five percent are not, with only 0.4% classified as large companies. Even the large businesses, heaven forbid, create good jobs as well, in every town, city and village. These jobs often lift people out of poverty because the best way to do so is to get them a job. Many of the large companies that I have heard mentioned in this House in recent days are franchises run by Irish people. They are Irish owned and, yet again, they create jobs. Too many people in this House are taking job creation for granted. I remember that when I first got

elected to the Dáil, it was hard to get a job in this country. We are back at full employment and we have to make sure we back businesses and reduce their cost bases. This is a practical measure. We are not reducing it for just a year or two. This is a permanent reduction to reassure business owners across the country in the hospitality sector that we have their backs and are reducing their cost bases and to drive on and keep and grow those jobs in towns and villages around the country.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The Government is proposing to spend €681 million on what is clearly an unnecessary and wasteful cut. At the same time, the Government has raised tax on PAYE workers, reneged on its commitment to abolish the means test for carers and reneged on its commitment for a weekly cost-of-living disability payment. The Government has cut all cost-of-living supports in the budget. There is no second tier of child benefit to tackle child poverty or no maximum of €200 per month for child care costs. Very profitable fast-food giants are benefiting at the expense of poor children, carers, persons with disabilities and PAYE workers. Does the Government have the political will and, indeed, the good sense to reverse this decision, stop paying hugely profitable multinational organisations and bring forward a targeted scheme that would support local cafés and restaurants with moderate turnovers?

The Tánaiste: We are not going to agree on this, so no, the Government does not intend to reverse the commitment it gave and is delivering on, but it needs to be seen in context. This is an important measure to back business and jobs in regional and rural Ireland. It is also just one of a number of measures. The budget allocated a hell of a lot more to childcare, disability, education and health than it did to this measure. In addition, we have also taken very important measures to protect those most in need. The minimum wage will increase for 200,000 workers. All workers will now have an automatic entitlement to a pension as auto-enrolment begins. We are continuing to drive down the cost of education. We are moving towards the abolition of the carer's means test. I reject out of hand what Deputy Healy said about that because we took the first step in the budget, with an increase in thresholds to €1,000 for a single person carer and €2,000 for a couple.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Abolish it.

The Tánaiste: Please do not mislead carers. Family carers deserve to know the truth and this is the truth.

We have frozen VAT at 9% for gas and electricity for the next five years and we are making sure an extra 50,000 households throughout the country will benefit from the fuel allowance. We are extending the renter's tax credit. We have the back of Irish people and the back of businesses. Crucially, the measures in the budget most proportionately favour the most vulnerable in our society and that is the way it should be.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Nonsense.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltáí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Joe Neville: In my first speech in this Chamber I highlighted the need for major upgrades in infrastructure in the State and I used many examples in my county of infrastructural deficiencies and issues that need to be resolved. As Vice Chair of the new infrastructure committee I focused extensively on obtaining an understanding of the blockages in the system and the difficulties we have throughout the State in delivering the key infrastructure we need. We are working closely with the Department of public expenditure and key State agencies to highlight and resolve these.

Today I want to continue to highlight the need for key infrastructure project delivery in Kildare North, in light of the significant focus on infrastructure in the budget. Since the establishment of the Government we have seen the focus put on infrastructure and delivery and I welcome this. Projects such as MetroLink, the DART+ programme and the national broadband plan, along with many others, will have huge positive impacts on our country in years to come. Five towns were added to the living city initiative in the budget, which is great to see. I would like to speak to the needs of towns in Kildare, and the many projects needed to ensure Kildare, which has such a rapidly growing population each year, is not left behind in terms of implementing key infrastructure and building communities and not just housing.

In my home town of Leixlip a housing development with 900 new houses was recently built around the appropriately named Wonderful Barn. This development would have been eligible for the urban regeneration and development fund, URDF, in the past but no new tranches of the grant have been introduced recently. Unfortunately, the project is not being further developed. As outlined in the budget, €300 million will be given to the URDF, which will help to support the regeneration of our towns and urban areas but we need to ensure Kildare projects in the north of the county will be included. My fear is the URDF is overly focused on regenerating older towns rather than helping to build new towns with bigger populations than those old towns, and I will continue to raise this.

In Celbridge there are traffic management issues that cause congestion multiple times a day. As one of the four councillors who voted in favour of the Celbridge local area plan in 2017, for the first time designating a second bridge for the town, I want to see this delivered. A total of €10 million of URDF funding has been allocated for the bridge but additional funding will be required to see it through to completion. I continue to work with Kildare County Council and TII as they move through various phases of the project. We will need additional funding to get the project shovel ready.

In Maynooth there is a university with more than 16,000 students and a town population of 17,000 people. Issues such as traffic are to the fore. School drops take too long and routine trips to the shops may mean joining endless traffic. Last Friday it took me 40 minutes to get out of the hotel car park in the town due to an accident on the N4. The relief road must be built.

Separately, with the continuation of DART+, as highlighted by the Minister on Tuesday, I want to reiterate once again the need for the DART+ to go to Kilcock. This would help to connect another 10,000 residents to the system. Traffic issues in Clane as well as Naas must also be addressed.

In my capacity as Vice Chair of the infrastructure committee I know that big projects need to be delivered. I want to be the one to ensure that, parallel to this, communities such as the towns in my constituency are not left to fend for themselves with projects left waiting for years. I ask that urgent infrastructure issues are fast tracked and URDF funding is allocated adequately so we get the underground and overground infrastructure, and, most importantly, the social infrastructure to go along with the houses and build communities.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Neville for raising this issue. It is fair to say he raises these issues on a very ongoing basis. Recently I was at Kildare Chamber of Commerce with Deputy Neville and the Minister, Deputy Heydon, where we had a good chance to sit down and talk with the Kildare Chamber of Commerce. What I heard very clearly from it was the growing frustration that the county, not dissimilar to my county, is seeing a growing population and infrastructure that really needs to grow to keep up with the extra population. One of the frustrations I heard at that meeting, and which I hear from Deputy Neville regularly and which I know he highlights in his role as Vice Chair of the Oireachtas committee on infrastructure, is the need to remove blockages and barriers that delay projects.

What I can say, and what Deputy Neville and the people of Kildare know, is that we now have a record level of capital funding provided through the national development plan. It is a large amount of money that we can invest now and in the years ahead. We need to make sure the urgency with which these investments are required is also in place, in terms of not allowing bureaucracy and red tape delay the delivery of planning. The Department of public expenditure and reform now has a new infrastructure delivery unit. It is the job of that Department not only to count the money but also to drive forward the delivery of the projects that are funded. The Minister, Deputy Chambers, will be back to Cabinet in the coming month with proposals from the expert group he has set up on what we can do to make processes more simple and straightforward and speed up delivery. We have also allocated money in the budget, for example, for, An Coimisiún Pleanála so that turnaround times and planning decisions can be much more speedy.

As I have said, Irish Water ran a very effective public relation campaign highlighting the need for more funding. The Government has provided the funding but there is a proviso that we want the funding to be used to enable more homes to be built. There is a very clear understanding of the Government's expectation on this. It is not acceptable that homes are built in Kildare for which people are awaiting ESB connections, or that there are homes that could be built in Kildare if people could have access to water or wastewater. The Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, has reminded me that additional funding has been provided in the budget that will allow us to have a further round of the URDF, and we will reflect the point Deputy Neville has made on a balanced focus for the funding.

I know a bugbear of public representatives in Kildare is the proportion of local property tax the county gets. I understand there have been improvements in this. I am proud that Maynooth one of the first towns in Ireland to have student accommodation that has been at least part funded by the Government. We need to continue to do more on this. I want Deputy Neville to know I am very conscious of the infrastructural needs in growing areas of our country, such as north Kildare. We have put the funding in place and we are now trying to remove the blockages and barriers to delivery. The budget, alongside the revised national development plan, gives us a real basis on which we can proceed with confidence.

Deputy Joe Neville: I am very aware that through the sound economic foundation set by that Tánaiste and the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, over the years, we now have the opportunity to deliver for communities throughout the country. Not only do we have the houses but we have the facilities. I want to point out that three towns of Leixlip, Celbridge and Maynooth, which we all know and many of us pass on the motorway, are only a stone's throw away from each other. They are only a couple of kilometres apart. Between the three towns we have 53,000 people. This is just below the population of the city of Waterford on the list of largest towns in the country. At the same time, between these three towns there is no public swimming pool, no cinema or no small theatre people can go to. Castletown House, the primary amenity we had in the area is, unfortunately, now closed. Through my work on the infrastructure committee and here I will continue to raise these issues. Ensuring we have the best possible places for our fast-growing communities is the most important thing we can do.

The Tánaiste: I agree with Deputy Neville. It is important that local government, national government and State agencies work in partnership to try to drive forward the delivery of this infrastructure which is much needed in north Kildare. It is stark when Deputy Neville makes the point that when we look at Leixlip, Celbridge and Maynooth together there is a population of 53,000 people. As he says, it is almost the population of some cities in our country. I am satisfied the budget we have put in place has provided significant funding for sports capital, which is one of the areas Deputy Neville highlighted, so we can deliver community and sporting facilities, and there is more funding for community centres also.

On the local property tax, which enables and empowers the local authority to partner with us on projects, the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, tells me Kildare will get an extra €4.9 million as a result of the campaign that Deputy Neville, the Minister, Deputy Heydon and others highlighted on the unfairness Kildare was feeling in terms of getting its fair share of this. We will work in partnership in the times ahead but the message is received and heard clearly, and it is a fair one, that certain parts of our country are growing faster than other parts and we need to make sure the infrastructure keeps up with it.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Irish fishing and seafood industry received terrible news in the past week that there will be further devastating cuts to the mackerel quota as well as cuts to blue whiting and boarfish. This has been referred to as economic Armageddon by the industry. My constituency of Donegal will be hit really hard by this. The European Commission has known for many years about the reckless overfishing of mackerel by fishing fleets from Norway, Iceland, the Faroe Islands, Russia and Britain but it has taken no meaningful action and there have been no repercussions. What is the Tánaiste's plan to secure our fair share of fish in our own waters? Is it acceptable in his view and in the Government's view that the fishing fleets from the countries that have recklessly overfished mackerel continue to fish in our waters? Is the Government finally going to stand up for Ireland and our fishing communities in the face of this economic Armageddon, as they call it?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Doherty very much for raising this issue. I had the opportunity to visit Donegal in the not-too-distant past and I met some of the fishing organisations and fishers in Killybegs. I know what a worrying time this is for people, as do the Minister, Deputy Heydon, and the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, who has specific responsibility for the area. There is no doubt that the proposals are deeply concerning. They will significantly impact on the Irish seafood sector.

Ireland has repeatedly raised the overfishing of key stocks by some coastal states outside the EU. The Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, will continue to highlight this critical issue for our fishers and engage intently with the European Commission and other member states on possible actions we could take to protect our stocks. The Minister of State met with concerned fishers in Killybegs last Sunday. I have not had an opportunity to speak to him since but he was also to meet relevant stakeholder groups yesterday to gather input so that we could see how best to approach this together. I will ask that he keep in touch with Deputy Doherty and other interested Members of the House.

Deputy George Lawlor: In a week when hundreds of millions of euro were gifted to burger barons and builders, although the Tánaiste may disagree with that characterisation, I will raise an example of the reality that many on the ground are encountering. I was contacted by the Furlong family in Duncormick in Wexford. I have their permission to raise this issue on behalf of their son, Josh, who is 23, has severe non-verbal autism and is doubly incontinent. The mattress he has been sleeping on for the last ten years needs replacing. It is a waterproof mattress used for people who are incontinent. The mattress was originally supplied by the HSE. The family have been trying to get it replaced since January 2024. Josh wakes several times a night because of the condition the mattress is in. When the sheet is changed, it becomes wet as well. This mattress was originally approved back in March in a conversation with the autism liaison nurse. Someone was even paid to travel from Belfast to Wexford to measure up for the mattress. When I raised this matter, the response I got stated that the assistant director of public health nursing presented the purchase of a mattress for Josh to the resource allocation group but the RAG declined to approve funding because no clinical need for a mattress was identified. This is absolutely appalling treatment of a family with what is essentially a child of 23 years of age who is non-verbal and incontinent. Please, we need intervention in cases like this.

The Tánaiste: That is disgraceful to hear. I am not going to endeavour to justify it. It is not acceptable. These sorts of things drive any right-thinking person absolutely berserk. That is appalling. I suggest that anybody who thinks there is not a clinical need should go spend an evening with Josh, as his family does in caring for him. I will ask the relevant Minister to follow up with Deputy Lawlor and the HSE immediately to see if we can make progress in this regard. I am very sorry to hear about this.

Deputy Rory Hearne: In this budget, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael once again showed that they put generation rent behind the developers and investor funds, which were completely prioritised. During the election campaign, they never said that their big idea was going to be a tax-cut giveaway of up to €500 million a year to wealthy developers and funds. Today, the Government's developer VAT cut has been torn apart by none other than its own Parliamentary

Budget Office over a lack of evidence and the fact that developers that have already started building thousands of apartments will get this windfall. This is utterly damning. Billions of euro are going to be given to developers and investors for apartments that are already being built, with no affordability obligations. Billions are going to be given to build apartments that no one will be able to afford to buy or rent. It is clear that, when the lobbyists came in and said "Jump", the Government asked "How high?" because it is unwilling to take the radical action needed to address this housing crisis. Why will it not ban evictions to stop children being made homeless? Why will it not implement the radical action we suggested in our alternative budget? The reason is the Government has been captured by the lobbyists of the investor funds and developers and is unwilling to take that radical action, so it will leave 5,000 children homeless and give billions to developers and investment funds. The Government's members should be ashamed of themselves.

The Tánaiste: Deputy Hearne is captured by an ideology that believes private investment in the housing market is bad.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Who is? Is the Tánaiste saying I am?

The Tánaiste: Yes.

Deputy Rory Hearne: That is completely untrue.

The Tánaiste: What the Deputy said about me was completely untrue. It is not pleasant, is it?

Deputy Rory Hearne: No, it is not. It is a fact that the Government is giving billions to developers and investors.

The Tánaiste: We are taking every step we possibly can to endeavour to increase housing supply. There is a viability issue when it comes to apartment construction. Anything that can assist in the construction and sale of apartments is a good thing. Of course, this is only one of the many things we are doing to try to help.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Can the Tánaiste justify billions for apartments that are built?

The Tánaiste: I do not know why the Deputy keeps saying "billions" when the total cost of the measure is-----

Deputy Rory Hearne: It is half a billion.

The Tánaiste: You cannot just say a million here and a million there comes to a billion.

Deputy John Cummins: Half a billion is not billions.

Deputy Rory Hearne: In two years' time, it will be up to a billion.

Deputy John Cummins: Ah, stop.

The Tánaiste: Half a billion is not the same as a billion.

Deputy Rory Hearne: In four years' time, €2 billion will have been spent.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please, Deputy Hearne.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy came in here and said that we were giving billions for completed apartments.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Yes, because the Government will be.

The Tánaiste: We are not. That is misinformation.

Deputy Rory Hearne: It is not.

The Tánaiste: The total package is millions. The proportion that will go to completed apartments is presumably a very small fraction of that.

Deputy Rory Hearne: That is not necessarily the case.

The Tánaiste: It is nowhere near billions. Accuracy matters when one is talking about taxpayers' money.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The Tánaiste still will not answer my question.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The disabled person's grant scheme and the housing adaptation scheme are vital elements in ensuring that older people and disabled persons can remain in their homes for as long as possible and enjoy a better quality of life. These grants also support employment and small builders. Tipperary County Council has stopped taking grant applications, effectively meaning that no work can be done for nearly six months. These are essential works like level-access showers, stair lifts and downstairs bedrooms. Tipperary County Council has used this scheme proactively and very effectively but the scheme has now been stopped due to a lack of funds. I ask the Minister to make funds available immediately to ensure grants can continue for the remainder of this year and to put in place a multi-annual funding model so that situations like this never arise again.

The Tánaiste: After disagreeing with Deputy Healy earlier, I find myself more in agreement with him in relation to this matter. As the Deputy knows and has alluded to, we have allocated extra money for the disabled person's grant in the budget. The question he is asking is a fair one, namely, whether we can do anything between now and the end of the year in relation to

Tipperary. We always keep these issues under review. We obviously want to see these works continue. I will ask the Minister to engage with Tipperary County Council to see if progress can be made because there is now certainty and a line of sight as regards funding as a result of the budget.

On the broader point, the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, is overseeing the new human rights strategy for disabled people. This is a real example of where we need to see good co-ordination across the country and across our local authorities. Perhaps we can take that away as an action. Specifically on the period from here to the end of the year, I will ask the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, and the Minister, Deputy Browne, to engage with Tipperary County Council.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: A few weeks back, newspapers revealed that the Irish Prison Service paid almost €25,000 of taxpayers' money for a single podcast by The 2 Johnnies. There are also reports of other podcasters receiving payments of almost €100,000. At the same time, we see extraordinary capital spending on ten single modular homes at Shelton Abbey at a cost of €640,000 each. At Loughan House in Cavan, units housing just one prisoner each are being built on publicly owned land at a unit cost of €520,000. Coincidentally, we see that senior IPS executives travelled to Kentucky the very same week the Kentucky Derby was being held. Executives also travelled to Perth, Kraków and other expensive destinations. In light of this picture of the system, it seems we need the Comptroller and Auditor General to undertake a full forensic audit of these expenditures to restore accountability and public trust in the Irish prison system. Does the Tánaiste agree?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy O'Flynn very much. I heard the Minister for justice comment on the issue regarding podcasters recently and he expressed his surprise and, perhaps, displeasure in that regard. I will ask him to come back to the Deputy on each specific issue he has raised. The Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, is putting a real focus on increasing prison capacity and has worked very hard to secure additional funding for prison capacity. We need that going into the delivery of prisons. Value for money is going to be very important in that regard. I will ask the Minister to reflect further on the issues the Deputy has highlighted. Our plan for the years ahead is to drive forward with increasing prison capacity. I take the point on value for money being important.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I raise the issue of newborn screening for SMA. During the week, I was contacted by SMA Ireland regarding the continued delay in expanding the heel prick test. The national rare disease strategy recently published by the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, provides a welcome and comprehensive framework to enhance diagnosis, treatment and support for people living with rare diseases with the stated aim of enabling better health outcomes. As the Tánaiste will know, one in 17 people in Ireland lives with a rare disease. A key element of the strategy, outlined in section 6, is the expansion of newborn screening. Specifically, it states that in 2023 the then Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly, endorsed the addition of severe combined immunodeficiency and SMA to the newborn blood spot screening programme. This decision should have brought to 11 the number of conditions screened for at birth in Ireland. Early diagnosis of SMA, as the Tánaiste knows, can mean the difference between a child walking or breathing independently and not doing so or can determine whether

he or she requires lifelong support. Treatments are funded and available in Ireland, but without early detection through screening, access is delayed.

The Tánaiste knows that the person mainly responsible for what I am speaking about is a constituent of his. I will not mention him here today. Two years after the commitment made by the former Minister, I urge the Government to provide a binding timeline for when SMA screening will actually be conducted using a heel-prick test.

The Tánaiste: I sincerely thank Deputy O’Sullivan for having put this issue in the spotlight so many times. It really is important. He is right that I am familiar with it as a result of the advocacy of an incredible person I know, a constituent of mine, in County Wicklow. This advocacy has really helped to move the dial.

The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, is also very committed to addressing this issue. She would have met and engaged with the Deputy on it. We have the rare diseases strategy, which, as the Deputy said, is very clear on the expansion of newborn screening. It is a cause of collective frustration that we still have not seen this expansion. To say the screening is transformational and life-altering is quite an understatement. I do not have an answer to the direct question, but let me talk to the Minister to see if we can get a specific timeline for delivery. I will ask the Minister to revert to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: Last Sunday night, 400 premises in the south Leitrim region were without electricity after Storm Amy. Power was restored more quickly this time but only because other regions were less affected, allowing manpower to be redirected there. People living in the area, with its considerable proliferation of forestry through which electricity lines run, realise this is the reason for the problem. Is there a role for the Commission for Regulation of Utilities in dealing with the ongoing failures affecting electricity and communications infrastructure? In August, I was made aware that after Storm Éowyn ESB Networks had been conducting forestry, timber and vegetation clearance work. I very much welcome this, but last weekend a mid-level orange warning over a few counties threw the whole system into disarray again. The people of south Leitrim want more; they want better access in order to ensure they will not be without power for most of a week again.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Feighan for raising this issue. I am very conscious that he represents a part of the country impacted by Storm Amy and that is still very much living with the fallout from Storm Éowyn and, to put it mildly, the absolute chaos it caused. People in Sligo, Leitrim and Donegal were particularly affected by Storm Amy, as were those in Mayo, Roscommon and Galway.

I extend the sympathies of everybody in this House to the family of Mr. Connors from Letterkenny, who died due to a weather-related incident in Donegal. All our thoughts are with his family.

Preparations were put in place for Storm Amy. The ESB put crews in position in advance. At the peak of the storm, over 184,000 premises were affected by power outages. The Deputy is right about the ESB, which has taken a number of measures. It has taken on additional contractors to manage forested areas where there are damaged or weakened trees. Forestry-harvesting machines have been acquired and the ESB has sourced stocks of material to

underpin repair capacity during the winter season. However, I will ask the relevant Minister to do exactly what the Deputy suggests, namely interact with the regulator of utility companies. The latter is the prudent thing to do at this stage.

Deputy Mark Ward: The Government has abandoned whole communities to the drug crisis. Yesterday, it reduced the overall budget for drug and alcohol task forces by a shameful 25%. I am a director of an addiction service in Clondalkin and I know the devastating effect this is going to have. The cut will have a negative and immediate effect on some of the most disadvantaged communities. In the area where I grew up, there is not one person - be it a particular individual, a neighbour, a family member or a friend - who has not been affected by addiction. Funding for addiction services was butchered during the austerity era but there is no excuse doing that now. What is the excuse? The country is awash with money. The cuts are nasty and cynical. I believe that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael absolutely despise working-class communities. There is no other reason they would do this to them – none whatsoever. I demand that the funding be restored immediately because everybody has the right to recover from addiction and to be given every chance. The Ministers opposite let down working-class communities; that is the truth.

Deputy Martin Heydon: Shocking.

Deputy Mark Ward: You let them down.

Deputy John Cummins: That is an outrageous statement.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Excuse me, but the Member has the right to raise an issue without being interrupted. I call the Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: And I have the right to reply.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Exactly.

The Tánaiste: I was genuinely rising to my feet to try to give a constructive reply, because I doubt there is a family, and certainly not a political party in this Oireachtas, that has not been impacted by addiction. I can tell the Deputy that there are many people in my party, his and all others, who have lived with addiction, have loved ones with addiction or go home to addiction. Therefore, let us not be-----

Deputy Mark Ward: A 25% cut. Come on.

The Tánaiste: I will deal with that constructively. I will even work with the Deputy on it, but I will not stand for the suggestion that only the people he represents are affected by addiction. It is a scourge in so many parts of society, causing pain for so many who deal with it in family life. Addiction is not a party issue at all.

The Deputy did raise a legitimate issue, however, which is what I wanted to start by saying. The drug and alcohol addiction task forces do excellent work. I am aware of the work they do in my constituency - right across Wicklow. I will speak to the Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor, about this to see what can be done to support the task forces in the context of what is a massive budget for the health service overall. I will ask her to meet the Deputy specifically on this issue. Also, I will be happy to engage with him directly.

Deputy Mark Ward: The budget is a pittance overall. In Europe-----

The Tánaiste: I am happy to try to help.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I represent many working-class communities on the northside, so I do not accept the Deputy's analysis at all.

Deputy Mark Ward: The Deputy is standing over a budget that cut €3 million-----

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I do not accept the Deputy's analysis. I am happy to go with him to working-class communities on the northside any time he wants.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Ó Muirí, you are using up your time.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I appreciate that. I am just not going to let the comment go unchallenged.

I welcome the additional money allocated to the SEAI this year. It has a huge part to play in getting our housing stock retrofitted from a climate perspective, but there is something of an issue with heat pumps. Heat pumps appear to be the nirvana when it comes to retrofitting. For older citizens in particular, they are expensive, so it is really difficult for them to change to them. It is easy when it comes to new stock; 99% of new houses built this year have heat pumps installed, and that is fine. For retired people in their later years who live in older houses, however, the cost of a heat pump is prohibitive, grant or no grant. Will the Tánaiste ask the Department and SEAI to examine this issue and see whether there are shallower retrofit measures that we can identify, roll out and support in order that the houses in question can gain some benefit from retrofitting?

The Tánaiste: Deputy Ó Muirí is right. I thank him for highlighting this. It is an issue I have been raising personally for a while. We all want to do our bit for the climate – of course we do, and we are living through a climate emergency – but we also have to recognise that while quite a few people in this country would like to retrofit some element of their homes, they may not be in a position to do everything at once. We have to show flexibility in the context of the grants, particularly for those who are older and do not necessarily want the whole house uprooted but who are happy to take some measures that will help to keep them warm in their own homes and reduce their energy bills, and also allow them to do their bit for the planet.

As the Deputy rightly said, we have increased the budget for retrofitting and climate measures. We will be working through all the detail of what that will mean in terms of numbers

of home-energy upgrades, and the relevant announcement will be made as part of the REV later this year. As the Deputy knows, we reduced the VAT rate for heat pumps to 9% from 1 January, which has helped somewhat when it comes to affordability for people switching to efficient electric heating. The Department and SEAI keep their grant schemes, including the terms and conditions, eligibility criteria and rates, under review. I will ask that they reflect on what the Deputy has suggested.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: During last year's general election campaign, I met many carers who were not eligible for the carer's allowance because their partners either got overtime or a promotion. Many people felt it demeaning that their role in caring and the job they were doing were dependent on their partners' incomes.

I welcome the increase in the income disregard. If I am correct, this means a couple can earn up to €108,000 per year, excluding PRSI, and still receive the carer's allowance. That will substantially address the concerns of a huge number of people who have fallen into the category I have mentioned. However, the principle still remains that their income or the job they are doing is dependent on the income of their partners. This is a fantastic and really important step forward. I urge the Government to continue to move towards the total abolition of the carer's allowance means test and to replace it with a payment for caring to ensure the dignity of the role is respected.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy McAuliffe very much for raising this issue. We took an important step forward in this budget in moving towards the abolition of the means test with the increases in the thresholds to €1,000 for a single person and €2,000 for a couple. This is to show intent. We have not reached the destination yet. That destination is to abolish the means test. That is what we intend to do, working with colleagues, during the lifetime of this Government.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I have received hundreds of emails from parents, teachers and SNAs complaining that the new NCSE guidelines for the review of SNA allocations for 2025-26 are unsatisfactory. These mainly consist of four demands. Those who sent them are calling for: a suspension of the guidelines until proper consultation with schools, SNAs and parents is carried out; fair criteria for defining level 3 complex care needs; assurances SNA supports will not be reduced; and that the six-week window for application for additional SNA supports be scrapped. Will the Tánaiste and the Department consult with the parties concerned to plot a better way forward, particularly as this issue has far-reaching consequences for many parents, teachers, SNAs and, especially, children with special needs?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Mythen very much for raising this issue. There is, as there should be, constant engagement with all stakeholders in respect of special education. I am pleased that the budget has provided significant additional funding that will allow for 860 extra teaching posts in the area of special education needs and 1,717 extra SNA posts. Also, we will be providing funding of €16 million to roll out the national therapy service in education to special needs schools. I will ask the Minister to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter.

Deputy Paul Lawless: The Tánaiste has acknowledged that there is a viability issue in terms of apartment construction. However, the Government has ignored the fact that this issue is having an impact right across the construction sector. That is why we have the paradox whereby we have a housing crisis but so little development, particularly in rural counties like Mayo. Housing commencements for the first six months of this year are among the lowest in a decade. I know small and medium-sized builders in County Mayo who would be willing to build but who simply cannot afford to do so because of construction costs. I know families who have jobs, mortgages and planning permission that simply cannot afford to build at the moment. That is the viability gap that exists right across the construction sector. Meanwhile, the Government took in over €3 billion from VAT on construction materials and services last year. Development contribution levies, connections to services, etc., are driving the cost of construction and choking housing delivery.

I ask the Tánaiste not to refer to housing schemes, because these do not exist in Mayo for middle Ireland. The affordable housing scheme delivered five units. There were no cost-rental units in Mayo over the past number of years.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy should conclude.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Why has the Government ignored middle Ireland and ordinary families across Mayo? Why is ignoring couples who choose to self-build as well? These people are totally locked out of housing schemes and so on.

The Tánaiste: I will try not to do what the Deputy asked me not to do. We obviously need to look at the housing situation nationally but we also need to work locally, county by county, in relation to housing. That is what we are trying to do. It is what the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, and the Minister, Deputy Browne, are trying to do. The Taoiseach and I will be interacting with a number of local authority chief executives. I will see if we can engage with the chief executive of Mayo County Council as well. Even in a country as geographically small as Ireland, there can be certain ways that local authorities and national government can work together to try to advance a response to the housing challenges. I would point out, though, that we are seeing in Mayo, for example, one of the largest drawdowns in the country of the vacant property refurbishment grant. The latter is a practical measure that is helping.

