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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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# DÁIL ÉIREANN

*Dé Céadaoin, 22 Deireadh Fómhair 2025*

*Wednesday, 22 October 2025*

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy) i gceannas ar 9 a.m.

*Paidir agus Machnamh.*

*Prayer and Reflection.*

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9 o'clock

## Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy):** 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 Catherine Ardagh - To discuss the additional investment provided in budget 2026 for children's respite supports.

Deputy Joe Cooney - To discuss a recent court decision regarding the connection by the Ennis Plaza to the Clareabbey wastewater treatment plant, WWTP, system.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss the establishment of a dedicated pilot study on the health service in the Iveragh and Dingle peninsulas.

Deputy Martin Daly - To discuss Portiuncula maternity services in Ballinasloe.

Deputies Barry Heneghan and Cian O'Callaghan - To discuss the lack of autism class places at Stapolin Educate Together National School, Dublin 13.

Deputy Pa Daly - To discuss early intervention classes in Kerry.

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

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss the post of radiographer clinical specialist ultrasound at Louth County Hospital.

Deputy Louis O'Hara - To discuss the ban on turf cutting in Barroughter, Clonmoylan and Ardraigue bogs in County Galway.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness - To discuss policing issues in Waterford.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara - To discuss the need to establish the countryside forum.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - To discuss the increased number of wandering and malnourished horses in urban areas of Limerick.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss the docking of the *MV Matthew* at Marion Point and at Passage West dockyard.

Deputy Shane Moynihan - To discuss the provision of new school buildings in Balgaddy, Lucan, County Dublin.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin - To discuss the closure of the meals on wheels service for Courtown and Gorey.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the impact of delays in the coroner's court.

The matters raised by Deputies Louise O'Reilly, Martin Daly, Ryan O'Meara, Barry Heneghan and Cian O'Callaghan and Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire have been selected for discussion.

## Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

### Coroners Service

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** I thank the Minister of State for being here this morning to take this matter. If he does not mind, I will refer to two separate matters. The first is the story in this morning's newspaper to the effect that delays with funerals are feared as Waterford Hospital is to end coroner-requested autopsies. The article in question refers to a global shortage of pathologists, which means there will be further delays.

I tabled this matter on the basis of my own experience. The matter revolves around the number of leave days available to a person who is bereaved. If we take the civil and public service as having the best bereavement leave entitlement, we find that a person is entitled to five days leave on the loss of a mother or father. I had that experience recently when my mam died. She died on a Wednesday. She was not cremated until the following Wednesday, which, to put it in bald terms, would have put anyone with only five days' bereavement leave in a situation whereby they would have to go back to work. If you take the Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, that is three days. If you take the Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of the following week, that is six days in total. Even if you get one *force majeure* day and you take five, it is quite possible to find yourself in a situation where you do not have enough leave. This is not about me. It only came to my attention because it happened to me. It was something I had not thought about at all. You might not be able to go back to work, but you might be someone who has to do so. If you are lucky - and lucky is the word - you get five days' leave.

This is not a plea for additional leave days, because I do not think that is the solution. Culturally in this country, there is a short time between the death and the cremation or burial. As a result, there will be a particular impact if the delays to which I referred occur. I was thinking about it and talking to members of my family. I could not have gone back to work; it would just not have been possible. I am very lucky, however. I have Marian and Freya in my office. They and all of my colleagues together made sure the work was done. I am very lucky, but there are an awful lot of people who are not.

Imagine you are working as a nurse. I am sure that when you go onto the ward, your colleagues are of course going to be lovely to you, mind you and all of that, but you might not have a choice. You might not have any annual leave left. This is to bring attention to the impact of these possible delays. It is not a plea for more leave, because I do not think that is the issue. There is a cultural expectation. When you talk to people from other places they say "Gosh, it is very fast". Culturally, however, that is how it is done in this State. It really shocked me when I realised that even had I taken one day of *force majeure* leave and five bereavement leave days, I would have had to returned to work the day after my mam's funeral. I physically would not have been able to do so. Had I not had the leave, however, I would have had to return. Coming up to Christmas, people might keep leave because they have to have it for the festive period. In some employments, the boss will tell their employees that they have to keep some leave days to cover that period. Someone may find themselves in a situation where they simply do not have the leave.

I tabled this matter to spark a discussion. I do not expect the Minister of State will have the answers this morning, but I had resolved, when I was able, to raise this issue on the floor of the Dáil. I spoke to a number of people, including the funeral directors. We had that conversation, so I am making good on a commitment that was given.

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Niall Collins):** I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. I had not realised that her mam had passed. She has my condolences and sincere sympathies in that regard. I thank her for sharing her personal experience in the aftermath of the event that is informing our discussion this morning.

I am responding on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan. I hope to be able to provide some clarity on some issues and guidance on where we go from here. The Coroner Service comprises a network of coroners in districts throughout the country. A coroner is an independent officeholder who performs a public service by making inquiries into reported deaths. While recognising the significance and sensitivity of the coronial investigation process for loved ones of the bereaved, neither the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration nor his Department can interfere with a coroner in the exercise of their statutory function to investigate deaths. The Department has direct responsibility for providing financial and administrative support to the Dublin District Coroner's Office since January 2018. Outside Dublin, the relevant local authorities fund the costs of all other coronial districts.

The Minister is aware that the provision of post-mortem examination services nationwide is a significant area of concern at present. As the Deputy noted, pathologists provide the post-mortem examination service on what is known as a grace-and-favour basis. This is resulting in delays for the conduct of such examinations in some parts of the country. Several hospitals in Dublin no longer provide autopsy services to support the work of the Coroner Service.

This is causing undue pressure on the system and can cause delays in the conduct of post-mortem examinations in Dublin.

In late 2024, University Hospital Waterford, UHW, advised the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration that it intends to withdraw its autopsy service for all coroner-directed autopsies from 1 January 2026. It is understood that there are nine sanctioned posts in UHW for pathologists, however only six are filled. The team at UHW has advised the

Department of challenges in filling the remaining three posts. Of the six filled posts, three of the consultants are understood to have decided not to conduct autopsies, meaning that only three consultants are available to conduct in the region of 700 autopsies per year.

A pathologist contract does not currently include an obligation to conduct post-mortem examinations, hence what is known as the grace-and-favour model. The Department is ready to assist in finding a solution to this issue in advance of the 1 January deadline. As the post-mortem examination service is largely provided through the health service, a solution clearly cannot be found without significant input and engagement on the part of the HSE. The Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration will continue to engage with the Department of Health on this issue in order to assist in improving the delivery of this service, which is of critical importance to bereaved families who are engaged with the Coroner Service.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** I thank the Minister of State for the reply and also for the confirmation that the Department is ready to assist. The purpose of raising this issue was to ensure that the impact on families will be taken into account. I can see from the reply that the Minister of State is aware of that, but I urge that the practical impact on individuals be factored into the negotiations. As a former trade union official, I cannot believe I am standing here and saying that I am not looking for additional leave. It is not about that, however, it is about the process. I had a chance to discuss the delays with some people. What I say is purely anecdotal. I posit no scientific evidence for this. Sometimes the delays can cause a bit of uncertainty because if a State case comes in, it could push back the release of a loved one's remains, which can have a knock-on effect. The fact is that people are in limbo. It is very individual in nature. We are never going to settle on the right number of leave days. How long does it take to deal with grief? It takes forever. I speak about the capacity of people to be able to go back to work.

Had I been required to be back in work on the Thursday for monetary reasons - to be brutally frank, in a way we are lucky that we can do a job that we love, but a lot of people work for the money not for the love of it - I do not think I would have been able. There is an inability to not go back to work. The fact is that I went back to work on the Friday but that was my choice. I wanted to do it. I had the luxury of additional time off, which a lot of people do not have. They dread the thought of having to go back into work. I want to put that on the Government's radar so that it is factored into the discussions.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** I assure Deputy O'Reilly that our Department is committed to driving the modernisation of the Coroner Service in Ireland, including Dublin, where she outlined the issues many families are experiencing, including her own. The Department has received approval from the Government to draft the general scheme of a Bill to significantly reform the Coroner Service in order to increase efficiencies and minimise the impact of the death investigation process on bereaved people and their families. The heads of the Bill, which will be brought to the Government before the end of the year, will aim to address all aspects of the Coroner Service, including the establishment of an independent office of the chief coroner, who will be responsible for setting standards, providing guidance and overseeing the activities of full-time salaried coroners modelled in line with best practice internationally.

Other proposals include reform of the current approach to the provision of coroner-directed autopsies to ensure that families across Ireland have equal access to pathology services and do not experience unnecessary delays. The Coroners (Amendment) Act 2024, which was signed

into law in February of last year, makes provision for the assignment and appointment of temporary coroners where workload demands warrant such an assignment. This ensures that there will be adequate coronial provision in all districts pending the reform of the service to which I alluded earlier. I hope that helps.

## Hospital Services

**Deputy Martin Daly:** I acknowledge Deputy O'Reilly's loss and the issue she raised as well.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** I thank Deputy Daly.

**Deputy Martin Daly:** I want to discuss a matter of profound importance for women and families across the west, namely the ongoing failure to fully implement the recommendations of the 2018 Walker report into maternity services at Portiuncula University Hospital. I acknowledge the families who have suffered devastating outcomes. Their experiences must be acknowledged. I also recognise that the midwives, doctors, nurses and other health staff who work in the unit under extraordinary pressure in an organisationally dysfunctional system. This discussion is not about blame, it is about governance, accountability and leadership.

On the floor of the Dáil two weeks ago, the Minister for Health informed me that the Walker report was implemented and that HIQA had reviewed it in 2019. Walker was all about clear governance, modern infrastructure, robust communications and continuous training, yet seven years later many of those recommendations remain unfilled. I spoke to people at the highest level in the HSE and I have also looked to see what HIQA report the Minister referred to. There was a HIQA review in 2019 but it was part of a normal, natural audit of all maternity units in that year. To my knowledge, there has not been a specific HIQA review of the implementation of the Walker report of 2018.

The non-implementation of the Walker report was also confirmed to me at the health committee three weeks ago by the CEO of the HSE, Mr. Bernard Gloster, who said that it was patently clear, given the points I raised with him about the deficiencies in the management of the maternity unit at Portiuncula hospital, that the Walker report had not been implemented. There has been some rowing back from that position, and I am now being told that the Walker report was implemented but was not sustained. I am really confused, as are the people in Ballinasloe, east Galway and Roscommon and in the wider region Portiuncula maternity unit serves. All of the same issues arise again, such as staffing and consultant staffing. We were promised following the Walker report that there would be seven obstetricians but at no given time in the intervening period were there even four obstetricians. There were three full-time obstetricians sharing on-call care. There was one on managed sick leave and one on managed leave over that period.

Issues around infrastructure, having a gynaecological theatre on the labour ward, training such as cardiotocography, CTG, which is basic training, and ongoing training for staff. All of these issues were identified in the Walker report and again identified in 2025 by the Coulter-Smith report. We have to recognise that there are 12 cases under review by Coulter-Smith and that he has reported in seven of those reviews. I will await the outcome of the other five reviews.

Is the clinical leadership that was supposed to implement the Walker report the same one that is going to lead us out of this? There was a policy under Walker of one hospital on two sites. That was discarded in July 2024. No good reason was given as to why that joint governance was discarded. I want to know why it was discarded, particularly as the idea was good. There was no full commitment to it. The associate clinical director was to come from Galway on three days one week and two days another week for six hours on alternate weeks. That never happened because the work was not backfilled in Galway so they could not commit to it. That was not the implementation of the Walker report.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I welcome the opportunity to discuss the delivery of maternity services at Portiuncula University Hospital. There are 12 external reviews related to maternity care at Portiuncula. Seven of these reviews have now been completed. I understand the very natural worry that developments in Portiuncula may be causing for many women and families who attend or who had planned to attend for Portiuncula maternity hospital. I also acknowledge and offer support to those women who may have had devastating outcomes as a result of their care. I am very proud of having rolled out perinatal mental health support across all 19 maternity hospitals over the last six years across. These perinatal mental health supports are very important especially for first-time mothers, mothers who might be who might be nervous, mothers who might have mental health conditions and women who just might have anxiety. It is really important for them to be aware that those supports are there.

In January 2025, a highly experienced external management team was put in place to oversee and manage maternity services in Portiuncula. The team reports directly to the HSE west and north-west regional management and is responsible for managing and supporting all aspects of maternity, gynaecology and neonatal services at Portiuncula. This team will continue to oversee the work and services provided at the hospital. The maternity unit at Portiuncula is being fully supported in this regard.

The safety and quality of our maternity services are priorities. The steps that are being taken to support the unit are to ensure the safety of all women attending maternity services across the region. The HSE has advised that the work to implement recommendations arising from the reviews is in progress through the Portiuncula external management team and the regional women's and children's managed clinical and academic network.

An implementation team has been established to ensure the recommendations arising from all reviews are followed and to progress any changes required over the coming months. There are currently 52 recommendations, arising from the seven reviews completed to date. I take on board what the Deputy said about the 2018 Walker report. Some of them may be implemented but not sustained. He is quite right in saying this is all about governance and accountability. This is not a blame game. This is to support the staff who are supporting women and girls every day of the week to deliver their babies safely.

The implementation team will also oversee the transfer of care for women with higher risk pregnancies from Portiuncula to University Hospital Galway or the hospital of their choice. This is not a new approach. It is in line with the well-established pathways in place for the transfer of care of complex or higher risk pregnancies within the regional maternity network. This approach is being broadened to include women with a wider range of clinical factors

known to contribute to higher risk pregnancies. The HSE has communicated this to the women and families booked at Portiuncula, while GPs have also been advised and may refer women to Portiuncula University Hospital for assessment of the appropriate pathway of care.

These changes mean that women in rural communities who previously attended Portiuncula may now need to travel to Galway, or another unit of their choice for their maternity care. This may result in additional travel demands for expectant mothers and their families. The HSE west and north-west, through the work of the implementation team, is considering additional supports to assist women affected to ensure a seamless transfer of care for women identified as having a higher risk pregnancy.

**Deputy Martin Daly:** I thank the Minister of State for her answer. I will deal quickly with the transfer. On the transfer of high-risk cases, there was already a pre-existing system for women who had underlying medical conditions to be transferred either to Galway or to Dublin. The initial suggestion was that all women with diabetes, gestational diabetes or pre-existing diabetes would be transferred. That is not happening now because there is no capacity in UHG. We are either implementing this policy on the basis of safety or we are applying it on the basis of capacity.

The Minister of State raised the issue about women having to travel to Galway. The women who will be most affected by this are the women with the least resources, the women who cannot travel, the women with the least education. There are pockets of severe deprivation around Ballinasloe and the east Galway and south Roscommon area. We will have these ladies not presenting for antenatal care and presenting late at the delivery unit at Portiuncula because that is the closest place to them. They need accessible high-quality and safe care.

We need the recommendations from the Walker report to be implemented. It is clear to me that all the issues around training, communication and governance were promised but they were incompletely or inconsistently applied. We are in denial here. People have told me that the recommendations from the Walker report were implemented when they patently were not implemented. The people in Ballinasloe deserve the implementation of the recommendations from the Walker report and also the implementation of the recommendations of the Coulter Smith report. What is really important and what we are forgetting here is that even with the movement of maybe 200 high-risk cases to University Hospital Galway, given that the diabetic ladies and ladies who developed diabetes during pregnancy are being maintained in Ballinasloe we need a safe high-quality service in the maternity unit in Ballinasloe.

I implore for this to happen because this is not just about management. There are issues around interprofessional and intra-professional relationships within the department which need to be managed very closely because people have a professional responsibility to collaborate to produce a high-quality service.

**Deputy Mary Butler:** I again thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I acknowledge and appreciate his knowledge of the situation on his doorstep. In some cases they may be patients he has worked with previously. I accept his passion about that. He is absolutely right. We have to prioritise patient safety not only at Portiuncula but across all maternity units in Ireland. The Minister and the Department of Health are continuing to work closely with the external

management team, the HSE clinical leaders and families to ensure that the necessary improvements are delivered and sustained.

Pregnancy in Ireland is predominantly a safe experience with good outcomes. Ireland compares well with similar countries on international safety metrics. While most women experience straightforward pregnancy and delivery, sometimes things go wrong. When they do, the health service must do all it can to establish what happened and support these women, their babies and their families to the greatest extent possible, and try to prevent it from happening again. I hear what the Deputy said about capacity issues at University Hospital Galway. I also hear what he said that asking women, who might be from a deprived area and whose financial situation might not be good, to make an additional journey for the safety of them and their babies, which is understood, can put them at a financial risk. I will certainly raise that with the Minister.

There has been focused investment in the quality and safety pillar of the national maternity strategy but I know the Deputy is speaking specifically about Portiuncula today. I give him a commitment on the floor the Dáil that I will speak to the Minister today about the issues he has raised. It is a difficult time for many women - people need to go through pregnancy to understand that. People need to be reassured that they will get the best care for them and their babies and I know that is what the staff are trying to do. I acknowledge the issues the Deputy has raised here today.