On the viability issue, we have to try to get the balance right. We felt it was a prudent use of taxpayers' money for apartments. We thought the need in that regard was more acute in terms of the viability issue and a better use of money as opposed to a wider tax measure on housing. Such wider measures have not always worked in the past.

I will mention schemes, but they will be the only ones. The first home and help to buy schemes have a lot of relevance in County Mayo, and perhaps even greater relevance there or in some counties that are even further away from Dublin. I will be happy to have a proper conversation with the Deputy on the matter.

Deputy John Cummins: They are available for self-builds too.

The Tánaiste: The Minister of State reminds us of a good point.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month. The targets for mammograms in 2023 and 2024 were missed by nearly 80,000. On KCLR recently, I listened to so many women across Carlow and Kilkenny telling their stories. One woman told of her experience after being referred for a scan by her GP because of a lump on her breast. She said months went by without a single word from the hospital. She contacted the hospital only to be told that she was marked as an urgent case but that the wait for her scan could be up to ten months. The results of the scan took a further 16 weeks. That is more than a year for a potential cancer to be spreading. The emotional stress and toll this is taking on thousands of women is overwhelming. This is happening in circumstances where the time from referral to result for someone who has the money to go private is less than a month. This is very wrong. Budget 2026 leaves cancer patients and clinicians with so many unanswered questions, which is deeply worrying. Is the Tánaiste satisfied that public patients have to wait more than a year for their results when private patients wait less than a month?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy very much for raising this very important issue during Breast Cancer Awareness Month. The Minister for Health engaged with the national cancer screening service recently and has engaged with cancer advocacy groups too. I am not satisfied if people are experiencing those waiting times. The Deputy is quite right. As well as the clinical importance of quick diagnosis, there is also – as she very eloquently put it – the hugely stressful and worrying time that it is for women and for their families. I will ask the Minister to come back to the Deputy on the actions she and the HSE believe we can take since there is clarity regarding funding for the health service in budget 2026. We will try to make progress on the matter.

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: I recently met a lady in my constituency of Meath West who was finally approved for a carer's allowance nine years after she first started to care for her beautiful daughter who has many additional and complex needs. A short time later, this lady's husband got a modest increase in what is a good income, shall we say. That income, though, does pay for many private supports and therapies they need to get. In this instance, carer's allowance was going to someone who saved the State so much money by caring for her daughter, day in, day out. It provided her with a tiny bit of financial independence from her husband. More importantly, it was a small recognition of the work she does so diligently.

To say she was devastated when the family received a review letter would be an understatement. She felt used, let down and targeted when it arrived. To receive such a letter a few short months after being approved for carer's allowance to begin with is deeply unfair. She is lucky in that the family will survive financially without the allowance, but some others will not. Will the Government take immediate action to remove the review process for those who are approved and in receipt today of carer's allowance?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Dempsey for raising this case. In many ways, it reminds us of why we need to abolish the means test. We are all hearing too many stories of carers not qualifying because of the income of the people they are married to or in a relationship with. As the Deputy said, there are also cases where people finally get the allowance and then find that if their spouse or partner does a few hours of extra work or gets a promotion, which are good things that happen in family life, they lose out.. These are kinds of traps and anomalies.

I do hope, without knowing the particulars of that person's situation, the budget might have helped. It is one of the reasons why we have significantly increased the income disregard for single people and couples in this budget. We want to build on that in the years ahead to deliver on the programme for Government commitment to abolish the means test. In the interim, I will ask the Minister, Deputy Calleary, to reflect on the point the Deputy made regarding the reviews.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Tánaiste recently launched a joint framework on the legacy of the Troubles with the British Secretary of State. We hope that will provide a route to bring about truth and justice for the many people affected by conflict-related tragedies. Would the Tánaiste be willing to work with Members of this House to establish an independent, time-bound, historical inquiries unit in this State to deal with legacy issues? I refer to issues relating to the heavy gang within the Garda Síochána, other conflict-related cases in this State and instances where there were clear cases of investigative failures, many of which continue to cast a shadow over communities. Will the Tánaiste support such a historical inquiries unit that would allow for effective and independent police investigations into unresolved deaths and incidents of torture or ill-treatment?

The Tánaiste: I am always open to engaging on a cross-party basis on this. I was with the First Minister for Northern Ireland in Hillsborough last night with representatives from western Balkan countries. We had a conversation about our peace process and the learnings from it for other parts of the world. It was a brief opportunity to talk to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in relation to legacy matters. We have a framework. It needs to be implemented and translated faithfully into legislation in the House of Commons. We will then need to do our corresponding piece of work here. I am happy to have a further or longer conversation about this with the Deputy and his party. What I will say now, however, is that we are already proposing to do two things in this jurisdiction. First is the establishment of a legacy unit within An Garda Síochána by the end of the year. Second, going back to Stormont House proposals, we have, from memory, committed to establishing that cross-Border information retrieval body to operate on a pilot basis for two years. I am interested in the Venn diagram as to where there may or may not be gaps, but I am very happy to have a conversation with the Deputy.

Deputy Alan Kelly: More than half of the submissions relating to a recent EU inquiry into the evaluation of whistleblower protections came from Ireland. There were 40 such submissions. This is concerning. The length of time - whatever the outcome - it is taking to process disclosures, the manner in which some of them are being dealt with and the toing and froing involved is not good for the State and it is certainly not good for the individuals involved.

I want to raise the case of Noel McGree, who first pointed out wrongdoing in the Prison Service in 2013. He made a substantial protected disclosure in 2019. Noel is being made homeless, as are his wife and two kids. I have met Noel. The Leas-Cheann Comhairle knows the issues relating to Noel well. He is going to be out on the streets. He and his wife and kids will have nowhere to live because he had the guts to open up an issue relating to how funds were being misspent within the Prison Service. This is what he gets for doing so. I want to ask two things. Can we ensure that the process by which protected disclosures are dealt with is done in an efficient manner and as quickly as possible and that we do not have another

scenario whereby we are the laggards in Europe in relation to this? Will the Tánaiste try to ensure that no one else will end up like Noel McGree, namely having to sacrifice the family home because they cannot pay their mortgage and ending up on the street because they did what was right?

The Tánaiste: The first thing I will do is read that EU report. Deputy Kelly was right to bring it to the attention of the House. We want to be leaders in terms of the structures we have here. We certainly do not want to be laggards. This matter sounds concerning from what he tells me, which I am not doubting. We have taken a number of measures in recent years in trying to establish the new structures for protected disclosures, greater clarity around what is meant to happen when disclosures come in and greater understanding across the system. This is a responsibility in the first instance for the Minister for public expenditure and reform. I will reflect on what the Deputy has said and ask that the relevant Minister reverts to him. Without commenting on any specific case, all whistleblowers are, under law, expected to have all of the protections that are right in the context of whistleblowing. Bringing information into the public domain is a very important part of our democracy.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.23 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.03 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.23 p.m. and resumed at 2.03 p.m.

World Mental Health Day: Statements

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marie Sherlock): I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, to the Chamber. I note that we have mental health campaigners in the Gallery. They are all very welcome.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I welcome our counterparts from the Swedish parliamentary friendship group to the Public Gallery of the Chamber. I had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Lars Mejern Larsson and the other members of the group during my St. Patrick's Day visit to Denmark and Sweden earlier this year and it is fantastic to have them and the Swedish ambassador to Ireland in the Gallery for this important debate. I also welcome mental health organisations and, in particular, representatives from Shine.

I am grateful for this opportunity to discuss the important topic of mental health today on the eve of World Mental Health Day. It was an absolute honour and privilege to be reappointed as Minister of State with responsibility for mental health by the Taoiseach in January of this year and to be the first person to represent the mental health portfolio at the Cabinet table. It is a real milestone for mental health in Ireland to have a seat at Cabinet and we are the envy of many in Europe for having such an influence in government.

Mental health is a subject I am very passionate about and not just because I have held the role of Minister of State for the past five years, delivering six budgets in a row. My interest and energy come from lived experience in my own family and community. For everyone in this Chamber, and everyone watching from the Gallery and online, mental health issues touch us all. As I say every day, there is no health without mental health.

Reflecting its importance to us all, a lot is happening in mental health right now. The second implementation plan for our national mental health policy, *Sharing the Vision*, was launched in April 2025, providing a policy delivery roadmap for the next three years, including the expansion of crisis supports and community alternatives, the first phase of which I announced yesterday. Work on the successor to our national suicide reduction strategy, *Connecting for Life*, is continuing at pace following a successful public consultation earlier this year and I hope to launch the new strategy early in the new year. Earlier this week, I secured an unprecedented level of new staffing growth in the budget, of 300 whole-time equivalents. In the coming weeks, the Mental Health Bill will complete its journey through the Houses of the Oireachtas. These important developments speak to the work of thousands of people across the country to make mental health services in Ireland modern, person-centred, recovery-focused and accessible. It is my hope that we will continue to work together, across all parties in the House, to reduce the stigma associated with mental health difficulties, to promote the message that recovery is possible and to deliver legislative reform so that quality services are accessible in the right place at the right time.

Over the past decade, Ireland has made significant strides in mental health literacy. More people understand what mental health means. More are willing to talk about it and more are seeking help. The stigma that once silenced so many is slowly being dismantled. However, we must be honest that there is still more to do. Stigma persists, especially when it comes to more enduring mental health difficulties and illnesses. We must continue to challenge it through education, empathy and leadership, and by example.

One of the most powerful tools we have is conversation. Talking openly about mental health and suicide can save lives. Silence is dangerous and we must encourage people to ask for help, to check in on one another and to know that it is okay not to be okay. Suicide prevention begins with connection. Every one of us has a role to play as friends, family members, colleagues and neighbours. Initiatives such as Shine's green ribbon campaign encourage a culture where people are not judged or labelled because of their mental health difficulties, but rather we are encouraged to understand, to be inclusive and to better respond to people's diverse needs.

Part of the benefit of our collective stigma reduction efforts is that more of our people are coming forward seeking mental health information, help and treatment across our full range of services. I recently announced €2 million in funding for new counselling supports for men. The funding is targeted at assisting with stigma reduction and to actively encourage men who otherwise would not usually avail of counselling to seek help with their mental health, to assist men in accessing mental health services and to provide much-needed support for men experiencing a mental health crisis. The supports went live on 1 September this year. They are available via GPs and are being actively promoted through a national campaign targeting men. The initiative will provide over 15,000 free counselling sessions to men through accessible supports over the phone and in-person, and I will be receiving regular updates on the uptake of the sessions. I am happy to report that men are already reaching out and some appointments have already taken place. These sessions are a lifeline and I urge anyone who needs support to reach out.

For our young people, learning about mental health and navigating services at the same time can be overwhelming. That is why we launched SpunOut's Navigator tool, a digital resource that helps young people aged 14 to 34 find the right support, tailored to their needs. It integrates

curated content, guided and self-guided experiences. Whether for counselling, peer support or crisis help, Navigator is a trusted guide in a complex world. I am delighted to say that since going live in June over 17,500 sessions have taken place, of which nearly 16,000 are new users. It is great to see such take-up and I encourage all young people and people who work with young people to try it out. In an era of misinformation and disinformation, it is so important to have appropriate person-centred care for young people. The green ribbon that I proudly wear and Navigator are just two examples of how much richer our mental health system is in Ireland because of the community and voluntary sector. Organisations like SpunOut, Shine, HUGG, Pieta and Jigsaw are the backbone of mental health supports in Ireland. They offer compassion, expertise and localised care that meets people where they are. I want to thank every volunteer, every staff member and every supporter who makes this work possible. Your impact is immeasurable.

Ireland has made significant advancements in recent years to promote recovery-orientated care by centring input from people who have used services, and their family members. We want to place people at the very centre of mental health services and supports. We want to empower them to take the lead on their own recoveries and journeys through a partnership approach. The HSE's mental health engagement and recovery office was specifically set up to integrate lived experience expertise into the development, delivery and review of our mental health services. If we want our services to really be recovery focused, they must be built on the twin pillars of clinical expertise and lived experience expertise. I have been a vocal advocate and supporter of this approach since taking up the role.

I have embedded these principles in the governance and implementation structures for Sharing the Vision. This ensures that the voice of lived and living experience is reflected at all levels, including in the national implementation and monitoring committee which oversees the delivery of the policy. I am happy to be supporting the HSE mental health engagement and recovery office with its collaboration with the World Health Organization in the recent launch of a toolkit to support integrating lived and living experience practitioners into wider policy, services and community. I also look forward to launching their inaugural lived experience learning event next Wednesday, 15 October. I really believe that other policies throughout Government would benefit from a similar focus on codesign and inclusion of lived experience and I hope this event will kick-start the spread of the good practice we are seeing in mental health.

Today, we mark World Mental Health Day, a day of reflection, solidarity and renewed commitment. This year's theme, Access to Services - Mental Health in Catastrophes and Emergencies, is both timely and urgent. It reminds us that mental health support must be resilient, equitable and accessible, especially in times of crisis, whether that be a natural disaster, a public health emergency or a personal trauma. This year's theme is a call to action. Crises fracture communities. They leave emotional scars and they can expose the inequalities embedded in our systems. Mental health care in these moments is not a luxury; it is lifesaving. It gives people the strength to cope, the space to heal and the support to rebuild.

We learned this both during and in the aftermath of the Covid pandemic. Many younger people did not get a chance to develop their social muscles, while many older people did not get a chance to flex them. Afterwards, some in each cohort struggled to adapt to the post-Covid world. Many of them are still struggling. Whether it is a young person avoiding school or

social situations, or an older person who has yet to regain the confidence to step outside the door and say, "Hello again, world", we need to acknowledge the impact of crises like these and develop responses to support people in real time and in the aftermath. I am really proud of the work of organisations in Ireland like ALONE and men's sheds, to name just two. They are doing a lot of work to address these issues.

Feeling helpless in the face of immense global crises, like the devastation in Gaza or the accelerating climate emergency, can also weigh heavily on our mental health. A sense of powerlessness can often bring anxiety, grief and emotional exhaustion, especially when the suffering feels distant yet deeply personal. It is very natural to feel overwhelmed when the scale of injustice or environmental collapse seems beyond our control. In Ireland, however, we carry a long tradition of compassion and collective action. The resolve of the Irish people to raise our voices, whether in solidarity with Gaza or in defence of our planet, is a powerful reminder that even in despair we can choose courage, community and hope.

Mental health does not exist in a vacuum. It is shaped by social determinants such as housing, income, education, employment and social connection. Mental health begins with security - a roof over your head, food on the table and safety in your community. If these basic needs are unmet, mental health suffers. We must address the root causes. We must ensure that mental health is not just treated after the fact, but protected through social policy. We must meet every person's needs, not just for survival but for dignity and mental health. To do this, we must ensure a mental health lens is applied to all Government policies. From housing to education, from social protection to climate action, every policy decision has an impact on mental well-being.

I was very proud to sign the World Health Organization declaration on mental health in all policies on behalf of Ireland in Paris in June of this year. This is not just a health issue. It is a whole-of-government issue and it demands a co-ordinated and compassionate response. The strength of both our mental health policies, *Sharing the Vision* and *Connecting for Life*, is that they have a much wider focus on initiatives that cut across multiple branches of Government. Positive examples of cross-departmental collaboration over the last number of years include the high-level task force, which focuses on the mental health and addiction challenges of those who come into contact with the criminal justice sector. This has involved extensive co-operation between the Departments of justice and Health, with good progress being made on diverting very vulnerable people away from the criminal justice system and towards our healthcare system. I was very pleased to jointly launch the community access support team in Limerick late last year, for example. This key initiative between the HSE and An Garda Síochána will bring more focused interagency care as envisaged under *Sharing the Vision*. A key priority of the project is to lead with a compassionate mental health response to vulnerable people rather than a policing response, and the emerging results from this pilot are very encouraging.

My Department colleagues also work closely with Department of housing officials to deliver on the commitments as set out in the national housing strategy for people with disabilities and *Sharing the Vision*. This cross-government co-operation directly improves outcomes for people with disabilities and, since 2017, has resulted in over 3,000 people with a mental health-related disability being assisted to access housing in the local community, which provides an essential foundation to support their recovery. I have also provided the HSE with additional

funding to support the recruitment of housing co-ordinators to support people with a mental health difficulty secure and retain independent tenancies. This is what policy should be about: making a real difference.

Significantly, in June last, I oversaw the establishment of an interdepartmental steering group for mental health, with representation from all Departments and chaired by the Department of Health. This new group will work to ensure that mental health is considered as a priority issue in policy development and delivery across government.

Travellers are identified as a priority group within both Sharing the Vision and Connecting for Life and face many challenges in relation to mental health and suicide. I have consistently provided significant funding for Traveller mental health in the annual budgetary process, including almost €1 million across budgets 2025 and 2026 for initiatives codesigned with representative groups of the Traveller community. We will continue to develop and deliver Traveller-led evidence-based policy and service interventions. In addition, I have established a Traveller mental health specialist group under Sharing the Vision structures to take a wider cross-government lens on issues facing the Traveller community that impact their mental health.

For a decade now, Connecting for Life has provided us with a comprehensive cross-government plan for how we can reduce suicide in Ireland. Reducing deaths by suicide is a complex task, but evidence and experience internationally show that real reductions in suicide rates can be achieved by involving the whole community, the whole of government and all of society working in unison. That is exactly what we have done in Ireland through our policy implementation structures, which go from the cross-sectoral group of key Departments and agencies, right down to individual resource officers for suicide prevention co-ordinating local plans for their own areas. Permanent improvements to our approach to suicide reduction from Connecting for Life have included development of the model of care to manage self-harm presentations to emergency departments through the national clinical programme for self-harm and suicide-related ideation, enhanced bereavement and crisis support services including culturally appropriate services for Travellers, and media monitoring activities to ensure safer media reporting of suicide.

Work to develop a successor suicide reduction strategy to Connecting for Life is well advanced. The previous strategy has been formally evaluated. The Department of Health ran a public consultation survey earlier this year which received almost 1,900 submissions, with a further 200 people attending in-person consultation sessions. The significant response by the public to this consultation demonstrates the strength of feeling to reducing lives lost to suicide in our country. The voices of those with lived experience will be central to shaping our next national strategy. We know already that suicide rates in Ireland are reducing, which is encouraging. Recent studies show the suicide rate in Ireland decreased by approximately 25% between 2001 and 2021. However, every death is one too many. Every death is so devastating for that person, their loved ones, friends and communities. There is no greater tragedy than someone deciding life is not worth living. As Minister of State, I never lose sight of this. We must be even more ambitious in our next suicide reduction strategy.

In budget 2026, we have made mental health a priority, with a major focus on crisis support and suicide prevention. We are deploying specialist mental health nursing teams into every model 4 emergency department across the country. This will ensure that people in acute

distress receive timely and compassionate care. This is an important initiative. Nurses, clinical nurse specialists and advanced nurse practitioners will work out of hours from 6 p.m. to 2 a.m. They will support the non-consultant hospital doctor on call. It will be a step change to have dedicated people working in the emergency department and not on call from another part of the hospital. It should make a significant difference.

There is over €15 million in new funding for crisis support and suicide reduction measures in budget 2026. As I said, this includes specialist nursing teams. It also includes three new crisis resolution services including drop-in Solace crisis cafes as community alternatives to emergency departments in areas with model 3 hospitals. They will be located in Donegal, Kerry and the midlands. It also includes 12 additional suicide crisis assessment nurses to support people in crisis who present to GPs in their communities. They will be distributed on a geographical basis. There is increased funding for suicide prevention community and voluntary organisations, including Pieta; funding to implement a new suicide reduction strategy; and funding to develop a new crisis response pathway for children and young people, with 19 new CAMHS specialist doctors for emergency liaison and out of hours.

Budget 2026 is a continuation of the investment and recruitment which are critical to modern and responsive mental health services. An additional 300 whole-time-equivalent staff will be hired in mental health services in 2026. This represents 9% of the total growth in health service staffing next year. The total allocation for mental health services for 2026 will be almost €1.6 billion. This investment supports the implementation of our national mental health policies across a broad continuum, from mental health promotion and prevention to early intervention.

In addition to our major focus on crisis supports and suicide reduction, budget 2026 will also include investment in funding to implement the new digital mental health strategy, a new talking therapies fund for providing community therapy services, additional mental health peer support workers, additional core staffing for adult mental health teams, a new dual diagnosis team, funding to reopen the Keltai treatment centre, and new consultants for perinatal mental health. It will also include two new liaison teams for mental health services for older people, a new early intervention in psychosis team, a new adult eating disorder team, an additional specialist CAMHS eating disorder team which will bring the number to 16, two new mental health with intellectual disability teams for children, five new mental health discovery colleges for young people and funding to open ten new intensive care rehabilitation unit beds at the National Forensic Mental Health Service. I also secured funding for 17 whole-time equivalents to reopen the beds closed in Cherry Orchard and funding for 30 new staff for the new children's hospital that will open next year.

Having announced what we intend to do next year, I will take a moment to reflect on progress made in mental health over the past five years. All I have said will not work unless we get the 300 whole-time equivalents recruited and in place as quickly as possible. One of the main focuses next year has to be to make sure we can start recruitment immediately. I have already spoken to several regional executive officers across the six regions about getting the staffing done.

Social prescribing services are now available in every county, with over 5,500 people accessing the service each year. An evaluation is now under way to assess how the service is performing and the outcomes for people who use it. New and expanded crisis resolution services are providing alternative care pathways to emergency departments through both

multidisciplinary crisis response teams and drop-in Solace cafes. Initial findings are indicating that they are significantly reducing emergency presentations to acute hospitals by up to 20%.

On youth mental health, while we have made a lot of progress there are some areas where I would like to see more, including CAMHS. In 2023, I launched the new national child and youth mental health office in the HSE to improve leadership, operational oversight and management. The office published its youth mental health action plan in February which sets out a clear roadmap across 16 themes to ensure children and families have equitable and timely access to high-quality mental health care. CAMHS receives approximately €167 million in dedicated funding annually. In addition, approximately €110 million is provided by Government to community and voluntary organisations each year to develop mental health supports and services, with much of this focused on children and young people. A priority for me is to improve access to community CAMHS and to reduce waiting lists. Throughout this year I have been carrying out a series of visits to all HSE regional areas to impress on the teams that I need more from them. I also stressed the importance of filling all approved posts for each CAMHS team to ensure better delivery of services. A key objective for me in reducing community CAMHS waiting lists is to eliminate waits of over 12 months. At the end of August, after visiting 21 teams, there was a decrease of 121 children - almost 17% - waiting more than 12 months compared with the end July. This is progress and reflects the focus on the issue but more needs to be done. While CAMHS is an incredibly important service for some, we must also make sure we continue to invest in upstream early intervention youth mental health services. When I visited the 21 teams, I noticed the turnaround in the Limerick area is unbelievable. It now carries only 3% of the waiting list whereas the Cork and Kerry region carries 24%. In Donegal, three CAMHS teams work together and see a lot of children. They support one other so that siloed nature is gone. Cavan-Monaghan has nobody on a waiting list. There are three regions that are significantly challenged in relation to waiting lists, however. The most important thing we can do is keep supporting the teams and focusing on those waiting. I secured funding to open two new early intervention youth mental health Jigsaw services in Waterford and Clare. This brings our national coverage for early intervention youth mental health services from 67% to 74%.

The Mental Health Bill will continue its progress through the Seanad. Second Stage concluded a couple of weeks ago. I look forward to debating many amendments to the Bill in the weeks and months to come.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Tomorrow is World Mental Health Day. I acknowledge everyone who has experienced mental health difficulties or illnesses, those experiencing them right now, the families and friends who have stood beside them and those who have lost a loved one. Every one of us knows someone who has struggled; many of us have been that someone. When talking about mental health, we cannot only talk about statistics. We must talk about the people - that young person who dropped out of school because their anxiety became too much, the person who hides their depression for fear of being judged or the person in recovery, rebuilding their life brick by brick. These people could be any one of us.

Sinn Féin believes in a country where if someone has a mental health crisis, he or she will receive appropriate care in a timely manner. However, our mental health services are in disarray because of years of Government neglect and a lack of investment. I was incredibly disappointed this week to see the paragraph in the budget expenditure report that was

essentially copied and pasted from last year's. There are serious concerns about the complete failure to provide a detailed breakdown of mental health spending in this year's budget and again I see that replicated in the Minister of State's press release of yesterday. The failure to release full information is unfair and not right and means there are now unclear and undefined funding measures, or any measures, to be funded in 2026. It shows no ambition and a lack of urgency when it comes to mental health. It appears very much to be another box-ticking exercise in the budget, a paragraph to be included, not the crisis that needs to be solved. If the Government is banking on words rather than actions, people see through that. Stakeholders see through press releases and soundbites to this not being the priority for Government that it needs to be. Not just the Minister of State's Government but successive Governments have failed on mental health and there is now a legacy of missed targets, increased waiting lists for CAMHS and psychology, and a postcode lottery for other areas of care.

The review into CAMHS by Dr. Maskey and the Mental Health Commission should have stopped the Government in its tracks, with children being misdiagnosed, mistreated and lost in a system. As of April, the over 4,500 children waiting on a first time appointment with CAMHS - a significant increase - were being failed. The over 23,000 children waiting on a psychology list at the end of April were also being failed. Some 11,500 of them have been waiting for more than a year. While I welcome the funding put aside to reopen Keltoi - it is our policy, so why would I not? - the Mental Health Bill the Minister of State spoke of did not mention dual diagnosis despite being almost 200 pages long. I see it in the Minister of State's speech, though, and that is welcome.

There is currently no dedicated mother and baby perinatal mental health unit on the island. That should also be a priority for the Government.

There is little to no new funding that anyone can identify for national clinical programmes such as eating disorders or suicide reduction. Last year, more than 500 people were diagnosed with an eating disorder, which was more than 100 cases more than in 2023. There were 894 referrals for treatment, which is up 33% on the previous year. While I will always welcome any announcement for new eating disorder beds, no one seems to be able to clarify when these beds will be open and ready to serve patients despite the urgent need for them. People living with eating disorders and their families need clear answers and firm deadlines. The urgency cannot be overstated. Under a previous model of care, the additional 20 eating disorder beds identified as needing to be opened between 2018 and 2023 never happened. No funding was allocated. I give credit to Ms Andrea Gilligan and her Newstalk "Lunchtime Live" show and to Sean, Angela, Jane and Paula. They have been contributing to that show for the last number of weeks. They contributed their lived experience. It was incredibly difficult listening, and heartbreaking at times, but it was also incredibly powerful. They spoke of the waiting lists. They spoke of delays after obstacles followed by more delays. They spoke about it taking up to 26 weeks for an initial assessment and the lack of eating disorder specialists or medical professionals trained in eating disorder care. They spoke about being unable to access supports until a formal diagnosis, which was compounded by waiting lists for assessments. They spoke of being forced to travel abroad for medical care that should be available here.

We currently invest about 6% of our health budget in mental health, far below international benchmarks and well behind countries like Finland, where mental health is treated as a priority. In real terms, this translates into longer waiting times, more waiting lists, more staff under

pressure and more of the people who desperately need assistance being told “No”. I note from the Minister of State’s speech that she spoke to the REOs and stressed to them the importance of filling CAMHS teams. A key objective is to reduce CAMHS waiting lists to eliminate those waiting for over 12 months. Is the Minister of State really sending the message to parents whose children are in crisis that 12 months is an acceptable length of time for a child to be waiting on a CAMHS appointment? For every press release she puts out, there are people sitting in silence who are struggling and in desperate need of help they are unable to access. Record investment means nothing if it never reaches the front line and it is cold comfort to somebody who is waiting over a year for a psychological appointment or to the person with an eating disorder sitting abroad today. We constantly hear about this record funding, but when are we going to see record change? Until the Government matches words with effective investment, the situation will continue.

I note the Minister of State said that the recovery focus "must be built on the twin pillars of clinical expertise and lived experience". We have an ample amount of lived experience. What we do not have is the expertise. The Minister of State spoke of unfilled posts. We have people who are trained and good at their jobs working in positions but they are not accessible because they are drowning and firefighting due to these waiting lists. Often, they are one of very few in a team that is not fully resourced.

Overall, this Government’s legacy is one of heartbreak and children being denied every opportunity to reach their potential. I agree with the Minister of State when she says mental health is health. I agree with her when she says there needs to be parity of esteem. I do not agree with what she put forward in terms of funding, plans or solutions because they have proven to be ineffective. If somebody breaks a leg today, he or she is treated straight away. If somebody is having a heart attack, the system moves heaven and earth to save that person, and rightly so. However, if somebody is having a mental health crisis and standing on that same knife edge of fear and despair, what happens? More often than not, he or she is told there is no bed, no doctor and no appointment for years. There is no help available in the here and now and that can be the difference between life and death. That is not equality, it is not appropriate care and it is not parity of esteem. A person struggling with depression or a child waiting on CAMHS deserves the same access to care as somebody living with a physical illness. This means that recovery and support are not privileges, but rights. When we talk about building a fair Ireland, we cannot do that unless we give mental health the same standing and support as any other part of our health system.

This World Mental Health Day, let us stop and reflect and let us recommit in every aspect to building parity of esteem. More importantly, let the Government start delivering it. We have done tremendous work on breaking the silence on mental health. Communities across the country have done tremendous work by themselves. Nobody asked them to; they saw a need and they stepped up. Talking may save lives, but let talking lead to action that delivers for every town, village and community in the country. Last year when we published our mental health action plan, Sinn Féin laid out a fully costed five-year strategy not just to give hope to people that it was possible to transform our service, but to deliver a fresh start for mental health care. The plan would ensure that care was built on fairness, access to high quality services, early intervention, prevention and suicide reduction and ensure parity of esteem between mental and physical health. There would be universal counselling, a new child and youth mental health service, more community teams, intellectual disability, ID, teams, CAMHS

inpatient beds and early intervention psychosis teams backed with multi-annual funding certainty for all clinical programmes from eating disorders to psychosis to ADHD adult teams and self-harm and suicide reduction as well as those critical additional inpatient eating disorder beds and community-based services, and a full ED roll-out of a self-harm and suicide reduction programme embedded across primary care and everyday clinical practice, with consultant liaison psychiatrists at every emergency department.

We need an action plan to combat loneliness and isolation, which far too many of our people experience. We would legislate to obligate any Government to uphold a "no wrong door" policy. I welcome the residential dual diagnosis Keltai facility, which I referenced earlier, but we need crisis resolution on a regional basis, not just in model 4 hospitals. There are no model 4 hospitals in the midlands, yet the Minister of State repeatedly says "midlands" without giving the definitive location. I have said umpteen times and will say it again that Ireland is not a doughnut; the midlands is a big place. We need to know where it will be, how it will be staffed and when it will be opened for people. We need that all-island, mother and baby, perinatal mental health unit. Critically, we need multi-annual strategic workforce planning, matched with an increase in graduate and postgraduate training places.

The Sinn Féin plan would move us decades away from the situation of today, from underinvestment and a lack of proper management to a system that is community based and proactive, backed by multi-annual funding and long-term planning. Where the Government fails to deliver, people suffer. Nowhere is that more evidenced than in the waiting lists for psychology, CAMHS, primary care services, specialist services and acute services.

I ask the Government to please learn from its past mistakes. Publish the detailed budget. Tell us where it plans to spend this money. Tell us what programmes it is planning on funding and let the stakeholders review that in its entirety.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I commend everybody who works in mental health services across the country. Many people's first port of call is their GP. The GP is the rock they can cling to and sometimes the only access they have to someone who will help them.

In her opening statement, the Minister of State said this year's theme was "Access to Services – Mental Health in Catastrophes and Emergencies". I was quite taken by that because of an issue I have raised with the Minister of State before and want to raise again. A young man from Sligo, Jimmy Loughlin, was unfortunately murdered in February 2018 by a mental health service user. This issue has gone on for some time and his family wrote to the Minister of State on 11 August. The family also wrote to other members of the Government and to the CEO of the HSE but has not got a response yet to that particular letter.

I have a copy of a letter the Minister of State sent to Michael Loughlin, the father of the young man who was killed, on 25 July. The letter stated a review was in the final stages and a draft would be received in the coming weeks. It stated that once the report was finalised, the HSE had confirmed that it would contact the Loughlin family to discuss the findings and recommendations. The Minister of State also promised that her office would be in touch with the HSE and would discuss those findings and recommendations with the family when this happened. We are now in the middle of October and we have not seen this review. After the tragic event it went through, the family sought and expected a full review. A serious incident

report is something that, statutorily, is normally carried out. It was not carried out, we are told. We understand it was started but stopped.

My colleague has mentioned people who break a leg or get a heart attack. Of course, services are there for those people. If the service is not there, that particular person can suffer huge consequences. If the service is not properly there when a person with a mental health condition contacts mental health services and goes into the system, that can have a tragic outcome. Suicide is often at the end of that route. In some of these cases, and in this family's case, it was not suicide; it was an innocent member of the public that suffered. This is not the only such case. There are others. People have come to me and we see other cases unfolding all the time. The absence of follow-up in mental health services to acute situations like this can have tragic outcomes for any member of the public as well as for the service user, yet the Government is stonewalling this family and stopping us finding out the truth. This situation is similar to many others around the country.

Across the water in Britain, there was a case where three people were killed and a report was done into it. The Government over there conducted an immediate, full and thorough investigation into it to find what lessons could be learned. Why are we not doing that here? Why are we allowing this to continually happen? It is totally at the Government's door that it does not ensure mental health services are in place to protect people - not just the unfortunate service user, but others who may face fatal consequences if this is not done.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I welcome the opportunity to speak on World Mental Health Day. Enormous work is being done across the country by many groups, both informal and formal. Progress has been made on breaking the stigma in our communities in recent years. However, it is important to say that stigma is alive and well in workplaces and in the medical profession when people present with a long history of mental health conditions and then seek assistance for physical health conditions but are effectively not afforded the seriousness and consideration they should be. There has been progress but, by God, we still have a long road to travel.

I acknowledge the Minister of State's commitment to her role in recent years. We sharply differ on some issues but there is no doubting her commitment. I also want to acknowledge the presence of Deputy Roche, who has spoken so powerfully about his own family. When people speak out, particularly public representatives or others in positions of influence, that can be a wake-up call to services and as to the reality of mental health in this country. We know from research that 42% of all adults in this country have experienced a mental health illness. Just under half of the population will experience a mental health crisis or illness at some point in their lives. That is enormous.

The Minister of State spoke of the structural factors and it is important to speak of those here. Homelessness, the lack of affordable housing and, in some cases I know very well, the lack of access to disability services, particularly for children, can have a devastating impact on the mental health of parents, children and families. It should harrow us all to know one in ten adults in Ireland has at some point attempted suicide.

The Minister of State referenced the significant challenges for adolescents since the pandemic. We know from research by the RCSI that one quarter of adolescents have described their mental health as bad or very bad and one in ten reported attempting suicide following the pandemic.

The critical point is that our mental health services were very much in the dark ages. There has been some improvement but there is a long road to travel.

It has already been said that heart attacks, strokes and falls are not nine-to-five issues and for a long time our health services have recognised that with 24-7 availability of care. For mental health, it is a very different story. I was glad to hear this week's announcement of the specialist nurses or advanced nurse practitioners who would operate in emergency departments. I hope there will now be a separate pathway. The Mental Health Commission made clear last year how inappropriate it was, and how out of step Ireland was, that those presenting with a mental health crisis were filtered to an ED. They are first filtered for their physical health and then referred for mental health. We all know the long hours people spend in emergency departments and to think that people spend hours on end waiting for the appropriate care, particularly when it is a mental health crisis, is horrendous. We know 51,000 people annually access mental health services for the first time through emergency departments, so the lack of out-of-hours services and appropriate spaces is critical.

I welcome this week's announcement but I have two questions. First, it is important to have the advanced nurse practitioners or specialist nurses providing that service, but where is the referral to the consultant psychiatrist in the hospital on a 24-hour basis? Second, will the Minister of State clarify what "out of hours" truly means? Many of us would expect it to be 24-7 but I hear today the service is until 2 a.m. That is better than 5 p.m. or 6 p.m. but it is still not on a 24-7 basis. Nor is it clear whether that is for Saturday and Sunday. We need to have that clarity. In my constituency we have had children in adult emergency departments waiting for days for a service to become available. It points to the lack of inpatient mental health services for children.

In regard to CAMHS, the announcement this week is to be welcomed. We have not seen the clear commitment on funding. Only when we see that will we be sure that is going to be there. The 300 additional staff is to be welcomed. However, in the context of now having 248 fewer staff compared with December 2023, it is really a case of running to stand still in CAMHS.

In regard to the length of the waiting list, I hear what the Minister of State said. Some regions have upped their game for a variety of reasons and other areas have not. There are 4,554 children waiting to be seen. Deputy Clarke referred to the more than 23,000 people waiting on the psychology waiting list with over 11,000 waiting more than a year. Last week we heard from the Minister for Health that there will now be special interventions with regard to occupational therapy, speech and language therapy and physiotherapy for children's disability services. We did not hear anything with regard to psychology. To my mind, any child waiting 12 months or longer or any period of time is utterly unacceptable. I am told it is complex and that it is difficult to recruit psychologists, but something dramatic has to be done.

Outsourcing is the unspoken piece of the mental health funding story. In 2018, €46 million was spent on private providers for psychiatric and mental health care. That figure was €80 million last year and we are spending an additional €13 million sending people to the UK for care. As the HSE has itself acknowledged, mental health expenditure on private placements is contributing significantly to the overall mental health expenditure. That level of outsourcing is unacceptable and reflects the deep and structural failings within our system. Earlier this year we spoke about eating disorders and the number of people who have to travel. Again, we have differed in terms of the words being used here but saying that people are choosing to travel

seems inaccurate. Those families do not believe that they are choosing to travel. They feel they have no service available to them here. The reality is that in this country, according to the Health Research Board, 76% of inpatient admissions for eating disorders are to private facilities or private charity providers. That is simply not good enough.

I note the commitment in the budget this week but we have a long road to travel to ensure there is sufficient provision for those suffering one of the most difficult mental health conditions. Of all mental health conditions in this country, eating disorders actually have the longest of inpatient stays.

The lesser-spoken part of the mental health piece is mental health clubs. Regarding the piece about prevention, support and assistance to those who got a prevention from additional hospitalisation, for those who have long-standing mental health conditions that is important. In my constituency, two mental health clubs were closed down in the past number of years, Shines on Mountjoy Square and the 245 Club in Drumcondra. I met four men earlier this year who have a long history of suffering from schizophrenia and want to set up a mental health club. They came looking for help. They have worked it all out. They have a business plan. They themselves need this service but they recognise the need in everybody else as well. We do not have enough of these mental health clubs, which are vital yet simple service provisions that are effective in keeping people out of hospital and ensuring there is the support and framework around them.

Deputy Peter Roche: I commend and thank the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, for all she has done in this regard. I thank her for her constant support and engagement with me in my role as the Fine Gael spokesperson on mental health. I welcome our visitors to the Public Gallery.

As we mark World Mental Health Day 2025, the message could not be clearer. It is access saves lives. This year's global theme is access to services. Mental health in catastrophes and emergencies carries particular weight here and indeed in Galway because for too many people in Ireland the catastrophe is never too far away and it is happening every day in the corridors of our emergency departments. I have raised the issue in the Chamber previously. When a person in acute psychological distress reaches the point of seeking help and the first and often the only option is to present to accident and emergency, they arrive there not with a broken bone or a visible wound, as was mentioned earlier, but with unbearable emotional pain. What they need and want is a system that is designed to receive them. They sometimes sit for hours, sometimes overnight in crowded waiting rooms. They are triaged, assessed and left to wait again, often in surroundings with noise, distress and lack of privacy in many instances. Some leave before being seen. Some do not make it back. Every time this happens it suggests our system has failed a family, another community and another future.

As was mentioned, we would never ask a heart attack patient to sit in the waiting room of a hospital while their condition worsens, yet we do that every day to people in the throes of a mental health crisis. This is not compassion, this is not care and it is not sustainable. It is time we created a separate, direct and dignified pathway for individuals presenting in mental health crisis, one that allows immediate referral to access the psychiatric and psychological team, bypassing the standard accident and emergency route. This is not a luxury but an urgent reform rooted in basic humanity and common sense. We already have strong models within our

healthcare system, including liaison psychiatric teams, crisis cafés, 24-7 helplines and community response hubs. However, they are somewhat fragmented, inconsistent and in many cases inaccessible. We need a national standard, a standard integrated crisis pathway that ensures no one in mental distress is left behind in a waiting room.

When we talk about crisis, we must also talk about our children. Pieta House recently shared a heartbreaking reminder that one in three people, which is a high statistic, under the age of 18 who turns to it for help is only in primary school. A case like Orla, who was just 11 years old, told her therapist she did not want to be here anymore. These are not isolated cases. They are cries for help from children who feel unseen, unheard, or burdensome. They are children who need understanding, not silence. No parent should ever have to hear those words from their child. No child should ever believe that their family would be better off without them. That is why accessible, early and compassionate intervention must be at the core of every form of delivery.

Most recently, the heartbreaking loss of Adam Loughnane, a 34 year old man from County Galway who tragically died by suicide after presenting himself at University College Hospital Galway, reminds us all that behind every policy delay a real human life exists. In Adam's case, he was described as a gentle soul, a man who sought help, who did what we tell people to do, to reach out, go to your hospital, ask for support. His death has rightly prompted a hospital review. However, it must also prompt national reflection and reform. No person should ever walk into an Irish hospital seeking help and leave feeling unseen, unheard or unsupported. Behind every statistic is a family holding its breath, a parent who does not sleep, friends who blame themselves, a child wondering why help did not come. As someone who has walked alongside families in my constituency of Galway East, I have seen the human cost of delay, disconnection and neglect. Mental healthcare is not an optional add-on to our health services. It is a moral obligation. The men and women who present, in distress, at accident and emergency departments are not numbers on a page. They are our neighbours, colleagues, children and parents. They deserve to be met, not with confusion or queries but with understanding, expertise and hope.

On this World Mental Health Day, I call again - and I know my call will be heard - on the Minister and the HSE to establish a dedicated national crisis response pathway for mental health with trained staff, designated spaces and seamless referral to psychiatric care. When a person reaches out for help, that moment is sacred. It may be the first, but it may also be the last attempt to live. We have a duty as legislators and leaders to follow human beings and make sure the hand they reach out to is there to hold them, not to make them wait.

Like the Minister of State, I come to the table with lived experience. Tragically, we lost our son and close friends of our son, in what was felt by me to be a crisis year. It was 2010. The figures at the time were escalating to somewhere around 500 people per year. Perhaps because of what I, others and support organisations have done over the years in offering advice, support and help - I commend all the people who did that because they have provided remarkable service - as the Minister of State mentioned, there has a welcome reduction in the number of people losing their lives by suicide. We have a lot more to do in that regard, but I am heartened and pleased that we have looked at the best pathway forward.

I want to continue to support the Minister of State in respect of this matter. I thank her for taking these statements today. Many of us have lived experience. Sometimes the story is told

with a very heavy heart, but it is important that we allow people to understand the heartbreak, torment and loss that goes with losing a child or a number of people in a community. Sometimes we might look back and say it was avoidable. In this instance, all we can do is look forward to a stronger and better system.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Roche. We understand just how personal this is to him.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am glad to have this opportunity to speak on World Mental Health Day. Like previous speakers, I thank and commend all those who work in mental health services, for both the State or the organisations that do absolutely necessary work.

I was very taken by what Deputy Roche said. It obviously came from the heart. Unfortunately, it is the worst aspect of the detrimental impact mental health difficulties can have on lives and families and the real anguish involved. We all may have dealt with some of this in our families, but, fortunately, not in quite the same way as Deputy Roche and his family. My heart goes out to all those involved.

While we will never have a perfect system. We will have arguments about resources and particular cases. We need to find a better framework. I was very taken by what Deputy Roche said in the context of it all being about pathways. The problem is with systems we set up in this State in many cases. We sometimes talk about integrated systems and there being no wrong door, but we constantly build silos, circumstances and imperfect access pathways. Whether we are talking about CAMHS, community services or departments of psychiatry such as that in Crosslanes, Drogheda, it is all imperfect. We have all had many people come to us who cannot access services and some who come to talk about family members who do not want to access services. The latter do not realise the anguish they are causing. Deputy Martin Kenny spoke about a brutal case, and we have to look into cases like that from a point of view of making sure we do everything possible to mitigate or avoid the impact. Those are the worst of circumstances.

We also understand the world we live in, the issue of drugs and how there is sometimes an overlap with mental health services. We are constantly told about people who cannot access services when they are in psychosis because of underlying addictions. We need to find a means to deal with these sets of circumstances. The Minister of State has dealt with issues such as ensuring the likes of SOSAD has funding. She met Maxi's Law campaign, which is about ensuring we can offer equality in mental health services. We have issues in Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda regarding access to services.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We have to look at all of this. I welcome some of what has been said, but we definitely need better pathways.

Deputy Liam Quaide: I thank the Minister of State for being here. I commend Deputy Roche on his heartfelt and powerful testimony. I thank him for sharing it with us.

In response to the mental health allocations in the budget, I want to be constructive and fair. I welcome the crisis support cafés that were announced, the focus on suicide prevention and the increase in CAMHS inpatient bed capacity. However, it is also important to state that the Sláintecare report recommended that at least 10% of the overall health budget be spent on mental health. This year's allocation of almost €1.6 billion represents only 5.8% of the overall health budget. Last year's budget allocation for mental health was 5.7% of the overall health spend, so the Government is moving towards that 10% at a snail's pace.

Meanwhile, many people who are desperately in need of multidisciplinary intervention in secondary and tertiary mental health services will have to continue to wait extended periods because of the recruitment restrictions still in place under the pay and numbers strategy. The latter has resulted in the decommissioning of an as of yet unknown number of essential community mental health and inpatient posts, which, in turn, as resulted in an unsustainable clinical burden being placed on existing team members. Anecdotally, I know of many posts that have been vaporised by the pay and numbers strategy. The HSE's responses to previous parliamentary questions, one of which I received only a short time ago, involve seeking more clarity with follow-up questions to me only to obfuscate the details further. Until we get beyond the pay and numbers strategy, we cannot really get serious about resourcing our mental health services and that is the case from primary care up to intensive mental health support for people with the most serious and urgent mental health difficulties.

Two days on from the publication of the budget, transparency in reporting is a long way off. We need to see a more detailed breakdown of the mental health allocation to analyse it properly. We need to know, for example, how many inpatient beds for people with life threatening eating disorders will be provided. We currently have three of the 23 beds recommended in the model of care. We need to know how many residential placements will be funded for the vulnerable cohort of people who have an intellectual disability and co-existing mental health difficulties.

It is extremely disappointing that no capital funding appears to have been committed in this budget to a perinatal mental health mother and baby unit, despite the fact that it was identified as a priority in a model of care that is now more than eight years old. Dr. Suzanne Crowe, president of the Irish Medical Council, wrote in *The Irish Independent* on Tuesday of the additional suffering caused to mothers with severe postnatal mental health difficulties who are separated from their babies. This is an acutely sensitive and consequential time for both mother and baby and it is essential that both be supported, along with the mother's partner where that applies, in a therapeutic environment. I say consequential because we know from research and clinical experience that the early stages of attachment are crucial to later mental health and development. The crude medicalised psychiatric wards that mothers with severe post-natal mental health difficulties are currently referred to are likely in many cases to actually deepen their distress further and run the risk of disrupting those early bonds with their babies.

I know from patients and colleagues that those characteristics of many inpatient wards have worsened in recent years as those services have come under more pressure a result of fewer staff being on site and the increasing demand on services. Dr. Crowe states in her editorial that nearly nine years on from the publication of the model of care, no such unit has been built. She said this inertia is unfathomable. Yet there are plans to build other types of facilities, including a 50-bed centralised residential service for adults with severe and enduring mental health difficulties on a hospital site in Glanmire, County Cork at a projected capital cost of €64

million. If this goes ahead the residents will be starkly dislocated from anything resembling community living, living on the grounds of a hospital, and the proposal would be at odds with every mental health policy that has been written since Planning for the Future in the mid-1980s as well as being in breach of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This is a retrograde proposal with no precedent as a new development in recent decades which will send mental health rehabilitation and recovery services into the dark ages where we removed people with mental health difficulties from society. I look forward to further details on the breakdown of the mental health allocations on the budget.

I also want to raise an issue of major concern to psychotherapists and one of great public interest regarding the regulation of their discipline by CORU. The Irish Council for Psychotherapy represents over 2,100 psychotherapists across ten professional organisations. It has raised six critical objections to what is being proposed under this CORU framework and has submitted a detailed policy proposal on that to the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill.

My own background is in psychology. I have the greatest of respect for psychotherapists and I believe there is much about their training that my discipline could learn from and strive to emulate. A core part of psychotherapy training is that the trainee would have mandatory psychotherapy for themselves. The ICP is extremely concerned about the removal of a mandatory personal therapy requirement for trainees under CORU's proposals. Psychotherapy at its essence is a deep human engagement, often necessarily over a sustained period of time that requires humility, self awareness and constant reflection on the part of the therapist, what the Neville Symington called the core of one person meeting the core of another. It is recognised within the broad field of psychotherapy and psychology that it is essential to face one's own areas of vulnerability, shame and aggression and become aware of one's own psychological blind spots before attempting to help a client to do so. Removing this requirement amounts to stripping away part of the essence of psychotherapy and it should be reversed. The ICP is also deeply concerned about the absence of close clinical supervision requirements, no minimum duration for training programmes, a reduction in required clinical practice hours from 500 to 200 and a failure to distinguish psychotherapy from more brief psychological interventions. These proposals by CORU amount to a disregard for European standards jeopardising employment mobility across the EU for psychotherapists and undermining public safety. I urge the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, to engage with the Irish Council for Psychotherapy as a matter of urgency and to intervene with CORU on this matter.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome this debate to mark World Mental Health Day. The simple truth is still the strongest line: there is no health without mental health. Today is about removing stigma, yes, but also about showing that the services are there, close to home and getting stronger year-on-year.

Since 2020, funding has risen sharply and budget 2026 builds again on that. I want to commend the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and her team on securing a record allocation of almost €1.6 billion, the sixth increase in a row. It adds 300 new staff across services and puts real weight behind crisis supports and suicide prevention. In short, it backs what clinicians, families and service users have asked for: earlier help, easier access, better alternatives to

emergency departments and more joined-up care. That is the direction of travel and it is the right one.

Funding will establish specialist mental health nursing teams out-of-hours in all model 4 emergency departments, so if someone arrives at 11 p.m. in acute distress, the right expertise is there at the right time. We will also see three crisis resolution services with associated Solace crisis cafés in Donegal, Kerry and the midlands, giving people a safe, community-based alternative to the ED.

I welcome plans to expand the suicide crisis assessment nurse service working with GPs, because many people first reach out in primary care. These are practical fixes to real-world issues people and practitioners regularly face. The opening of 21 acute CAMHS beds, including ten at the new National Children's Hospital is very welcome as is the reopening of 11 beds at Linn Dara. These are badly needed, as are the ten new intensive care rehabilitation unit beds at the National Forensic Mental Health Service in Portrane. That increases capacity where pressure is most acute and it builds a more humane, therapeutic pathway for recovery.

For children and young people, a priority is early help: two new early intervention youth services, a digital single point of access so families are not lost in the maze, more eating-disorder capacity in CAMHS and discovery colleges to equip young people with skills and confidence. When help is easy to find, it is easier to take. We are expanding talking therapies, rolling out a digital mental health strategy and growing peer-support roles because recovery is often peer-led and community-anchored. We are strengthening the national clinical programmes, dual diagnosis, perinatal mental health, early intervention in psychosis, adult eating disorders and services for older people, so the specialist help is there when general support is not.

Crucially, progress is not just on paper. The Mental Health Commission's latest reports show continued falls in seclusion and restraint, a hard-won shift towards human-rights-based, person-centred care. That is what service users have asked for and that is what services are delivering.

The Government is also investing in the fabric of care and facilities which is welcome. Some €31 million in capital this year, the largest single-year mental health infrastructure allocation, funds safer inpatient environments, community hubs and specialist capacity like the new eating disorders hub at Mount Carmel, with feasibility work for Ireland's first mother and baby perinatal mental health unit.

I want to place a particular focus on men's mental health. Men are more likely to die by suicide and less likely to seek help early. I really welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Butler's ring-fenced allocation of €2 million for more than 15,000 free counselling sessions for men, with supports available by phone and in person, and targeted work with young Traveller men through Exchange House. The aim is simple: lower the threshold, fit services around men's lives and tackle stigma head-on.

However, we also know that care does not start and end in clinics. It starts where people live. In my area, for example, the men's sheds in Dún Laoghaire, Blackrock and Loughlinstown are quiet powerhouses: a bench, a kettle, a shared project and suddenly the conversation is made easier. You do not have to call it therapy for it to be therapeutic. Government can help by

signposting, backing social prescribing and making sure local grants and premises are there for groups that hold men in the community before they ever reach a crisis point.

Progress also means joining the dots across Government, housing, education, work and justice. The new interdepartmental steering group for mental health, bringing together 14 departments alongside the HSE and the Mental Health Commission, is designed to do exactly that, aligning delivery with Sharing the Vision and the next suicide reduction strategy informed by nearly 1,900 public submissions, 85% of whom said suicide reduction should be a Government priority. People told us to make access easier, target supports better and fix the social determinants that drive distress. These voices have been heard. We are seeing the long-term curve bend. Between 2000 and 2021, Ireland's suicide rate fell by 28%. Preliminary figures show that there were 302 deaths in 2023. We are now at the lowest preliminary level in over 20 years, and self-harm rates are down 12% since 2010. Every life lost is one too many, but it matters that investment, reform and community action are saving lives. Our job is to keep going, to keep investing and to keep reducing the stigma in order that people reach out early and are supported. It was great to see that every mental health nurse graduating this year has been offered a permanent contract, reducing reliance on agencies and giving patients continuity of care. That is investment not only in posts, but in people.

Budget 2026 is really encouraging in this area. The allocations and investment secured by the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, will ensure faster access through out-of-hours emergency teams, more services in the community and work on a single point of access for children and young people at an early stage. The direction is right, with record funding, smarter pathways, stronger community roots and a quiet revolution in how care is delivered, with dignity and partnership at its heart. On World Mental Health Day, let us say clearly to every person who is struggling that help is closer than you think. Please reach out.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: As the Minister of State knows, a 2022 report noted that 42.5% of Irish adults met the criteria for at least one mental health condition, while 19% of people have sought professional help to deal with mental health challenges. These are huge numbers and demonstrate how difficult life can be for so many people. One of the most difficult things to do is recognising that something needs to be addressed and then taking the steps to do so. I commend all of those who have taken that brave first step.

World Mental Health Day, which falls tomorrow, 10 October, is a day that can be beneficial in raising awareness of mental health issues. Unfortunately, it can often be very difficult for people to access State supports. In recent years, this has particularly impacted young people who have tried to engage CAMHS. In Limerick, the CAMHS system is being overwhelmed with referrals. Since 2020, the number of young people waiting more than a year for assessments has increased by 145%. In an area of health where early diagnosis is critical, that is extremely disappointing for these kids and their families.

In the absence of available and consistent State support for those in need of mental health supports, volunteers have stepped into the breach. In my home city of Limerick, we are extremely fortunate to have so many volunteers who are ready to assist people. Various groups, run by individuals who give up their free time, have been critical in our efforts to address mental health challenges. I refer to places such as the Haven Hub, where people can walk in and talk to someone who cares and wants to help. There are also suicide prevention teams such as

Limerick Treaty Suicide Prevention and Limerick Suicide Watch. These women and men give up their time to walk the city and the banks of the Shannon to offer support and the hand of friendship to anybody who may be considering entering the water in a last desperate act. The Limerick Mental Health Association, which has been in existence for 23 years has done great work in raising awareness of mental health issues and has worked to reduce the stigma associated with the challenges in this regard. I encourage anybody in Limerick to visit its website this week to see all the events that are scheduled to occur.

Last October, the Minister of State and I attended the launch of the community access support team, CAST. There were many false dawns in establishing this team, and the launch date was pushed back several times. However, it was launched eventually and has become a crucial tool in combating out-of-hours mental health emergencies. For those who are unaware, CAST comprises gardaí, medical professionals and paramedics who assess and respond to mental health issues, particularly out of hours. Between January and May of this year, the team has had over 200 interactions with people. An assessment suggests that 80% of those interactions had an impact on the person in crisis. This project has been a success but it continues to operate on a pilot basis. I urge the Government to ensure that it is maintained and supported through central funding and not funded by already hard-pressed local HSE and Garda.

During the summer, I was heartened to hear the Minister for justice say that this service should be expanded across the State. It really is working. Assistant Garda Commissioner Paula Hilman told the health committee that over 40 people have avoided arrest by availing of support services. As the Minister of State knows, the emergency department in UHL is the most overcrowded in the State. There are positive things being done that should be retained and expanded. Unfortunately, such positive interventions are often quickly followed by a regressive step. One such regressive step was the announcement in Tuesday's budget of the cuts to transport.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Tomorrow is World Mental Health Day. I wanted to give a nod to the fact that with genocide, racism and an increase in violence and brutality worldwide, huge damage is being done to people's mental health. We hope that the peace plan announced today for Gaza will bear fruit, but we still have huge issues of ecocide and genocide that are causing massive damage to the mental health of so many children, in particular those who are orphaned or disabled. I must mention Sudan in this context. I feel it is important to note that. I am wearing a keffiyeh in solidarity with those sentiments. This is a cultural symbol of Palestine, a symbol of fish and nets and olive trees, rather than a political symbol, as it is being interpreted.