## National Parks and Wildlife Service

**Deputy Ryan O'Meara:** I would like to discuss the need to establish the promised countryside forum for nature. As a Deputy representing a rural constituency, I have a deep understanding of the importance of striking a balance between protecting our countryside and preserving and supporting the economic social and cultural interests and traditions of those who live in, work in and enjoy the countryside. Engaging with, giving voice to and actively listening to rural stakeholders is critical to achieving this balance.

In 2021, a review of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, recommended the creation of a nature advisory committee with a wide stakeholder base. That council was not established. The subsequent strategic action plan for the NPWS which was approved by Cabinet agreed to establish a stakeholder forum with an implementation deadline of September 2022. That deadline was not met. The stakeholder forum was never established. Earlier this year the NPWS agreed a memorandum of understanding with the National Association of Regional Game Councils, NARGC, with an establishment deadline of 30 June this year. That deadline was not met. That countryside forum for nature has not yet been established.

There appears to be a recurring pattern here. Commitments are made but they are not delivered on and deadlines continue to slip. Unfortunately, rural communities and stakeholders bear the consequences. It is those communities, those representative bodies and organisations, those local people I have met time and again that I wish to speak up for here today to make sure that their voices are heard and this commitment is met.

I accept there are specific sectoral forums on issues such as nature restoration and sustainable bird hunting.

However, there is no single overarching forum whereby rural stakeholders - not just game hunters but also farming groups, rural sports groups, conservation groups and environmental NGOs - can sit around the same table with the NPWS to discuss a national policy approach to conserving nature, wildlife and the habitats that make up rural Ireland's countryside, while keeping balance with the rights, traditions and interests of the people who call that countryside their home, workplace and haven. The Government has approved the establishment of this forum, possibly for a third time now. The NPWS has signed a memorandum of understanding with the NARGC committing to its creation. Rural Ireland, including the people I represent in rural Ireland, and these groups are waiting for the forum to become operational. There is no excuse for any further delay at this stage and there is certainly no excuse for missing a third forum to which the Government has committed.

I ask for update on when the first meeting will happen and request that progress be made immediately. In particular, I ask for a date for the first forum meeting.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I am responding on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Browne, and the Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan.

The NPWS is committed to strengthening its engagement with all stakeholders and, accordingly, has established a number of fora through which the Minister of State and his officials meet stakeholders. In addition, there are multiple informal contacts and discussions that happen on a regular basis.

The sustainable hunting of wild birds stakeholder forum was established in 2024 and has met on several occasions. The forum comprises a wide range of stakeholders, including the NARGC. Stakeholders are also involved in various fora relating to the development of the nature restoration plan. The Minister of State values the work carried out by the NARGC, and he and his officials hold meetings with representatives from that organisation on a regular basis. The NPWS also engages regularly with farming representatives in the designated area monitoring committee. While the NPWS had committed to establishing a wider stakeholder forum, officials are unable to progress this at this time due to other priorities, including an inordinately large number of judicial reviews of aspects of planning, nature conservation and its work. NPWS staff participate in multiple interagency and sectoral committees and are active in myriad stakeholder engagements, including with the NARGC.

The Minister of State welcomes the opportunity to confirm to the House the Government's continuing commitment to nature, the countryside, and the broader biodiversity agenda. Members will be aware that, in the context of budget 2026, the combined operating, capital and current allocation for the NPWS exceeded €100 million for the first time in the service's history. This figure is not merely symbolic. It represents a tangible investment in the protection and restoration of our natural heritage and underscores the Government's recognition that biodiversity and a healthy countryside are essential to our national well-being and our economic and social future.

Over the past five years, the Government has supported a range of initiatives to strengthen engagement with citizens and communities on nature and heritage issues. These initiatives include the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss, the young people's assembly on biodiversity loss, a series of annual biodiversity conferences and the annual Heritage Ireland

2030 conference. Right now, we are in the middle of community conversations in relation to the nature restoration law. There is a veritable cascade of committees working with the independent advisory committee in the context of developing our national nature restoration plan. The National Association of Regional Gun Clubs is represented in those key fora. These fora, together with extensive consultation with farming, environmental, community and recreational stakeholders, reflect an unprecedented level of public dialogue and co-operation on the future of Ireland's countryside. One of the many valued participants in that conversation is the NARGC, which, along with a myriad of other community and national organisations, plays an important role in the stewardship of rural landscapes. Its input and that of all such organisations is both recognised and appreciated. The Minister of State wants to be clear that he is committed to ensuring that all stakeholders have the opportunity to engage constructively with the NPWS.

**Deputy Ryan O'Meara:** I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Collins, for taking this matter on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan. I appreciate that this is not directly his departmental area but I must express my concern at the initial response. In 2021, the nature advisory committee was committed to but not established. In 2022, the stakeholder forum was committed to but not established and I am worrying now, based on the reply, that we are seeing a third forum being promised but not being established and another group of organisations in rural Ireland being let down. We still do not have a clear commitment or a date for the establishment of the countryside forum for nature. Rural communities have been waiting for years for a forum where stakeholders, including farmers, rural sports groups, and conservation organisations, can come together to discuss policy on nature, wildlife and habitats in a balanced and constructive way. While progress has been promised on multiple occasions, deadlines have slipped and I am worried that we are about to see more deadlines slipping.

The NPWS has signed a memorandum of understanding and I cannot comprehend how it can do that, commit to a date for a meeting to take place and then turn around, mere months after missing that date, and say that it is too busy to do it. How does the NPWS have the authority to sign something, commit to it and say to representative bodies that it is going to do something, and then turn around and say it is too busy with other things, has too many other commitments and cannot make it happen? A commitment has been made to the NARGC, a very good body that wants to work with the Government and the NPWS and other State agencies for the betterment of rural Ireland in the context of conservation activities. There are other groups that want to be involved too, in the one room, informing policy on a very important area for the people whom I represent. I ask the Minister of State to bring my concern back to the NPWS and the Minister of State and make it very clear to them how disappointed I am, on behalf of these groups, that they are possibly being let down again.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** Since taking office, the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, has been acutely conscious of the extensive engagement that has taken place with the NARGC, particularly in the context of the wild birds forum. At the same time, he must acknowledge that the NPWS operates within finite resources and that its executive and ecological capacity is already under significant pressure. The service faces a challenging and demanding agenda. It is responsible for the drafting and delivery of Ireland's nature restoration plan; the management of over 90 sites in State ownership; compliance and oversight across more than 600 Natura 2000 sites; the processing of over 11,000 permits and licences each year; statutory

consultation on planning and development proposals; international compliance with a range of binding instruments; and 5 million visitors per annum to its sites. All of this represents a substantial and complex workload. Moreover, the upcoming EU Presidency will place additional demands on the same teams and key personnel.

In that context, the Minister of State has asked that a review be undertaken of all existing memoranda of understanding and the commitments arising from them. Specifically with regard to the MoU with the NARGC and in light of the current workload and overlapping responsibilities, he does not now believe it would be feasible to convene the cited forum before 2026 and certainly not before the work of the wild birds forum is concluded as he does not have the resources or the capacity to service two fora that would ostensibly cover the same subject area at the same time. This is not a reflection of any lack of value placed on that engagement. Rather, it is a practical response to the scale of the service's current obligations and the need to ensure that all sectors receive fair and balanced attention. The Minister of State must also be mindful of the legal context in which these interactions occur and of the advice available to his Department in that regard.

## Special Educational Needs

**Deputy Barry Heneghan:** Today, my constituency colleague, Deputy Cian O'Callaghan, and I are speaking on behalf of a school that we both visited with the Minister earlier in the year. I hope the staff and children who are watching this debate in the school today are having a lovely morning. At present, Stapolin Educate Together National School has two autism classes and one developmental language disorder, DLD, class.

Despite this, there are currently multiple children in mainstream classes with eligibility letters for placement in autism classes and waiting lists of around 50 children still seeking places. My colleagues and I across Dublin Bay North are hearing this consistently. I know this is not the Minister of State's responsibility, but I hope he relays this to the other Ministers.

In light of this demand the school is ready and eager to open two additional autism classes. We visited with the Minister of State. He was blown away by the resources and the resourcefulness of the staff and SNAs as they help children develop successfully. I commend Deputy O'Callaghan on the work he has done with the school before I entered this House.

Its autism classes are only in their third year and yet in that short time they have built a great model of excellence. My main asks on behalf of the school are for the Minister to sanction two additional autism classes for the 2026-2027 school year to meet demand and to ensure that with its proven capacity and clear success it is prioritised along with other schools when allocating special classes. I also ask that the Minister renews the SENO guidance and decision-making to ensure recommendations are based on children's assessed needs rather than absence of available places.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** I thank Deputy Heneghan for his contribution. I also want to acknowledge that Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, visited the school - Stapolin Educate Together National School - a few months ago. The Government has said time and again that every child that needs an appropriate school place should have one. Stapolin Educate Together National School has asked to open two additional autism classes. There is huge demand for

places in autism classes and here we have a school that is offering to open two more classes. Suitable space is available on the school site for the modular units required. There is experienced staff in the school who can support the establishment of two additional classes and the school is willing and able to meeting the need in the area.

There is substantial need. There are eight children in the mainstream classes who have been issued eligibility letters for autism class placement. In addition, the school has a waiting list of over 50 children looking for a suitable place. All that is required is approval.

No immediate action is being taken to progress the provision of these two much-needed additional classes. Why not? This is urgent. It requires action and approval and requires them now. Why is the provision of these two much-needed classes being held up? When will approval be granted? Will Minister, Deputy McEntee, meet with the school principal who has requested this?

The National Council for Special Education, NCSE, has told the school that priority is being given to schools that do not yet have any special classes. That is a laudable aim. However, given the level of need there is why can that objective and the provision of additional classes where there is the demand, need and capacity not be provided at the same time? Why not build on the very successful provision of autism classes that are already in the school?

**Deputy Niall Collins:** The Government is committed to the provision of additional special places for children with special educational needs. As the Deputies know, the school referred to by them has three special classes, two dedicated for children with autism and one for children with a developmental language disorder or speech sound disorder.

The school is to be commended on its proactiveness and willingness to open further special classes to supports its community. Indeed, the hard work and dedication to special education was evident when the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, visited the school earlier this year with the Deputies.

Budget 2026 secured funding for 3,000 new specialist places and the NCSE is currently examining where these places are best located for the 2026-2027 school year. In County Dublin, 705 special classes are now in operation providing capacity for over 4,200 students. This includes 103 new special classes for this school year. There are also 42 special schools in Dublin with approximately 2,700 students enrolled. Two of the five new special schools being established for the 2025-2026 school year are located in Lucan and Belmayne.

The NCSE will have a clear picture of local demand for specialist places for the 2026-2027 school year after it reviews and assesses all of the information which has been provided through the parents notification process which closed on 1 October.

The NCSE is also engaging directly with schools' boards of management in relation to the opening of new special classes. This engagement and earlier scrutiny of information means that the NCSE is on track to sanction the majority of new classes for the 2026-2027 school year by 31 December this year, four months earlier than in previous years.

In addition, in order to ensure new special classes can open as quickly as possible, the NCSE will continue to prioritise working with medium and larger primary schools that do not already have a special class and have available accommodation to accommodate a new special class.

This approach maximises the use of existing space which can be reconfigured efficiently while ensuring that new provision continues to be established. It also increases the number of schools with special classes providing parents with greater choice and reducing the distances that some children are travelling to access a specialist placement. However, as in other years where schools have no available accommodation, particularly at post-primary level, and there is known demand in a local area, the Department will continue to provide additional classroom accommodation to provide necessary places.

This earlier commitment to the sanctioning of special classes combined with the rollout of the common application system pilot are some of the ways this Government is committed to ensuring the burden on parents is alleviated when seeking a specialist placement particularly in high areas of demand such as in Dublin 13.

I assure the Deputies that the Department and the NCSE are committed to ensuring that sufficient special education placements remain available for all children with special educational needs.

**Deputy Barry Heneghan:** Tá sé deas é sin a chloisteáil ach, lena bheith ionraic, we have to really look at what the NCSE says it is doing. It says that it wishes to expand provision to schools that do not yet have special classes.

I commend Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, for engaging with me on this matter. I know he has a huge body of work but the fact is he is getting through it and did visit four schools in Dublin Bay North. We were lucky to get the Minister of State out and he has responded to a lot of my emails to help them. As I said, when he was there, he was blown away by what the staff were doing to cope with funding.

Both goals can be pursed together. We have a situation where children with eligibility letters are sitting in mainstream classes. The programme for Government says that we want every single child to not only survive but to thrive. We need these key asks to be put in together.

**Deputy Cian O'Callaghan:** I want to read from correspondence from the school principal. She says:

> Our autism classes are now in their third year, and in that short time, we've gained extensive experience in setting them up and supporting our pupils to thrive. The success of our model has been widely recognised with teachers and SNAs from other schools regularly visiting us to observe and learn from our approach. We have developed a reputation as a well-run and highly effective setting, something we are deeply proud of.

We should all be proud of that. That is such a good model to build on. When there is school with that success that is willing to provide the additional classes that are needed, it makes no sense not to grasp that opportunity. The Minister of State said that the school should be commended. It does need a commendation. It needs the Government to act on this. This is an area with a huge amount of new residential accommodation built over the past number of years. There is also a huge number of families with young children. It is a thriving area with a massive need. We need the Minister to act on this now. Will the Minister of State ask the Minister, Deputy McEntee, to meet with the school principal? Will he pass that request on?

**Deputy Niall Collins:** I thank the Deputies for raising this question and giving me an opportunity to reassure the House that the Department of Education and Youth and the NCSE are committed to ensuring that all children can access an education suitable to their needs. The Department of Education and Youth is committed to engaging intensely with the NCSE in relation to forward planning for new special provision to ensure every child has a place in an educational setting best fitting their educational need. It is important to remember that as we do this, our focus remains in keeping with policy on an inclusive education which promotes that children will be supported to receive an education in the most inclusive setting possible.

It is important to remember that, as we do this, our focus remains in keeping with policy on an inclusive education that promotes that children will be supported to receive an education in the most inclusive setting possible. Of course, where demand is identified for special education classes, this will be sanctioned by the NCSE and established in schools within local areas. I accept that it may not always be possible to sanction these classes in preferred schools. It is important that classes be distributed fairly across schools in areas. This ensures inclusion practices continue in as many schools as possible and ensures our provision continues to expand evenly across diverse schools.

The NCSE continues to examine the information gathered through the parents' notifying system and match this demand to appropriate schools in local areas. It is envisioned that the location of the majority of special classes will be sanctioned by December of this year, four months earlier than in previous years. Parents will therefore be able to apply for specialist places much earlier than in previous years. I am aware that the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, continue to meet NCSE and senior Department of Education and Youth officials weekly to discuss the progress being made in providing further special classes for the next school year, 2026 to 2027.

## Revenue Commissioners

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** The Minister of State will be aware that, in October 2023, the *MV Matthew* was intercepted and seized. There was €157 million worth of cocaine on board. It was an extraordinary Garda operation and great credit is due to all the gardaí and others involved. However, the people of Passage West have had to put up with the very large vessel ever since. It is about 200 m in length and has been docked in Cork Harbour since its seizure.

Local councillor Eoghan Fahy and I have raised this with the Government and also the Revenue Commissioners. We were informed initially that the vessel was required for evidence, that it was seized under the provisions of the Customs Act 2015 and that it remained under the care and management of the Revenue Commissioners. When the court proceedings concluded, eight men were convicted. Subsequently, in September 2024, which is 11 months ago at this stage, it was advised that the vessel could be removed. Unfortunately, it is still there.

This is a massive boat. It is 200 m long. It regularly has to be towed from one side of the harbour to the other. Three or four times per month, it must be brought from Marino Point across to the docks at Passage West, which is a residential town. This has created significant issues with noise, particularly in the Church Hill area of Passage West. There have been issues with smells that come and go. The boat is towed back and forth regularly, with significant

implications for the people of Passage West in terms of noise, nuisance and so on. This has been dragging on for some time. The people of Passage West have been quite patient.

The other element of this is the cost involved. It has cost some €10 million to date. Every time the vessel has to be towed back and forth across the harbour, it represents an additional cost in terms of crew, equipment and so on. The costs are adding up and the people on the ground in Passage West are asking me and Councillor Fahy when the ship will be moved on. The court case ended almost a year ago but the boat is still towering over the town, with all the noise implications and so on. When will we see it removed? What steps have been taken to date to see it removed, and what are the outstanding obstacles? People have been patient enough and understood there was a court case going on. That case has now concluded and the vessel needs to be removed. The people of Passage West need to be in a position to get on with life and get past this.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** I thank the Deputy. I am advised by the Revenue Commissioners that, following the *MV Matthew* seizure and forfeiture, immediate steps were taken to prepare for its disposal. In November 2023, initial consultations commenced with a shipping broker with a view to marketing the vessel for sale. In December 2023, the Revenue Commissioners were advised by the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions that disposal could not proceed as the vessel was required for evidence in the associated criminal trial. On 2 November 2024, the Special Criminal Court authorised the release of the *MV Matthew* and a shipping broker was then formally engaged by the Revenue Commissioners to market the vessel. The bidding process concluded in quarter 1 of 2025, when a preferred bidder was identified. The Revenue Commissioners continue to engage with the preferred bidder's representative. There are significant regulatory and legal obligations that must be fulfilled in order to finalise the disposal of the *MV Matthew* and facilitate its removal from Cork Harbour.