It is obviously welcome that the suicide rate in Ireland has reportedly come down since 2020, but suicide is still the most common cause of death among young people. That is a horrific indictment of our system and according to the CSO, it is the most common death for 18- to 34-year-olds. A mental health survey by Laya Healthcare shows that 43% of the population struggle with their mental health. A UNICEF survey has found that Ireland ranks 24 out of 36 countries for good mental health among young people, with one third being unsatisfied with their lives. We have a huge mental health crisis among young people that has to be seriously explored. It certainly does not help that so many young people do not have the prospect of a home of their own and have to consider emigrating and so on. There are obviously other causes too.

The College of Psychiatrists of Ireland and Sláintecare have stated repeatedly that mental health should be 10% of the health budget, but yet here we are again, and it is 5.8%, so it is just over half of what is needed. That really is an indictment at a time when we have a budget surplus. Some patients are waiting more than six months for public counselling. Most people do not bother waiting for public counselling. We all know most people scrimp and save and try to pay for it themselves, a bit like what happens with dental care. but it risen by over 40%. On the CAMHS waiting list, 620 children are currently waiting more than a year for access and 4,437 are waiting for access to an appointment. In 2023, Ireland had 30.7 psychiatric hospital beds per 100,000 inhabitants, compared with an EU average of 71 beds, so it is around half of the EU average. Some of the beds that have been announced are in the children's hospital, so they will not be available for a long time.

I want to mention the 24-7 accident and emergency services that are meant to be available for people who are suicidal. Annually, 51,000 people have a mental health crisis and go to an accident and emergency department. The suicidal ideation action plan for the HSE states that there should be 24-7 mental health services available in most hospitals. However, in hospitals that are 24-7, people who work in that sector have told me that only 70% currently meet the psychiatric liaison accreditation network standards and eight of these departments lack any appropriate space for mental health crisis. People show up at an accident and emergency department and often leave again because they do not get the proper care. Unfortunately, some end up taking their own lives. This has been seen again and again by so many families. The Minister of State admitted that overcrowding and a lack of staff are leading people to go into hospitals when they should actually be getting care elsewhere. Then, they are not seen quickly enough and they end up dying.

The promises regarding 24-7 mental health services that were made a decade ago need to be delivered. Mental health reform is needed in order to alleviate the worst aspects of the problem. A psychiatric nurse is often sent along with a garda to deal with somebody in the midst of a mental health episode. That is not a good approach because some gardaí - I am not saying all - are not trained in this area. We also know there has been a poor track record of gardaí dealing with people in the throes of mental health crises. It is not a good approach. We know there has to be specialised support for people.

I want to mention the perinatal mother and baby unit, which will cost €13.5 million. It has been promised for the past couple of years but it is still not in place. The lack of such a unit means that when mothers are put in adult units they end up getting separated from their babies. CAMHS is a huge area that needs massive resources. The waiting lists are increasing and the staffing is going down. This needs to be addressed.

With regard to Traveller community mental health, it is some indictment that members of the Traveller community are six times more likely to take their lives. One survey found that two thirds of Travellers know somebody who has taken their life. This study found discrimination and racism to be a major factor. The Traveller mental health action plan was never fully implemented. It was promised in the previous programme for Government and it is urgent.

I want to mention eating disorders. The Minister of State has been challenged on this by many activists. Eating disorders are the most deadly mental health condition. The HSE estimates that 180,000 people are affected by eating disorders. A couple of years ago, 220 people were admitted to hospital for eating disorders. There was a doubling over the pandemic

of people aged under 18 being admitted. Many promises were made by the Minister of State regarding eating disorder provision. Bodywhys has seen a 20% increase in demand but it gets very little funding in comparison with other NGOs. Funding is meant to be available to add two new eating disorder teams but where are these services?

In the time I have left, I want to ask about the mental health of LGBT and trans people. From previous debates with the Minister of State, I know it is an issue she is personally invested in. What is the Government's stance on the Gender Recognition Act? My feeling was that the Government supported it. It was introduced ten years ago by the then Minister for Social Protection. During the week, a former Minister for Social Protection was asked about it in an interview. She said that somebody who is trans should be classed as transitioning and not as male or female. She said the Gender Recognition Act should probably be looked at and that it is all very complex. To me, this is a very dangerous signal to be sending out to trans people at this time, when their lives and whole existence are being undermined and threatened. It needs to be addressed by the Government. That person is not in government now but is standing for the Presidency, Heather Humphreys. They are sending out a signal, leaning into this very far right vote, with the disappearance of Maria Steen and the disappearance of a Fianna Fáil candidate.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is aware-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: There is nothing stopping me talking about a presidential candidate. I checked the Standing Orders. I cannot talk about the President-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Well I am sorry, it is a ruling that I have made.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: You can rule all you like but there is no Standing Order preventing me from doing this.

An Ceann Comhairle: Excuse me.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I am talking about a candidate for the Presidency who has raised something in the public domain that the Government needs to address. That is all.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is perfectly all right, Deputy. I would just ask you to-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I am saying they need to address it because trans people are hearing these messages going out.

An Ceann Comhairle: It is rather disrespectful to disregard a ruling of the Chair, a ruling that is made to safeguard all candidates and the office of the President. You could have referenced your comments without naming anybody if you wished to do that. It is a disregard of the ruling of the Chair. All I ask is for some respect.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: What ruling?

An Ceann Comhairle: There was a salient ruling the other day that the office of the President is above political debate, as well as the nominated candidates. I ask Deputy Coppinger to be respectful of that.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I have not seen that.

An Ceann Comhairle: It was advised-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I checked the Standing Orders.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sorry, it was advised at the Business Committee this morning to the senior Deputy in your group, Deputy Paul Murphy. I ask that Deputy Coppinger consult with him.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: There was nothing wrong with me raising what was in the public domain.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Tomorrow, Friday, 10 October, is World Mental Health Day. It was first celebrated in 1992 as an initiative of the World Federation for Mental Health. In many ways, the conversation on mental health has completely transformed since 1992 when I was a teenager. I look with great admiration to the many people who are able to talk about their mental health now. I distinguish between mental health and mental illness. We have come a long way on lifting the stigma from mental illness but we still have an incredibly long way to go.

With regard to the budget and mental health, I welcome that the Minister of State is with us today and I welcome the commitment in the recent budget for funding of additional resources for mental health services. There have been significant developments in mental health resources in Ireland in recent years. We must always strive to achieve and support those who are more vulnerable and who experience mental health crises. I particularly welcome the measures outlined in the budget that will see major investment next year in crisis supports and suicide prevention.

I heard the Minister of State say at a press conference that this was her sixth budget in the portfolio. I have to say that while we will always find reasons to criticise Ministers and their performances, and challenge them to do better, I pay tribute to the Minister of State's commitment to this portfolio. She wears it very passionately and she believes in what the portfolio can do. I have seen some of the benefits and changes delivered in her time.

I understand there are an unprecedented 300 new staff for mental health services, which will represent 9% of the total growth of 3,300 staff in the health service next year. The total allocation for mental health for 2026 will amount to €1.6 billion. This is record funding and it has increased for the sixth year in a row. Mental health funding was increased by more than 50% in 2020. This was an apt time for it to happen, given what happened with the Covid pandemic. There was not only the virus itself, and we know the subsequent impact on mental health for every generation. Sometimes we focus on younger people alone, and the challenge was immense for them, but I think of many older people who were left more isolated and

separated from their connections during the pandemic. I have seen the impact this has had, in terms of local community groups and support groups. Many older people have not got back out or engaged, and they feel a bit more vulnerable. Much of this has to do with their mental resilience.

I was particularly pleased to see in the budget specialist nursing team out-of-hours services in all model 4 hospital emergency departments. I will come back to this because it is a particularly important intervention. There will be three new crisis resolution teams, including the drop-in Solace crisis cafes, to support people in crisis. There is funding to develop a new crisis response pathway for children and young people, with 19 new CAMHS specialist doctors for emergency liaison and out-of-hours services, and an additional specialist CAMHS eating disorder team. I know the latter in particular is an area the Minister of State has worked on and has made improvements.

I want to speak specifically about the specialist nursing teams. I had reason to be in an emergency department earlier this year. As, unfortunately, I was waiting, I had the chance to talk to a young man who was beside me. He had suicidal ideation and felt he was in crisis. While he was there he felt safe. He said he felt safe in the emergency department and that being there was protecting him. He knew the procedure because he had been there before. He knew he had to wait until the morning for someone to make an intervention and do an assessment for him to get treatment. Out-of-hours specialist nursing teams in all model 4 hospital emergency departments would make a massive difference to young men like him and to the many other people who present. While many of us might have to wait a little bit longer in an emergency department, someone in a mental health crisis has less resilience to be able to wait for this time. I particularly welcome the provision of those teams.

With regard to mental health commitments for 2025, last month, the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, welcomed confirmation from the HSE chief executive, Bernard Gloster, that every mental health nursing graduate in 2025 would be offered a permanent position within the HSE by 19 September. We will now have a direct transition from classroom to practice, ensuring a stable and achievable number of nurses to support our health services.

I also compliment the use of apprenticeships in this area and particularly in the area of social care. We can do a lot more on apprenticeships. When we brought in degree-level qualifications for nurses, they spoke about the parity with their colleagues in the nursing profession this provided them. We can do more in the area of social care with regard to that element of apprenticeship, on-the-job training and the availability of skills to the health service that results from it. I encourage the Minister of State to look at applying the apprenticeship model to other social care professions. Some apprenticeships are at master's level. People get a master's level qualification through the apprenticeship model. That is fantastic and we should be doing it more across the health service. It not only provides certainty for graduates at the beginning of their careers, it also ensures that patients benefit more from a stable and sustainable workforce.

Mental health does not exist in isolation. It can be influenced by housing instability, employment or education. It can also be influenced by trauma. I welcome the investment in trauma-informed communities around the country. We know the impact trauma and adverse childhood experiences, ACEs, have and how that can impact how people engage with public services. I encourage all public services, including front-facing counters in local authorities

and so on, to ensure that staff are trauma informed because trauma can often impact how people interact with services.

The Mental Health Act has been in place for 25 years. While elements might work, we need mental health legislation that better reflects the current growing needs of those seeking help. I supported the passage of the Mental Health Bill 2024 through the Dáil in July and I welcome its continued passage through the Houses. If I am correct, it is with the Seanad at the moment. We must continue to reduce mental health stigma and promote the broad range of services and supports that are available to people in communities right across the country, which I understand the Minister of State is actively doing.

It is often said that there is no health without mental health. That becomes all too true in the winter months. Longer nights and colder evenings mean that people do not have the same freedom to get out and circulate, often leading to a sense of cabin fever or isolation. We must remember to check in on each other during those times. I make particular reference to the older people I spoke about earlier.

We have a long way to go. In addition to the interaction I had with that young man in the emergency department, people regularly present to my clinics with a housing or social welfare issue but, after a number of minutes, I become aware that there may be a mental illness issue involved as well. It can often be incredibly difficult to navigate anybody through public service bureaucracy but navigating someone with a mental illness - I am making that distinction between mental illness and mental health - through can be incredibly difficult. There are advocacy services to assist those people. While TDs and the citizens' information service can help and support such people, in many cases, people with a profound mental illness can find themselves utterly lost in applying for basic public services. Many civil servants do their very best to guide people through but the advocacy services that are available are very important. I urge the Minister of State to continue with the work she is doing.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Access to mental health services should be based on need, not on where you live and most certainly not on your ability to pay. Unfortunately, for many people across this State, that is not the case. I have no doubt that the Minister of State's office and that of the Ceann Comhairle are, like my own, inundated with people who are desperate to access mental health services, especially child and adolescent mental health services. In July 2020, there were 2,112 children waiting for first-time appointments with CAMHS. As of June 2025, there were 4,554 children waiting. The figure has more than doubled over the course of five years. This is why I was so surprised to read that there are only going to be ten CAMHS beds provided under the new budget when there were 20 last time. I do not understand. Perhaps we could get clarity on why there has been a reduction in CAMHS beds. Is this part of the legacy of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael? Is this what they want to be remembered for? Of those children waiting over a year to access services, 216 are in the HSE area that includes my own constituency of Cavan-Monaghan. A staggering 88 of those children have been waiting for more than 18 months. They continue to be utterly failed by this Government. Families are crying out for help from the Minister of State's Government and, in many cases, it is simply not arriving. There is no help and no support.

I only wish I was standing before this House today to welcome new investment announced as part of this week's budget but the truth is that we do not even know what the Government

has done on mental health. Unfortunately, we do know what has not happened for mental health in this State. The Government did not even invest the time to meaningfully update the budget document. A copy-and-paste job was done for mental health. Just seven words were changed from last year's document. It is absolutely pathetic.

Sinn Féin proposed an additional €52 million a year for a revolutionary mental health action plan that would have overhauled child and youth mental health care, provided for free counselling for everybody on referral and made critical investments in vital programmes for eating disorders, dual-diagnosis, ADHD, crisis resolution, suicide prevention and urgent and emergency care. This is the type of investment and policy that could have made a real difference for those struggling with mental health. It is what the people deserve. I ask the Minister of State to make the change. She has the responsibility and she can make the change.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I very much welcome the opportunity to speak on this issue. The issue of mental health and suicide is devastating. It affects many families and communities across Ireland. I will speak on a couple of specific issues. The first is that of farmer mental health. This has been very topical in my own constituency in recent days. The last weeks of September were particularly wet and what was essentially a slurry ban was introduced on 1 October. That had huge consequences for farmers. All of the regulations and the challenges associated with them are driving farmers' mental health into the ground. The idea that spreading slurry this week, when it is dry, is worse for the environment than spreading it last week during torrential rain when we saw some of the wettest weeks on record makes no sense and caused great difficulties for farmers. According to Teagasc, 23% of farmers are at risk of suicide. In the same survey, over 55% of farmers reported depression. That is a shocking statistic. When I think back to my own grandfather, who farmed the land with such joy, and remember those days as a child, I think it was a much more enjoyable profession in those days when farmers could concentrate on the job of farming. The Minister of State needs to work with the Department of agriculture to ensure that all of these guidelines work with farmers.

As a TD, I enjoy nothing more than knocking on doors and speaking to people, including elderly people and young people. Many elderly people want nothing more than to chat. Many feel very isolated in their communities. I believe Covid changed everything, particularly for senior citizens. Across the years of the pandemic, the message was that we should isolate from one another and that contact was extremely damaging. People stopped visiting each other and going to Mass, the pub and matches. Could I have the attention of the Minister of State, please? Many among the cohort in question have continued to live as they did during Covid. The Minister of State now has a big job of work in her Ministry to promote the idea that isolation is damaging. We really need to get that message across. I spoke to a social-dancing teacher recently who identified some of the issues in this area. She said it was so sad that the people she knew so well, who used to go to social-dancing lessons and dances, are still isolating and have never returned following the Covid pandemic. It is important that we get the message out that we need to reverse this trend. It has been on repeat for so many years.

I want to raise a very concerning issue, namely, suicide contagion or cluster suicide. In my constituency recently, a community and town experienced a number of suicides. I reached out to the HSE for help and to alert it to the great difficulty the town, community, friend groups and families were experiencing, and I was shocked by the response. I spent countless hours on phone calls and emails. I had expected that there would be some protocol for a rapid response

whereby teams of professionals, including psychologists, would go into the community, identify the friend groups and reach out with supports. Instead, I was asked to share a poster on social media and put it up around the town. Many of the organisations and resources on the poster - including Samaritans Ireland, Pieta House, Childline, SpunOut and www.yourmentalhealth.ie - are very positive, but if the poster is the response to suicide contagion in a community, it is simply inadequate. Several weeks after the contagion, we eventually managed to deliver a community prevention meeting, but meanwhile in the community the friend groups of the individuals concerned were meeting late at night in cars outside filling stations. These were young people of 18, 19 and 20. They were children in many cases. There was no support. Nobody reached out and nobody identified the people as potentially needing supports, signposting and therapy. The response, I believe, was entirely inadequate. Quite frankly, I was frustrated by the lack of proactivity and willingness to intervene and reach out to the community to indicate the supports. A meeting, forum or small group-support mechanism could have been set up in the local community centre, GAA club or elsewhere to help the young people and signpost them to further supports. Instead, there was no real action – let us be honest. I campaigned and fought and eventually we established a community support meeting. However, if the response is just to put up a poster with telephone numbers, it is totally inadequate.

I believe there is a model to follow, namely the one in secondary schools, whereby NEPS staff go into a school, assist students and teachers, signpost supports and try to identify individuals in need of help. However, what happened in the community in question was that the young people most affected had to support each other in cars late at night outside filling stations. I ask the Minister of State to meet me to discuss the matter and determine how we can develop a framework or rapid crisis response team that can go into a community and reach out proactively, not simply throw out a few numbers and ask people to reach out for help. Those most in need of help are often the least likely to pick up the phone but they may be willing to engage if the hand of friendship is extended and there is a proactive approach. I reached out in the hope and expectation that this would happen but it did not. Perhaps as a new TD I was naïve. What happened was inadequate. I would like the Minister of State to work with me and to follow up with me on this.

I want to speak briefly about the CSO data. We need to speak about the difficulties, the tragedy that is suicide and the devastating impact it has. The CSO data on suicide are about four years behind. According to the CSO website, the most recent suicide data are from 2021. I understand there are delays with coroners' reports and so on, but the delay in this area is a real difficulty. We should be considering the surveying of GPs, funeral directors, parish priests and so on to try to get a handle on the situation.

Deputy Martin Daly: Tomorrow marks World Mental Health Day, a moment to pause and reflect on our nation's mental well-being. I welcome the Government's sustained commitment to improving mental health services right across the country. Next year, the total allocation for mental health will reach €1.6 billion, representing an increase of more than 50% since 2020. This is a remarkable achievement and a reflection of consistent, deliberate investment in the well-being of our people. It means more psychologists, counsellors, nurses and psychiatrists and more accessible care for those who need it most. I commend my colleague, the Minister of State responsible for mental health, for her determination to ensure this funding translates

into genuine, measurable change on the ground in crisis care, early intervention and community-based supports.

The plan to add 300 new whole-time equivalent staff next year, representing 9% growth in the mental health workforce by 2026, is another major step forward. New crisis-resolution teams, Solace cafés, SCAN nurses to support GPs, targeted suicide-prevention initiatives for Travellers, expanded CAMHS capacity, new Jigsaw services and the implementation of a digital mental health strategy are the building blocks of a stronger, more compassionate and more modern mental health service.

I welcome in particular two initiatives in which the Minister of State has been involved. The first is accessibility to specialist nursing in emergency departments, where people in distress must face long waiting times before seeing a hard-pressed junior doctor or where they lack access to a consultant. That is a major initiative. Also, there is the men's online counselling initiative, for which the Minister of State allocated €2 million. It began in September and will allow men, in particular, who are slow to seek psychological help, to access counselling in their own homes without having to attend a centre.

Closer to home, there is very good news for Roscommon and the wider west. HSE West and North West has plans for a new 50-bed replacement psychiatric unit at Roscommon University Hospital. It is to be a modern, purpose-built facility that will replace the existing unit. This is a major and long-awaited development for patients, families and staff throughout the region. A multistorey car park is part of the development and this will finally ease the parking pressure at the hospital and make access safer and more convenient for everyone. This investment will not only provide a better environment for patient care, it will also help make Roscommon University Hospital a more attractive place for staff to work.

We face genuine challenges in recruiting and retaining consultant psychiatrists and high-quality specialist staff in rural areas. Too often, smaller hospitals lose out to larger urban centres, not because the work is less meaningful but because the infrastructure and supports cannot compete with those in the larger centres. That must change if we are to be serious about an equitable mental health service nationwide. We must make our regional hospitals places of professional excellence, with strong multidisciplinary teams, modern facilities and clear opportunities for clinical and career advancement.

As a practising GP, I see daily the profound human consequences of our modern pressures on mental well-being. The levels of anxiety, low mood and burnout presenting in general practice have risen dramatically over the last two decades, and I believe we are only seeing the tip of the iceberg. What once might have been considered occasional stress and sadness is now, for many, a persistent sense of being overwhelmed. Capacity in general practice is also a major issue, with a growth in population, the need to deal with additional cultural complexity and more complex chronic medical illness care being provided in the community. That can impact urgent access where there is a mental health crisis. This is why those other pathways that have been provided are so important.

The use of antidepressants and anti-anxiety medication has grown exponentially in this time. Between 2012 and 2022, the use of antidepressant medications more than doubled among children and young people. Among those aged 75 and older, prescriptions have increased by over 50% in a decade, with this group now accounting for nearly a quarter of all antidepressant

use. Across Europe, the pattern is the same. Consumption of these medications has more than doubled since 2000, reflecting a wider and deeper tide of psychological distress.

Let me be absolutely clear that these medicines work. They help people and save lives. They are essential in helping people to recover from depression and anxiety and they allow countless individuals to function, work, parent and rediscover hope in their lives. The scale of their use, though, tells us something important, namely, that far too many people are reaching a point where medication feels like the only lifeline available. This is not a criticism of medical care or of the patients who need these treatments. It is a reflection of the world we live in, which is faster, noisier, lonelier and more digitally demanding than ever before. We are witnessing an epidemic not just of illness but of disconnection from community and purpose.

That disconnection is being accelerated by forces we have yet to fully control. Artificial intelligence is now present in nearly every aspect of young people's lives. From homework help to late night conversations, AI chatbots have become constant companions, yet regulation has not kept pace. Earlier this year, Meta quietly integrated its AI assistant into WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and Messenger, reaching roughly 3 million Irish users, including an estimated 300,000 children without parental consent, warning or opt out. CyberSafeKids reports that a quarter of eight-year-olds to 12-year-olds and more than a third of 12-year-olds to 15-year-olds are now actively using AI chatbots, not just to gather information but to chat, seek comfort and pass the time. These systems are not designed to nurture well-being. They are built to capture attention, mimic emotional intimacy, create dependency and keep young users engaged for profit. We are already seeing troubling reports from abroad of AI bots engaging vulnerable users in harmful and sexualised conversations, even encouraging self-destructive behaviour. The idea promoted by some in the tech world that chatbots might one day replace therapists or solve loneliness is a dangerous proposition. Artificial intelligence does not understand context or conscience and it cannot detect despair or respond with genuine empathy. It can only mirror what it is fed, sometimes amplifying it in deeply damaging ways.

Ireland faces some of the highest levels of loneliness in Europe. One in three individuals shows patterns of social media addiction. Combine this with the rise of anxiety and depression and the surge in prescription medications and it is clear we are living through a profound mental health challenge. It is one that cannot be solved by algorithms or quick fixes. This is why Ireland must play a leading role in ensuring AI is safe by design, transparent in purpose and accountable in impact. The forthcoming EU AI Act provides an important opportunity, but national implementation will be key, particularly when it comes to protecting children and young people. Platforms that profit from emotional manipulation must be held to account. Child safety cannot be an afterthought or a marketing slogan. It must be a legal and ethical obligation.

As we approach World Mental Health Day and as we welcome historic levels of investment - €1.6 billion for mental health in 2026 - and hundreds of new staff, new crisis supports, new digital pathways and new facilities, like the 50-bed unit at Roscommon, let us also recognise that no system of care, however well funded, can flourish in a society that is becoming emotionally disconnected. Our task is twofold: to build services that respond to illness with compassion and skill and to build a culture that sustains well-being before illness takes hold. This means investing not only in clinicians and infrastructure but also in communities, education and the digital environment in which our young people now live their lives. Mental

health is not merely the absence of disease but the presence of connection, meaning and hope. If we lose those, then no amount of medication or innovation will be enough. Let Ireland be the country that combines compassion with foresight, embraces technology, but never at the expense of our humanity, and ensures progress always serves the people and not the other way around. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Deputy Máire Devine: Deputy Daly and I do not often agree. In fact, we very rarely agree, but I say "Well done". He articulated the concerns for this generation - our new generation - going forward with the explosion of AI and social media and all that stuff that is really scary. It is good, but most of it is scary for young minds and bodies. We really need to grab hold of it. I ask the Minister of State to push this issue if we can. I am not sure what Department it sits in, but it involves mental health and communications and requires legislation. We need to grab control of it now because it is lashing ahead of us and we are way behind. It is the young people who are so proficient at it. Deputy Daly has articulated that many of them are now on antidepressants. They are looking at social media - girls are in particular - and at the slugging going on there about their image, what they say, what they do and the competition. Then we have AI coming into the mix and making reality unreal. We have to tackle that because our next generation - our next leaders - will be reliant not on one another, but on whatever comes up on their phones.

I also want to take the opportunity to talk about Loreto Centre Crumlin counselling. The Minister of State was kind enough to accept and take an email from me this morning. The centre does vital work in the Crumlin area. I have been out to visit it and I have engaged with it several times. Deputy Ó Snodaigh and I did a site visit there. The people there are volunteers, along with one paid worker. The nuns in Loreto College own the building and were subsidising the centre with the provision of the building, the cost of the heating and the lighting and through financial support. The centre has provided over 3,000 hours of counselling and 350 individuals have been helped. The waiting lists are at six weeks, but this is better than other much longer waiting lists. I do not necessarily want to be downhearted in relation to the HSE's capacity, but it is poor for the number of people in life-challenging situations and difficulties. The centre sees people in the constituency from all incomes and none. It is a mix of everybody in the Dublin 12 area. There is a meeting tomorrow between Mr. Kevin Brady and Mr. Brian Cummins and two Loreto counselling board members, and the request is for €100,000. It is not a lot for what the centre does and I think we need to reward that volunteerism. The money would just be to cover the cost of running the place, upgrading fire exits and things like that.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. She can correspond further.

Deputy Máire Devine: Am I finished now?

An Ceann Comhairle: You are.

Deputy Máire Devine: Okay. Very quickly, then, I just wanted to say-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Well, you are finished.

Deputy Máire Devine: -----that mental well-being is a community concern.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Máire Devine: In September, we celebrated the tenth anniversary of The Tree of Hope. It is community, not necessarily professional. It has to be me, you and everybody.

An Ceann Comhairle: You are going to have to correspond. I thank the Deputy. I call Deputy Gillian Toole.

Deputy Máire Devine: That went very quickly.

An Ceann Comhairle: I know.

Deputy Gillian Toole: Go raibh maith agat. I watch and I learn.

Deputy Máire Devine: What does that mean?

Deputy Mary Butler: Keep talking.

Deputy Gillian Toole: I am very appreciative of all the discussions I have heard, both in the Chamber and in my room today. There is a fantastic exchange of knowledge, diversity of debate and agreement on many subjects. I have edited out the bulk of my commentary rather than be repetitious. I will keep it with a community focus.

I welcome the annually increased and increasing budget funding and the improving fiscal and human resources to date. There is probably uniformity of agreement on much more needing to be done. With the community focus in mind, I am most grateful to the various community and voluntary groups in County Meath - the men's and women's sheds groups; the ICA groups; Foróige; SOSAD; the youth diversion projects, the age-friendly and the older person's councils - all of which foster that key ingredient of connection. I am very grateful to members of the emergency services, the healthcare professionals, Meath River Rescue and all of the people who work with people experiencing a crisis in their mental well-being and who try to bring them back to a path of recovery. Healthy Meath, this year, in line with the WHO's recommendation, has five ways to well-being: to connect; to be active; to keep learning; to give; and to take notice. Our purpose in these Houses is to enable all of these ways to well-being. We are human beings, after all, not human doings, and our purpose should be to try to enable and to reduce barriers and remove obstacles.

Under the theme of connection are meeting friends and family, attending leisure and sporting groups and building positive relationships. They are all very beneficial to our well-being. Affordable, accessible and efficient means of transport are also essential for enabling these connections. In future, we must critically evaluate the far-reaching impacts of public health policies on anxiety, isolation and depression, particularly from 2020 to 2022. It is fair to say those are ongoing. Various sociological and psychological evidence is showing deleterious and ongoing effects on anxiety, loneliness, our immune systems and ageing.

Under the "be active" heading are enjoying local walks, joining sports clubs and participating in outdoor activities. They all release our happy hormones, such as dopamine, serotonin, endorphins and oxytocin. Planning and development must make adequate provision for these simple and necessary community infrastructure elements. Phase 2 of the land use review must be published as a matter of urgency to ensure the adequate provision of parks and open spaces and community buildings. They are so important in a rapidly developing county such as my own, County Meath.

The third theme of "keep learning" includes recommendations of access to education for all, exploring workshops, courses and lifelong learning. I am very grateful to the library services in Meath, such as those in Ashbourne, Dunboyne and Dunshaughlin, which continuously offer all of these courses and more, especially in building and being points of valued connection to our older people.