Since March 2025, the Revenue Commissioners have been actively engaging with the vessel's flag state, Panama, to ensure these regulatory requirements are satisfied. However, the manner in which regulatory processes were conducted by the previous owner has created certain difficulties and delays in Revenue's being in a position to make progress on the disposal. Following engagement between the Revenue Commissioners, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and Panamanian officials, progress has been made in addressing some of these difficulties, including the registration of Revenue's ownership of the vessel with the flag state, which was necessary to facilitate Revenue's disposal of the vessel. Accordingly, it is anticipated that progress can now be made on the disposal process. However, as matters stand, there remain certain regulatory and port State control matters to be addressed. The Revenue Commissioners are engaging with the relevant State agencies to progress these matters. As such, it is not possible to give the Deputy a firm timeline for the disposal and departure of the vessel at this point. However, the Revenue Commissioners are considering all options, including the recycling of the vessel, so that the disposal and removal can proceed in the most expedient manner.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** People will be frustrated by that response. People have been patient enough already about this. As I read it, we have a preferred bidder who remains interested and who is continuing to engage with the Revenue Commissioners. The issue with flagging has been resolved. Significant progress has been made in that regard.

The Minister of State said certain regulatory and port state control matters had to be addressed. That could mean anything. We are no clearer about the actual obstacles and precisely how they will be overcome. While it is not possible to give a firm timeline, even a general sense of one would help. People in Passage West, Monkstown and the surrounding areas, and indeed Cobh and Rushbrooke, which are on the far side of the harbour, are worried that this could drag on and on.

We do not really have any sense of when this will be concluded, and that is not good enough at all. I appreciate that it might not be possible to give a calendar date. Could we have a vague sense of whether this will be dealt with in the next couple of months, in the next year or even later? The vessel is a significant nuisance. Every time it must be towed, which is three or four times per month, there are various implications, including noise.

The cost has to be considered too. Revenue has stated this is in excess of €10 million. The vast bulk of this, amounting to €8 million to €9 million, is associated with crewing and maintenance. Every day of every week the vessel sits in Passage West Harbour waiting to be disposed of costs the State a significant amount of money – money that could be better spent on other things. People in Passage West are probably thinking about whether it could be spent on housing or health services. Progress needs to be made. There is a cost to the State and a significant nuisance. A firm timeline or specific calendar date is one thing but it is frustrating to see no timeline at all has been given. Could the Minster of State give me greater insight, either here or in writing, into the specific regulatory issues outstanding? Could we be given any sense of a timeline? It is not good enough to have none.

**Deputy Niall Collins:** I cannot give the Deputy any sense of the timeline. There is no better organisation within the public service than the Revenue Commissioners in terms of efficiency and the expediency of the work done. I believe the Deputy would agree with that.

It its fairly clearly implied in much of the information the Revenue Commissioners have supplied to me that there are circumstances outside our control. The Irish Revenue Commissioners cannot direct the Panamanian authorities to move any quicker or at the pace desired.

10 o'clock

The questions Deputy Ó Laoghaire raises are fair. Both he and I have a channel available to us where we can communicate with the Revenue Commissioners. A straightforward question directly from the Deputy to the chairman of the Revenue Commissioners would probably elicit a reply. I would be interested in it myself. I take onboard the concern the Deputy raises on behalf of his constituency and the communities impacted by this. It is going on a while. However, I would not like the message to go out that Revenue is dragging its heels in relation to this because it is an extremely efficient organisation, as many people know.

## Office of the President: Motion [Private Members]

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy):** The next item on our agenda is a Private Members' motion on the Office of the President from the Independent Technical Group. Before I call on Deputy Tóibín, I refer to a ruling made by the Ceann Comhairle on 7

October, to be aware that the President is beyond political debate as are the candidates running in the upcoming election. Both sides must respect that we do not delve into the current election or the President himself.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

recognises that:

— there is a need to reform the presidential election nomination and voting process, to ensure all Irish citizens living north and south are entitled to vote for the President of Ireland; and

— future healthy robust campaigns should facilitate a competition of values and ideas, and a diverse range of candidates who will provide democratic choice for citizens;

notes that:

— currently Irish citizens who live in the North of Ireland can stand in a presidential election, campaign in a presidential election, win a presidential election, be the President of Ireland, but cannot vote in a presidential election;

— Irish citizens in the North of Ireland, are recognised by the Good Friday Agreement, hold Irish passports, live in Ireland, but cannot vote in an Irish presidential election;

— affording Irish citizens in the North of Ireland the right to vote in presidential elections does not remove one right from our unionist brothers and sisters;

— 700,000 Irish citizens in the North of Ireland are disenfranchised in presidential elections;

— 73 per cent of the participants of the "Fifth Report of the Convention on the Constitution - Amending the Constitution to give citizens resident outside the State the right to vote in Presidential elections at Irish embassies, or otherwise", voted in favour of giving Irish citizens in the North of Ireland the right to vote;

— opinion poll research has suggested that 49 per cent of voters do not feel represented by the current presidential election system, and 55 per cent of voters believe that the Constitution should be changed to make the nomination process easier;

— there is a lack of transparency around the Office of the President and Áras an Uachtarán, and these institutions do not have the same level of transparency which applies to Government Departments and State agencies; and

— the Constitution and the law set out the nomination process by Oireachtas members, County Councils, and the nomination by an incumbent, and these rules make it difficult for a prospective candidate to get onto the ballot paper; and

calls on the Government to:

— commit, within a period of two years, to enacting Aontú's Forty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Voting Rights in Presidential Elections) Bill 2025 or similar, in order to grant voting rights to Irish citizens living in the North of Ireland during presidential elections;

— repeal Section 42(h) of the Freedom of Information Act 2014, which exempts the President from the mechanisms of this Act;

— introduce, within the next six months, legislation which would mandate the publication of an annual report by Áras an Uachtarán, which would detail all costs associated with the entertainment of foreign guests and dignitaries hosted by the President, all costs associated with foreign travel by the President, costs associated with the running of Áras an Uachtarán, including decoration, repairs, and refurbishment costs; and

— amend the law to allow 14 Oireachtas members or more, 110 county and city councillors or more, or three county or city councils, or an incumbent to nominate a presidential candidate.

I am delighted to be able to table Aontú's second Private Members' motion in this House. This is a significant motion. It is one of the biggest reforms of the presidential election and Áras an Uachtarán in the history of the State. It tackles three areas of real importance.

First, this motion tackles the shocking democratic deficit in the presidential election that we are all witnessing at the moment. So many people are angry at the presidential election farce that is unfolding, and frustrated at being locked out of the presidential election campaign. If implemented, this reform would open up the presidential election nomination process to ensure that a larger number of candidates, more representative of the people, would be able to participate in an election campaign. It would allow for the democratic competition of ideas, where the best ideas would percolate to the top.

In most elections, the people pick the representative but it is not the case in a presidential election. In council, Dáil or European Parliament elections, people can enter their name on the ballot if they reach a certain criteria in relation to how to get onto it. However, that is not the case here. The presidential election has an extremely high threshold. A threshold which is basically giving the power to the Oireachtas and councils to decide who even gets on the ballot. We in Aontú have a very simple proposal. Let the people pick the President. Let the people decide who should be elected President, rather than the political establishment.

If we look at the current system, it was built in 1937, at a time when there were two and a half political parties in the State. We are now in a very different situation. We now have a multi-party, diverse political system where those two legacy political parties are now small minority parties. When I say two legacy parties, I should really say one legacy party - the Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael party - still has major control over the development of the presidential election. That is really unfair.

Not only do we have a very strict legal threshold but in this election we have also seen a very strict political approach. In previous elections, the political parties were very liberal in the ability given to their councillors to nominate individuals for the presidential election. In this case, we had one of those parties imposing a diktat, a whip on their councillors, and another of those parties intimating that thou shalt not select anybody else in this particular election. That is a major difficulty.

That has significantly reduced the routes to nomination for this presidential election and has caused major problems. The result is quite shocking. If we look at opinion polls, 49% of voters say they do not feel they are represented by the current presidential election candidates. Some 55% of voters believe that the Constitution should be changed to make the nomination process

easier. The resultant election campaign has been a curated election campaign, and half the population is locked out of it.

The polls show that many people are not likely to vote and that a significant number of people will spoil their vote. One of the polls shows that Maria Steen would have achieved 22% of the vote in the election, and yet she has not been allowed on the ballot. That should be a wake-up call for the political establishment.

The political establishment should be shocked that people are disengaging from the political process to such a level. However, it is not a shock and the political establishment has said little or nothing about the disaffection of people from the political process. It may be in the interest of the political establishment that the electorate is disengaged from this particular election. After the election, we will have people who will decry that it was shocking that such a low level of voters turned out and that there was such a low level of engagement in the political process but, in reality, the political establishment has engineered a low engagement and low turnout in that particular election.

In the political establishment, many people decry the polarisation of the political system in this country. However, the only way to tackle the polarisation of the political system is to show that the parliamentary political system works and to show that it works, we need to convince people that their voices will be heard loud and clear here, that their vote matters and that they have a choice. We need to convince people that they are at the table of the representative democracy that is meant to exist here. However, that is not the message that has been sent out over the past while in terms of this election.

The reality is every single party, bar Aontú, is happy enough for the system to carry on regardless, for them to plough on regardless, and that they get the results they want. That shows the bubble that exists in Leinster House and that the anger and frustration that exists outside of Leinster House is currently only being articulated by Aontú.

Our motion looks for common-sense changes to the political system. We look for a referendum to be held within three years to amend the Constitution to reduce the Oireachtas threshold to 14 members, to reduce the council threshold from four councils to three and to create another pathway to nomination, which would allow for 110 councillors across the country to sign a nomination paper. There would be four pathways to nomination because, obviously, the incumbent President is also allowed to nominate in an election situation. That would make a real difference and allow for a larger ballot. It would allow for a real choice, and a functioning democracy.

I note that People Before Profit has put forward an amendment that seeks a fifth way for people to get on the ballot and that is with 35,000 signatories. I have no problem with the idea of 35,000 signatories selecting or nominating but the only problem I have with it in practical terms is how could we confirm each one of those nominations to be real if it is not done in person, and that would be seriously difficult?

The other significant reform Aontú is looking for in this particular motion is, in many ways, a revolutionary step. We are looking to give the right to vote to Irish citizens North and South. We are looking for equality between Irish citizens North and South. Incredibly, Irish citizens in the North can stand for President and campaign in a presidential election. They can win the presidential election and be this President of this country, but they cannot vote in the

presidential election. That is an incredible disparity in any democracy that functions in the world. A person in the North of Ireland is an Irish citizen and an Irish passport holder. He or she is recognised as such by the Good Friday Agreement, but is still not allowed to vote in a presidential election. In effect, that means we have a two-tier citizenship in relation to this country and it is undemocratic. It is against the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement.

Imagine for a second the absolute joy that would exist in the hearts of Irish citizens in the North of Ireland if they could cast a vote in an all-Ireland election for the first time since 1918. That would be a significant step forward for most people in the North of Ireland and indeed for the Irish nation as a whole. That gift is not in Westminster. It is not decided by Stormont. It is decided by this House and then by a referendum of the Irish people. Why are we withholding that opportunity?

Some people might say they have heard the Government say things are very serious in the North of Ireland and we do not want to rock the boat and we have to be careful. Míchéal Martin can think of 100 excuses why we should not take any steps towards Irish unity. He even says we need the unity of the Irish people before we have the unity of the territory.

Does anybody think that the unity of the Irish people is more likely in the United Kingdom than in a united Ireland? Why is it that sectarianism is rife in the North but not in the South? Is it because sectarianism is part of the UK and part of the partition of this country? The reality is that if we want to move beyond sectarianism and unite the people, we must first unite the territory. We need to ensure we make this decision. It is not a zero-sum decision. We are not taking any rights from our unionist brothers and sisters in enabling a vote for Irish citizens in the North of Ireland. There are currently 700,000 Irish people in the North with Irish citizenship. They are being blocked by this Government.

There is often a difference between talk and action in this place. Every political party has said openly that it supports the Aontú proposal to give citizens in the North of Ireland the right to vote. Opinion polls show that a majority of people on the island of Ireland seek this measure. We have launched a Bill, which has passed First Stage, to achieve this particular objective. A motion was passed in Stormont recently. A majority of MLAs put forward the same proposal, that is, that people in the North of Ireland would have the right to vote. That is significant. It is not unusual internationally. Countries allow votes in presidential elections to citizens outside the existing jurisdiction of control. This measure would bring this country into alignment with many other western democracies. I believe it is beyond time for that to happen.

People ask me why it is not happening. I do not mean any disrespect to the Minister because he probably has sympathy for this proposal. There is, however, an instinct in Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael that if there is an all-Ireland presidential election, they will not be able to win it because we would be introducing 700,000 new voters, many of whom might vote for all-Ireland parties. The first thing to say is that it is wrong to prevent democracy because you do not like the potential result. The second thing I will say is that we should fix that situation. Fianna Fáil at one stage did stand in an election in the North of Ireland and had a cumann in Queen's University Belfast. I say to it: become an all-Ireland party and build across the island. Unity should begin at home and in the functioning of a political party. That is important.

This motion seeks to achieve another important objective, namely, transparency. Incredibly, the Office of the President is one of the few public offices in this country that is not subject to

the Freedom of Information Act. In fact, section 42(h) specifically exempts Áras an Uachtaráin from the provisions of the Act. The Aontú motion seeks to repeal that provision and open the office to the same level of transparency and scrutiny as the Minister is under. Why should he have more transparency enforced on his actions than on the Office of the President? Incredibly, any citizen of this country can request, under the freedom of information provisions, copies of the Minister's briefing notes and emails, and inspect his work, but is insulated from requesting them from the Office of the President. Our motion would ensure that would be introduced in legislation within 16 months. It would also mandate the publication of the annual report of Áras an Uachtaráin and give all the detailed costs in relation to the entertainment of foreign guests and dignitaries hosted by the President, all the costs associated with foreign travel by the President and all the costs associated with the running of Áras an Uachtaráin, including decoration, repairs, refurbishment and costs. This is a basic request and it is incredible that it is not in place already.

What we have before us is important. There will be hullabaloo because one of the most undemocratic elections in the history of State is happening at the moment. There will be a lot of talk today about giving citizens in the North the right to vote in this election. There will be talk on the issue of transparency. My worry, and this is important, is that if we do not act now, in four, five or six months' time, this interest in taking action will disappear. Nothing will be done for six or seven years and we will be up against the next presidential election in exactly the same space, with no change achieved. That would be wrong. That happens in the political system in this country. It often closely follows the media cycle. When people ask me who is the most powerful Minister in the country, I say it is Joe Duffy because if it is not a crisis in the media, it is not a crisis in here. Ministers do not seem to be interested in something unless it is consuming the media cycle. Let us make sure that we act now on this reform. It offers a solution to the democratic deficit that exists in the presidential election. It democratises the system and gives citizens an opportunity to stand in the presidential election. It gives elected representatives more power in the selection of candidates. It stops the blockage of candidates by political parties that, for their narrow self-interest, want to keep other candidates out of the system. It revolutionises the situation in this country and allows citizens, North and South, to vote. It does not go as far as Irish unity, but takes a step towards it without costing anything to our unionist brothers. It would be a major step forward in all-Ireland democracy. It would be celebrated for generations. It would be a fine legacy for the Minister's party and Fine Gael. It opens up to transparency the Office of the President. It would shine the light of transparency into all aspects of our government. I urge the Government to support the Aontú motion.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** We in Independent Ireland welcome this motion. This is the kind of genuine, sensible proposal that speaks to ordinary Irish people, North and South. It is a motion about fairness, inclusion and democracy, which have been missing to date from too much of the operation of our political system. The presidential election has brought that into sharp focus in recent weeks.

Independent Ireland supports the motion. We believe it is long past time that all Irish citizens on this island, whether they live in Bantry or Belfast, had the right to vote for the President of Ireland. It is ridiculous that someone born and living in the North of Ireland, an Irish citizen with an Irish passport recognised under the Good Friday Agreement, can run for President, be elected as President and be the President, but cannot vote for the President. That

is madness, plain and simple. If we are serious about inclusion and recognising all Irish citizens, this wrong has to be put right. Giving people in the North the vote does not take a single thing away from anyone else. It just means that 700,000 Irish citizens living in the North, who are part of this country, finally get to take part in choosing their head of State. That is what equality looks like in practice. It is not just about the North. It is about the health of our democracy across the board.

Independent Ireland has been clear that we need a system that gets people involved, values their vote and makes it easier for good, genuine candidates to put themselves forward. We do not want a system that is locked up by the big parties or controlled by old-style political gatekeepers. The current presidential nomination process is a shambles. We saw that again recently. Only three people got through in a country of 5 million. I know people who worked their socks off to gather support and do everything right only to be blocked by a rigid system that suits the establishment. Good people, such as Maria Steen and others, put their names forward but were told, "No, thanks", before the public ever had a say. That is not democracy. That is a stitch-up.

Independent Ireland has already called for big changes to that process. We have a Bill to do that with the Bills Office, as we said we would following the recent nomination process. We want a fairer, wider system that allows Oireachtas Members, MEPs and councillors to have a role in nominating. We proposed that a number of councillors could back a candidate that would open the door to genuine competition and give the people real choice.

Another thing that must change is the age requirement. You have to be 35 to run for President. Why? If a person is old enough to vote at 18, can serve in the Defence Forces, pay taxes and contribute to society, he or she should be old enough to stand for office. As I have said previously, the age requirement should be brought down to 21 years. We need to get young people back into politics and make them feel that their voices matter and they can help to shape this country's future. Are they too young at a certain age? Let the people decide. The truth is that too many people have switched off. I fear we are, sadly, going to see one of the lowest turnouts ever in a national election this Friday.

The motion also touches on something that does not get talked about enough, which is the need for greater transparency around the Office of the President and Áras an Uachtaráin. The President does an important job.

We all respect the office. However, that does not mean it should be above scrutiny. Every other public body has to account for its spending and make public reports. Áras an Uachtaráin should be no different. Repealing the section of the Freedom of Information Act that exempts the President is the right move. The public should know what the costs are for travel, for hosting dignitaries and for refurbishments. There is nothing wrong with that. It is just good governance. When people see that their money is being used wisely it builds trust.

This motion is about fairness, transparency and the basic democratic right of our citizens. It is about saying that everyone on the island should have a choice in choosing our President. It is about breaking the grip of the old political system that keeps new candidates and fresh ideas out. It is about holding every single one of our institutions to the same standards of openness and accountability. Independent Ireland fully supports the spirit of this motion. We will work with anyone who is serious about reforming our democracy and giving power back

to the people. We have been talking about these issues for years. It is now time for action. Let us see legislation brought forward within the two-year period proposed. Let us make it easier to run for President. Let us open up Áras an Uachtaráin to public scrutiny and, finally, give all Irish citizens, North and South, the right to vote for their President. That is what real democracy looks like. That is what an Ireland that respects all its people looks like.

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne):** I thank the Deputies for raising these important matters. I welcome the opportunity to update the House on behalf of the Government. The Government is not opposing this motion. However, I would like to make a number of points in respect of each of the proposals raised in the motion, which might warrant further consideration by the House.

In relation to voting rights, it should be noted that to extend the franchise at presidential elections to our citizens resident in Northern Ireland would require the holding of a referendum to amend the Constitution. In this regard, I am going to propose as set out in the Forty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Voting Rights in Presidential Elections) Bill 2025, which was published by Aontú on 17 June last. In the event that any such referendum on extending voting rights at presidential elections was held and approved by the people, it would then fall to me, as the Minister responsible for electoral legislation, to bring forward appropriate amendments to our electoral laws to give practical effect to the constitutional change. Such legislation would need to include provisions covering issues such as registration of voters from Northern Ireland, the method of voting, for example, postal voting or otherwise, and a constituency where voters would vote, for example, a separate or reserved constituency for the purposes of collating and counting the votes from Northern Ireland. These are all important practical considerations.

By way of some background, the Fifth Report of the Convention on the Constitution, published in November 2013, recommended that citizens resident outside the State should have the right to vote in presidential elections. While 73% of the members of the Convention on the Constitution voted in favour of extending the right to vote in presidential elections to our citizens in Northern Ireland, at a separate vote a total of 78% supported the right for our citizens resident outside the State, irrespective of particular jurisdiction, to vote in presidential elections. I note that the Private Members' Bill does not propose to address the latter.

In response to the evolving needs of our society and its relationship with the wider Irish diaspora, in March 2017, the Government at the time agreed to accept, in principle, the main recommendation in the Fifth Report on the Convention on the Constitution that Irish citizens resident outside the State, including citizens resident in Northern Ireland, should have the right to vote at a presidential election and that a referendum would be held to seek to amend the Constitution to give effect to this. Over several years, my Department and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade worked closely on this issue and on 16 September 2019, the Thirty-ninth Amendment of the Constitution (Presidential Elections) Bill 2019 was initiated in Dáil Éireann by the then Minister for Foreign Affairs to facilitate the holding of a referendum on this important issue. However, as Members will recall, with the advent of Covid-19 and the ensuing restrictions that arose in response to the pandemic, the Bill lapsed with the dissolution of the Thirty-second Dáil on 14 January 2020. Notwithstanding the lapsed Bill, I am aware that on 24 June 2025, a Private Members' motion was tabled in Dáil Éireann calling for the extension of the franchise in presidential elections to those living in Northern Ireland. The Government did not oppose the motion and during that debate, the Minister of State with

responsibility for international development and the diaspora confirmed that the Government was reflecting on this important matter.

In relation to freedom of information, as Deputies are aware, section 42(h) of the Freedom of Information Act 2014 provides an exclusion of the Presidency from freedom of information. The Office of the President is subject to a separate and discrete Vote of its own. The Vote of the President, which covers all expenditure of the Office of the President, in agreement with the Oireachtas, is subject to audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General and its expenditure is subject to examination by the Committee of Public Accounts. Therefore, the perceived gains of subjecting the Office of the President to the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act may not outweigh the potential risk of injuring the independence or apoliticality of the Presidency.

I should emphasise that the annual accounting financial reporting arrangements for the Office of the President are managed in the same way as the expenditure arrangements for other public services Votes. As is the case with all Government Departments and many other public service offices and agencies, each year, in the course of the Estimates process, the Office of the President engages with the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation to establish its budget for the forthcoming year. The detail of these allocations is made publicly available when the Estimates are published at budget time. In addition, the Oireachtas Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, and Taoiseach scrutinises the allocation to the President's establishment Vote as part of its consideration of the annual Estimates. The management of the day-to-day expenditure over the year under the various subheads in the Vote falls to the personnel in the Office of the President who are subject to public financial procedures and audit controls in the same way as everybody else. Expenditure on the President's Vote is audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General and it is reported annually to the Committee of Public Accounts for examination in the usual way.

I also note for the House that the management, upkeep and maintenance of State properties and expenditure in that regard are a matter for the Office of Public Works, which, I am sure Deputies will agree, does a fine job with so many of our historic buildings around the country. The annual accounting financial reporting arrangements for the OPW are the same as for other Votes. In short, there is nothing to suggest that there is a particular value added in any other arrangements being applied uniquely to the Office of the President in respect of financial accounting and reporting.

In relation to the candidate nomination process, similar to the position with regard to the extension of voting rights at presidential elections, proposals to amend the candidate nomination process for election to the Office of the President would require an amendment to Article 12.4.2 of the Constitution. If such a referendum was successful, it would be necessary for me, as the Minister responsible for electoral legislation, to bring forward appropriate amendments to the Presidential Election Act 1993, as amended, to give practical effect to the constitutional change. In this regard, it is important to note that we now have an independent statutory Electoral Commission, An Coimisiún Toghcháin. Ireland's independent Electoral Commission was established in February 2023. An coimisiún's research, advisory and public information function enables it to carry out research on electoral policy and procedure. It is also empowered to advise and make recommendations to the Minister and the Government in

relation to any proposals for legislative change or any other policy matters concerning electoral and legislative proposals.

I thank the Deputies for raising these important issues and for providing me with an opportunity to inform and contribute to this debate.

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** The motion is rooted in three simple, democratic principles, namely, that every Irish citizen should have the right to vote for the President, that the Office of the President should be transparent and accountable and the process for standing for election should be fair and open to all citizens, not just the politically connected, and that voting rights for Irish citizens should be extended to the North of Ireland. Close to 2 million people live in the North of Ireland. Thousands of them are proud Irish citizens by birth, by heritage and by right under the Good Friday Agreement. They carry Irish passports, pay Irish taxes and send their children to Irish universities. They are part of the nation in every possible way. However, when it comes to electing the President of Ireland they are excluded from that right.

The President should represent the Irish nation as a whole. Our Constitution speaks of the nation and of the people. The Good Friday Agreement and the constitutional changes that followed it made this all the more clear. That agreement recognises the birthright of the people in the North of Ireland to identify themselves and to be accepted as Irish or British or both. It affirms their right to Irish citizenship, a right recognised in both Irish and international law. That means that every person born on this island, North or South, is part of the Irish nation if he or she so chooses. Yet, our electoral laws deny those living in the North of Ireland the right to vote. This goes directly against the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement and the Constitution.

You cannot recognise a person as Irish in law but deny them the most basic democratic right of citizenship, namely the right to vote for their President. In 2013, the constitutional convention, a citizens' assembly made up of ordinary people and elected representatives, examined this very issue. After detailed discussions and public consultation, it voted overwhelmingly to extend presidential voting rights to Irish citizens living in the North of Ireland. That convention was made up of 66 randomly chosen individuals and 33 politicians from across parties and from the North, and was chaired independently by Tom Arnold. It represented the Irish public in the most genuine sense. Its recommendation was clear and democratic, and, yet, more than a decade later, no action has followed. In 2019, the Government again promised a referendum on this issue and again it was quietly shelved. We hear daily about a shared island, but we cannot credibly talk about sharing if we deny the most basic democratic right. Successive Governments have refused to act in the way long promised in respect of this reform.

The office of President rightly commands deep respect. It symbolises service, dignity and unity but respect for institutions cannot mean a blank cheque. It must rest on trust, and trust comes through transparency. Right now, the financial operations of the Áras are not fully subject to independent audit or publication. The Comptroller and Auditor General does not have complete oversight of the President's spending and budget. Spending reports are not made public in the same way as those for the various State agencies. This lack of transparency serves no one, least of all the President. When every local authority, hospital, school and public body has to account for its expenditure, it is simply wrong that one of the most publicly funded

institutions in the State is exempt. Families across Ireland are being asked to stretch every euro. Public trust in Government spending is already fragile. The best way to protect the dignity of the Presidency is not through secrecy but through openness. Aontú's proposal is straightforward, namely publish the annual financial accounts relating to the President's spending in full.

On the nomination process, in this election, people have felt starved of choice.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I support the motion. The Minister spoke about the Act. The Act should be something the Government reflects on when it comes to presidential election campaigns. This motion is about having people on the island of Ireland be allowed to vote in presidential elections. I am old school. For me, there are 32 counties in Ireland, not 26. I will never change from that. Out of respect for everyone in this country, I will say that it is the island of Ireland.

In the farcical run-up to this presidential election, parties in this Dáil stopped candidates and gave direction to their members and councillors to block candidates running for the office of President of Ireland. Fianna Fáil did not even allow one of its own members to be nominated to go before its convention to run. Instead, it picked someone from outside the grassroots of the party. Fine Gael gave a direction to its councillors to block anyone who wanted to run. This sounds like a dictatorship. Now, we are going to have the lowest turnout ever in the history of the State for a presidential election. Anyone looking in here from the outside, people from all parties and none, are saying to me, that after all the years they have been doing so, they are not even going to vote. I could not believe it. People who used to carry me to vote are telling me they are not even going to go out to vote.

What have Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael done to the loyal members of their parties, the people who put them in here time after time? They dictated to their supporters that they will not give them the basic right of democracy of the choice of President. Is that what we are telling the people of Ireland? It is no wonder that we see what we see when we look at the turnout and the rural versus urban divide when it comes to voting patterns. The highest turnout for any election by percentage occurs in rural areas. That is because of the grassroots. They all came from the county one time, moved to the cities and made their lives there. The grassroots grew up with politics. They saw everything that happened, listened to all the stories and wore different colours with pride because it was the party they followed. Now, they see a mockery being made of it by the Government that is in here today.

When I look at the final couple of days of the presidential election campaign, I see the gutter stuff coming from people. They went into a candidate's past and said that they did this or that. The same Government that is going to the gutter has destroyed this nation. They destroyed their own party members. In the most recent election campaign, in the county of Limerick, Fianna Fáil was down 3,000 votes and Fine Gael was down 2,000 votes. There was a displacement of 8,000 votes but out of those 8,000, only 4,500 gave me the votes. That means 4,000 people at the previous election did not vote. There is a pattern. They do not believe any more that there is democracy in this country. That is shown today by this motion and what the Government has done. In terms of what it is trying to achieve, it forgot the grassroots. It will be reminded of that shortly.

**Deputy Thomas Gould:** Democracy is at its best when it is robust and transparent. I understand that there in awful lot of anger at the process certain parties took during the nomination process for presidential candidates. This has to be looked at. Looking back, the majority of people agree on that.

I sat on the housing committee during the establishment of the Electoral Commission. Now is the time to commence the review of presidential elections. We have seven years to get this done. We can work together. This is something the vast majority if not all of the Dáil agrees with. The process should start as soon as possible. This must be the last election where the voting rights of our comrades and fellow Irish citizens in the Six Counties and around the world are blocked. I have friends in America, Canada, Australia and England who are as Irish as me. I have friends in the Six Counties who are even more Irish. I only have cúpla focal as Gaeilge. I have friends in the North who are fluent Irish speakers. Their family are also fluent Irish speakers. They feel it more and they are denied that right. We will work with the Minister and with everyone to make sure this is the last time they are excluded. "Vote Connolly ... cause we can't." Those are words of Kneecap, the Irish language activists and musicians who will not be able to vote in the presidential election on Friday. That is not because they do not love this island, do not champion the cause of Ireland or are not Irish citizens. It is not because of where they were born or the language they speak or because of a sport or their passports. It is because they live on the opposite side of an imaginary boundary line that means they cannot vote.

How can that be right? How can people who live on this island and who are Irish citizens be denied a vote by a line that is only imaginary? Young people across the island have been really inspired by this presidential campaign. I know some people are angry and disillusioned, but the young people I talk to have a vision for the President they want to see. When I cast my vote on Friday, I will be casting it for the likes of Mo Chara, the president of GAA, Jarlath Burns, and all of the people I know in the Six Counties and across the world who are Irish citizens who cannot vote. How can it be right that Irish citizens are not allowed to vote? It is not right. It is as simple as that. When I vote on Friday, I will raise my voice for all of them.

Presidential voting rights are a symbol of a united Ireland. That should unite us, all traditions and all people. The Ballymena actor James Nesbitt comes from a unionist background, but that does not stop him from identifying as an Irishman. He cannot vote for a person seeking to become the President of Ireland. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have failed to act, which means that people from the unionist tradition are being treated like second-class citizens. We do not want that for anyone, whether unionist, nationalist, republican, dissenter or none of the aforementioned. Legislation to extend presidential voting rights was introduced in 2014. It actually exists. It is a tangible thing. Why is the Government letting it gather dust? We have an opportunity here.

I will leave the Minister with this. I was sent a message after the last time I spoke. This person said that they are as Irish as the rest of the land and that, whether we are from Cork or Belfast, we were not just born in Ireland, Ireland was born in us.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** This gruelling presidential campaign will result in an Irish President representing all of the people living on this island and the global family of Irish citizens. She will endeavour to make us all proud, no matter where we live, yet the electorate is confined to Irish citizens living in the Twenty-six Counties. Even that franchise is restricted

because many students will not be able to make it home in time to vote, there are workers living too far away from their designated polling booths and there are people who will be on holiday or working abroad on polling day. Postal voting or proxy voting must be extended to make it possible for those citizens to vote.

Turning to the North, the question must be asked; what does Irish citizenship mean? In 2013, the Convention on the Constitution voted overwhelmingly in favour of extending the presidential franchise to Northern citizens and Irish citizens living abroad. That question was settled. Let us ask ourselves today what it means to be a citizen. Over 700,000 people in the North of Ireland now hold Irish passports. This number has grown significantly since Brexit. They carry that passport not simply as a travel document, but as a declaration of belonging, of national identity and of faith in the Republic they believe represents them. Being an Irish citizen must mean more than the possession of a passport. The true and practical expression of citizenship is the right to participate in democracy, the right to vote to shape the leadership and direction of your nation. That right, the right to choose the President of Ireland, the head of State for all of our people, has been denied to citizens resident in the North of Ireland and to our citizens abroad for far too long. The President of Ireland represents not just the Twenty-six Counties of this Republic, but the nation, the Thirty-two Counties of Ireland and the ever-expanding Irish family across the world.

It is frankly reprehensible that our Government continues to turn its face against extending this basic democratic right to the very people who embody that national identity. In these 12 long years, what has been the Government's response? The Minister's response earlier was that the Government is reflecting. There has been 12 years of reflection. That must be a world record for reflecting. In Global Ireland: Ireland's Diaspora Strategy 2020-2025, the Government committed to holding a referendum on this issue but here we are, almost at the end of 2025, and another presidential election will come and go while Irish citizens in the North remain voiceless in the choice of their Head of State. Where is the referendum? Where is the courage to act? There is no place left for this Government to hide in relation to presidential voting rights. This has to be put right now. We must correct it in the first two years of this Presidency. It is plainly unacceptable and morally wrong that the Government has failed to act on this promise.