The theme of giving includes volunteering or getting involved in local groups that make a difference. Again, our gratitude is frequently expressed in this House to Tidy Towns volunteers and to local heroes enhancing the built environment, fostering pride and a sense of place, and enabling us to take note of our surroundings.

The fifth theme of tomorrow's World Mental Health Day is taking notice. We are encouraged to enjoy nature, practise mindfulness and have moments of gratitude close to home. I pay particular tribute to the increasing number of teachers, early years educators and community practitioners who support individuals, classes and groups in experiencing mindfulness practice. I will give a shoutout to a local person, Ms Una Curran, who is running a mindfulness and well-being course in support of Ratoath Men's Shed this evening.

Our most basic purpose is to treat others the way we would like to be treated. This takes daily effort. Our purpose here is to enable all of these ways to well-being.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank everyone for being in the House this afternoon. First, I thank Ms Nicola Byrne from Shine and the team that have sat through every single word of it. I also acknowledge Deputy Clarke for sitting through every single word of it. When we have statements on mental health, it is normally on a Thursday afternoon. I could nearly write the list of people who will come in to speak because it is always the same. I thank each and every one of the people who have been here today to talk about mental health. If the Ceann Comhairle was not in the Chair, she would be sitting on the benches because she is such a strong advocate for mental health as well.

An Ceann Comhairle: Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Mary Butler: I acknowledge Deputy Peter Roche and his lived experience. He spoke about the loss of his son. It was powerful advocacy. The more we talk about mental health, the more important it is. The Opposition has a job to do. I listen and take notes. I take on board what is said. I fervently believe that this is a good budget this year, but we have to deliver the budget. There are 300 new posts across mental health. That is significant. I was never able to stand in this House before and say I had 300 new posts.

As soon as the Dáil went into recess this year, and as I do every year, we started meeting with all the various organisations. I met the executive clinical directors, the clinical leads across mental health, and the NGOs that are our partners and we did two weeks of meetings to try to decide what our focus was going to be. I met with the HSE, with the REOs and the various leads across mental health. It is our job then to try to decide a focus.

I have known for the last few years from my constituency office and from talking to colleagues that the crisis out of hours is significant, that is, during the time the services are closed and somebody is in distress and has suicidal ideation. Thankfully, there is a reduction in the numbers, but one suicide is one too many, as far as I am concerned. It is a very difficult situation for families and communities. The Mental Health Commission's report showed that out of hours was very challenging for many people, but also from the perspective of what we know. People were leaving emergency departments, people were feeling they were not supported and people were feeling they could not sit under the bright lights. That is why we had to do more.

I got my final figure of 300 whole-time equivalents at 4.30 p.m. on Monday. For that reason alone there was not a huge amount of detail in the book on Tuesday, given that I have to work with the HSE and the Department of Health to determine exactly where they are going, but I have a broad outline. There will be 40 whole-time equivalents for nine model 4 hospitals and one model 3 hospital, which is the Mercy hospital in Cork because the list of presentations is so high, with 1,200 or 1,300 people presenting. This is what we worked off of. Those are 40 posts to go into the model 4 hospitals initially. I will try to fund the model 3 hospitals in next year's budget. As I could not fund the model 3 hospitals this year, I decided to put in place crisis resolution teams and Solace cafés. I had been in Donegal during the summer and I had been in Kerry. The third one identified by the HSE is Tullamore-Westmeath. That is where the third crisis resolution team is going.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Tullamore is in County Offaly.

Deputy Mary Butler: I know that, but "Tullamore-Westmeath" is what the HSE identified. That is what it calls the midlands. A crisis resolution team is funded at €1 million a year, recurring, for a multidisciplinary team to work out of hours. There is also the crisis café. I have opened many cafés around the country. The crisis cafés have reduced the presentations to emergency departments by between 17% and 18%, and 20% in some areas. I recently opened one in Sligo.

I want to speak in relation to where other parts of the funding are going. Additional funding of €30 million has gone into CAMHS over the last two years. A total of €30 million has gone in and the waiting list has gone up. At this time last year, the waiting list was at 3,700. When I came back after being elected, it was gone to 4,500. I have visited 21 teams in the past three months. The waiting list today is 4,144. It was quoted as 4,500 during the debate. It was 4,500 and is now down to 4,144. The reason I prioritise those who have been waiting for longer than 12 months is that I do not want to see any waiting list where people are waiting for more than 12 months. I want waiting lists to be south of that. As a result, we have seen a 16.7% reduction since the end of July into August. That is the result of me going to meet doctors, clinicians and representatives of the HSE.

Deputy Bennett spoke about mental health. There are fewer than five people waiting for service in Cavan-Monaghan. It is one of the areas about which we are pleased. Deputy Quinlivan spoke about Limerick. CAMHS in Limerick has turned itself around completely. I acknowledge his support for the CAST project, which is important.

We have recruited 87 staff into CAMHS this year. Those are new staff. Not one inpatient child in CAMHS has travelled abroad since 2020. I must put that on the record of the Dáil because I must deal in facts. Some children may have travelled privately, outside the HSE, but no child in need of CAMHS support has left Ireland since 2020.

Many Members spoke about eating disorders. When I came into this post in 2020, three eating disorder teams were funded but only one was in place. We now have 11 teams in place and funding for 14. I have funded two more for next year, one adult team in the west of the country and one CAMHS team in the south east. I am not sure of the locations because the HSE, working with the Department, will determine those. I cannot specify. If I could, I would have everything in Waterford but I do not do that. I take a geographical perspective to see what we can do.

Some 100 clinicians are now working in eating disorder specialist teams all over the country. We also have eight consultant psychiatrists. I will be making an announcement soon about our plans to develop specialist eating disorder beds for adults, which will include a proper geographical spread. I will also be making an announcement soon about perinatal mental health and the mother-and-baby unit. We are working on a plan, which is commercially sensitive, under which there will be eating disorder beds for adults and a perinatal unit in Dublin. I cannot say anymore. There will be a geographical spread for the rest of those units.

The model of care proposed in 2018 included 16 teams. Those 16 teams have now been funded and I have already been told we need another, so we have gone to 17 teams. That will come in due course. It will certainly happen.

Other issues relating to the budget were raised. Some 5.6% of the overall health budget is allocated to mental health. However, I got 9% of the available staff next year, which is significant. Of the head count being provided through the HSE and the Department across all health services next year, I got 3,300 staff. That is 9% of the overall, and a head count that will do me. Once I have the staff, I must have the money to pay for them. That is important.

I want to touch on the clusters, which were spoken about. There is a community response to cluster suicides. We have the National Office for Suicide Prevention guidance for local response to suicide. All areas should have a HSE-led integrated group to monitor and respond to clusters. Where young people are involved, NEPS colleagues are involved and respond to children. We are also providing a response by way of bereavement support. It is important to note that we have those supports.

I will say one more thing before I finish. It is the most important thing I want to say today. Let us all get the message out. This is for any Member who has constituents coming to his or her office. At the moment, we cannot get men to avail of supports. If we only take away one thing from today's debate, it should be the site yourmentalhealth.ie/men. Tonight at 5 p.m., Connect Counselling is providing free counselling to people from their kitchen tables, sofas or bedrooms. It is for the farmer who has just come in from milking the cows if he is in trouble. MyMind is providing 5,000 hours of counselling between now and Christmas in 20 different

languages to support those who come in on permits and might not speak English or Irish. I have worked with Exchange House Ireland. Supports are now available online for young Travellers. I have worked with the one organisation for retired veterans to provide counselling supports. These 15,000 counselling supports are there. We have worked with the Irish College of GPs. Some 1,200 GPs were on a call three or four weeks ago. They now know that they can support people. There is no waiting list for those counselling supports. There is dedicated money for those, additional to what is there.

On World Mental Health Day, which is tomorrow, it is important that we all talk about our mental health. I ask any men out there to look at yourmentalhealth.ie/men. I ask Members to ensure their office staff know about the site. They can signpost people to those supports, which are needed.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank all Deputies for taking part in the debate. We all live and learn. The debate was scheduled for two hours and 25 minutes and we are on time. I thank the Minister of State and others.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: It was a joint effort.

An Ceann Comhairle: There would not be much leniency. I thank Deputies for their co-operation.

Deputy Máire Devine: I remind the Minister of State of the issues I raised in respect of Crumlin hospital.

Deputy Mary Butler: I have passed on that issue.

Financial Resolutions 2025

Financial Resolution No. 5: General (Resumed)

Debate resumed on the following Financial Resolution:

THAT it is expedient to amend the law relating to inland revenue (including value-added tax and excise) and to make further provision in connection with finance.

- (Minister for Education and Youth)

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I am due to be sharing time with other Deputies, who will no doubt be here imminently. We are splitting 25 minutes between four of us.

On a serious note, before I commence this debate, I sincerely and personally commend the work of the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, who has left the Chamber. That sentiment was echoed by the Ceann Comhairle. Her closing line was an appeal to men of my generation - I am a man of a certain age - to mind not only their own mental health but that of those around

them. It cannot be said enough. I have no doubt that is a point on which we are all in agreement, regardless of which side of the Chamber we sit.

It is my pleasure to commend this budget to the House and to speak in favour of this financial resolution. As a Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, I am cognisant of the world around us. I am cognisant of exactly what is happening in countries around us, not just from a societal and political point of view, but also from an economic point of view. We stand at a juncture. Countries surrounding us are entering into effective recession. We are in the teeth of a global tariff war and see the return of protectionism. All of that is against the backdrop of a global economy still recovering from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and, indeed, continuing to reel from the economic outflow of Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine and the cost-of-living issues that have impacted so many people. It is in that context that we witnessed a budget brought forward to this House, for the tenth year as either Minister for Finance or Minister for public expenditure, by Deputy Donohoe.

The budget is absolutely rooted in the principle of resilience. Listening to some of the commentary in this Chamber and beyond in recent days, it is amazing that a €9.4 billion package, focused on investment and balance, is somehow cravenly being labelled as an austerity budget. I was in these Houses as a staff member in the dark days coming out of the financial crash. It was not then about the possibility of cutting some spending. It was about cutting everything and the only question was by how much. We were at that time increasing all taxes and cutting all spending. The budget delivered this week by the Ministers, Deputies Donohoe and Chambers, will form the way for a financial resolution. We have already had votes on original motions and have a finance Bill making its way to the Government next week, which will be followed by a social welfare Bill. This is absolutely a budget of resilience that ensures there is investment. It is a pro-business budget. I say that sincerely.

It seems to some people that it is bad to be pro-business. Being pro-business is being pro-jobs and pro-profits. It is good for a business to make profit because as the Ceann Comhairle knows, as someone who ran her own business for long enough, the more profit you make, the more people you hire, the more tax you pay and the more funds go into the economy to pay for all the services that everyone requires. Some of us on this side of the House believe fundamentally in the social market economy. In order to make your society work, you need an economy that works. That is why I am not ashamed to say that this budget absolutely backs businesses of all sizes. It backs investment and will continue to do so. That level of resilience is going to be tested in the coming years, if it is not already being tested.

We have effective full employment. The economy continues to grow. There is continuing investment in the State. Nearly 90,000 new jobs will be created this year. Quite frankly, we have the opportunities that other jurisdictions around us do not have. That does not happen by accident. It happens through hard work and sensible decisions. Every commitment made in the programme for Government that we have all signed up to will be delivered during the Government's five-year term. This is the first budget of five, and we will continue to push on.

I will take a few minutes to speak specifically to the areas within my remit, as a Minister of State at the Department of foreign affairs. The first is the diaspora. I am delighted that the budget for the emigrant support programme this year will increase by €1 million. Our diaspora is our greatest asset in so many ways. It is made up of the individuals and the descendants of individuals who had to leave this State during much more difficult times. Those were times of

famine, civil conflict, double-digit rates of inflation, mass unemployment and a social system which did not respect the rights of minorities or women and which, in comparison with what we have today, did not involve decency. Many of them have found themselves in tough times and are reliant on the organisations that support them, be in Great Britain or, in particular, the United States. Many others are part of a second generation who dearly love this country, care for it and want to make sure they increase our business, artistic, sporting and societal impacts around the world. That is really important and is done through the work of the emigrant support programme.

More pertinently, I am delighted that at a time when so many western countries are cutting their aid budgets and overseas development aid, ODA, budgets, we in Ireland are saying very clearly that we are not doing so. At a time when the United States has completely abolished its aid budget, when the UK is moving from 0.5% to 0.3% and when traditional donors such as the Nordic countries and the Netherlands are cutting their aid budgets, Ireland will probably be the only EU country next year that will increase its ODA budget. The increase, by €30 million, will bring our ODA budget to €840 million next year. This is a record amount. It is 51 years since Dr. Garrett FitzGerald created Irish Aid, which will now have a record budget.

This is at a time when the world needs that record level of investment because many will give us their hot take to the effect that we are spending money on or giving it to people elsewhere. It has to be said that development and aid represent an investment. We think about the issues that confront some of our constituents on a daily basis, from grocery prices to energy security to the issue of irregular migration to radicalisation to the sheer uncertainty about the direction the world is taking. All of these stem from instability in the global south. While other countries are turning their backs and allowing other actors to fill the gap, Ireland is saying very clearly that we believe in investing at source. Rather than waiting until they come to our shores and dealing with them then, we will invest in communities overseas not just because it is the right thing to do - and it absolutely is - but also because it is in our interests. It is both the selfless and the selfish thing to do.

This investment is being made against a backdrop of so many countries turning their backs on the multilateral system. Ireland believes in the United Nations. Ireland believes in the European Union. Ireland has signed up to being a global contributor. We are now one of the 20 richest countries in the world. That is something that should not be taken for granted - it is not taken for granted - and we have to ensure that we deliver a budget that can maintain that level of resilience when so many other countries are looking to make cuts or increase taxes. We have a great opportunity in front of us for the next five years, but we face so many challenges. The only way we will face those challenges is with a resilient and strong budget. It is my privilege to commend this budget and this resolution to the House.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: To follow on from what the Minister of State said, this is a significant budget that involves expenditure of almost €117 billion and an additional package of €9.4 billion. Those are significant figures. It is about securing our future. Investment in key infrastructure is central to the budget, particularly infrastructure that will enable a continued supply of housing to be activated and progressed. That is critical. Also, we are securing our future by continuing to invest in two long-term funds, namely the Future Ireland Fund and the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund, which are critical.

Specifically on housing, this is an area in which I, as spokesperson for my party, have a great interest in. Again, there is record funding going into housing as part of budget 2026. There is a 20% increase overall, and a budget of more than €7 billion that is broken down between €5 billion in capital expenditure and more than €2 billion in current expenditure. There is significant additional money of €200 million for Home Building Finance Ireland. Again, this is very important. The VAT measure in relation to new-build apartments is significant, and I welcome it. This has been characterised as a tax break for developers by the Opposition. Nothing could be further from the truth. As we know, VAT is paid by the purchaser of something. If apartments are not being built, there will not be any VAT collected. This is about ensuring we get the building of apartments under way at the scale we need for housing delivery. That is critically important. I welcome that, as well as the corporation tax change that is involved in this regard.

There is additional funding for the housing activation office of more than €200 million to ensure that it can do its work in unblocking some of the barriers in terms of housing supply. That is also something I very much welcome. There is also the urban regeneration and development fund, URDF, funding of over €300 million. The new derelict sites tax is very important, although I would like to see it come in sooner. That is something I hope we can discuss further in the future. Changes to the living city initiative will be very important in terms of stimulating activity in our key urban areas. Measures such as the continuation of the renter's tax credit, mortgage interest relief and the recruitment of an additional 1,000 gardaí and 200 civilian staff to support them in their work are very important.

On the social welfare side, I welcome the increase in the income disregards for carer's allowance. That increase is significant. As we know, the programme for Government clearly states that we will get to a point where the means test relating to the carer's allowance will be removed, which is significant. I very much welcome the step taken in this regard by the Minister in Tuesday's budget. In the educational sphere the additional 1,700 SNAs as well as the additional staff in that sector is very important and something to be welcomed.

The one matter I am disappointed about is the fact that there is no measure in the budget to support workers on the personal taxation side. It is stated in the programme for Government that the Government will:

Implement progressive changes in taxation if the economy remains strong, including indexing credits and bands to prevent an increase in the real burden of income taxation.

It is fair to say the economy has remained strong and this budget did not provide some relief for workers in terms of their taxation or put some money back in their pockets. That is unfortunate and disappointing. The Minister indicated that this is something he will revisit at a future date. I would welcome that. Obviously, it is something we need to do as soon as possible because workers need a break. They are the backbone of our economy, and we need to support them. There is disappointment out there that there was not something for them in this budget. We know there has been a significant increase in the cost of living, so this is the one element of the budget that is disappointing for many people. Again, it is something we have to try to work on to ensure we can bring about improvements in this area as soon as possible.

All in all, this is a budget for securing our future and for investing in key infrastructure in a range of sectors, including the energy grid, water, wastewater, the transportation system and, of course, housing, which is our number one priority as a Government. The funding is being provided. We have to ensure that we get value for money and that we reform how we do our business in order that we can ensure large capital projects come in on time and on budget. It is critical that we get value for money and delivery. It is about delivery now. The Government is providing the funding, but we need to ensure that in the economy we have, which has high levels of activity and is performing strongly, inflation is beginning to creep up again. That is a concern. As well as providing funding, it is critically important to ensure that projects are managed properly, that delivery happens on time and that we get good value. All in all, this is a strong budget that will secure the future of our country.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I welcome the opportunity to make a contribution in respect of the budget. The people who were really celebrating on Tuesday when the announcements were made were the landlords, the developers and the vulture funds. This was a budget for them. The Government might as well have just handed the biro to them and let them write the budget. Not unlike the previous speaker, who is a Fianna Fáil Deputy, I was of course disappointed with the budget because it favours those who are on high incomes, have big investments and multinational corporations over ordinary people.

On the social protection budget, while the Minister, Deputy Chambers, was on his feet announcing a €2 billion increase in measures for the social protection budget, his colleague in government, the Minister for Social Protection, Deputy Calleary, was issuing a press statement congratulating himself for achieving €1.15 billion in additional investment. You are all over the place. The people at the business end of this do not deal in billions and millions. Many do not even deal in fifties or twenties. There are very fine margins. Many people on a fixed income like pensioners are in the bracket of the 300,000 in electricity arrears. We know what older people are like. In the main, they want to pay their bills if they can. Sometimes, they need a bit of a hand. Some €10 is an absolute slap in the face. In the face of rising costs, in the same breath as you put up the cost to fill your car with diesel or petrol, you offer people €10. It will not keep pace with the rising grocery costs or the rising cost of living. The people who sit around the Cabinet table or near it think by saying the cost-of-living crisis over that it will magically be over for people; it is not. If you were listening to your own constituents, you would know there very much is a cost-of-living crisis. If you did not want to listen to your constituents, like the Government representative in my area, who has no office - no one knows where he is and no one can find him - bury your head in the sand, stick your fingers in your ears and not listen, the facts tell us the cost-of-living crisis is not over. There are 300,000 people going into the winter in arrears on their electricity bills. One in five children - over 225,000 - lives in families below the poverty line. Those facts tell us the cost-of-living crisis is not over. When people look to the Government, they look for a hand up. They are not looking for a handout. They want to be able to heat their homes and buy food for their families - basic stuff. They see the continuation of the red carpet for vulture funds and Ministers coming out with their hoovers to make sure the red carpet is nice and clean for all the lads coming to get all the benefits of this budget. There are no benefits for people living in poverty.

The Minister for Social Protection made an announcement last month that there will be a target set for the reduction of child poverty. That is possibly a good thing but when the mask

slips it slips all the way down to your ankles because you will tell us your acceptable level of child poverty and moving towards an acceptable level of child poverty. You are quite prepared to live in a State where kids go to bed hungry and cold. That should not happen when we have surplus. There should not be a recession-style budget in a time of plenty. Now is the time people cannot heat their homes. As we saw in the Barnardos report, parents are having to reduce their portion sizes or skip meals. It is a damning indictment of the Government and its policy that in a time of plenty, children go to bed hungry. It tells you everything you need to know. That the Government is okay with this tells you everything you need to know. The Government is not coming to plead the poor mouth as it sometimes does. In fact, we had to sit and listen to Government speaker after speaker and Minister after Minister tell us we have never had it so good, clapping themselves on the back for all for the good work they are apparently doing. That does not manifest itself in my constituency office. It is not what my constituents tell me. When they come to me, they speak about needing a small amount of help. They ask me fairly simple questions such as does the Government listen? Does it know? Does it care? Unfortunately, we see every year in the budget exactly how much it listens and how much it cares. There is €10 a week for people who are dependent on the State, pensioners, people on a fixed income who worked their whole lives.

The Minister said he would introduce a measure for lone parents and it would benefit all lone parents. Of course, it will not. As I said, when the mask slips, it slips all the way down to your ankles. Not all lone parents are solely dependent on social welfare but they are over-represented in the group most at risk of not just poverty but consistent poverty. The Minister was very loose in his language. We have seen no costings from the Department of Social Protection. Before the election, you told us you wanted to abolish the means test for carers. Now that the election is over, that has slipped down the priority list. It remains to be seen how much has been put against that budget. By my reckoning, at the current pace of delivery by the Government, it is about 30 years. That is not the lifetime of a government but six governments.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Is é "lá na n-úitseach" an Ghaeilge i gcomhair Groundhog Day nó d'fhéadfaí an nath Francise *déjà vu* a úsáid maidir leis an méid atá foghlamtha againn ó thaobh an teanga sa bhuiséad seo. In ainneoin gur fógraíodh ardú i mbuiséad na Gaeilge, is léir go bhfuil roinnt cur i gcéill ar siúl ag Airí Fhianna Fáil agus Fhine Gael. Arís i mbliana, níl an t-airgead atá de dhíth á chur ar fáil do leithéidí Údarás na Gaeltachta, agus gan ach €2.5 milliún dó agus €2 milliún d'Fhoras na Gaeilge á chur ar fáil - sop in áit na scuaibe tar éis na mblianta d'easpa maoinithe agus géarchéim thithíochta agus theanga sa Ghaeltacht. In ainneoin go bhfuil an Rialtas ag rá gur chuala sé an teachtaireacht ón 25,000 duine a ghlac páirt san agóid CEARTA ar shráideanna na cathrach seo le déanaí, is léir nár chuala mar níl an maoiniú cuí á chur ar fáil chun cosaint cheart a dhéanamh ar mhuintir na Gaeltachta agus ar ár dteanga náisiúnta. Ní raibh tagairt ar bith do ghéarchéim thithíochta na Gaeilge sa bhuiséad seo in ainneoin agóidí BÁNÚ. Ní raibh tagairt ar bith don Ghaeilge sa chóras oideachais, don ghanntanas mór spáis, don ghanntanas múinteoirí ná don easpa Gaelscoileanna agus Gaelcholáistí timpeall na tíre. Ní raibh tagairt ar bith do scéim labhairt na Gaeilge a thabhairt ar ais ná do phacáistí tarrthála do choláistí samhraidh atá i mbaol agus do na mná tí atá ar an ngannchuid ina lán ceantar anois, rudaí a chuir muid béim orthu i mbuiséad malartach Shinn Féin.

Ar an iomlán, ní raibh ach beartas nua de luach €11 milliún luaite don Ghaeilge agus don Ghaeltacht sa bhuiséad sin. Is ionann sin agus an méid airgid a bhí le caitheamh ar phone pouches anuraidh. Cén fáth go bhfuil an Rialtas ag maíomh go bhfuil sé ag caitheamh €30 milliún nua ar an teanga i mbliana? *Déjà vu* atá ann toisc go bhfuil an Rialtas ag déanamh athfógartha ar mhaoiniú a bhí geallta aige cheana féin. Is in 2021 a fógraíodh an t-airgead chun lárionad Gaeilge a athchóiriú ar Shráid Fhearchair sa phlean forbartha náisiúnta, plean atá fógartha arís i mbliana. Fógraíodh €10 milliún chun Coláiste Lurgan i gConamara a athfhorbairt in 2023, plean eile atá fógartha an athuair i mbliana. Fógraíodh athfhorbairt ar Ché Inis Oírr i mí Lúnasa na bliana seo tar éis na mblianta agóide ag muintir na hoileáin agus ag an Teachta Dála áitiúil, Mairéad Farrell. Athfhógraíodh an togra sin agus an t-airgead a ghabhann leis arís sa bhuiséad seo. Dar ndóigh, fáiltimid roimh na geallúintí seo an athuair agus go mbeidh na tograí seo maoinithe i gceart cé gur fháiltíomar rompu roimhe seo ach tá sé in am don Rialtas gníomhú dá réir agus iad sin a thógáil gan tuilleadh moille.

Fáiltimid roimh an ardú de €5 milliún do TG4 ach ba chóir go mbeadh i bhfad Éireann níos mó ná sin curtha ina threo mar tá muidne agus é féin tar éis a léiriú go bhfuil gá le i bhfad Éireann níos mó chun gur féidir le TG4 cur leis an méid atá ann cheana féin agus seirbhís nuachta neamhspleách ó RTÉ a chur ar fáil. Dar ndóigh, ní luaitear sa bhuiséad seo aon rud maidir le stáisiún raidió Gaeilge don óige. Cúig oiread níos mó i mbeartais bhreise ná mar atá fógartha ag an Rialtas, €74 milliún, a bheadh á fhógairt ag muidne i Sinn Féin dá mbeadh muidne sa rialtas. Leag muid amach conas é sin a dhéanamh. Is anuas ar na geallúintí a bhí sa phlean forbartha náisiúnta é sin. Bheadh i bhfad Éireann níos mó fógartha agann maidir leis na healaíona agus cultúr na hÉireann chomh maith.

At at time when artists are struggling with the cost of living, the Arts Council cannot meet the demand for schemes and most artists do not yet benefit from the basic income for artists scheme, it is incredibly disappointing to see the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, in his first budget as culture Minister, cut the budget for the arts by €2 million. By contrast, Sinn Féin would have provided an additional €21 million to ensure that the arts thrive into the future, including almost €7 million to reach out to artists the Arts Council has not succeeded in getting to and €7 million additional funding for Screen Ireland in order that we might continue to build on the success of our film industry.

All the artists have been given is a promise by the Minister the basic income will continue in some form or other at some stage in the future. No clarity has been forthcoming on what form that basic income will take. Will it continue to be a random lottery or will it be based on merit or financial need? Will pilot scheme participants be able to reapply or will it be open to new applicants? Will there be an extension of the scheme or an expansion of the numbers taking part, or will it be another 2,000 different artists? Crucially, we need to know if disabled artists will once again be discouraged from participating by a Sophie's choice between getting the basic income or keeping the disability allowance and medical card, particularly as, despite pleas from the Opposition and disability campaigners, the then Minister for Social Protection, Heather Humphreys, refused to allow disabled artists to take part without it being counted against them in the means test. This put them at an immediate disadvantage compared with their peers who do not have disabilities and who faced no such punishment. We cannot allow the ableism and injustice Heather Humphreys perpetrated as Minister to continue in any new long-term scheme.

We should also seek to undo the threat the former Minister unleashed on our historical heritage to allow the demolition of the 1916 battlefield at Moore Street, which Sinn Féin is still trying to save from the wrecking ball. The relatives of the leaders of 1916, whose last stand was fought on that hallowed ground, are also trying to save it. We would have put an initial €10 million into saving those buildings, with a view to developing a cultural quarter there, and a further €3 million investment in the Heritage Council and the employment of county and city archaeologists. Unfortunately, this Government is hell-bent on shrinking the overall heritage budget by 6%, thereby continuing the austerity approach championed by the former Minister, Heather Humphreys, who it now wants to ensconce in the Áras.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I am going to focus on the climate and energy aspects of the budget. I will start by giving some credit to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien. There have been some positive steps from a long-term emissions reduction perspective. For starters, I am glad he has convinced the Minister of State, Deputy Healy-Rae, of the need for carbon taxes.

The funding given to EirGrid and the ESB for grid investment is very much welcome and will help unlock our renewable wind energy capacity. I was happy to see some, though not enough, additional funds being provided for retrofitting. In this budget, the Government has allocated an additional €50 million for local authority home retrofits, though we in Labour provided for double that in our costed alternative budget.

The same goes for the better energy warmer homes scheme. Increased funding is great, but there are huge delays for people trying to avail of the scheme. We need to see a plan from Government to reduce the wait times and address the affordability gap for home retrofits more generally.

The increased investment in our energy network is very welcome, but there is data-centre-sized elephant in the room with regard to this budget. Making our grid more resilient is vital, but are we doing it to enable more renewable energy generation to decarbonise homes or is all this new renewable energy just going to go towards the additional energy needs of new large energy users like data centres? This budget fails to make large energy users pay their fair share and the CRU's draft price review 6 is proposing we give them a discount on their energy bills. There was an opportunity to tax data centres in this budget so they actually contribute to our efforts in strengthening our grid, but that was missed.