Ireland is now an outlier in the democratic world. Over 150 countries already grant their citizens abroad the right to vote in their national elections. Thousands of people living on this island, citizens of other countries, can vote for the president of their country of origin. Why not Ireland? What is the Government afraid of? Let us be honest here; this is not about logistics, complexity or cost but about a political choice to deny Irish citizens the right to vote for their President, a choice made by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, which fear that extending the vote would expose their lack of representation in the North and remind the diaspora of the economic policies that forced them to leave our shores. My deepest hope is that this next President will be the last Head of State on this partitioned island.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I am very glad to have an opportunity to speak on this motion. It is straightforward. We all know that we need to facilitate far more people in the democratic process. Anybody who has been involved in elections over many years will know the issues that exist when somebody has to go on holiday and the difficulty of getting a postal vote. It is one of those things that is a lot easier to get in the North. We need to look at the whole issue

of proxy voting. The electoral register is a complete mess. At least we have a fully functioning Electoral Commission at this point. I have no difficulty with the commission looking at the means by which people get on the presidential ballot. We probably need to look at how people get onto ballots in general. In Louth, we had almost 25 candidates at one stage. That make voting difficult for people. I accept that it cannot be made too easy but we need to facilitate as many people as possible. We have the means and time to do so. We can look at best practice across the world.

If we are going to talk about presidential elections, we must talk about the major failure that people are going out to vote for the President of Ireland while those in the North, whether in Newry, Crossmaglen, Culloville, Jonesborough, Dromintee, Cullyhanna, Silverbridge or one of the other places in the vicinity of where I live or whether in Belfast, Derry or even Cullybackey and Ballymena, are removed from the process. Responsibility for that lies with Government. It should not be a major shock. Fine Gael still presents itself as the united Ireland party and, while I will admit that it has had a number of spokespersons in the last while who have done some heavy lifting in this regard, I have not seen it at governmental level. I do not know how Fianna Fáil can stand over calling itself the republican party as Deputy Micheál Martin shushes us and tells us that now is not the time.

Many of us here would have been at the launch of former unionist Ben Collins's book, *The Irish Unity Dividend*, across the road. We all realise there is a financial dividend to be had from Irish unity. The scaremongering has been blown out of the water by the likes of John Doyle, Ulster University and DCU in one of many reports on the cost of Irish unity. Meeting that cost is well doable and will lead to economic gains for both North and South. It also presents an opportunity to deliver on a better Ireland but we have seen no element of planning. When asked about Deputy Martin's position, Ben Collins said that, if everyone says we have to wait until everyone gets on and every other issue is sorted, there will never be unity.

Those who are against it will just say we have not agreed. There is no conciliation and there is no reconciliation. It is an absolute failure of an argument. We need to deliver on Irish unity; it is as straight as that, but presidential voting rights for those in the North would be a first step.

**Deputy Johnny Guirke:** Presidential voting rights need to be extended to all Irish citizens living in the Thirty-two Counties. It is also important these voting rights are extended to Irish citizens abroad. Last week I hosted Ciaran Staunton of the Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform and Karen McHugh of Safe Home Ireland who gave a presentation at a cross-party briefing on issues affecting returning Irish citizens. Many issues they face came up and one of the key ones was voting rights for the Irish living abroad. Former Taoiseach Enda Kenny promised presidential voting rights to the Irish in America during his 2016 St. Patrick's Day visit to the United States, but no progress has been made on that commitment. After being forced out of the country due to the high cost of living, housing, etc., many Irish citizens feel they should at least have the right to vote in elections, especially the presidential election. In 2013 the constitutional convention recommended extending votes in presidential elections to citizens living outside the Republic of Ireland, a position officially supported by the Government of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. We tabled legislation to give effect to this recommendation in 2014 and the Bill passed First and Second Stages. We have retabled the Bill in every Dáil since.

Sinn Féin is the largest party in the Thirty-two Counties. People in the North have always felt abandoned by the Government in the South. Denying them the right to vote in presidential elections has been another right denied. These citizens are as Irish as you or me. They live on the island yet cannot vote in presidential elections despite being eligible to stand in them, should they receive a nomination. In 2019 the Government set a referendum on extending voting rights to Irish citizens living abroad and in the North, but it was later delayed. Last May in the Assembly a Sinn Féin motion calling for Irish citizens in the North to have the right to vote in presidential elections in the Republic was carried 46 to 25. With so many Irish citizens in the North and all over the world wishing they could vote in the Irish presidential election and Aontú putting on the front it is fighting for people's right to vote, you would imagine it would encourage people to vote in the upcoming election. Instead Deputy Tóibín has said on the Plinth he may not vote. It sounds a bit hypocritical to me and as usual the party remains on the fence. It is no wonder it is better known as "Abstaintú". Many people died for the right to vote and their sacrifice should never be forgotten.

We acknowledge there are flaws in the electoral process but perhaps the Electoral Commission should be tasked with examining the nomination system in future. In 2011 Sinn Féin did not have enough Members to get Martin McGuinness on the ballot, but we worked with a number of Oireachtas Members to get him nominated. Many people who failed to get on the ballot this time did not even contact the same Oireachtas Members and local authorities they were seeking support from, but when you get bad advice this is what happens. Lots of people around here are saying that if Deputy Tóibín and Aontú were not so close to their candidate-----

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** It is amazing he is attacking Aontú rather than the Government.

**Deputy Johnny Guirke:** -----and had distanced themselves from her she would have had a far better chance-----

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** There was nobody from Sinn Féin here at the start of this motion.

**Deputy Johnny Guirke:** -----of getting on the ballot and would probably be on it.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** The Fr. Stone of politics.

**Deputy Ann Graves:** In just two days some Irish citizens will exercise their right to vote and I strongly encourage people to come out in large numbers to exercise that right. Unfortunately the right is not universal. The right of Irish citizens to vote on Friday stops an hour up the road. Citizens in the North can win an All-Ireland, play for Ireland, stand in a presidential election and even be elected to the office but unfortunately they cannot vote in this election. The election on Friday must be the last presidential election where citizens in the North cannot vote. As an Irish republican my hope for the next presidential election will be that it is held in a united Ireland free from partition and outside interference.

The President of Ireland, Uachtarán na hÉireann, is a President for the whole of Ireland. The role of the Irish President does not exclude people in the North. We have seen the President

play a very positive role in reaching out to those citizens living in the North and indeed to the unionist community. Irish unity is firmly on the agenda and the debate has started. Despite the best efforts of some people in government, the public, the media, cultural groups, businesses and ordinary people are discussing what a new and united Ireland would look like. Part of the process of dismantling partition must include extending voting rights to Irish citizens on this island. This is about equality, recognition and democratic participation.

Sinn Féin fully supports the holding of a referendum to extend voting rights to Irish citizens living in the North. We have introduced motions in the Dáil looking to extend voting rights to all Irish citizens in the previous three Dáileanna and in this one earlier this year. Momentum for this constitutional change is growing. In June Sinn Féin tabled a Private Members' Bill calling on the Dáil to implement the recommendations of the Fifth Report of the Convention on the Constitution and to extend voting rights in presidential elections to Irish citizens on the island of Ireland. The Bill also called on the Dáil to progress proposals that would extend voting rights in presidential elections to the diaspora. In May the Assembly the voted for the extension of voting rights to Irish citizens in the North of Ireland. This was a very strong cross-party message affirming the principles of the Good Friday Agreement.

Some 12 years have passed since the constitutional convention voted overwhelmingly in support of extending voting rights to Irish citizens living in the North and abroad. The Government is clearly behind the curve on this and is indeed the main barrier to this. Fianna Fáil dropped its commitment to extend voting rights to all Irish citizens from its election manifesto. It has rapidly moved from being Fianna Fáil: the Republican Party to Fianna Fáil: the partitionist party. It continues to abandon those who have been forced to live under British rule 90 miles up the road. Sinn Féin spelt it out in black and white in our recent manifesto. We promised to "Hold a referendum within the lifetime of the next Dáil for a referendum on voting rights in Presidential elections for the people of the North and of the diaspora". It is a matter of injustice and a violation of democracy that Irish people in the Six Counties are excluded from voting for their Uachtarán. Whatever the outcome of Friday's election we must ensure this is the last time Irish citizens anywhere are excluded from this democratic process. I hope people vote with their feet on Friday and come out in large numbers to make their voices heard.

**Deputy Ciarán Ahern:** My thanks to Aontú for bringing forward this timely motion. The role of the President has of course changed somewhat in recent decades. The President has essential constitutional duties to fulfil but there is a wider significance to the Head of State's role that is not set out in Bunreacht na hÉireann, although it has nonetheless come to be a central aspect of it. I am referring to the role of acting as a first citizen, of unifying and representing the Irish people at home and abroad and of the role of being a voice for the Irish people. That aspect has grown in significance through the active presidencies of Mary Robinson, Mary McAleese and Michael D. Higgins, all of whom carried out their role with distinction. It is correct, therefore, we pause from time to time to take stock of how best our electoral system can function in support of a Presidency which itself has evolved and will continue to evolve with our society and with our politics. I appreciate this motion is prompting us to do so and there are elements of it I agree with and others I do not.

I will begin with the elements I agree with. Most pertinent is the extension of the franchise in presidential elections to Irish citizens in the North. We debated this issue not too long ago and my position has not changed in the intervening few months. The motion references the

Convention on the Constitution. The convention was established by the Labour Party when we were in government and its fifth report, which was published in November 2013, recommended Irish citizens resident outside the State should have the right to vote in presidential elections. This would of course include those citizens born and living in the North. Many of the recommendations arising out of that convention have been acted on 12 years later, but this issue remains outstanding despite several commitments from different Governments since then. The Fine Gael Government of 2016 to 2020, which was supported by Fianna Fáil, committed to holding a referendum on extending the franchise for presidential elections to citizens living abroad. The then Taoiseach Enda Kenny reaffirmed that commitment on a St. Patrick's Day trip to the US in 2017. Leo Varadkar announced in 2019 he was postponing such a referendum at the upcoming local and European elections until later in the year, but it was never taken up again. It is quite incredible that in the 12 years since the Fifth Report of the Convention on the Constitution virtually nothing has been done to advance this really key recommendation. Labour supports the holding of a referendum on extending the franchise to citizens in the North and further afield.

11 o'clock

However, when we debated this issue back in June, I made the point that an extensive amount of preparatory work needed to be done in advance, such as arranging for voter registration for citizens in the North, working out the voting method and the costs and resources required, ensuring the security of the ballot and so on. None of this is straightforward. We need to take lessons from the recent referenda with regard to preparation and groundwork ahead of holding any referendum like this.

Other issues that need to be addressed in advance include whether the right to vote should be restricted to those born on the island of Ireland, those with citizenship or simply passport holders. The Labour Party supports citizenship as the condition for eligibility. As I said previously, establishing a special Oireachtas committee would be a good first step in addressing those questions and others. It could tease out these issues, get into the nuts and bolts of how voting would work, provide a roadmap for implementation and make substantive recommendations. The committee hearings would also play an important role in informing the public debate, as we saw during the repeal referendum. Rushing the constitutional amendment through without carrying out substantial work on the wording or heeding the recommendations of such an Oireachtas committee, should it be set up, is exactly what happened last year with the failed referendums. We risk setting a referendum up for failure if we do not take these preparatory steps. The Labour Party supports holding a referendum to extend the franchise in presidential elections to citizens in the North, but I also warn against going into it without having done the extensive and detailed planning work required.

A separate issue in the motion concerns a loosening of the nomination requirements to get on the ballot paper for our presidential election. We cannot ignore the fact that many people in this country feel they are not represented by either candidate in the ongoing presidential campaign. That is a legitimate position to hold. It is an issue coming up on the doors as I have been canvassing in recent weeks. We can all agree with the sentiment outlined in the motion that a competition of diverse values and ideas is good for democracy. Indeed, healthy and good-spirited debate is the very essence of our democracy.

With that being said, however, one issue I have with the motion is the line that states, "the Constitution and the law set out the nomination process by Oireachtas members, County Councils, and the nomination by an incumbent, and these rules make it difficult for a prospective candidate to get onto the ballot paper". We need to remember that we are talking about the highest office in the land. From my perspective, it should not be easy to get on the ballot paper. It should not be the case that a person simply decides to run for the Presidency one day and he or she can expect that to be facilitated with no questions asked. No one is entitled to receive a nomination. People should be required to do the hard yards. Whatever people's thoughts are on either candidate left in the presidential race, there can be little doubt that both of them have dedicated years of their lives to public service. I am deeply uncomfortable with the idea that someone should be entitled to get on the ballot paper on the basis of their celebrity, online following or personal wealth, which would allow them to put a large amount of money behind a campaign. The requirements for getting on the ballot in a presidential election, particularly the nomination by 20 Oireachtas Members, have been the case since our Constitution was written and enacted in 1937. Leaving aside the 1938 presidential election in which Douglas Hyde was elected unopposed, given the ever-increasing number of Members in this House, in terms of the percentage of Members' nominations required, it has actually become easier to get on the ballot paper.

I am open to the conversation around reforming the nomination process. As I said, we must acknowledge those who feel unrepresented by having only two candidates in this race. Equally, however, we must maintain high standards and a high bar for those seeking a nomination. The Office of the President deserves that level of respect. It is not something we should treat lightly. These issues around the nomination process and voting rights might be best served by a short, time-limited citizens' assembly.

I also have some difficulty with the suggestion that an incumbent should be able to nominate a candidate because it risks politicising the Office of the President. If someone could not get a nomination through one of the existing avenues, pressure could then be put on the President to nominate. For example, would a Fianna Fáil President be under pressure to nominate Billy Kelleher, or would a Labour Party President be under pressure to nominate a Labour candidate in circumstances where we did not have the required 20 Oireachtas signatures?

The Labour Party will not be supporting the motion on the basis of those aspects that I have outlined, but we do not oppose the essence of the motion, which seeks to extend the voting franchise to citizens in the North and look at ways to ensure a diversity of candidates. That is something we should all be able to agree on. I thank Deputies Tóibín and Lawless for giving us the opportunity to reflect on our electoral system this week and renew our commitment to bringing forward a referendum. Citizens in the North have now waited 12 years and counting since the Convention on the Constitution's recommendation to allow them a franchise. It is time to deliver for them. It is vital we continue to value the Office of Uachtarán na hÉireann. I hope everyone, despite any misgivings about the process or the choice of candidates on the ballot this week, comes out to exercise their franchise, raise their voice and vote on Friday in this pivotal presidential election.

**Deputy Rory Hearne:** I thank Aontú and others for bringing forward the motion today. It is an important discussion about how we choose our President, the processes set out for that and who is eligible to vote. The Social Democrats are open to engaging in a cross-party discussion

about the processes in place to elect a President. Uachtarán na hÉireann, as has been set out, is the highest office in the land. It is a position that sets out the vision for Ireland and one that everyone in this country holds dear. That is why we have seen such strength of feeling around this presidential election from different perspectives. In many ways, people want to see a President who not only represents them, but also is a part of them.

Over time, we have seen the nature of the Presidency change, even within the structures and restrictions of the Constitution. We have increasingly seen Presidents, within the bounds of the Presidency, engage in the discussion and debate about what type of country we have. That is important. What we need is a critical, embracing discussion of everyone about the type of country we have. We only have to look at the record levels of homelessness and the way in which we have a generation who are locked out of a home. Indeed, I encourage everyone to read the article written in *her.ie* by Kat O'Connor about her generation being forced to accept a housing crisis. She is 31 and has reached a point of hopelessness when it comes to owning a home in Ireland. A total of 70% of 25-year olds still live at home. Why is this relevant to this debate? It is relevant because our President encapsulates and has a role in guiding us as a country around the values, nature and purpose of our country and what we are achieving. In that regard, people respect and hold the absolute centrality of the Presidency.

We are in favour of engaging with reforms, particularly around citizens in the North of Ireland being able to vote in the presidential election.

When it comes to the process, we need to think this through because we want someone holding that position who can represent us all in dignity. The President is our Head of State who will have that position for seven years. It is not a decision that should be taken lightly. Indeed, it is one of the reasons I am deeply frustrated and critical of the idea of people spoiling their votes in a presidential election. People fought and died for this vote. We will see millions of people coming out to vote on Friday in this presidential election, including old people who may have not been able to leave their homes for a long time, people who are ill, disabled people and young people. We will see them coming out to exercise their franchise because they hold dear and understand the importance of the Presidency. That is why I am deeply critical of the idea of spoiling votes.

We need to see changes, however. People feel excluded and we can see that. We can see what happened in Citywest, which was absolutely disgraceful. I call on politicians in this House to be careful with their language. Unfortunately, we saw it yesterday. There was no leadership but rather the fanning of flames of hate.

**Deputy Aidan Farrelly:** I thank Deputies Tóibín and Lawless for bringing the motion forward this morning. It is always meritable to have a conversation, not only about the processes for nomination but, ultimately, as we are hearing from many contributors this morning, the merits and importance of the office itself.

Notwithstanding the context, which is important in terms of when we are having this debate, it is no way to legislate to try to change the rules to reduce the thresholds because the rules did not help us get our nomination onto the ballot paper. There needs to be an evidence-informed approach to that. That is what I would be calling for today. As my colleague Deputy Rory Hearne has said, we in the Social Democrats are certainly open to a conversation because we, too, are hearing in the campaign that there is that sense of exclusion, certainly, when there is a

small number of candidates on a ballot paper, but we do not throw the baby out with the bath water. The legislation has in many ways worked for many successful presidential elections we have had and the irony of Aontú calling for diversity is not lost on me. We have had a diverse range of candidates in successful presidential elections.

This election was seven years in the running. Parties' candidates had a long time to prepare their candidacies and for a diverse set of reasons, we have ended up with two candidates. What we are hearing on the doors is clear. We have seen the young people of Ireland motivated by one candidacy. We have seen a mobilisation and a movement towards one candidate that, I believe, has been inspirational, so to those who portray it as no candidate is speaking to a huge cohort, if they do their research and look up who the different candidates are, they will find something motivational, certainly about one of the candidates.

I will use the opportunity with the 30 seconds I have left to speak, once again, about what I believe is the most significant electoral reform that we should be talking about in this Dáil, that is, my Forty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Reduction of Voting Age to Sixteen Years) Bill 2025. It is before the House currently. In the UK, we will see young people aged 16 and upwards given the opportunity to vote in their next general election. We have a Bill before this House. I would urge the Government, again, to bring that before us to continue to move it forward. It will require a referendum and a national conversation about youth participation and about young people's voices, opinions and, ultimately, right to engage in the most civic action. We met hundreds of young people who wished they could vote on Friday and we are also hearing the dichotomy of that where so many people are planning to not use their votes. I would encourage everyone to use their vote on Friday.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** I thank Aontú for bringing forward the motion today. Listening in to this morning's proceedings, it has been quite an interesting discussion.

The motion includes some worthy measures. I fully stand over extending the voting rights to Irish citizens in the North of Ireland and even having a discussion about how nominations happen is something that we should do consistently but I cannot separate that from the fact that the reason we are discussing this today - it hangs like a spectre over the discussion - is ostensibly because a small number of essentially privileged people did not get to run in the race and, because the system did not work for them, they are now demanding that we change it. We had the best part of 70 years in this country where it was only ever going to be two conservative politicians who would run for President, potentially, one from Fianna Fáil and one from Fine Gael, up until that was broken by Mary Robinson. Now we have a situation where there is a slightly different hue and, because privilege did not get its way, privilege now wants to deconstruct the system.

I listened to Deputy Tóibín's contribution when he was introducing the motion. There were a lot of worthy aspects to the contribution but then it descended into how only Aontú was not part of the establishment. Surely we are better than that. Politics, at present, is quite disillusioning. We have seen that with Fine Gael debasing itself over the weekend. Now we see it here and we are told that only one small party is somehow not part of the establishment. Why exactly is that? Is that because the rest of us got out there early, found a candidate we supported, bought into a vision, and acknowledged that not all of us supported 100% of every ideal that person held but understood the difference between a person who spoke something

authentic and somebody who just offered platitudes whereas others simply try to erode trust in the system because they themselves did not benefit from it and then present the fact that opinion polls have shown that 49% of people do not have confidence in either of the candidates reaches the point where some other wealthy people are encouraging others to spoil their votes? The only outcome of that is the spoilt people themselves, who are predominantly privileged, who get to step back and tell us to look at what they did to undermine democratic norms in this country.

We are where we are at this point. I would encourage those of us around the Chamber who, for example, believe in the Irish language, say they speak for social justice and have spoken about Ireland's place in the world as being one of peace to get over themselves for this moment, come out and show a bit of leadership, stand for something that is more than moaning and undermining, and demonstrate the courage of their convictions to stand for something that is beyond the 100% of their own beliefs. That would steer us well.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I move:

To insert the following after "or an incumbent to nominate a presidential candidate":

"; and

— amend the law to allow a petition signed by a minimum of 35,000 people who are eligible to vote in a presidential election to nominate a presidential candidate.".

Before I start on the topic, I seek a little leeway, given the events that have happened in Saggart over the last number of days, to express my utter horror, condemnation and disgust at the alleged sexual assault of a ten-year-old girl. My heart goes out to her and to her family. It is obviously beyond every family's worst nightmare. From what we know so far, it seems that there is a failure by the State here of a vulnerable girl who, though in State care, ended up in a situation where she could be sexually assaulted in this way. It is utterly horrific.

People are right to be angry about this situation but some people's anger is being abused by those who want to cause violence, those who want to spread division and those who want to spread hate, and last night's violence at Citywest Hotel will do nothing for the victim of sexual assault. The man who allegedly did it has been arrested for it and was not even living in Citywest Hotel at the time. I am sure the people living there were horrified. They were in fear last night. The children living there were in fear about what would happen if the crowd succeeded in breaking through. Instead of division and violence, we need to stand together with the victim, with the family and against the repeated failures of the State.

On this motion, the simplest and very easy part, which, in theory, I think every party in this House agrees with but some parties are not going to do anything about because it does not suit them politically, is that Irish citizens living in the North should be entitled to a vote in presidential elections. That is obvious. It is an opinion that is held by the vast majority of people. It is an easy problem to fix and it should be fixed with a referendum as soon as possible, and we all know the cynical reason that it is not.

The more complex and in a way more interesting area is the question of the nomination process for president, which has obviously come into focus. It is undemocratic. I agree with a lot of the criticisms that are made, such as about why we are discussing this now, but it is

overly restrictive. It suits Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. They are the ones who made the rules. They told their councillors not to nominate anyone other than Jim Gavin and Heather Humphreys. However, there is quite a gulf between the rhetoric of Aontú on this issue and the actual proposal. I listened to Peadar Tóibín's speech earlier and it was about "Let the people pick" and stop the political establishment curating the process, but the proposals from Aontú do not let the people pick. They keep the political establishment curating the process. Aontú's proposals just create a slightly lower bar for the curation of the process to ensure that, if these rules had been in place, Maria Steen would have been selected. They reduce, for example, the number of TDs from 20 to 14. The motion also allows for a candidate to be nominated by 110 councillors - that is a new development to say councillors as individuals can nominate - or three councils. I agree with all of those proposals in the sense that they lower the barrier slightly but we should not pretend that this allows the people to pick. Fast-forward seven years and, let us say, there is a highly conservative candidate who gets 13 TDs, and I presume we will have exactly the same discussion where we will be told it is an overly restrictive process.

That is assuming this motion passes, we actually have a referendum and so on. What is proposed by Aontú does not get to the nub of the issue in terms of letting the people pick candidates.

Let us be real, as everyone here must be, in acknowledging we cannot have a system wherein anybody can nominate himself or herself for President. On a practical level, there must be some barrier to standing for President. It is just not feasible to allow thousands of people to stand. It would not be a democratic process, there could not be an informed debate and there is the question of how a ballot paper could have thousands of names. We need some kinds of barriers to entry as a presidential candidate. The question is what those barriers should be. That is really what the discussion is about.

Our amendment puts forward that we need a new direct democratic process by which the people actually get to decide. It would be a process whereby a set number of people can nominate a candidate. We chose 35,000 because it is approximately 1% of the electoral register for presidential elections. A candidate would need signatures from 35,000 people to be nominated without the need for any votes from TDs, Senators or councillors. I hope the parties and Independent Members will support our amendment. It would lead to a real and radical democratisation of the nomination process, which is not provided for in Aontú's motion.

The only objection I have heard is a practical objection as to how our proposal would work. This is a process that works in many other countries. I just spoke briefly to my partner, who was involved in socialist politics in America. On multiple occasions, she collected signatures for ballot initiatives - in effect, referendums - and nominations for candidates. A name, address and contact details had to be provided for each person, which were then checked. That answers the objection as to what is to stop somebody from just listing and signing for 1,000 people from the electoral register. The nominee details are physically checked. In America, this is very common in lots of states, with different states having different requirements. In Florida, 145,000 signatures are required, while in Michigan, the requirement is 12,000. Requirements are different from state to state but the process is very common. There is also something similar in the European Union. Citizens' petition initiatives require 10,000 signatures from Ireland. A process exists in Switzerland. It absolutely can be done.

Calls for people to spoil their vote on Friday are pitched as an anti-establishment campaign. That is what we are meant to think the calls are about. However, it is very revealing to look at where these calls are coming from and who stands to benefit from them. Leading the Spoil the Vote campaign, from his Downton Abbey-style mansion, is multimillionaire businessman Declan Ganley. He said he was going to write "No. 1 - Maria Steen" on his ballot paper. He and Maria Steen have a lot in common. They are filthy-rich, anti-choice Catholic fundamentalists. Anyone who can afford to pay more than €20,000 for a handbag or to live somewhere called "Moyne Park Mansion" is, by definition, not anti-establishment.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy should not make reference to individuals who cannot defend themselves.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Okay. The people who are driving this Spoiled the Vote process are part of the elite. They are not anti-establishment at all. They are a different, more socially conservative part of the elite than Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. They are the Opus Dei wing of the establishment - wealthy fundamentalist Catholics who want to drag us back to the Ireland of the Magdalen laundries, the mother and baby homes and the industrial schools. They want to make divorce and contraception illegal again. They want to abolish choice and bodily autonomy and force women back into the home.

People have the right to spoil their vote; there is no question about that. However, if they do so, they will be being taken for fools, like the millions of working-class Americans who voted for billionaire businessman Donald Trump because they thought he was anti-establishment. That is the reality. People who spoil their vote are offering to be the dupes of the Irish millionaires. They should not be under any illusion that Micheál Martin, Simon Harris or Heather Humphreys will be upset. They will not be upset. All the spoiled votes will go into one big pile in the count centre. People in Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael will not care what people write on their ballot papers. The only thing they care about is that the more spoiled votes there are from people who are rightly angry with and alienated from the political establishment, the fewer votes there will be for the candidate who is not their candidate and the less embarrassing a defeat it will be for them and the establishment.

If people want to strike a blow against the political establishment, against Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, on Friday, they should not spoil their votes. There are two candidates, one of whom will win. One is the Government candidate and the other is an Independent candidate backed by the Opposition. One of them, like most ordinary Irish people, voted "No" in the first Nice and Lisbon treaty referendums.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy should not get into the actions of individuals.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** I did not mention anyone. It is for people to assume which of the candidates is which. One of the candidates is someone who defends freedom of speech and ordinary people's right to criticise the European Union, wants to protect neutrality, condemns the genocide in Gaza and all who have supported it, stands with carers and disabled people and voted again and again to ban evictions. People have a choice. One of the candidates is going to win.

**Deputy Gillian Toole:** I will keep my commentary simple and straightforward. I missed the other contributions as I was at a committee. I wish the best of luck to both candidates on Friday. More importantly, I wish them a good recovery next week when the adrenaline and cortisol levels start to subside. I hope they avoid any illness.

It is fair to say that a percentage of the population is disenfranchised facing into this election. What that signposts us to do is take on board the recommendations in the 1998 Oireachtas review. It is common knowledge that the Constitution of 1937 is not contemporaneous. We have had referendums to try to bring the contemporaneous element to it. We must have a process that starts at the level of the 31 local authorities and interfaces with the public. We must look to a possible filtration process of candidates through the councils. Perhaps it will be found that a hybrid retaining elements of the current structure of votes from 20 Oireachtas Members or four local authorities is the solution. Whatever the outcome might be, discussions must commence imminently to review the process and plan ahead for the future. We have a considerable amount of time to do that. I do not know whether a new joint Oireachtas committee needs to be formed or if this is something that can come under the remit of the Committee on Public Petitions and the Ombudsmen. There are others more knowledgeable than I on this matter and I hope a solution can be found.

In the meantime, nothing will change the prospects of this Friday's election. As I said at the outset, I wish both candidates well.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I welcome this debate. Something has to change. I wish all the candidates on the ballot paper the very best. Like a lot of others, I am of the view that the chance to run for President must be opened up to many more people. The current system is very confined and, as we have seen, it is determined by a few people as to who can run. The local authorities were to have an opportunity to endorse people but members were restricted by their party hierarchies to ensure they could not vote for Independent and other candidates.

I do not like naming names but many people regret that the likes of Bertie Ahern, who we spoke about here last night regarding his role-----

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy should not mention names in the course of this debate.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** That is all right, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I will not name names but many people feel a certain other lady should have had a chance to run. I regret, as others do, that certain people did not get a chance. The likes of the man I mentioned did so much to secure the Good Friday Agreement and for the well-being of our country.

It is regrettable that he did not get a chance. He would have been a sound operator on the worldwide stage. We must do something different the next time. I know it is seven years away but we need to start planning now. I ask that the Government do that and take note of the fact we need to change how this is done to make the Presidency more relevant and get a larger number of people interested. It has been said that turnout in all the constituencies is expected to be very low. That shows that people are not interested. We must get people interested in and appreciative of the Presidency, give the President a good role and ensure that he or she plays an important part in the political well-being of the country.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell):** I thank the Deputies for raising these important issues. As the Minister, Deputy Browne, stated, I confirm the Government is not proposing to oppose this motion. As we can all agree, the Office of the President is a key part of our democratic institutions and it is important that our Head of State is representative of all Irish citizens, irrespective of where they may reside.

I reiterate that to extend voting rights at presidential elections to Irish citizens in Northern Ireland, or more generally to other jurisdictions, would require the holding of a referendum to amend the Constitution. On this matter, Sinn Féin tabled a motion for debate in the Dáil during Private Members' time on Tuesday, 24 June 2025, which called on Dáil Éireann to:

- implement the recommendations of the Fifth Report of the Convention on the Constitution, and to extend voting rights in Presidential elections to all Irish citizens on the island of Ireland; and

- progress proposals that would extend the right to vote in Presidential elections to the diaspora.

The Government did not oppose the motion and it was noted during the debate that the Government continued to reflect on this matter. On Tuesday, 17 June, Aontú introduced the Forty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Voting Rights in Presidential Elections) Bill 2025, which seeks to extend voting rights in presidential elections to all citizens on the island of Ireland.

The Government, like previous governments, is supportive of the work previously undertaken by the Convention on the Constitution on the matter of extending voting rights in presidential elections. However, there are a number of factors that need to be considered and addressed prior to the holding of a referendum. An amendment to our Constitution is clearly required but, from a practical perspective, a system would need to be put in place to allow for the registration of electors from Northern Ireland. Another issue is how such electors would vote, for example, if it would be postal or otherwise. I note that An Coimisiún Toghcháin, as part of its research programme, is examining the issue of extending postal voting in our elections. Separately, a reserve constituency will need to be provided to facilitate the return and count of the ballot papers from citizens exercising their right to vote.

On freedom of information, section 42(h) of the Freedom of Information Act 2014 provides that the Act does not apply to a record relating to the President. Policy responsibility for the freedom of information framework rests with the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation. The Office of the President is already subject to a separate and discrete Vote of its own, which covers all that office's expenditure, in agreement with the Oireachtas. In addition, that Vote is subject to audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General and its expenditure is subject to examination by the public accounts committee. While amendments to the Freedom of Information Act are more appropriate to the relevant Minister, as I already indicated, I note that, as the Minister, Deputy Browne, already stated, the perceived gains of subjecting the Office of the President to freedom of information do not appear to outweigh the potential risk of disturbing the independence or the apolitical nature of the Presidency.

In respect of the annual report, I also understand that the annual accounting and financial reporting arrangements for the Office of the President are managed in the same way as the expenditure arrangements for other public service Votes. Again, the question arises as to whether there is any particular added value in the preparation and publication of an annual report by the Office of the President in respect of financial accounting and reporting over and above the scrutiny provided by the Oireachtas and in the audit reports from the Comptroller and Auditor General.

In respect of the candidate nomination process, Article 12.4.2° of the Constitution explicitly provides that:

> Every candidate for election, not a former or retiring President, must be nominated either by
>
> > i. not less than twenty persons, each of whom is at the time a member of one of the Houses of the Oireachtas, or
> >
> > ii. by the Councils of not less than four administrative Counties (including County Boroughs) as defined by law.

To alter the candidate nomination process for the presidential election would require an amendment to the Constitution. As the Minister outlined, if such a referendum were successful, it would be necessary for the Minister responsible for electoral legislation to bring forward appropriate amendments to the Presidential Elections Act 1993, as amended, to give practical effect to the constitutional change. On this matter, it is worth noting that we now have an independent statutory electoral commission, An Coimisiún Toghcháin, Ireland's independent Electoral Commission. Its advisory and public information functions enable it to carry out research on electoral policy and procedure. Furthermore, an coimisiún is also empowered to advise and make recommendations to the Minister and Government in respect of any proposals for legislative change or any policy matters concerning electoral legislation and proposals.

I confirm the Minister's position, as stated, that the Government does not propose to oppose this motion or the amendment. Again, I thank the Deputies for their contributions to this debate and look forward to continued engagement on these important matters.

**Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty:** I welcome this debate on expanding the geographical area covered by the presidential election and amending the requirements to run for President to make it easier to do so.

To start with the issue of the diaspora, we know the constitutional convention was not limited to the Northern Irish state but also dealt with the diaspora around the world. Unfortunately, whether we like it or not, our Irish citizens in Northern Ireland are in another jurisdiction, so they would have to be treated as the diaspora for the purposes of any election. We could not just go into Northern Ireland and start setting up polling stations. I do not think the British Government would facilitate that. We would have to set up a copper-fastened, ring-fenced voting system through postal votes, with some form of identification in one envelope and the ballot in a second envelope. The mechanisms need to be worked out but I absolutely believe it can and should be done. We have so many citizens around the world who want to have their input and the presidential election is an ideal opportunity for them to do so, as it would be for the Irish citizens in Northern Ireland. I would add that if we get to have a

constitutional referendum on that issue, it should include Seanad reform providing that Senators be directly elected by the diaspora. We have not grasped that bull by the horns for some time.

On the wider issue, as per the motion today, we need to make it easier for someone to run for the Presidency. Obviously the voters of Ireland said a couple of years back - I think it was 2015 - that they do not believe a person under the age of 35 should be able to run for President. That needs to be revisited in any referendum that we put to the people, as would another constitutional recommendation about lowering the voting age to 16, maybe starting off with presidential elections.

I wholeheartedly support the proposal that 100 or 110 members of local authorities should be able to nominate someone to run for President, as should a lower number of Oireachtas Members - 14 is a good suggestion. I am someone who tried to facilitate someone in that process. Regardless of whether I would vote for the person, we need to make it easier. Obviously, there has to be a threshold. There are some nefarious individuals whom I do not think should be let run a sweet shop, let alone be President, but ultimately the voters have to decide, and there needs to be a threshold.

I note that People Before Profit has suggested 35,000 signatures. I am not caught up on signatures. It could be 100,000 or it could be less, but we need to work out the mechanisms of how we validate that. Would it be with PPS numbers and people having to publicly declare that they want a person to run so that there is absolute transparency? I definitely think there should be a direct democracy input as well so that the general public can nominate people directly.

I also believe that in terms of local authorities, three is a better number than four, which is the situation as it stands. To be honest, one local authority should be able to make a nomination for whatever reasons, on the basis of a majority vote or a two thirds majority vote. It makes a lot of sense.

In the remaining minute, I want to talk about the broader issue and address why we need to have more variety. Obviously, we have had different presidential elections over the years - I am not referencing any one presidential election - but in some cases there have been claims that the number of candidates running limits the voice of the people and the ability to have their voice heard. Even if it is for a candidate who may not ultimately get across the threshold, they want that person to be able to articulate their vision of what Ireland should be, conveyed through the Presidency. They are absolutely right. Future turnouts will show, as they did in the past, what the level of interest is in the Presidency and what the level of spoiled votes will be. It would be educational if we were to have this debate again one week from now.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I thank everybody who made a contribution to this important debate. There were some very interesting contributions and a fairly philosophical understanding of what is involved. This is one of the most important electoral reform motions that has come before this Chamber in a long time.

I want to address the contributions of a couple of speakers. I was disappointed by Deputy Guirke who spent his time attacking his constituency competitor for petty reasons. This issue

is bigger than Peadar Tóibín or Johnny Guirke. The idea that we would not spend our time trying to fight for this and instead fight with each other is absolutely silly.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly attacked Aontú on the basis of diversity. That attack shows a lack of self-awareness. The political establishment in this country dresses up in the colours of diversity and welcomes everybody's opinion as long as it agrees with theirs. Deputy Farrelly and Deputy Gannon probably do not recognise it, but their politics is in the ascendancy in the country. Their politics is the establishment in this country. For at least the last decade, this House and this country have become a cold house for diversity of thought. There has been an oppressive uniformity in the political system that has shut down voices. If people do not recognise that, it is because their voice has not been shut down. Other people's voices have been shut down and they have been pushed out of the political debate. There is a growing section of Irish society that no longer believe in their types of politics. There is a growing section of young people especially who believe in science and facts and want a common-sense future. Aontú is wholeheartedly at the cutting edge of that particular movement.

I was disappointed with Deputy Paul Murphy bringing up people's faith in this debate. We live in a country where there is freedom of religion. Discrimination on the basis of faith is wrong. If Deputy Murphy used any religion other than Catholic in those sentences, people in this Chamber would have been absolutely disgusted by it. If the Deputy can be inspired by Marx, as he is entitled to be, surely other politicians and other individuals can be informed by their faith?

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Yes, absolutely, and people will vote on that basis.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** People Before Profit says that Aontú's motion is too restrictive. The Labour Party says it was not restrictive enough. In reality, I have no problem with Deputy Paul Murphy's amendment. We are happy to support it. My concern is just to make sure the signatures could be verified.

Deputy Hearne said people died for the right to vote. They did not die for the right to vote; they died for the right to vote in a representative democracy. People in China have the right to vote. A democracy without half the people is no democracy at all. That is what we are looking at here. The fact that so many political parties have their head down in their own political campaign now and are not recognising the democratic deficit that exists in this country is a major problem. It is a significant problem, not just a theoretical one, but one that is leading to a polarisation of Irish society. If the Government parties are telling half the people in this country that they do not really care if they are not involved in this election or they do not have a horse in this field, that is fine but that is a bad message to send out. It is a message that is leading to a lack of democratic instincts among a small minority. That is dangerous for this country and for this democracy.

Some people say that the right to vote should be afforded to Irish citizens living elsewhere in the world. I have no problem with that, but that is a different question. The right of a person to vote in Enniskillen, Newry or Derry is a different question to an Irish citizen voting in Shanghai, Johannesburg or San Francisco. These are Irish citizens living in Ireland and they should have a right to vote as a result. This has to be the last presidential election where Irish citizens in the North are excluded. It has to be the end of a two-tiered citizenship in this country.

We must not have a situation where one section of Irish citizens is more equal than others. This has to be the last presidential election where candidates are blocked by the political establishment. It has to be the end of a curated ballot that is controlled by a handful of establishment parties. We cannot let the political establishment engineer elections that exclude voters and then come back into the system and say it is shocking that half the people have not voted. No one should be entitled to get on the ballot. We fully agree with that, but the threshold needs to be reduced.

I welcome that the Government is not opposing this motion, but it now has a democratic onus to implement it. We cannot have a situation where this Chamber votes to support the motion and it is ignored by the Government for the next ten years. I often say the best way for the Government to say "No" is to actually say "Yes". Every day, we see TDs from the Government parties going out to the gates and putting their arms around people involved in different campaigns, getting into photographs with them, telling them "Yes" and then coming in here and either voting against their interests or just ignoring the issue altogether. The Minister, Deputy James Browne, mentioned a number of difficult steps that might be taken.

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

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I feel sometimes that the Government's attitude is, Lord make me good, but just not yet. Let us implement these reforms and let us make it happen so we do not have another presidential election like this one.

Amendment agreed to.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

*Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 11.49 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar mheán lae.*

*Sitting suspended at 11.49 a.m. and resumed at 12 noon.*

## Visit of Finnish Delegation

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Before we proceed to Leaders' Questions, I would like Deputies to join me in welcoming our distinguished visitors. I ask Members to extend a warm céad míle fáilte to my counterpart from the Finnish Parliament, His Excellency, Speaker Halla-aho, who is here on an official visit. Speaker Halla-aho, it is an absolute honour to have you here alongside your country's ambassador.

*Members applauded.*

## Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** Cuirim céad míle fáilte roimh na cuairteoirí atá anseo inniu.

Before I begin, I take this opportunity to wish the female garda taken to hospital last night a speedy recovery from her injuries.

Struggling households were dealt two body blows on Monday. The first blow was that food inflation has reached its highest level in nearly two years. People are being ripped off when they go to the supermarket and it is clear as day to them that they are being ripped off. The second blow was the big hike in electricity prices for hundreds of thousands of SSE Airtricity customers, adding hundreds of euro to their bills. The Taoiseach was asked yesterday how bad things actually have to get before the Government does something. The Government needs to stand up to these companies and protect people from this greedy profiteering. When the Taoiseach responded to Deputy Mary-Lou McDonald, he said that the Government is engaging with these companies. If he is referring to the meeting that Darragh O'Brien had with energy companies on 26 September, then the top brass must have left confident that it is business as usual for them and open season. Since the Minister's big meeting, Energia, Bord Gáis, Pinergy and SSE Airtricity all jacked up their energy prices. This is reminiscent of May 2023 when Fine Gael Minister of State, Deputy Neale Richmond, gave the big supermarket chains six weeks to get their prices down. Today, those prices are absolutely through the roof.

While prices rise and companies continue to gouge households, the budget has left working people worse off. The Government refused to deliver a cost-of-living package, cancelled energy credits, removed double child benefit payment and decided not to give ordinary workers a break in their income tax. All of its decisions are piling more pressure on people who are already hard pressed. Surely the Taoiseach meets ordinary working people who are struggling. He must hear their stories of worry and stress, so why does he not do something about it? At one of my clinics last weekend, I met two teachers. They have two children in college. They have to pay for their dates and their fees. Their third child is due to start college next September. They have had to ask him to take a year out when he finishes the leaving certificate because they simply cannot afford to send him to college. Imagine that. We now have a situation whereby two teachers are so hammered by a cost-of-living crisis that is completely out of control that they have had to ask their child to look towards their future and not go to college when he should be doing so. It is bill after bill, and they simply cannot take it any more.

This couple are not alone, and the Taoiseach knows that. Working people are drowning in a wave of sky-high bills. They see absolutely no end in sight. There will be real tension when people's electricity bills land. The Government pushed back against proposals to get energy costs down. It ignored a major report which shows that companies are not passing on the drop in wholesale prices to Irish households. It acts as if this is not even happening. It needs to get off the bench and needs to start fighting the corner for ordinary households, because they simply cannot take it anymore. The Government needs to stop protecting these big companies and give regulators the powers they need to end the price gouging and stop this rip-off.

Feiceann daoine nach bhfuil aon deireadh ag teacht ar an ngéarchéim sa chostas maireachtála. Tá Fianna Fáil agus Fine Gael breá sásta seasamh siar agus ligean do na comhlachtaí móra seo leas a bhaint as daoine. Caithfidh an Rialtas a phost a dhéanamh agus céimeanna a thógáil chun cuidiú is cosaint a thabhairt do theaghlaigh.

The Government refused to include a cost-of-living package in the budget. Now it is refusing to include meaningful measures in the Finance Bill to help workers and families cope with runaway prices. My question is simple. Is this it? Is this all the Government has for families? Is it just going to leave these households on their own? Will the Government do

anything to tackle runaway prices as people face a rip-off winter that will push them even further back?

**The Taoiseach:** Ní aontaím in aon chor leis an Teachta. Tá an-chuid déanta ag an Rialtas seo maidir leis an gcostas maireachtála. Tá i bhfad níos mó déanta againn ná aon rialtas riamh i stair na tíre. Tá an-chuid déanta againn maidir le teaghlaigh ar ioncam íseal sa tír seo go háirithe. Is é an rud agus an cinneadh a rinneamar ná níos mó a thabhairt do dhaoine atá ag fulaingt agus faoi bhrú.

I reject completely the Deputy's assertion that the Government has not responded to the cost-of-living issues. Without question, over the past three to four years there has been a significant increase in inflation, particularly in the immediate aftermath of Covid and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which had a damaging impact on energy prices. Inflation went as high as 10%. The inflation rate is now back down to about 2%. The IMF is saying that in Ireland's case, it will come down to about 1.7% over the next two years. I acknowledge that there is elevated pressure and that prices are at a higher level because of that inflationary period, but remember that we brought in free schoolbooks for every child in this country and free hot school meals for every school. We also reduced transport costs. We reduced drug payment costs significantly over the past number of years and extended eligibility for access to general practitioners, which eases the cost of living in a permanent way for many families.

The Deputy ignores all of that and condemns us for not giving energy credits to the wealthiest in society. That is Sinn Féin's argument here this morning. I know what Sinn Féin said during the energy crisis. It took the Liz Truss approach to dealing with it and wanted to bail out the companies.

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** The Government gave them tax breaks

**The Taoiseach:** Sinn Féin wanted to give a blank cheque to the energy companies when we had that real energy crisis in the after-----

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** The Government gave tax breaks.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** We did not give them-----

**The Taoiseach:** Yes, you did. You put forward the very same proposal that Liz Truss brought forward in the UK-----

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** You did not read it. If you read it, you would understand it.

**The Taoiseach:** -----which had catastrophic impacts on the UK at the time, and on the Prime Minister of the day too.

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** You would not let Bertie run but you are robbing his ideas.

**The Taoiseach:** In the recent budget, we increased the child support payment by over €16 for those over 12 and by an extra €8 for those under 12. That is a significant permanent package to enhance the approach to addressing child poverty issues in this country. The working family payment threshold has increased by €60 a week, which will allow more families to qualify or to get support. We have extended the fuel allowance, and between 24% and 26% of households will benefit from the fuel allowance. We have brought in pension auto-enrolment, with significant State investment, which will benefit about 750,000 workers into the future.

We have focused on protection of jobs in this budget, particularly in the context of the research and development tax relief. Jobs and the protection of jobs are the most effective way to enable people to deal with high costs of living. The fuel allowance has been increased. In addition, the reduced 9% VAT rate on gas and electricity bills has been extended to 2030, which is a significant measure by any yardstick in terms of costs in this regard. The renter's tax credit has been extended until the end of 2028, which will help and is helping renters. Mortgage interest relief is extended for two more years for certain homeowners. That supports middle class families who are carrying mortgage costs.

Significant changes have been made to third level education eligibility. The income thresholds are significantly high now, well over €100,000 for eligibility for grants and for fees. The evidence for that lies in the exponential growth in third level education in this country.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** Let us look at what is actually happening under the Government's watch. A total of 300,000 households are in debt with their electricity bills. One in five children is in poverty under its watch.

Now today, I have told the Taoiseach two teachers who want to send their child to college - who wants to go to college - cannot afford to send them because of the policies he has implemented because the Government has failed to grasp the nettle here when it comes to the cost-of-living crisis.

To be honest, I have listened to what the Taoiseach has had to say here today which is people are imagining this cost-of-living crisis. Clearly from what he is telling us is, the Government has done all these things that are alleviating it. Well, they are not working. As Taoiseach, you need to take leadership and a bit ownership on this. The Taoiseach needs to grasp this nettle to say yes, there is a serious cost-of-living crisis and this is what I am going to do. The Government needs to accept the reality that what it has been doing to this point has pushed more people into poverty, into debt and has pushed more children into homelessness and poverty.

What people want to hear from the Taoiseach today is what is he going to do now to help them.

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**The Taoiseach:** I go by the metric of consistent poverty------

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** Poverty.

**The Taoiseach:** -----and real deprivation, not relative. The Deputy has been using relative all along. That is her figures.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** You should include housing in it if you are interested in doing something.

**The Taoiseach:** Second, the numbers going to college are increasing significantly year-on-year.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** It does not matter.

**The Taoiseach:** There is no evidence base to support what the Deputy is saying in respect of that. In terms of the energy question------

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** So they are liars.

**The Taoiseach:** There is no doubt there is a fundamental issue in terms of the regulatory framework that governs our energy markets, not just in Ireland but across the European Union, particularly its linkage to gas prices.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** What are you going to do about it?

**The Taoiseach:** That is the more fundamental issue that has to be dealt with and addressed. I make the point there is a balance here. What Sinn Féin wanted to do was spend an extra €4 billion on top of what the Government spent. We have increased public expenditure by 7.5% which is quite high. Sinn Féin wanted to add another €4 billion to that-----

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** To deliver the hospital beds.

**The Taoiseach:** -----which would have increased inflation by 2%. That is what you proposed. That would add to the cost of living and would add to prices. Those are not my figures, that is by the rule of thumb that is deployed by the Central Bank.

*(Interruptions)*

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** I condemn the awful scenes we saw in Citywest last night. One far-right account in advance of the riot posted online that "Citywest IPAS centre needs to be stormed." That was the clear goal last night, to overrun the accommodation centre. This was not done to protect children or the community, even if that is what the organisers claimed to the people they brought along with them. The organisers were intent on sowing chaos. It was done to whip up fear, create division and terrify vulnerable people. I commend gardaí for containing the violence and bringing it under control.

The alleged sexual assault of a ten-year-old girl who was supposed to be in the care of the State is shocking on so many levels. My thoughts are with her and her family. People across the country are rightly horrified. The alleged perpetrator is now in jail. He was not in Citywest

last night but innocent men, women and children were. Vulnerable international protection applicants who have every right to be here, all would have been terrified by the riot outside. Many are now no doubt living in fear. After the last riots in Dublin, many children of colour did not turn up to school across the city the next day. They were afraid to leave their homes, afraid their skin colour would make them a target. You have to imagine that is happening again today. People of colour, all over the city, now scared and on high alert. I wonder how children who are living in Citywest are feeling today. I wonder how many of them felt safe enough to go to school. It is disgusting that an alleged sexual assault on one vulnerable child has resulted in other children being terrorised.