We cannot just have business as usual if we are to meet our emissions targets. The Labour Party has proposed an SUV tax. There is no sign of that in the budget, despite a very obvious and concerning trend towards bigger, higher emitting and more dangerous vehicles entering the market over the past decade. It is deeply unfortunate that the positive steps taken with regard to investment in our energy and water networks and in things like home retrofits have been undone by the overall theme of the budget being a budget for big polluters and big business. Nowhere is that more obvious than in the decision to give a massive tax break to the likes of McDonald's, while pulling the rug from under the hundreds of thousands of households across the country that are struggling with their energy bills.

There should have been targeted energy credits in this budget to help those most in need. This Government has chosen corporate welfare over social welfare. It has made it clear whose side it is on, which is not the side of those who are stuck in Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael's perpetual cost-of-living crisis and who worry about how they will keep their homes warm this winter.

As usual, this Government has put the interests of big business, big developers and big polluters first. People deserve an explanation as to why the profits of drive-throughs and developers matter more to it than households that will be forced to choose between heating and eating this winter.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. Deputy O'Donoghue is next.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: A Cheann Comhairle, twice I have been in the Chamber now when the Opposition has used the *Áras* as a platform to attack one candidate.

An Ceann Comhairle: There was no mention of the *Áras*-----

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I am an Independent.

An Ceann Comhairle: -----but I appreciate that.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I have not said a word about it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: It is very unfair that it is allowed continue. I am sorry for taking up the time.

An Ceann Comhairle: There was no mention of the *Áras*.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I did not mention anyone.

An Ceann Comhairle: Not you.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I did not mean Deputy Ahern.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: No problem.

An Ceann Comhairle: Go ahead, Deputy O'Donoghue.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I just think it is unfair.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Up Catherine.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: What the Government showed on Tuesday is just how completely out of touch it is with some of the struggles of normal people. It announced the 9% VAT rate for the hospitality sector and handed out rewards to developers, fast food chains and lobbyists - the well-connected who do not need a cent of the money involved. Meanwhile, the people who keep this country running by going to work and paying their taxes did not get

anything. The budget does not tackle the cost-of-living crisis. Food, energy, petrol and rent are all up. Wages and social welfare payments are not keeping pace. The only thing that is going down is people's sense of belief that the Government is actually going to do something to help them. Families are cutting corners on basics, yet they still cannot get through the month. The Government needed to step in and give them some breathing space, but this did not happen. My constituency of Dublin Fingal West is bursting at the seams. Every day I deal with issues to do with housing, transport and a lack of public infrastructure. The same issues are being ignored again and again.

Let us start with early education, which was the big election promise. We all remember the Tánaiste doing his best Ryanair impression by promising cheaper childcare for all. The Government announced a budget of €1.47 billion, and that sounds impressive until you read the small print. The money will be spread so thin that it is hardly going to make a dent. If the Government wants to know what it could have done better in that regard, it could have started the transition to the public early education system. It could also have taken responsibility for the wages, which are 70% of providers' costs. If it did that, it could start to bring childcare costs down to €200 per month for parents.

On disability services, the Government has added more funding there too, apparently. It looks good on paper, but it is pouring money into a black hole that has no targeted supports. In my constituency, a child called Willow who is turning nine this month has been waiting two years for speech and language therapy. She finally had her assessment last month. Her parents were told she needs therapy, but the problem is she has to wait another two years to get it. Imagine that. She will be 11 years of age before she accesses any form of therapy. I have reached out to the Ministers for Health and children to ask them to intervene. What is happening is not good enough. The families of Dublin Fingal West deserve better than that.

What my constituency needed more than anything was funding for transport in order that people who are being stranded due to overcrowded buses and trains could get to work in the morning. It also needed funding for Garda stations like those in Rush and Lusk, which open two hours a week. In budget 2026, the Government announced nothing new. It put funding that was already there into a tumbler, added some glitter and loose change and called it new funding. The people the Government is supposed to service deserve better.

Deputy George Lawlor: This was a budget where workers were left behind. We had no personal income tax relief for workers. Hard-working families - the backbone of our economy and the people who keep our economy going, ticking over and working - were left with their hands hanging. We saw a reduction in the VAT rate. Many millions of that will go to multinational chains. I have heard descriptions of franchises run by families but the bottom line is the likes of McDonald's, no matter where they are, are among the most successful and profitable businesses in this country. It was trumpeted that small operators in the hospitality sector will benefit but if the customers who enter those premises cannot afford to go out and spend on meals or entertainment because they are put to the pin of their collar week in, week out they will not be in a position to spend to assist the hospitality sector. They will not have the money because of the rising costs across the board, yet they were left with their hands hanging after this budget.

We have heard much fanfare of various housing schemes being introduced. In reality, hard-working families on low pay, hard-working individuals trying their best and hard-working people on minimum wage have no hope of ever owning their own home; neither do they have any hope of getting any assistance from the State in the form of the housing assistance payment or being allowed to go on housing lists. In Wexford, for instance, two people earning the minimum wage are about €4,000 over the threshold for the housing list.

I have raised this issue before. There is a ludicrous situation involving people in receipt of working family payment. That payment is added to their household income when assessment is being made of that income for the housing list. I have seen numerous times where people in receipt of that payment, which is supposed to take them out of poverty, have it added to their income to put them above the threshold and immediately put them back into poverty because they are thrown to the wolves of the private rental market. Out of an annual household income of about €40,000 or €41,000 for two people on minimum wage, they are expected to pay maybe €1,500 of that into the private rental sector. Those are Wexford figures; it is worse in other areas. The notion the budget was good for the tens of thousands of people who go out to work day in, day out, who pay tax and who contribute to the economy, is nonsensical.

We saw a rise in the minimum wage and the Government trumpeted that increase. It is great to see it but it is not the Government paying the minimum wage; it is the small businesses it purports to support. It is wonderful to see increases and we want to head towards the living wage but do not trumpet an increase in the minimum wage when it is businesses that will pay it. People, in some instances, will suffer as a result of earning the minimum wage and not qualifying for any assistance, particularly when it comes to housing. We have to do an awful lot better if we are to support those who support us, that is, the workers of this country. Go raibh maith agaibh.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Tapaím an deis seo labhairt ar son na cáinainnéise agus na sonraí atá leagtha síos mar chuid di. Ar an mórchuid, ceann de na teachtaireachtaí is mó a thugann an cháinainnéis seo ná go bhfuil infheistíocht láidir á déanamh againn inár seirbhísí poiblí, ag cur le daonra atá ag fás ach ag déileáil le go leor de na gnéithe agus na fadhbanna sóisialta atá le feiceáil i sochaí an lae inniu.

I thank the House for the opportunity to speak on this week's budget announced by the Ministers, Deputies Donohoe and Chambers. I want to speak first about allocations to the transport sector, given my role as Fianna Fáil spokesperson on transport. Almost €5 billion has been allocated to the sector in its entirety. Some things that stand out to me for their importance to the broader economy are the roll-out of DART+ West and DART+ South West, and the BusConnects programme in Dublin and across the country. One important thing which has not had attention drawn to it this week is the increase in the public service obligation, PSO, funding to almost €1 billion. That 35% increase will ensure increased connectivity for towns and cities up and down the country, not just in Dublin. It is important to call that out, as well as the significant once-in-a-generation investment in the MetroLink project.

With regard to the tax changes announced, it is important to highlight and support those regarding dereliction. The role of the Revenue Commissioners will be pivotal to ensuring that is effective in dealing with dereliction in our towns and cities and bringing properties back into use, as well as the extension of the living city initiative.

I also welcome the increase in the research and development tax credit. It is an important signal to send to the global community and entrepreneurial community that Ireland is open for business, welcomes research, celebrates innovation and positions itself centrally as a knowledge-based economy that wants to be at the forefront of knowledge and innovation revolutions.

Turning to cúrsaí oideachais, one of the things I most welcome is the increase of €50 in capitation for primary students. We have been made aware in the House of a number of challenges facing primary schools with regard to funding and this capitation increase is a huge step forward in addressing those funding challenges. I look forward to further progress on reducing class sizes, as promised in the programme for Government. I welcome the similar increase in capitation for post-primary schools, the announcement of over 1,700 SNAs to support students in schools across the education system and 1,000 additional teachers, 800 of whom will be specifically focused on special educational needs.

An initiative I was pleased to see announced, and funding provided for, was DEIS Plus. I and colleagues in the House advocated before the general election and since then for a focus on areas of very difficult disadvantage and to ensure schools, often centrepieces of communities in areas like that, are supported and focused on.

With regard to mental health, I welcome the work of the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, in bringing forward the talking therapies fund, which will streamline the provision of community therapy services across the country. I recently joined the board of Beacon of Light Counselling Centre in Clondalkin, which provides this exact community therapy service. It is a world-class example and is a vital service in the community. The fund will be pivotal to ensuring those services continue.

I dtaobh chúrsaí Gaeilge, cuirim an-fháilte roimh an €5 milliún atá á thabhairt do TG4, ag tabhairt aitheantais don chraoltóireacht ardchaighdeán atá á cur ar fáil ag TG4 agus é sin aitheanta ag an Rialtas leis an dáileadh breise sin. In éineacht leis sin, tá maoiniú breise á chur ar fáil do scéimeanna agus do thograí i leith na Gaeltachta, ar nós pleanáil teanga, tacaíocht don teanga agus tacaíocht don Ghaeltacht.

I look forward to the opening of the community sports facilities scheme next year. It provides crucial capital funding for sports facilities up and down the country.

On the movement being made on childcare, it is important to note that 35,000 additional places will be funded and the extension of the building blocks grant scheme will provide 2,300 physical places in buildings across the country.

I welcome the targeted social protection measures, particularly the focus on child poverty, which goes far beyond any measures introduced in recent years. There is an opportunity to look in the coming three to four years at how we encourage and incentivise houses without earners, through provision of childcare, training and support, to go into work.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the opportunity to examine measures taken in budget 2026 on Tuesday, the first of five budgets expected in this new Dáil term. It aims to steady the economy in challenging times, invest for the future and improve services that families rely on. It attempts to balance day-to-day pressures with long-term capital investment in housing, hospitals, schools and safer streets. Housing funding will reach over €11.2 billion in 2026, up

a massive 20% with €5.19 billion allocated for capital investment and €2.02 billion for current spending. Within that is €2.9 billion to deliver 10,200 new-build social homes and continue the acquisitions programme. Homelessness services rise to €563.5 million, up sharply from last year. Water infrastructure, essential to new housing, gets a 29% increase for Uisce Éireann to €2.2 billion, with overall water services at about €2.5 billion. These are the building blocks for supply.

Compared with 2025, there is €1.5 billion extra in current health funding. This will allow the recruitment of 3,300 additional staff, between 220 to 265 extra acute beds, more than 1.7 million home-support hours, and capital of €1.56 billion to progress projects such as the National Maternity Hospital, ambulance bases and the digitisation of health records.

Education and youth funding totals €13.1 billion which is 7% up on last year, with 1,717 additional special needs assistants, SNAs, 860 extra special education teachers and higher school capitation of €50 per primary pupil and €20 per post-primary pupil. Some €69 million has been allocated to strengthen school transport while €1.6 billion in capital will move over 300 school projects through construction.

There is €5.78 billion current and €390 million capital for the justice sector. The Garda budget funds up to 1,000 new gardaí, 200 extra staff, a doubling of the Garda Reserve to 600, and 392,000 extra overtime hours for visibility purposes. There is €160 million for technology, including national rollout of body-worn cameras. The capital allocation for new stations is €174 million, alongside investment in prisons, probation and court services. It is appropriate that the Minister is here. I welcome the Garda capital programme. I again press for a new Garda station at Cherrywood and the refurbishment and expansion of the Dún Laoghaire and Shankill stations to match the growth and commuter patterns. Those projects should be prioritised within the capital envelope now provided.

The total Social Protection spend is €28.9 billion, which is the largest single component of the budget representing almost 25% of State spending next year. Core weekly rates rise by €10; carer's allowance income disregards increase to €1,000 for a single person and €2,000 for a couple; fuel allowance rises by €5 to €38 and opens to working family payment households; domiciliary care allowance is up by €20 a month. These are modest but meaningful steps and crucially must continue across the next four budgets. Work always pays and families are supported.

I welcome the reduction in VAT for labour-intensive sectors like hairdressing and hospitality, supporting jobs in every town and village across Ireland. It was interesting to see some of the Opposition, including Sinn Féin members, voting against the VAT cut here then hailing it outside the Chamber in the media.

The increase in the national minimum wage from €12.70 to €13.80 on 1 January 2026, worth almost €2,230 a year for a full-time worker, is a step in the right direction. Again, this was largely ignored by Opposition speakers.

The USC 2% band moves up to €28,700 in line with the increase in the minimum wage and the 9% VAT on household energy is extended to the end of 2030.

Many positive steps have been taken in budget 2026. We are not hearing a lot of that in this Chamber from certain quarters but ultimately it is there to support hard-pressed families at a

very difficult time and also to support enterprise so that it can continue employing people and continue the growth in the economy.

Deputy Gary Gannon: There has been a lot of talk from the Government benches this week about economic stability and about protecting our competitiveness. The previous speaker just verified that. That is absolutely fair enough. However, I believe that this year the Government has chosen big corporations over people who need protection the most. If one wants to make an argument that multinationals are vital to the economy, which clearly they are, let us be consistent. Investing in people is every bit as economically transformative as investing in profits. A report a couple of years ago by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul calculated the cost of poverty to this State to be about €4 billion a year. If we really believe that strong companies make a strong country, surely a second tier of child benefit targeted at families living in poverty would deliver an economic and social return that far outweighs the tax breaks we have seen from the Government. The difference is that those dividends would not show up in the balance sheets of Burger King or McDonald's, they would show up in a vulnerable child finally getting support from a proper State safety net or in carers being valued for the essential work they do every single day.

I agree having some positivity is important. We have seen some proper investment, for example in the League of Ireland academy system. That is good. The expansion of the basic income for the arts actually provides a net of security for a cohort of people who put a lot into the economy. I give credit where it is due. When a State actually sees something that can be transformative there are times when we can do that. For me however, it is about how do we not see the whole picture, because right now Ireland, in all our constituencies, is at a crisis point. You can feel it when walking down the streets of this city. We heard it today during the Oireachtas committee on drug use when we had groups in from Epic, Empowering People in Care. Social workers attended who work in special care units and are being left to manage children detoxing off drugs because the addiction and mental health infrastructure simply is not there. I recognise the fact we are also celebrating World Mental health Day today. That is not what the service was designed for, and it is certainly not what those young people deserve.

Yet, when you open budget 2026 you see the same failed logic being baked into a system again. The prison service allocation for the next year is €579 million. The Government is literally building its way deeper into imprisonment in a country where seven out of ten people who go to prison will reoffend within three years. Meanwhile, the probation service, one of the few services that actually helps people to get out of prison, gets an increase of just €6.7 million. Youth justice gets €7.3 million. That is less than 3% of what is being spent on expanding cells. At the Dóchas Centre last night, 27 women slept on mattresses on the floor. Government Ministers are talking about the expansion of prison services when women were sleeping on the floor just last night. That prison is running at 140% capacity. What does this budget do? It funds 26 extra beds. Expanding cell spaces does not solve overcrowding. It just gives us more space to repeat the same failures. Even with the spaces, we are being told our prison population is currently operating at about 118% over capacity. Even with the type of investment in this budget and what the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, aims to reach, that actually only brings it down to 104% overcapacity. That is mental as logic. If we invested even half of that money into prevention, housing and rehabilitation we would not need more cells at all. One would think that the Minister for justice, of all people, a man who spent a

lifetime listening to and presenting evidence, would know better than to ignore it when applying it to his legislation. This is not just about justice spending. It is about the choices that reveal a Government's values: a Government that can fund hundreds of million for new prison spaces but cannot find the courage to fund early intervention programmes for young people at risk; a Government that celebrates corporate windfalls but ignores the social collapse happening in plain sight in our capital city. There is almost nothing in this budget that deals with early intervention, nothing that breaks the cycle of poverty, trauma and addiction that keeps communities trapped. Instead, we keep chasing the symptoms and not the causes. If that continues, I am absolutely certain we will be back here next year debating the same problems, and the year after that and the one after that. We will see more young people criminalised effectively for being poor, more families without homes, more women sleeping on prison floors and more Ministers congratulating themselves on a responsible budget. It makes no sense, it is not responsible and it is not inevitable. These are political choices. The evidence is there. Experts have consistently told us what will work but year after year the Government ignores it because the real investment, the kind that changes lives rather than headlines, cannot be measured in quarterly returns. We cannot keep doing this. We cannot keep repeating the same cycles of neglect and then acting surprised when they lead to the same forms of social breakdown that are often lamented from the centre-right quarters of this Chamber.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: It is a week today since Manchán Magan passed from this world. I take this opportunity to remember him and reflect on a truly incredible person. In the past week, we have heard people who knew him well tell stories about him and talk about their respect for him and gratitude for the work he did and how he touched their lives. I did not know him. I only met him once at a talk he gave at the Mermaid Arts Centre in Bray. The talk lasted an hour and a half and was about rewilding your mind. He spoke as Gaeilge and as Béarla, and he had the audience completely transfixed. In science, we talk about how when we learn, our brains create synapses and connections. That is how our brains work. Manchán could achieve the same thing with his words. When he spoke, he created connections from the present day to our ancestors, our past, our landscapes, our nature and our culture and, indeed, other cultures. At a time when people across the world are increasingly divided, he showed how ancient cultures were connected and how they were all the richer for that. Particularly important for me was that - and I was appreciative of it - he completely understood nature and where we stand in relation to it. We are part of nature. We do not stand above it. That is how many indigenous cultures think about nature, and we have forgotten that. Therefore, I wanted to remember Manchán today. He was a gift to our nation. There is a responsibility on us to take the work he did and move forward with it strongly. Ní bheidh a leithéid arís ann.

On that note, the Government has closed its eyes to nature and the environment. Instead of seeing us as part of nature, it sees us as something above it. It sees nature as something to win over, fight, control and make profits from and the budget was a perfect example of that. Let us look at the €85 million allocated in respect of the bovine TB eradication programme. A large proportion of that will be for badger culling, when all the evidence from the UK and Scotland shows that it does not make a difference in the eradication of bovine TB. The document refers to rivers as channels, something the OPW is given money for. They are invested in to try to engineer our way out of climate change, climate impacts and flood risk, rather than looking at nature as part of the solution.

The Minister for agriculture spoke about how retaining the nitrates directive is his number one priority, despite the fact that it has had a huge impact on our landscape and our rivers. A mere 20 rivers are in pristine condition, versus 500 rivers in the 1980s. We have seen a 90% drop in our salmon populations since the 1970s. One third of our wild species are threatened with extinction and 63% of our birds are in decline.

I take this opportunity to say, in memory of Manchán Magan, because I think it is something he would have appreciated and felt strongly about, that it is foolhardy to think we can continue to live the way we do. The Government cannot continue to govern the way it does. We need to respect nature. Nature is not something to be exploited. It is to be lived with in a sustainable manner. We have not done that for many decades. What we are seeing is a continual degradation of nature in this country. At what stage will we say that enough is enough and that we need now to protect and restore nature? There is a different way. We do not have to destroy nature as we grow. There is a way to grow sustainably with it, but it is important that the Government take the lead in this regard. I hope the Government will take those lessons, and those from Manchán Magan, forward.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: This year's budget is about targeted investment to support those who need it most, while also ensuring that we plan wisely for the future. It is about looking after people today while securing the economic foundation for the generations ahead.

I welcome the strong focus on social protection, particularly the increase in weekly core welfare rates, which will benefit 1.5 million people. The expansion of the child support payment and changes to the working family payment threshold are targeted and sensible. These measures will support low- and middle-income families who are feeling the pinch more than ever. The increase in the fuel allowance will also bring real relief to many households.

Education has rightly received a major allocation, with increased funding for special education, new SNAs and additional special education teachers. Continued investment in the school transport scheme and DEIS supports shows a clear recognition of the need to back young people and their futures. Childcare and disability services have been prioritised too. Expanded access to childcare places, improved funding for Tusla and investment in disability supports will make a real difference to families on the ground. In disability services, the focus on additional residential care places, home support hours and respite services is welcome. These are practical and necessary measures that can transform people's daily lives.

Housing remains one of the biggest challenges facing the country. The investment by means of current and capital expenditure is essential. The delivery of more than 10,000 new social homes and funding for enabling infrastructure are steps in the right direction. The national development plan must continue to guide these investments, making sure what we build today will stand the test of time, not just for housing, but also for energy and water infrastructure.

Cuirim fáilte chomh maith roimh an infheistíocht sa Ghaeilge agus sa Ghaeltacht. Tá mé fíorbhuíoch go bhfuil maoiniú breise de €41.4 milliún curtha ar fáil don Ghaeilge agus do phobal na Gaeltachta sa bhuiséad seo. Tá sé seo riachtanach chun ár dteanga dhúchais a chaomhnú agus a threisiú. Cuirim fáilte roimh an maoiniú sa bhreis do Roinn na Gaeltachta agus do TG4. Is céim mhaith í seo chun níos mó infheistíochta a fheiscint i leith na Gaeilge.

This budget is also about preparing for the future. I strongly welcome the funding allocation for the national AI office. This is something I have been pushing over the past six months. I was about to introduce a Bill but, thankfully, the Minister for enterprise has moved ahead with establishing such an office. This office has the potential to ensure that Ireland becomes a leader in responsible and innovative use of artificial intelligence, supporting enterprise, jobs and competitiveness. However, if it is to truly succeed, further investment will be needed in the years ahead to match our ambitions. I would love to see a commissioner appointed to the office and for the office to be independent of the Department in order that it might work with all aspects of Government and society.

If we are serious about creating a resilient and dynamic economy, strategic investment must go hand in hand with targeted supports, as we saw this week. That is what the Government is attempting to do with this budget. The budget will protect the most vulnerable, support working families and build the foundations of long-term economic strength through infrastructure, skills and innovation.

Deputy Barry Ward: It is said that these things should always be done like sandwiches, so I have both criticism to make and praise to give. First, I acknowledge what Deputy Jim O'Callaghan has done as Minister for justice. I have long campaigned for the restoration of criminal legal aid rates. It has been a myopic approach by the Department and my Government not to restore them. Criminal barristers and solicitors appear to have been the last sector not to have rates restored after the FEMPI cuts that reduced payment for providing criminal legal aid to a very small amount, which has meant that people are not going into that area of law. Some will say they do not care about that, because the only people who care about criminal legal aid are criminals and lawyers. Not everyone makes a distinction between the two categories, but it is an important distinction. This is an area that allows criminal justice to function, so I welcome that there will be full restoration during the year. That is a positive step.

The next bit of the sandwich is inheritance tax. I am really disappointed that nothing has been done about that. I have raised this issue previously, particularly in relation to my constituency. In Dún Laoghaire and much of Dublin, because of the cost of houses, families are massively disadvantaged relative to their cousins in areas outside Dublin, where property prices are lower. It is a very significant discrepancy between the two and I felt it was time to bring us back to where we had been pre-crash, at the €0.5 million threshold for inheritance directly by families because at the moment there is a situation in areas like Dún Laoghaire where families have to sell the family home because they cannot afford to pay that inheritance tax. I would have liked to have seen something done in that area. I also want to acknowledge the campaign to support people who do not have children. I note that nothing has been done in that area either. This is a double-decker sandwich.

The next thing I want to come to relates to the rainy day funds. One of the things we overlook very often in this polity is praise for future planning. It is one of the things this Government has been really good about. I want to particularly want to mention the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, who has consistently ensured that we are putting together a fund which will look after us in the future not just for economic shocks that are unforeseen but which we know are coming all the same, but specifically for the pension cliff that is coming. We know we are moving towards a situation with an ageing population where more people are going to be pensioners and fewer people will be working, drawing a wage and funding the expense that is

the pension scheme. We need to make sure we are in a position to look after people who have retired and are just as entitled to have a good quality of living as the rest of us. Therefore I welcome the fact that more money has been put aside for those.

The next part of the sandwich is about the 9% VAT rate. I support the 9% rate. It is really important to support small indigenous industries that occupy space in every town, village and corner of this country. There are over 20,000 restaurants, hotels and pubs in this country which need the support of the reduction in the VAT rate. I support it but I do not support it for large companies or companies that do not need it. I know there have been a lot of great soundbites from the Opposition as to where that lies. That is good politics but it is not necessarily good budgeting. I have argued for a long time that we need a scheme that is actually targeted at those who need it. There is no point in giving a reduction to a 9% VAT rate to McDonald's, Burger King, Costa, Starbucks and the big coffee chains. They do not need it. I am not saying they should close down. What I am saying is we should be targeting it at those businesses which do need it. Every one of us in this room has small cafés, small restaurants and pubs in our constituencies which desperately need this support, and that is why I welcome the move, but I would much rather it to have been targeted at those businesses. I acknowledge that there cannot be differentiated tax rates for different businesses within the sector and there is no legitimate basis for doing that, but we could have put in place through this budget a scheme that would give a VAT rebate to companies or entities that exist in a particular space in the economy. One could pick a metric - I think turnover is probably the most reasonable - and decide that if a company's turnover is higher than a certain level, it will not get a rebate, but a rebate scheme would be put in place to give back to small businesses with turnover below that rate the VAT the company would have saved had the rate been reduced to 9%. In that way, we would keep the VAT rate at 13.5% but there would a rebate scheme for those businesses which need it. I am not saying the larger businesses should close down or that the large hotel groups which fund our tourism industry and support people coming to every corner of this country should be closed; I am just saying they do not need the 9% VAT rate to survive and we should have been targeting the 9% VAT campaign towards those businesses which genuinely do need it. I think of two restaurants in my own area in Blackrock. The first is Big Mike's, which was a well-known restaurant in Blackrock shopping centre but closed its doors last month. It was very successful on the face of it but just could not survive in the economic climate. The second was a much smaller but really high-quality Italian restaurant in Deansgrange called Fellini's. Emila and Paolo, who ran that family restaurant, employing local people and providing a fabulous service, have also closed their doors and that is regrettable. They would have benefited from the 9% VAT rate. It is exactly those types of businesses that we are trying to safeguard.

Going back to the rest of the sandwich, gabhaim buíochas leis an Rialtas as ucht an mhéid airgid atá curtha isteach aige sa Ghaeilge. Is fada an t-am atáimid ag labhairt le heagraíochtaí cosúil le Conradh na Gaeilge agus na daoine atá i bhfabhar na Gaeilge inár gceantair ar fud na tíre. Tá níos mó ná €41 milliún ar fáil acu anois agus tá sé sin thar a bheith tábhachtach. Caithfidh níos mó airgid a chur ar fáil don Ghaeloideachas. Tá díomá orm a rá nach bhfuil ach dhá Ghaelscoil i mo Dháilcheantar féin i nDún Laoghaire, cé go bhfuil a lán daoine a labhraíonn Gaeilge sa bhaile agus gach lá. Caithfidh níos mó roghanna a chur ar fáil do dhaoine gur mhaith leo a bpáistí a chur i nGaeloideachas, bíodh sin i nGaelscoileanna nó Gaelcholáistí. Tá súil agam go bhfuilimid chun roinnt oibre a dhéanamh ar an ábhar sin.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: Budget 2026 is about protecting and supporting jobs in the face of turbulent economic headwinds. As the first of five budgets that will be delivered over the lifetime of this Government, of course we cannot achieve everything we wish to at once and there will always be more that we can do. However, the permanent incremental measures that are outlined in this budget will go a long way towards providing the structural supports that our economy needs to weather any potential storms. This is a budget designed to keep us economically safe, to provide real supports to ensure more homes are built and to put greater protections in place for the most vulnerable to ensure those who have the least benefit the most.

As a former SNA, I am heartened to see provision for an additional 1,717 new SNAs and more than 1,000 new teaching posts, with the majority of those, at 860, being in the area of special education. The further roll-out of OTs and therapists in special schools will take significant worry and stress from parents, as well as ensuring our children in special schools receive the regular therapies they require without missing excessive amounts of school time. The €16.5 million DEIS plus plan will make education more accessible to many children in disadvantaged areas and circumstances. The increase in student capitation fee, which I called for in the Chamber, is most welcome. I recognise it is a little shy of the €75 per child in primary schools that was asked for but, as I say, this is year one of a five-year plan. The pupil-teacher ratio is also in need of attention, but it is year one of five.

Carlow-Kilkenny is a great farming constituency with a strong tradition of tillage farming, and the budget of €50 million is desperately needed. Of course, we would have liked more. I look forward to seeing the outcome of the Minister, Deputy Heydon's consultation with farm organisations to see how it is invested most efficiently and effectively for the sector. I thank the Minister for his work in preparing the TB eradication plans which enabled him to secure the €85 million for TB measures. The rollover of the various tax reliefs for farmers for four years is also very welcome and positive.

The budget has provided for the largest defence budget spending in the history of the State, at €1.49 billion. That is an extra €60 million, which is welcome and means we are on track to meet the level of ambition 2 by 2028, as recommended by the Commission on Defence Forces. The major challenge, however, will be the additional 4,000 personnel who are required to reach the 11,500 for level of ambition 2. I look forward to working with an Tánaiste and this Government to ensure we continue to invest in recruitment and retention initiatives in terms of specialist pay and a better arrangement for post-2013 personnel, and I will continue to push for addressing the gap in cadets' pay to ensure Óglaigh na hÉireann is supported to fill out right to the edges of its potential and get the full opportunity to do what it does best – protect and defend our State.

One cannot speak about defence without speaking also about national security. I am hopeful that part of the biggest-ever defence budget will go towards resourcing the JCDC to ensure our Defence Forces possess operational cyber capabilities in our modern world, a world where cyberattacks are increasing in frequency, complexity and destructiveness and can compromise critical infrastructure without any hindrance across geographical borders. That is the threat we face as a nation and that is the reason we need robust cybersecurity and resilience. Therefore the increase in budget of over 50%, to €12 million, for the National Cyber Security Centre is definitely welcome and needed and the further investment of €3 million to establish a new

statutory national security authority to ensure the State has a comprehensive security clearance regime in line with EU and international obligations is reassuring to see.

As we all know, housing is the number one challenge facing people in Ireland today and a central means of addressing that challenge is through tackling vacancy and dereliction. Therefore I was delighted to see that the living city initiative will provide supports for the enhancement of older housing and commercial properties in Kilkenny, with the increased scope of the initiative to include residential properties built before 1975. With these measures, the Government has shown that it is serious about ending dereliction in our cities.

I also welcome the largest ever increase in the carer's allowance income disregard from July 2026 and the Government taking another stride towards the removal of the means test in the lifetime of this Government, as was a commitment in the programme for Government, as well as the €20 increase in domiciliary care allowance per week.

In relation to the future, I welcome the introduction of My Future Fund, which will help almost 750,000 people save for their retirement. I also look forward to working with my fellow Oireachtas colleagues towards achieving all of the commitments made in the programme for Government over the lifetime of this Government.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I had just been elected and I had national school principals from Coolock on to me straight away about DEIS Plus, and fair play to them. They were determined to make sure DEIS Plus got off the ground and got funding and support. I was more than happy to raise it in the parliamentary party and directly with the Minister, to work with like-minded colleagues to make sure those working-class areas, with great communities but deprivation, would get a shot at DEIS Plus. I am delighted to see €48 million allocated to the programme.

Our Lady Immaculate Senior National School, in Darndale, St. Francis Senior National School in Priorswood and St. Joseph's National School in Coolock are three schools that would really benefit from being in the DEIS Plus pilot. Their principals and staff stand ready to get involved, so I just wanted to call them out.

The increase in education capitation is a huge plus for schools and for primary schools in particular. The more primary schools I visit as a TD, the more they raise the issue of energy bills and other bills and having to rely on parents and fundraising activities to close the gap. The capitation changes are very welcome and I look forward to future increases as well.

Housing supply has got a lot of attention in the Chamber in the last few days. The measures introduced by the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, are a clear signal of intent to start working on supply-side measures for housing. I welcome that. I recently read an academic piece by a learned housing academic and of the five measures advocated, none were supply-side measures.

There are 98,000 apartments with planning permission but no start date yet, with 42,000 of those in Dublin. The VAT change should help increase the viability of those apartments. To be fair to the Minister, he made very clear that he cannot prove that will be the case but the Government is trying to do everything it can to close the viability gap to make sure those apartments can be built.

In relation to VAT, we should look at construction materials and other inputs in future budgets. If we can have a zero or reduced VAT rate on construction materials, that would feed into trying to close the viability gap. I take issue with my colleague, Deputy Ward, on the 9% VAT rate. Trying to target VAT is very hard to do. You may be able to target across sectors but it is very hard to take a sector and try to find ways to target VAT changes, for example, at small, medium or large restaurants and cafés. It is really hard to do and I do not think it is workable.

Cuirim fáilte, ar deireadh, roimh an infheistíocht agus an maoiniú breise do TG4. Chas muid le hionadaithe ó TG4. Déanann TG4 an-chuid oibre ó thaobh an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn agus caighdeán na gcláracha a chuireann sé ar fáil. Tá seans ag TG4 anois seirbhís nuachta neamhspleách, láidir, mhaith a chur ar fáil don tír, don dream ar fad a bhéas sásta éisteacht agus breathnú ar an tseirbhís sin trí Ghaeilge. Fáiltím roimh an infheistíocht seo. Fáiltím freisin roimh an maoiniú breise don earnáil oideachais agus don Ghaeltacht go ginearálta, ach tá níos mó oibre le déanamh againn ansin.

Deputy Edward Timmins: This budget represents the first of five budgets and is step one in the implementation of the programme for Government. It is not possible to deliver everything in year one. Financial changes, as anyone with a grasp the finance knows, happen over a period of time. This is something the public understand, but it is not recognised at all by much of the Opposition. This budget is possible because of the massive taxes we earn due to full employment and because we support multinational industries by above all being pro-business and giving corporations certainty. These multinationals are crucial to all the spending we have discussed over the past two days.

Our Government promotes wealth creation. It is something that much of the Opposition does not recognise or understand. Sinn Féin never once mentioned job creation in its budget day contributions. Without this, there would be no money for our health service, education, pensions or social welfare. We would become a basket case without wealth creation. I understand this, but I feel the need to state it explicitly so that those who do not understand it start to think about it. Many on the Opposition benches think this money will always be there, but it may not be. That is why we must protect jobs and industry. That gives us the wherewithal to fund our services. The reason we have this budget is that it recognises these realities.

Sinn Féin says that we are not spending and taxing enough. The Labour Party says we are spending too much. It is clear we have got the balance just right. The Opposition is fond of selecting one item and saying that our costs are the highest compared to other countries, but by so many measures, we are at the top or close to the top in class. Other countries look on and wish they had our public finances. Our nearest neighbour, the UK, is in danger of going bust while in France they cannot even agree on a budget. We are a beacon of stability and we display a sensible middle ground. Long may this continue.

Many Opposition TDs speak on different issues and take very extreme and radical positions. These comments represent a threat to our successful country. Their aim is to make people feel miserable. That is their policy. Of course we have challenges, but there will always be challenges. In the past, it was employment and the public finances, and we solved these. When it comes to the finances of running a country, in an ideal world, one runs a surplus, reduces national debt, puts money aside each year - €6 billion this year - invests in infrastructure, education and health, and supports the most vulnerable. That is exactly what this budget does.

If I was asked what struck me most forcefully on my first budget day, I would say it was the exaggeration of some of the Opposition spokespersons. It was reported that at People Before Profit's alternative budget launch, the party said it would introduce a €9 billion wealth tax on multinationals. This must be called out for the reckless policy it is.

I referred earlier to the issue of jobs. This is the biggest contribution to taking people out of poverty. This country has been transformed for the better by huge job creation. That huge success has led to the challenge of housing. There is no simple fix to the housing shortage. There are a hundred or more things that can help deliver enough houses. This budget proposes another part of solving this challenge. It is right to use targeted tax measures to help deliver housing. The Government will do everything it can and make all necessary changes to deliver housing. It will be done in a pragmatic way, not in any ideological way.

I will finish by repeating what I said at the beginning. This budget represents the first of five budgets and is step one in the implementation of the programme for Government. It is not possible to deliver everything in year one.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I agree with what Deputy Timmins has said. I will fire a shot across the bows of the Opposition because no one has bothered to turn up tonight. When people are watching this on TV at home Opposition Deputies are the first people to point the finger when the benches are a bit light on this side of the House. Their absence is either an endorsement of the budget or they could not be bothered to turn up

I welcome the increase in the capitation grant. This will see an additional €50 per pupil allocated to primary and special schools and an extra €20 per pupil for post-primary schools. Many of my colleagues will have received numerous emails from constituents in recent weeks on this issue. As a former teacher, like Deputy John Connolly beside me, and having spent 15 years in the classroom, I understand the immense pressure on parents and schools. I know the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, is committed to improving the support for our special education services and that commitment is evident through the increase of 1,717 in the number of SNAs and the 860 additional SEN teachers in special education settings. It is vital that we continue to have the staff and resources necessary to expand special education provision.

Housing received a major uplift in the budget. The expansion of the living city initiative will help to address vacancy and dereliction and hopefully bring more houses into the market. The scheme is being extended and expanded, increasing its scope for residential properties from those built before 1915 to those built before 1975. Amending this scheme to support the use of over-the-shop premises for residential purposes is also a good idea.

Far too many people are homeless, living in emergency accommodation or in precarious and uncertain living conditions. We all know this is not good enough. We must continue to accelerate the delivery of homes through key initiatives such as the first home scheme, vacancy grants, affordable purchase options, cost rental housing and the help to buy scheme.

Turning to infrastructure, I want to address the ongoing issues with water quality in Cork city, which have been well documented, particularly the problems with discoloured water and excess manganese. While the additional funding is welcome, we must acknowledge that the full replacement of ageing cast-iron pipes is going to take time. Long-term planning and delivery

must remain a priority. Nevertheless, an additional €1.4 billion for Uisce Éireann is extremely welcome and needs to be directed at areas servicing new housing developments in particular.

In his speech yesterday, the Minister referenced several road projects. I want to ensure the northern distributor road, the Mallow relief road and the Cork to Limerick motorway are included in the projects that receive funding and make tangible progress. We need more definitive timelines for their delivery and I will continue to press for clarity and action on them. It is crucial to restate that the funding to deliver these projects is in place under the national development plan, despite what Members of the Opposition say.

Last year, I spoke in the Chamber about the importance of making our communities safe and my disappointment at the allocation of new Garda recruits. Of the 1,000 recruited, only four were assigned to Cork and only one to my constituency. This year's budget includes a commitment of €110 million to recruit 1,000 trainee gardaí in 2026. I sincerely hope that Cork receives its fair share this time. Our communities deserve adequate policing resources. I also want to highlight the ongoing issue of prison capacity. I was pleased to welcome the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, on a recent visit to Cork. I appreciate his commitment to expanding prison capacity there.

Moving on to health, last week I vocalised my frustration at the lack of progress on the Cork elective hospital. As I have said, I raised the issue last week and I will continue to do so. The facility is critical to reduce overcrowding and to address long waiting times. We need urgent movement on it. There are a number of primary care centres in the NDP in the pipeline for Cork North Central, including, as examples, Glanmire, Mayfield and Blarney.

I have long advocated for increased funding and approved access to medicines for persons living with rare diseases. Ireland has allocated €8 million for rare disease funding in 2026, increasing from €6.5 million in 2025 and €1.5 million in 2024. There is incremental progress, which I welcome. This funding will help facilitate the implementation of the national rare disease strategy, which makes 11 key recommendations designed to enhance diagnosis, treatment and support for people living with rare diseases.

I have very little speaking time remaining so I will mention several other issues that involve small amounts of funding but which I welcome nonetheless. I am a spokesperson on sport and while in recent months I have had my issues, which have been well documented, with the FAI as an organisation, I welcome the €3 million for sporting academies to be administered by Sport Ireland. It is fundamental to recognise the grassroots of Irish football and the good work they do, whatever difficulties I might have with the parent body.

I also welcome the €1.6 million allocated to the GAA. I acknowledge the incremental increase to sporting organisations in the budget, and the further enhancement of the large scale sport infrastructure fund, LSSIF. I am already looking forward to seeing a more enhanced LSSIF in next year's budget. As I have said in the past, some of the best things I have been involved in as a public representative in recent years have been in the area of sports capital funding. It is probably the most important and best delivered funding we give directly to communities. It is great to see this further enhancement.

Deputy John Connolly: I welcome the emphasis in the budget on capital investment in infrastructure and housing. There is a full allocation of €19.1 billion for infrastructure in budget

2026, which is an increase of more than €2 billion on the 2025 figure. I very much welcome this. When we have such quantities of money to spend, it is important that we do not allow it to become bogged down in red tape and bureaucracy, which slows down the development of infrastructure. I know that next month the Minister, Deputy Chambers, is to publish an action plan on infrastructural development. I very much look forward to this simplifying regulation and reducing the administrative burden and red tape involved in progressing crucial infrastructure projects in all of our constituencies throughout the country.

I will mention a few projects in Galway in particular that I hope will benefit from it. We are advised that funding is there for them but I want to see them move through the infrastructure guidelines quickly. The development of two additional bed blocks at University Hospital Galway will be the first phase of the redevelopment plan for the hospital. I understand from the HSE that a design team is to be appointed before the end of the year. I hope that in 2026 we see this progressed through the accelerating infrastructure task force and planning system. As I have said, it is a first phase, following which will be development of the new emergency department, the maternity section, the paediatric section and cancer services. I hope we will see the quick development of these using the new infrastructure guidelines.

The Galway city ring road is long spoken about and I am very hopeful of a planning decision on it by the end of the year, and if not by the end of the year then early next year. I hope the new infrastructure task force and accelerating infrastructure guidelines to be published by the Minister, Deputy Chambers, will make sure the ring road is developed in a quickly. The Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, will be interested in the development of the pier at Rossaveel and, perhaps, the Galway Harbour Company. A planning decision is awaited and I hope it will receive planning permission and move through the infrastructure task force quickly. There is also the cross-city link, which will be a substantial public transport development in Galway city.

I welcome the record funding of €7.2 billion for housing next year. I hope it can bear fruit quickly. We need these houses urgently. We should alert the local authorities again that the Government has announced efforts to reduce the bureaucracy around gaining approval for public housing projects. We are advised the Government has reduced the approval process for social and affordable housing projects from a four-stage process to a single-stage process. I hope this will see quicker development of housing. I hope it will not be a case that it will still take the same length of time but with the process condensed into one stage. I hope we will see quicker decisions.

Allow local authorities to build. I do not see why we do not advise local authorities of their budgets at the start of the year and state that by the end of the year we will expect them to have built or developed a certain number of social and affordable houses. Local authorities are the bodies responsible for this. We have the budget now to allow this. Give them the money and let them do it, rather than having a process of the local authority seeking approval from the Department of housing. It seems to duplicate work. We should streamline it by giving the local authorities the money. I look forward to the publication of the new housing strategy during this Dáil term. I hope it will accelerate residential developments.

Other measures are included in the budget, which we hope will trigger investment in the private sector and the development of apartments. I certainly hope these measures have the intended impact. There is figure of close to €1 billion, I think it is €700 million, and it would

be fantastic to think we might tackle the housing crisis through a combination of public and private investment.

One of the most noteworthy features of the budget is the effort to which it goes to protect and further develop our public services. All of our citizens benefit from good quality public services. It is one of the great levellers in society. The Taoiseach said after the election last year that the development of better public services was one of the main focuses of the Government. It is mentioned throughout the programme for Government. I hope we see the measures in the budget having impact and being continued over the life cycle of the Government in each budget.

According to the budget, we will see an additional 12,500 staff in the public service. It is difficult to think this will not result in significant improvement for citizens accessing and benefiting from public services. This is the aim of it. The public should be reassured by this. We should have measures to make sure the public get the benefit of this expenditure and we should not see this money going into further bureaucracy and red tape. We should see bodies employed quickly to provide services. Some of the measures that stick out are the additional 3,370 staff in the health services and the €3.8 billion increase for disability services. The Taoiseach has spoken about the Government wanting to provide a step change in how we deliver disability services. This €3.8 billion is an indication of this intent. I hope that in all children's disability network teams, we will see enhanced therapeutic services and reduced waiting times for the children and support for families. We can talk about these figures, and it is fantastic that we have the capacity in the economy and the Exchequer to provide them, but we need them to deliver for the public, particularly in this area. It is a commitment of this Government and we want to see it having an impact that benefits the end users. Also included in that €3.8 billion increase for disability services are further resources for respite care. We all know families who need respite care in support of the well-being of all of the family members. We all see it being a struggle for certain families to access respite care. Again, we need to make sure the moneys we are providing have that impact and that they provide the buildings for respite care and the staff to provide the service.

Another welcome initiative in terms of the public service for next year, which Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan has mentioned, is the 1,000 additional gardaí. Already in the lifetime of this Government, two classes have entered Templemore, resulting in 500 additional gardaí in the past year. The Minister may have said it was even more than that. The Minister of State would know himself. There is funding for 1,000 next year. The commitment to community policing is very welcome. Citizens throughout the country will welcome that.

I also concur with my colleague Deputy O'Sullivan in welcoming the additional capitation moneys for schools. I have been on career break from my school for just over a year. In the past number of years, especially since the Covid cleaning supplement was taken away from schools, they have been struggling. The increases in the cost of energy and the cost-of-living increases that has affected households has also had an impact on schools. This additional €50 in primary and special schools is badly needed. I hope it will provide some relief to schools and ensure they can provide adequate educational infrastructure while covering the day-to-day running costs of the school, that is, heating, lighting and so on. It is very welcome.

To add to my earlier comment about the development of our public services, the additional teachers - more than 1,000 - and over 1,700 SNAs to be provided next year again highlights

the commitment of the Government, and I compliment the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, in particular, to the provision of classes for children with additional needs. This is most welcome. We all know parents and have heard about the stress they face coming into September not knowing whether there will be a class in their community for children with additional needs that their child can attend. I hope this additional 1,000 teachers and 1,700 SNAs will ensure more communities have the classes needed to ensure all children can attend their local mainstream school.

I also echo the sentiments of my colleague regarding the additional €3 million for the FAI. I encourage local authorities in those places where the FAI intends to develop academies to work with local soccer clubs to develop the types of facilities needed to progress the game locally. The additional money for the GPA and the large-scale sporting infrastructure fund is also very welcome. The Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, has advised us that the sports capital programme will be open for clubs to apply to for funding in the new year. That is a much sought after programme. These resources develop facilities that every community needs. I look forward to that expenditure and to helping clubs try to avail of that funding.

Debate adjourned.

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 Séamus McGrath - To discuss the need to review the protocol in dealing with suspected victims of a drink spiking incident.

Deputy John Connolly - To discuss a proposal to close the salmon hatchery at Cong on Lough Corrib.

Deputy Marie Sherlock - To discuss the completion of necessary works to the George's Hill primary school in Dublin 7.

Deputy Joe Cooney - To discuss the HIQA report into the delivery of urgent and emergency healthcare services for the HSE mid-west region.

Deputy Barry Ward - To discuss the shortfall in ancillary grant funding for schools in the Booterstown area.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger - To discuss the policies around the use of pepper spray by gardaí.

The matters raised by Deputies Séamus McGrath, Ruth Coppinger, Marie Sherlock, Barry Ward and John Connolly have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Crime Prevention

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank the Ministers for being here this evening. I raise the issue of the need for a better protocol to be put in place in relation to the offence of spiking. To explain what I am referring to, we are all aware that, when people are out enjoying themselves on social occasions, there are incidents of their drinks being spiked. Essentially, drugs are put into their drinks without their consent or knowledge. This is an extremely serious offence. In some cases, it can lead to much more serious offences such as sexual assault or violence. These incidents are a massive concern in our society and among our electorate.

What prompted me to put down this Topical Issue this week was a story that came to me from a good friend of mine regarding an incident involving her daughter. I obviously will not refer to names or anything but this happened in Cork in recent weeks. This woman's teenage daughter was out enjoying herself socially and suddenly became extremely intoxicated not because of the drink she consumed - she was only drinking moderately that evening - but because, in her strong view, her drink must have been spiked. She attended Cork University Hospital and it is from there that the story really begins to explain why there is a need for a far better protocol to be put in place for incidents like this. One of her parents had to come to the hospital to explain the situation. Effectively, her explanation of what had happened to her was being doubted. Because it was leaving certificate night, there was an assumption that she had drunk too much. Her story was not fully listened to and she was not attended to in the way she should have been. There was no mention of calling An Garda Síochána. There was no reference to a urine or blood test. Effectively, there was no protocol in place.

I appreciate that this straddles the Department of Health and the Department of Justice. At the root of all of this is a very serious offence. Unfortunately, we are led to believe there is a significant incidence of this offence taking place across the country. Many campaigners in the area of sexual assault and sexual violence argue that it is a very significant issue. Mary Crilly, a renowned campaigner in the area of sexual violence who supports those who are victims of it and works closely with the Sexual Violence Centre Cork, has highlighted this as a significant issue and has pointed out that significantly better systems, protocols and laws need to be put in place.

It is an offence to spike someone's drink. I understand it is classified as a poisoning offence. I am interested in knowing how many convictions for this offence there have been. I suspect there have not been many at all because they are not fully investigated in most instances. That is very serious. The Government needs to become far more alert to this and put in place a significant strategy to deal with it. There are consequences to a spiking incident, whether the spiking of a drink or people being injected with something without their knowledge in a nightclub or other venue. If we do not follow through on this, it will become a much bigger issue. I ask that a protocol be developed and a strategy put in place by Government to address this issue once and for all. We must support victims, believe their stories and ensure they are given the benefit of the doubt in relation to their reports. A proper system must be put in place involving blood testing and sampling to determine what has been injected into victims' systems and there must be proper follow-through by An Garda Síochána comprising an investigation into the venue where the offence is likely to have happened and so on. That is what I am asking for here this evening.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Niall Collins): On behalf of the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, I thank Deputy McGrath for

submitting this Topical Issue and acknowledge the concerns raised in relation to the very serious issue of drink spiking. Spiking is a crime that preys on vulnerability, that undermines consent and that can have devastating consequences for victims. The Government is committed to taking a zero-tolerance approach to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. The final implementation plan for the third national zero-tolerance strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence was launched in June and sets out the delivery targets and collective action needed to tackle domestic, sexual and gender-based violence to the end of 2026.

The programme for Government also includes a commitment to introduce stronger laws to combat the spiking of drinks. Currently, there is no specific crime type of spiking. Spiking may be reported as an independent offence in the form of poisoning, or it may be used by offenders to facilitate the commission of other crimes. Spiking a person's drink or spiking someone by injection are, in effect, poisoning offences under the Non-Fatal Offences Against the Person Act 1997, which can result in a three-year prison term. Section 12 of that Act applies to anyone who intentionally or recklessly administers a substance capable of interfering substantially with another person's bodily functions, which explicitly includes inducing unconsciousness or sleep. A person guilty of the offence of poisoning may be subject to a maximum penalty of three years' imprisonment. Depending on the nature of the substance administered, it may be possible to charge a perpetrator with endangerment under section 13 of the Act. This provides that it is an offence to intentionally or recklessly engage in conduct that creates a substantial risk of death or serious harm to another. The offence of endangerment carries a maximum penalty of seven years' imprisonment.

An Garda Síochána takes all reports of spiking seriously and investigates thoroughly to determine the exact nature of each incident, including through the results of toxicology reports. The nationwide roll-out of the divisional protective services units has ensured that victims of domestic, sexual and gender-based crimes presenting to An Garda Síochána are met with a consistently high standard of specialist, sensitive, professional and expert assistance. There is now a protective services unit in every Garda division. An Garda Síochána advises any victim of an incident or spiking to report it to their local gardaí. The Garda continues to engage with partner agencies in monitoring the reporting of these matters for early warning of any identified patterns. These partner agencies include the HSE, the Health Protection Surveillance Centre and the Health Products Regulatory Authority. Any incident of this type, including those where there is evidence to suggest a link with spiking, will be investigated either by local gardaí or those supported by or attached to the divisional protective services unit.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank the Minister of State for the response. I acknowledge that the Government is committed to taking a zero-tolerance approach in relation to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. Of course, I also acknowledge the zero-tolerance strategy and its recent launch, and also the additional funding provided. It is welcome that the programme for Government specifically includes a commitment to introduce stronger laws to combat the spiking of drinks. However, as has been reported, there is currently no specific crime type of spiking. That is a very significant issue.

With all due respect to the Minister of State, his response referred very much to the criminal offence of poisoning and to potential penalties, including the three-year sentence, but what I am trying to focus on in particular are the measures in place when someone presents in a hospital in the strong belief that their drinks were spiked. Often, such people will have been

enjoying themselves and having a few drinks, but nothing excessive, and will suddenly have got into a state not explained by the amount of alcohol consumed, for example. The logical conclusion will be that something was put into their system without their consent.

We need to be very careful about how we approach these situations. In this particular case, the system let the individual down. There was no proper seizure or protocol put in place. Doubt was cast on the person's story and that is not acceptable. The benefit of the doubt needs to be with the victim in these scenarios and we need to ensure there is a proper set of procedures in place such that if someone believes their drink was spiked some evening or on a night out, a blood sample will be taken, the Garda will be alerted and the incident will be reported and logged, with proper follow-through. I would be genuinely interested in knowing how many convictions have occurred in relation to the offence of poisoning and drink-spiking incidents. I know the Minister of State may not have that figure this evening, but this is something we should highlight.

Deputy Niall Collins: Again, I thank the Deputy for raising what is a very serious issue. I acknowledge that the incident in question was very serious for the person and family on whose behalf he is raising this matter. Combating and eradicating sexual and gender-based violence is one of our core priorities. The programme for Government reaffirms our commitment to introducing stronger laws to combat the spiking of drinks. This is a specific and targeted commitment to protect people, particularly in the night-time economy, and to ensure our laws are robust enough to hold perpetrators to account. It sits within the overarching goal of the prosecution pillar of the zero-tolerance plan, which is to ensure that our justice system effectively vindicates the rights of victims and survivors. Our Department will progress this important work to strengthen the law, ensuring those who carry out this cowardly act face the serious consequences they deserve.

While the zero-tolerance plan contains 95 distinct actions across prevention, protection and prosecution, the promise to strengthen laws against drink spiking is a fundamental component of our mission. It demonstrates our resolve to address all forms of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence and to adapt our laws to tackle specific threats as they arise. As a Government, we are dedicated to making our communities safe for everyone.

I assure the Deputy I will make the Minister and the Department, and, by extension, An Garda Síochána, aware of the issue he has raised here on the floor of the Dáil in view of the seriousness of the incident and his call for a review of the protocol.

An Garda Síochána

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I wish to raise a matter of very serious importance, namely the use of pepper spray by An Garda Síochána. My concerns arise from what happened last Saturday at Dublin Port. A group of protesters went to the port in solidarity as we approach two years since the genocide in Gaza began, and in light of Ireland's continued favourable trade with Israel. This was part of a global movement. In Italy last Friday, for example, workers held a general strike to try to stop the barbarism and bloodshed. The protesters at Dublin Port, who were entirely peaceful, met a large cordon of gardaí who blocked their path and prevented them from progressing. The gardaí then proceeded to use pepper spray indiscriminately,

without any verbal warning and at a distance closer than the recommended 1 metre minimum. Gardaí also had riot shields and used long batons on the day.

I have a statement issued by the Irish Council for Civil Liberties following the events. It states it was gravely concerned by the heavy-handed policing approach to the protest. It refers to the indiscriminate use of pepper spray and states any use of force by gardaí must always be proportionate and necessary, in line with Garda policies.

Let me set out what Garda policies stipulate and how they were breached. Human-rights law provides broad protection for the right to peaceful protest. It actually protects the right to block a road. The only ground upon which gardaí can use pepper spray is if they fear violence is being used directly against them. The UNHRC specifically notes that mere pushing or shoving or anything like that, which was not even the case at the port because people were just walking, does not constitute or amount to a threat or to violence. Independent legal observers were present on behalf of the ICCL on the day and will, I hope, provide a report.

I turn to the Garda's own regulations on the use of pepper spray. They state gardaí must always consider non-physical approaches, obviously. Paragraph 1.4 states the fundamental principle underpinning the use of pepper spray is that it must comply with the principles of legality, necessity, proportionality and accountability and is not to be used in a non-discriminatory manner. The regulations also state: "Every effort should be made to resolve an incident without resorting to the use of force." They add that gardaí "should avoid extended or repeat uses of Incapacitant Spray". That certainly did not happen. A councillor there on the day gave witness testimony. A young member of my own party who works with me went down with her friends. She is in her 20s and was not even particularly taking part in the protest and was sprayed with pepper spray. I want to make it very clear that this is double strength pepper spray that the Garda is now using. The impact of it was felt by people for more than two days. Women I know who were the victims of this told me that they showered about three times and they were still burning the next day. There was absolutely no justification in using that type of what is basically chemical warfare against peaceful protesters. There was no threat of violence. This pepper spray was not used at the race riot, for example, when gardaí were under attack. I think it was being used for a different reason. There had been an effective protest the previous week that had an impact at the port. By the way, people are entitled to do that. The Garda was determined that would not happen again and it wanted to send a message to pro-Palestine protestors not to go to the port again. That is what I think happened.

Deputy Niall Collins: I am responding on behalf of the Minister for justice to the issue that was raised. We in Ireland are lucky to have a police service in An Garda Síochána that has the widespread community support that has been hard earned over decades of service to the State and to our people. The common refrain from the public is that they want more gardaí in their community and on their streets. This is certainly not the case in many other jurisdictions in the world. This is because An Garda Síochána undertakes an important role in upholding and protecting the human and constitutional rights of everyone in our community. It does this by providing a high quality, effective policing service in partnership with the community and in co-operation with other agencies.

In relation to the use of incapacitant spray, it is one of a number of tactical options available to gardaí when faced with the use of force or the threat of violence when it is reasonable to

believe that such force or threat of violence may result in injury to themselves or others. Information on the use of force, including the use of incapacitant spray, is published on the Garda website and in the Commissioner's monthly reporting to the Policing and Community Safety Authority.

The right to protest peacefully is enshrined in our Constitution and legislation. An Garda Síochána, through its human rights-led approach to policing, seeks to uphold and protect the right to freedom of assembly and to protest while also upholding the law and protecting the safety of the public when required. Balancing the right to protest with protecting the public and upholding the law is a complex task. An Garda Síochána's policing approach to protests is focused on keeping the public at large safe and preventing antisocial or criminal behaviour while respecting the right to peaceful assembly under the Constitution. Protests create operational challenges for An Garda Síochána, especially where those protestors engage in force against Garda members and seek to push violently through cordons.

Factors such as the number of persons protesting, the location of protests and actions at the protest as well as the health and safety of all, including gardaí, require significant assessment. A detailed policy document on the use of incapacitant spray has been developed by An Garda Síochána and is publicly available on its website. The fundamental principle underpinning this policy is that any action taken which requires a member of An Garda Síochána to use an incapacitant spray must comply with the fundamental principles of legality, necessity, proportionality and accountability. It must also be applied in a non-discriminatory manner in accordance with the principles of the European Convention on Human Rights. In policing protests, it should be noted that the Garda engages in a gradual response that is reasonable. Where physical force is used against members of An Garda Síochána, they are entitled to respond in a proportional manner.

I agree with the Deputy that there is a right of protest in this country, but I do not think the right of protest should allow a bunch of protesters to lock down this city by blocking Dublin Port as they did. They had no right to do that. They should not do that. They inconvenienced the entire city. I wonder does the Deputy support the idea, the principle or the action of locking down this city by blocking Dublin Port. Does the Deputy think that is right? I certainly do not, and millions of people around the country do not either. I think I have responded in a comprehensive manner to the Deputy regarding the issues she has raised. I support An Garda Síochána and its actions. I have seen the videos in this regard. Protestors have a right to protest, and in this case they were protesting about something that is fundamental, and all of us in this House support trying to sort out the issues in Palestine, but locking down the Dublin Port tunnel does not achieve anything. I would like to hear what the Deputy has to say in this regard. Does she agree with and did she support blocking the Dublin Port tunnel and reducing this city to a mass gridlock? Did she agree with it and does she agree with it?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I hope I get the extra half minute now that the Minister of State got. I will tell the Minister of State what I agree with. I agree that this Government that is meant to support the Palestinian state has utterly failed to carry out action in the past two years to do that. It would not even pass the occupied territories Bill.

Deputy Niall Collins: That is not true.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: We are the second biggest trader with Israel.

Deputy Niall Collins: That is not true.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is true.

Deputy Niall Collins: It is not true.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Minister of State asked me a question. I totally agree that workers and young people throughout the world have been the only saving grace as this horrific genocide that we are seeing livestreamed on our phones each day has occurred. Only for the protest movements that are happening, there would be no action at all. The EU has been an utter disgrace throughout this and obviously the US has been a partner in the genocide. The Government is complicit in that it did nothing. I know the Government does not like that being said, but the word "complicit" means doing nothing when you see things happening as well doing something.

Deputy Niall Collins: That is not true.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Nobody would have to protest if the Government actually undertook and carried through its so-called support for Palestine. The injuries sustained include one person who has a broken wrist.

Deputy Niall Collins: What about locking down the city and the tunnel?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: One young woman I know is on crutches. I got a phone call after and went down myself, and I actually saw a second round of pepper spray used. The impact on some of the people and the effect of it was absolutely horrific. I remind the Minister of State there is broad protection for the right to protest, nationally and internationally. If you are walking on a road or even if you are going to block a road, the Garda does not have the right to use pepper spray. Blocking roads is an effective means of protest. It was done for the right to vote for women. It was done for civil rights. It is done for lots of things. The Minister of State wants ineffective protests that achieve very little. He asked me if I think people have the right to block a port for a period of time.

Deputy Niall Collins: The Dublin Port tunnel.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I absolutely do to stop a genocide. They were not blocking the port tunnel. They were up at the port. The Minister of State does not know what they were going to do because they were actually blocked by the Garda. They were not actually blocking anybody.

Deputy Niall Collins: You see, the Deputy tries to own the argument every way. She does not have a monopoly on concern for the Palestinians. I have been to the Middle East. I have been to Palestine and to Ramallah and Hebron. I have walked the streets of East Jerusalem. I

have been to the settler communities and seen the impact those have on the people of Palestine. The Deputy does not have a monopoly on concern for the Palestinians. She likes to present that she has a monopoly on it. The protestors do not have a monopoly on it. This Government has done more than any other Government across Europe in terms of trying to highlight and support the cause of the Palestinian people. I wonder if the Deputy thinks that locking down Dublin and reducing it to gridlock and impacting hundreds of thousands of people is acceptable. The Deputy failed to address it. Did she support it and does she support it? She obviously does by her silence.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: For a genocide? To block a road to stop a genocide? Absolutely.

Deputy Niall Collins: You cannot have it both ways. You want to have it both ways. The Deputy thinks we can just lock down Dublin city centre every single day of the week.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Not every day, just one day

Deputy Niall Collins: That is what the Deputy is saying, because if it is okay once, then it is okay twice. Where does it go from there then? The Garda was right and acted completely correctly in my view.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: They were right; okay.

Deputy Niall Collins: I have seen the video and I will support every single member of An Garda Síochána who policed that event because they were looking out for the hundreds of thousands of people around this city and region who-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Minister of State will not wait for any report. He will just---
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Deputy Niall Collins: -----have an absolutely right go about their business and use the public roads to get on with their business, get home to their families, do their day-to-day activities, get to work, get home, rear their children and bring their kids to their clubs and their sports. The Deputy, though, seems to think that locking down Dublin is acceptable.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is about gardaí breaking their own rules.

Deputy Niall Collins: No, it is not. People are absolutely entitled to protest. Nobody disputes that. The Deputy, though, wants to elevate it and bring it to a place where it actually discredits what they are protesting for, and that is regrettable.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: You are the one who has broken lots of laws with your housing and your properties.

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Marie Sherlock: My question for the Minister for education relates to Presentation Primary School in George's Hill. Before I get to the problems about the school, I want to say that this is a great school in the heart of the north inner city in Dublin 7. It is a DEIS band 1 school. It probably has one of the most diverse populations of all schools in the country and has a significant amount of need, both social and educational. It has a hugely committed staff, who go above and beyond in ways that will never be aired. Three years ago, the Department paid for extensive works to the school, including three new autism classes, a lift, a new rooftop yard, fire doors, a reconfiguration of the top floor and other works. I understand the project manager was KSN, the main contractor was Vision and other contractors were involved.

These works should be a source of pride for the school. Instead, the school has been left with a disgraceful botched job that no one seems to be taking responsibility for. The lack of accountability and oversight by the Department of education is frankly disgraceful. I visited the school a number of weeks ago. My appeal to the Minister of State and to the Minister for education is to visit this school. What I saw was asbestos in the floors throughout the building and broken tiles that occurred during the works and on which children are walking every single day. There is water ingress on the roof yard. The plug points have no earthing. The roof shed is disintegrating. It is on the fourth floor. It is a flat roof and it is unprotected. Think about that in the middle of a storm. The floors were damaged when the fire doors were being installed and the plumbing is simply inadequate. One of the maddest things when you walk through the school is that the walls are only half-painted. The painter went to a certain point and no further.

Some of these situations arose during construction. Some of it was pre-existing. When the contractor went to the project manager three years ago, they were told the Department had not approved expanding the scope of works. Earlier this year, the Department said it should have approved them but, lo and behold, the project manager said the account was closed and the case had to be resubmitted. When the school went back to the original contractors for new quotes, they declined and advised the school to find an alternative elsewhere. When the school went elsewhere for those quotes, every other contractor said they could not get involved in this and that the school would have to go back to the original contractors. You could not make this up.

All the while, this is a school catering to some of the most disadvantaged children in this city. The principal herself has had to climb onto the roof to apply Tec7 to a leaking roof light. She has had to paint a closet room to try to create some space in the school and has had to become an expert in unblocking toilets. This is the reality of this school. There are other schools that are suffering from a severe shortage in terms of the capitation grant and the cost of running the school. More crucially, we have a very real health and safety risk here. In fact, it is an immediate health and safety risk. The Department of education, to my mind, has done nothing to investigate the works that it paid for three years ago, nor has it taken any actions to ensure that the contractors it paid actually did the correct work.

A letter was sent to the Department last week from the board of management of the school. I appreciate that it is budget week and there is lots to be done, but the letter pointed out that there is an immediate health and safety risk. As of this afternoon, there has been no response from the Department of education to that school. If that school were in a better off area with parents with more political capital, I think there would be a speedier response. As of this

afternoon, the Department of education has not acknowledged any of these problems. Tonight, I want to hear from the Minister of State what the Department is going to do about it.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney): I am taking this matter on behalf of my colleague the Minister for education, Deputy McEntee, who is unfortunately unavailable this evening. I thank Deputy Sherlock for raising this matter as it provides me with an opportunity to clarify the position in relation to the repurposing works undertaken at George's Hill primary school in 2022. The Deputy may be aware that George's Hill is a Catholic, co-educational primary school. The school has a current enrolment of 165 pupils and a staffing level of a principal, nine mainstream class teachers and three special class teachers.

The project approved by the Department of Education and Youth in 2022 provided accommodation for three special classes and associated ancillary accommodation for students with special educational needs. In addition, repurposing works were completed to provide a general-purpose area and a rooftop play area. This project was delivered under the Department's devolved special educational needs reconfiguration and modular accommodation programme. This programme involves the use of project management supports that are designed to enable the accommodation to be provided as quickly as possible and help ease the administrative workload for school authorities in the management and delivery of projects. The project was completed in 2022.

The school principal made contact with the Department of Education and Youth's planning and building unit earlier this year relating to a request for further works. It appears that the works described may fall within the scope of the Department's emergency works scheme. The advice given to the principal was that the next step was for the school to submit an application under the emergency works scheme for consideration. The Department has no record of receiving an application from the school and will make contact with the school directly in this regard.

Since 2020, the Department of Education and Youth has invested over €6 billion in schools throughout the country under the national development plan, involving the completion of over 1,300 school building projects. Government support for this investment, including by way of supplementary capital funding, has delivered real benefits for school communities. Supplementary capital funding of €210 million was approved by the Government and has brought the total capital allocation for 2025 for the Department of Education and Youth to €1.6 billion.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I thank the Minister of State for that reply on behalf of the Minister for education. I have to ask him directly. Is he comfortable with children walking on asbestos tiles every day of the week? The tiles were broken by works undertaken three years ago. We know that there is no safe level of asbestos. I have to ask him that direct question.

The Minister of State said the project was completed in 2022. He mentioned the good money, €6 billion, being spent on schools. Some of it has been well spent. Some of it, frankly, has been appallingly spent. A project manager was taken on to oversee this project. It is a project manager who, I am aware, is also involved in other school projects at this time. If that project manager has reported back to the Department of education that the project has been completed,

there is a serious dereliction of duty there. In fact, I would go as far as to say that somebody has been seriously negligent in reporting to the Department. There is fault here on the part of the project manager and whatever officials in the Department wrote the statement claiming the project had been completed in 2022.

It is a source of shame that the Department of education would consider any works left half-done to have been completed. This is particularly the case in a school that provides a safe and secure space to children, many of whom have gone through trauma, are going through homelessness accommodation or have seen things in their life that any child should not see. There is an even greater impetus and need to ensure that we get things right in this school, yet we have this nonsense that the project was completed in 2022. That is factually incorrect. I would like the Minister of State to bring that back to the Minister for education and to plead with her to visit the school as soon as possible.

Deputy Seán Canney: I listened to what the Deputy said and some of the charges she made are fairly grim. My understanding, from reading the reply prepared for me, is that the works that were contracted for in 2022 have been completed. It was only this year that the school principal made contact with the Department looking for further works to be carried out. As of when this reply was put together, the application had not yet come in from the school.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: They cannot submit it because they cannot get a quote.

Deputy Seán Canney: They could put in a report from an engineer with a costing on it, I am sure. Nothing has been received. The Department has no record of receiving it. It is going to make contact directly with the school as soon as possible because it is important that no school or child be left in a danger, if that is the case. I come from a construction background. If the works were completed in 2022 and it was 2025 before the principal made contact, I would be concerned.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: There is a new school principal.

Deputy Seán Canney: To fully answer the Deputy's question, I will take her concerns back to the Minister. The Department will be making contact with the principal as a matter of course because no application has come in yet. If there are difficulties in that regard, I am sure the Department of education will be able to assist with advice on how to get the costings together in order to make the application formally.

Grant Payments

Deputy Barry Ward: I raise an issue relating to ancillary grants for schools. This affects many schools in my area. Last week, I met the principal and treasurer of St. Mary's Boys National School in Booterstown. It is by any measure a fantastic local parish school. It provides a service for the community and does so in a way that contributes much to provide for special educational needs and children from the IPAS centre in Blackrock. It does a good job and does it well.

It gets an ancillary grant, as the Minister of State will be aware, as many schools do. That grant was used in the past to pay secretaries and caretakers. Since the secretaries, for example, were put onto the payroll of the Department, a decision has been made that schools do not need the same ancillary grant. A difficulty arises here. I raise this issue specifically in relation to St. Mary's Boys National School but it also applies in other schools. The difficulty is that the Department has made a calculation which assumes that those school secretaries were paid all year round, 12 months per year when, in fact, very often they were part-time workers who were not paid in July and August. The calculation takes into account money that was available to the school and was used to pay for important things, including electricity, insurance, heating and lighting. The Department decided to cut that out. St. Mary's Boys National School reckons it is at a loss of between €4,000 and €6,000 on the basis it would not have been paying those people in July and August.

The Department may well say, "Tough", but I do not think that is the right answer. I welcome the resolution of the issue with the caretakers and secretaries. I supported them totally in their call to be put onto the payroll of the Department and to have the same terms and conditions in respect of pensions, sick leave and all the other employment benefits that teachers in schools have. They are entitled to those and I hope the workings of the WRC will result in a positive outcome in that regard. You cannot have a desire to solve that problem and also expect the schools and the communities they serve to be less well-off as a result.

The Department needs to take account of the fact that the cutting of the ancillary grants is an unfair measure that disadvantages schools, which are doing a good job for communities. They are doing their level best on pretty tight budgets.

St. Mary's Boys National School serves 170-odd boys. Let us do something that helps them. Instead of saying we are cutting out that grant, let us acknowledge the reality of what was happening and the way in which secretaries were paid. That should also be reflected in the reality of the way in which the ancillary grant is paid.

I welcome the increase in the capitation grant from €224 to €270 per child enrolled. That is very welcome. Let us be clear, however, that it is not enough. Schools need that money and that increase because of the increase in all the costs that come with running a school. Let us not penalise them by hitting the ancillary grant. I ask the Minister of State in the first instance to acknowledge the fact that this calculation by the Department is perverse, incorrect and unfairly reflects the needs of the schools. It is something that the Department can address by changing the calculation and acknowledging that schools did not pay people 12 months per year and there were two months during the summer when school secretaries were not paid out of those ancillary grants, and, therefore, to remove them is both arbitrary and unfair. I hope the Minister of State can acknowledge that and we can make some progress towards fixing the problem.

Deputy Seán Canney: I am taking this matter on the behalf of the Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy McEntee. I thank the Deputy for giving me the opportunity to outline to the House the position in respect of St Mary's Boys National School, Blackrock, County Dublin. The Department is committed to offering all available and appropriate supports to schools. As the Deputy rightly pointed out, budget 2026 includes €39 million towards increased capitation funding for primary, post-primary and special schools to provide

additional financial support towards their running costs. This will see an increase in the standard capitation rates paid to schools of €50 per pupil for primary schools, from €224 to €274, and of €20 per pupil for post-primary schools, from €386 to €406. Over the past three budgets there has been an increase of 49.7% in the level of capitation rates paid to primary schools.

The ancillary services grant is payable to recognised primary schools and special schools in the free education system. The grant is intended to cater for the cost of employing secretaries and caretaking staff. It is up to the boards of management to allocate this funding as per their priorities. As per Circular 40/09, the capitation grant provided for general running costs and the ancillary services grant provided for secretarial and caretaking services may be regarded as a common grant from which the board of management can allocate according to its own priorities.

After Fórsa accepted the Workplace Relations Commission agreement about salaries and leave for grant-funded school secretaries, the secretaries who accepted the agreement were added to the Department of education's payroll from September 2023. Because of this, the ancillary-related grant funding has been updated. Schools are no longer paying these salaries directly.

Since the 2023-2024 school year, schools have been paid the usual ancillary grant amount minus the amount that schools previously paid to grant-funded secretaries prior to their acceptance of the new terms and conditions. Schools provided the Department with these details and this information is now being used to reduce the ancillary-related grant funding. Schools should be in no way disadvantaged by this as the grant is reduced only by the amount they previously paid to their secretaries.

To date we have issued correspondence to schools with details of the arrangements for September to December 2023, January to August 2024, September to December 2024 and January to August 2025.

In some situations, the salaries of ancillary staff in a particular school may have been higher than the ancillary grant due to the school and the school may have funded this difference via other revenue streams. In situations where the salary that a school was paying their secretary was higher than the ancillary grant due to the school prior to them being added to the Department of education's payroll, the ancillary grant is reduced to nil. This should not impact the school's financial position.

For the specific school mentioned, the ancillary grant has now been reduced to nil as the salary the school was previously paying their secretaries, prior to their moving to the Department's payroll, is now higher than the ancillary grant available to the school prior to reductions being applied. A full review of the grant was completed by the Department in September 2025 and an update was provided to the school on the breakdown of the grant. The rate of ancillary services grant has not decreased and continues to be paid based on the relevant enrolments in the school multiplied by the rates set out in Circular 17/21.

Work is ongoing to identify a method of standardising the reduction to the ancillary-related grants for the longer term where school secretaries are being paid on the Department's payroll. The House should note that the reductions may change when a permanent model for ancillary-related grant reductions has been finalised.

The financial support services unit, funded by the Department, is an important source of advice and support to schools on financial matters, including budgeting and cash flow management. Contact can be found on its website.

Deputy Barry Ward: I thank the Minister of State, to a point. An awful lot in that response is not relevant to this particular school. What made my blood boil, to be perfectly honest, was when the Minister of State said, "Schools should be in no way disadvantaged by this [meaning the changes in respect of the secretaries' payment] as the grant is reduced only by the amount they previously paid to their secretaries." He spoke about a review in respect of this particular school in which the Department decided that the amount paid to the secretaries was greater than the level of the grant that was given, and, therefore, the grant is being reduced to nil. The first thing I said when introducing this Topical Issue was that that was not the case. This school is being impacted by these changes. It was paying less to the secretaries than the ancillary grant. Therefore, it had money left over that it used to pay for important goods and services in the school. It is now left without that money because the Department has decided the school was paying the secretaries all year round when, in fact, it was not. This is not some kind of smoke and mirrors. The school is not trying to hide anything. It published properly audited accounts. I met Mr. Noel Scully, the principal, who is doing an excellent job, and Mr. Conor Gahan, the treasurer. They have put together accounts that show this very clearly, so whatever review the Department has carried out is incorrect because it has come to a conclusion that leaves the school worse off. All the policies in the world can state that this should not impact on the school's financial position, but it has impacted on the school's financial position. St. Mary's Boys National School is between €4,000 and €6,000 less well off every year because of this change. The bean counter within the Department who has done this has made a mistake or has wilfully ignored the facts of the matter. Will the Minister of State please commit to me that the Department will examine this again, review it and be honest about the matter in terms of looking at what the actual end costs for St. Mary's Boys School are? If the Department can establish that the school has been left less well off than it was before this review - I am confident that it will be able to do so - I ask it to reinstate the ancillary grant in order that it can pay for what it needs to pay for.

Deputy Seán Canney: I feel the Deputy's frustration. I will repeat what is contained in the reply. For the specific school mentioned the ancillary grant has now been reduced to nil because the salary the school was previously paying its secretaries before they moved to the Department's payroll is now higher than the ancillary grant available to the school prior to the reductions being applied. A full review of the grant was completed by the Department in September of this year, and an update was provided to the school on the breakdown of the grant. I suggest that if the school is not happy with the breakdown of the grant, its representatives should go back to the bean counters, as the Deputy called them, or whoever did this in the Department. If the breakdown is wrong, the school should be able to demonstrate that it is wrong. Genuinely, no school should be penalised as a result of the good work that was done to get school secretaries onto the Department of education payroll. If there is a particular problem with this school such as an anomaly in the way the calculations are being done - the Deputy has the update from the school, and the breakdown of the grant has been given to the school by the Department - there is a bit of work to be done between the school and the Department to sort it out.

I will definitely bring this matter back to the Minister. I suggest that the Deputy should speak to the school's board of management and the school authorities to make sure they have received the breakdown of the grant with the clarifications on it. If the school representatives do not agree with that breakdown, my suggestion is that they should go back to the Department and try to get the matter ironed out that way.

I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. It could be an issue in other schools so we have to get it right. The transfer of school secretaries to the Department of education payroll was the right move - it is very important that we applaud it - but I do not believe schools should lose out as a result of the good work that was done at that time.

Fisheries Protection

Deputy John Connolly: I want to bring to the attention of the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, my concern about the proposal by Inland Fisheries Ireland, IFI, to close the Cong salmon hatchery at Cong on Lough Corrib. I cannot get clarity as to whether a decision has been made, or is due or pending. This concern has been brought to me by angling groups, in particular, but also by groups that advocate for the conservation of salmon on the Corrib and by tourism stakeholders. Many of the anglers who have visited my constituency office recently have fished at the salmon weir in Galway for many years. Generations of Galwegians have fished at the weir for years. It is a tradition that has been passed from generation to generation. They have told me they are concerned about the future of what has been a traditional pursuit for many people. Galway and the Corrib have been famous for the quantity of salmon available to be fished by locals and tourists alike.

The Minister of State will be familiar with the salmon weir in Galway; I think most people are. People have fished it for generations, but the concern now is that the stocks are at a low level. Anglers advise me that this has been a particularly bad year, unfortunately. The decision of IFI to close the hatchery at Cong will exacerbate this and will hasten the end of their pursuit. It is of great concern. There has been a notable decline in salmon stocks on Lough Corrib over the past 50 years. The causes of this decline, of course, are complex. It is difficult to pin it on one particular issue. The decision to close the hatchery is not something that will ameliorate this; in fact, it will make it worse. I understand that the Cong hatchery is the only IFI facility that produces salmon smolts. In 2016, IFI decided that not only was it not going to close the hatchery at Cong but also that it saw it as something that would be an upgraded facility for research. That is part of the issue here because, disappointingly, IFI is now alleging that it is no longer required as a research facility, while also ignoring its use for social activities and the tourism industry. The hatchery helps to ensure there is an adequate level of salmon in the Corrib for locals and tourists alike. The decision to close the hatchery will undoubtedly make things worse. It will undoubtedly reduce the numbers. There is no evidence whatsoever to say that closing the hatchery will enhance the Corrib salmon. I ask the Minister of State to engage with IFI on the issue, to prevent the closure of the hatchery, and to plead for the local anglers and others who come to Galway to enjoy the Corrib for fishing pursuits.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Timmy Dooley): I thank Deputy Connolly for raising this issue. I know of his great interest in the angling sector. He is passionate about this issue and it is very close to his heart. He has

had a number of discussions with me about angling, generally. I must begin by putting on the record that operational matters such as this are the preserve of IFI. I have no direct capacity to force it to do anything other than follow its duties. It does not fall to the Minister in this regard. I have been in discussion with IFI to try to understand more fully and clearly what the issue is. I understand that in July of this year, IFI notified the Department that a board decision had been taken to cease the operations of the Cong salmon hatchery in north Galway. The hatchery is a complex of buildings, ponds and a rearing station owned and operated by IFI. For many years, the hatchery has produced salmon smolts for release into the Corrib and Erriff catchments, initially to address declining stocks, as the Deputy identified, following a disease outbreak, and later to support research around salmon return rates and sea lice, and angling for Atlantic salmon.

Together with officials, I have liaised with IFI on the decision to close the Cong salmon hatchery. IFI has indicated to me that it no longer has any requirement for access to what it refers to as ranched smolts. Moreover, and I think this is the important piece, there are some scientific concerns regarding the impact of ranched salmon being released into a special area of conservation and the potential negative impact on wild populations of Atlantic salmon. There is no longer a research requirement within IFI to produce smolts. According to international evidence-based guidelines from the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organization, NASCO, there is no conservation basis for the farmed production of smolts, given the status of wild salmon populations in the Corrib and Erriff catchments. It follows that there is no benefit to wild salmon populations from the release of ranched smolts into those systems.

The presence of ranched fish can result in interbreeding with wild salmon, which are genetically unique to each system. This has a range of well-known risks to the wild stock as outlined by NASCO, which has advised:

Risks associated with stocking have been well documented and largely result from the relaxation of natural selection and the impacts of domestication leading to maladaptation and reduced individual fitness. In some cases, stocking has been linked to declines in wild population productivity and reduced wild fish individual fitness.

The scientifically accepted view indicates that human interference in the mating selection has the risk of affecting the fitness of the offspring. Both the Erriff and Corrib catchments have sizeable stocks of wild salmon to meet their natural reproductive capacity and do not require supplementation with the hatchery stock. Research advice details that the Corrib wild Atlantic salmon stock was assessed as being above its conservation limit in all years since 2007, as has the Erriff, with the exception of 2025, when it was assessed as marginally below that limit. On the basis of international best practice, as reflected in the NASCO guidelines, salmon ranching was therefore not advised in either catchment to supplement the wild salmon populations. Even for degraded wild populations, stocking of ranched smolts from hatcheries in general is not advised in rivers where the wild stock has the potential to naturally rehabilitate.

A decision was sought from the board of IFI as to the continued production of smolts from 2026 onwards. At its meeting on 30 June, the board, in consideration of all the facts outlined, took the decision to cease production of ranched salmon smolts at Cong hatchery and their release into the Erriff and Corrib catchments. Returning adult ranched salmon shall continue to be removed and recorded for several more years until returns cease for the Erriff and Corrib

catchments. Clearly, this stands as an evidence-based decision on the part of IFI, carrying out due diligence across scientific, environmental and conservation grounds. I trust the Deputy will appreciate the rationale based on those decisions. It is a complex issue which anglers are not entirely happy with. I have to put on record the basis for it.

Deputy John Connolly: I thank the Minister of State for his response. There is an independence to the board of Inland Fisheries Ireland. I recognise that the Minister of State is being prudent in not interfering in its decision-making processes. I do not have the scientific background required to challenge some of the content of the response. Nevertheless, there are a number of things I note. This hatchery has been in place since before 2016, and possibly before that. I am not sure of the foundation date. It is not recently that the Corrib has become a special area of conservation. It has been one for some time. I imagine that consideration was previously given to whether this would have an impact on that SAC and whether the activities of the hatchery would have been a negative in terms of the conservation of the salmon population in Lough Corrib. However, I am not sure about that.

I have been made aware by people who frequent the Corrib that Cong hatchery brood stocks are indigenous Corrib salmon. This suggests that the evidence IFI is putting forward regarding the risk to wild stocks is limited. I am not sure whether it stands up. I am not sure there is interbreeding with different species of wild salmon. The hatchery produces indigenous Corrib salmon. Correspondence from IFI states that the stock levels meet its objectives, but that is not the sentiment among anglers. They have been angling on the Corrib for generations. Stocks are declining. The hatchery was one conservation measure that maintained the stock. It seems this decision was made by IFI without consultation with local anglers. Those anglers take great pride in their pursuit and in the natural facility of the Corrib. They would not do anything to harm the stock of salmon or the natural environment of the Corrib. I ask that IFI engage with local anglers on the issue.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I understand the anglers' perspective, but IFI is charged with the conservation of the Atlantic salmon stock. It is conscious of the protection and preservation of that species in all its forms. There is a concern that once the stock is above the conservation limit, it is not justified. At the time it was there before the conservation limit was under pressure, there was also an exercise in trying to understand the patterns of return. That was a separate project which is no longer relevant from IFI's perspective. Knowing his interest in this area, I will ask IFI officials to meet the Deputy and share with him all the details and data in order that he can understand the reasons behind this.

I recognise that anglers are an important part of the ecosystem relating to our fisheries. In virtually all cases, they are the custodians of the waterways. They act to preserve and protect that resource in a respectful way. I met some of the anglers from the Corrib. I think I was due to meet them this week but due to other events meetings had to be postponed. I am happy to have ongoing dialogue with them. The Deputy fed into the provision in the programme for Government about the protection and preservation of the salmon stocks in the Corrib region. I look forward to ongoing dialogue with him. My office will be in touch in relation to setting up a meeting with IFI.