Last night's rioting was orchestrated by far-right actors online. They pedal racist myths that international protection applicants are more prone to crimes against women and children. They openly incite violence and celebrate it when it happens. While they spread their dangerous and divisive disinformation online, there is an onus on everyone in this Chamber to counter that rhetoric. We must use language carefully and factually, continue to point out there is no link between migration and crime, counter racist innuendo about asylum seekers and highlight the vast majority of deportation orders have nothing to do with public safety concerns. They are issued because people do not meet the very narrow criteria to make a successful asylum application.

What measures are being put in place to ensure that vulnerable men, women and children in Citywest are kept safe, and have threats been made against any other IPAS centres?

**The Taoiseach:** First, I thank the Deputy for raising the issue in the manner she has; it is a very important issue. In the first instance, I too want to thank An Garda Síochána for its bravery, courage and professionalism-----

**Deputies:** Hear, hear.

**The Taoiseach:** ----- in dealing with a very serious and grave situation last evening, where the Deputy correctly said, innocent people were threatened in terms of their own safety and security, particularly children, and also the surrounding neighbourhoods where walls were apparently damaged for people to get missiles to throw against the gardaí.

The gardaí come from our community. They are there to protect us all. It beggars belief that these people would articulate such vile abuse of members of An Garda Síochána and would then attack them in a very serious way which could cause injury and damage if they did not have their protective clothing. It needs to be dealt with robustly. We are very clear, and the Minister for Justice, Deputy O'Callaghan, is very clear we are in total solidarity with An Garda Síochána and that our criminal justice system needs to hold the people responsible for last evening to account. We wish the female garda who was injured the very best. It was a very difficult situation those young gardaí faced last evening and they should not have to face that.

Also, it is a matter of genuine and sincere concern the alleged assault on a ten-year old-girl but the whole circumstances surrounding that is a matter of deep concern and our thoughts are with that ten-year-old young child and her family and so on. Our job in the State is to protect and support that child. That child, in my observation, was not protected by the State and that

is it. I do not mean that is it - I am calling it that way. We then have to respond as a State to that.

I have been consistently raising this issue, certainly for a long time but with greater intensity in the past number of months, of the attacks on ethnicity and I have condemned attacks on people because of their ethnicity, colour or creed. I have met with different groups who have articulated concerns to me. Young people, in the context of the child poverty group that was formed, have told me the fears they have. I do not like using this phrase but these are Irish citizens who may be of a different ethnicity - Asian ethnicity or whatever, it does not matter - but the point I am trying to make is they were articulating to me they were afraid to go into town. Some of their siblings were afraid of being chased home from schools. Employees are being attacked. Employers have reported this to me.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Taoiseach. He can come back in.

**The Taoiseach:** As a society, we need to address that. I am very clear about that but equally then, we must also be open to voices - not last night now - but in this House and elsewhere, who raise issues and who would not condone at all what happened last night. It is important we try to have a civilised debate here. I am not saying the Deputy is not doing that, but I just noticed things yesterday. We have to engage as an Oireachtas.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Taoiseach is over time. Deputy Cairns will be coming back in.

**The Taoiseach:** We must protect our fundamental values. The dignity of every human being matters. I am 100% with the Deputy on that.

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** I genuinely welcome the Taoiseach's comments. I also hope he will practice a bit more of what he is preaching today because they are welcome. In comparison to yesterday, when Deputy Fitzmaurice raised increasing knife crime in the same breath as concerns about the asylum system, the Taoiseach's response was to thank him, and I quote, "for raising the issue in a responsible and fair way." Then when my colleague, Deputy Quaide, later pulled him up on that and said we had a duty not to use that kind of language which inflames tensions, the Taoiseach accused him of being intolerant and asked him to reflect on his comments.

The Taoiseach should reflect on that. He should show leadership and counter false narratives like that rather than indulge them. I am not saying that we cannot discuss the asylum system; we absolutely have to do so, but it should not be too much to ask that we do so in a fact-based way and that we shut down racist tropes. This is something we all have to do at every opportunity. I hope the Taoiseach will do it too in the future. What plans are there to counter those false narratives?

**The Taoiseach:** I do not preach, but I do practice. In carrying out my duties as Taoiseach or as a public representative and in all of my life, I do so by means of actions and practice. These speak much louder than words or preaching. I take exception to the Deputy's suggestion-----

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** I just-----

**The Taoiseach:** -----that I should practice what I preach. I will outline my position on this. In everything I do as a public representative, I will embrace all people, whether it is in connection with a school, a community or whatever. I will go out of my way to do that; it is the right thing to do. I do not expect any credit or anything like that. It is the natural thing we should do, and that is what I do.

In respect of Deputy Fitzmaurice's comments, I know that Deputy Cairns and her party took exception. If we keep drawing hard lines-----

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** He was wrong.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy, please do no interrupt.

**The Taoiseach:** Could I please just make a very important point? If we keep drawing hard lines, we are giving ground to the people who did what they did last night. There are people in this House who may not share our perspective entirely on this. It is important that we hear those voices-----

**Deputy Holly Cairns:** The Deputy conflated knife crime with migrants, and you welcomed his response.

**The Taoiseach:** ----- and then address the issues by means of a fact-based and evidence-based approach. If you keep-----

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** That is pure arrogance.

**The Taoiseach:** ----- with a certain degree of arrogance-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Taoiseach, time is up.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** The last resort of the desperate.

**The Taoiseach:** What you are saying is, "We know best. Don't be-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Taoiseach, you are way over time for the third time today.

**The Taoiseach:** -----stupid over there, and, please, come with us." That will not work. If you are trying to score points off people, it is not going to work.

**Deputy Gary Gannon:** There is best practice. It is not good form

**An Ceann Comhairle:** I call Deputy Brian Stanley.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** I wish to raise the many problems in the National Ambulance Service. Staff are doing their best but there are problems beyond their control. I will outline some of those problems. There are not enough staff or ambulances. We have approximately 1,500 staff. Scotland, which has a similar population, has more than double that number. We have 675 operational ambulances in the service. Scotland has more than double that number.

There is a problem with so-called dynamic deployment, and I really want to push the Taoiseach on this. What dynamic deployment means is that ambulances can be sent anywhere. An ambulance based in Laois could be sent as far as Cork or Waterford. Ambulances are being sent that far. Sometimes they are turned back when they are within a couple of miles of their destination because a local ambulance has got there a minute or two quicker. A crew can do more than 600 km across a shift and only pick up one or two patients Recently in Laois, there was only one crew and one ambulance on call. When the crew clocked in, they were immediately sent to Wexford. Meanwhile, Laois was left without an ambulance. There is one ambulance station. On Monday and Tuesday nights, there is only one ambulance available. An ambulance can take up two hours to arrive at locations within the county - it might not even arrive at all - because of this. That is no fault of the staff.

As stated, only one ambulance is on call on Monday and Tuesday nights. That ambulance can be sent to destinations three counties away, which has actually happened. Recently, a young person died less than a mile from the hospital. There is, as already noted, the one ambulance base in the county and there was no ambulance was available to pick up that child. Two ambulances were on call at the time but both were attending calls in other counties.

We have less cover in the county than we had 15 years ago, despite the fact that the population has increased by over 40% and now stands at over 100,000. There is also a problem with the rapid-response vehicles in the county, namely the cars used by advanced paramedics. Again, there is less cover now. The drivers of those cars used to be allowed to bring them home. Regardless of whether they were on shift or not, if they were contacted, they would leave from their homes and rapidly deploy to the scene of an accident or emergency. They not doing that now because some genius decided that they had benefit-in-kind because they had cars with all the signs on them that they might be using to do the shopping or something like that. As a result, these vehicles are left at the base and the extra cover that people were offering on a voluntary basis is no longer there.

In addition to everything I have outlined, we have a staff shortage and retention problems because of staff burnout. The *Irish Medical Times* reported earlier this year that the critical shortage of advanced paramedics is endangering life. There are targets in this regard. I have them here. They were sent to me in the form of a reply to a parliamentary question I tabled recently. In a situation involving a life-threatening illness or injury, the target time for advanced paramedics to reach the scene is 18 minutes and 59 seconds. That is only happening 45% of the time. If you set a target that low, of course you will not meet it. It is ridiculous. Will the Government put an end to the madness of so-called dynamic deployment? Will it invest in more ambulances and increase the number of staff available? Will it step up recruitment immediately?

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. At one level, the National Ambulance Service and pre-hospital emergency care have been transformed over the past 20

years in terms of the professionalisation of emergency medical technicians, EMTs, and of the level of response in general. There has been significant investment in the service. This year, €8 million has been allocated for new service developments, for 180 additional posts in the service and for increased capacity for aeromedical services. As of 30 August last, total staff numbers stood at 2,400. That is a 25% increase since 2020, meaning that 502 extra people have joined the service. Some 85% of those staff work in direct patient-facing roles.

The issue of dynamic deployment has arisen since the configuration was developed many years ago. On the surface, I can instinctively empathise with the Deputy's point because it does mean that ambulances are travelling long distances. We have to respond to this in an evidence-based way. I will talk to the Minister for Health and have further engagement with the National Ambulance Service and the professionals involved as to what is the optimal deployment of staff and ambulances and what is the best way to do it. In Dublin, for example, there has been a unique situation where Dublin Fire Brigade has provided a very effective and efficient ambulance service for many years. The HSE and the service were arguing the toss as to how to reform and reconfigure it. In that context, one view for a long time was "If it's not broke, don't fix it.".

We should be open to examining what is the optimal way to deploy the resources. Many professionals would say that what they are doing is the optimal way to do it. The Deputy is articulating a different perspective. I respect the points he is making, but I do think we probably need to look at this in a more evidence-based way. Perhaps the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health could examine it in more detail. The professionalisation of the service and the development two dedicated helicopter emergency medical services, for example, represents a significant expansion that is enhancing our response. As the Deputy knows, the key responder, namely an EMT or a first responder who is qualified and professional, can save lives. There have been a lot of very positive reforms and a great deal of significant investment in the service in the past number of years. There have been issues and, from time to time, Members have raised the matter to which Deputy Stanley refers.

**Deputy Brian Stanley:** The Taoiseach is correct about the investment, but we will not get the benefit of it because of the way the system is configured. The Taoiseach used the word "evidence". I will tell him what the evidence is. A county has no cover because the ambulance that is on call has to go to an emergency two or three counties away. That cannot be allowed to continue. That is the way Laois has been left on two nights each week. If a person is injured or is in a life-threatening situation only a mile or a half mile from the hospital, there is no ambulance to collect them. This is because the two ambulances that are there during the day have been sent somewhere else. I am not arguing for them to be kept within a strict limit, but a radius needs to imposed. I previously raised the case of a farmer who a few years ago was left lying in a farmyard in the Clonaslee area for two hours because there was no ambulance available in Portlaoise to be sent to assist him.

The officials will give the Taoiseach answers and will blind him with the figures they have available, but he needs to look at the reality of what is happening. I am spelling out the reality in black and white.

I am asking the Taoiseach to review this dynamic deployment. The Government needs to do it, invest in more ambulances and step up recruitment of staff.

**The Taoiseach:** To be fair, we are talking about 430,000 urgent and emergency calls in 2024. That is the scale of this issue. It is a 32,000-calls increase, or an 8% increase, on 2023. The Deputy has done the statistics. Performance is improving with 72.5% in 2023 to 73.2%. against a 75% target for life-threatening cardiac or respiratory arrest. We have to look at alternative care pathways as well. The Deputy mentioned the rapid response car. I have had experiences myself where that has been far more effective and fast in cases that maybe did not quite require an ambulance once one had the confidence of either a GP or a medic who could say "Look, we can manage this in a certain way and get the person to a hospital". We have to use the resource to the optimum. That is the objective. One of the biggest issues has been turnover time at hospitals at times of high demand in emergency departments. They are working to improve that outcome.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Before I call the next speaker, at the behest of Deputy Richard O'Donoghue, I welcome Greybridge vintage club to the Gallery.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I have some great friends with me today. I have been involved in Greybridge classic club for the past 15 years. The youngest member, Louise Crowley, is in the Gallery and she is the Limerick IFA chairperson - the youngest chairperson in the organisation. She has been a member of the club since it started and is also its secretary. The Macra na Feirme president and the outgoing president, Elaine Houlihan, are here as well.

These people have been working around the area raising money for charities and people in need. Cliona's Foundation is one of the main beneficiaries of the Greybridge classic club. A total of €300,000 has been raised since its beginnings. We have a Christmas light run on 30 December in Limerick to raise money for vulnerable people, including Cliona's Foundation and Milford hospice. No matter who we ask when we go around the county, and all vintage clubs across the country are doing it, even if people do not have a few bob themselves, they come up with it and support people who are vulnerable.

We are having a presidential election. I will not mention any names but we have a candidate who has withdrawn from the race. This question is coming from members of the Taoiseach's party who have asked me this so I need to ask him. Is it correct that if that candidate who has withdrawn gets 12.5% of the vote, the Government will be reimbursed for the money it has spent to date and the taxpayers of this country will end up having to pay for that? It will come out of the public purse, which is raised by taxpayers. If he reaches a certain percentage, even though he is not running for the presidency, will the taxpayers of Ireland will pay for the mistake of running him in the first place during a cost-of-living crisis and after a budget that gave nothing back to working people but increased their taxes? This is the question the members of the Taoiseach's party are asking. They want to know whether it will be refunded for putting up a ghost candidate during a cost-of-living crisis.

**The Taoiseach:** I welcome all those who have come from Limerick and from the Greybridge vintage club. I mention vintage clubs all over the country, which do a lot of charity. We all have experienced that in summer festivals or whatever. They bring a bit of excitement, colour and novelty to events and, in the process, raise significant funding. We thank them for that and

the work they do. I will not be able to join the run in Limerick closer to Christmas but I will do a swim on New Year's Day.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I will supply his tractor.

**The Taoiseach:** That is my commitment. I am not going to dive into the ocean with a tractor. It is wonderful and reflects the very strong value of community in the country. I acknowledge that.

In the context of the cost-of-living crisis, the Government has taken a lot of measures that I outlined in response to an earlier question, particularly in terms of supporting families and increasing the child support payment by €16 for a child over 12 and €8 for a child under 12; extending the fuel allowance to the working family payment, which now means that about 26% of families are covered by the fuel allowance; continuing with the free books scheme, which brings about huge savings for families; and the hot school meals, which have been very effective for many families. We have also kept VAT on electricity and gas prices at 9%, so we have done a lot in respect of the cost of living but on this occasion, we have targeted it. We have provided schools with the highest ever capitation grant, which is €50 per pupil for primary and €20 per pupil for post-primary. This will help schools to meet the cost of living-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** What about the presidency?

**The Taoiseach:** I am coming to it. The Deputy did mention the cost of living. Just as he dealt with the question, I will reply to him in like fashion. What we did in the budget in raising public expenditure was to invest in services that matter to people, so we prioritised disability, child poverty and infrastructure for more roads, rail, buses, schools and healthcare facilities across the board. That matters to people.

In fairness to the Deputy, he left Fianna Fáil a long time ago and is now an Independent. His concern for our members is touching but I respectfully suggest that we will deal with that within our party in terms of the issues. The law is the law in respect of deposits and returns. The people will decide. I know we cannot comment on the presidency.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Taoiseach is running out of time and he cannot comment.

**The Taoiseach:** I would just make the point-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Taoiseach can come back in again.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** I thank the Taoiseach for his vague answer. The bottom line is the taxpayer will pay regardless. The vintage clubs are very important to me for one reason along with the men's sheds and women's sheds. The vintage clubs look after our ancestors and our past and use it for the present to raise funds. The Taoiseach is right. I did leave Fianna Fáil a good number of years ago and am now a member of Independent Ireland, a political party for the people of Ireland. It gives me a voice which I did not have within the Fianna Fáil Party and I will keep using that voice. I want a clear answer to my question. Will the taxpayers

of Ireland have to pay for a candidate who is not running? With the laws that are in place, will the taxpayers pay?

**The Taoiseach:** I have just answered it - with the laws that are in place. The law is the law.

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** So the taxpayer-----

**The Taoiseach:** That is it. I admire the Deputy's commitment to vintage clubs, men's sheds and women's sheds. I have had a spin in Jack Lynch's car myself. We have enjoyed all of that. The juxtaposition of vintage clubs, men's sheds and women's sheds with the presidency and the rules that apply perplexes me-----

**Deputy Richard O'Donoghue:** It is to do with charity and raising funding.

**The Taoiseach:** -----but it is a very novel way to come around the subject matter. The law is the law. People are entitled to vote in whatever way they wish and if that means deposits or whatever are returned, so be it. I do not think people vote on that basis.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** It is not normal for me to comment but I too would like to endorse vintage clubs. I attended a charity vintage run on Sunday where there were 638 vehicles. That is a huge offering in respect of a charitable contribution to any community, so well done, particularly to the clubs in Wexford.

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

**Deputy Gillian Toole:** At this point, every Member of Dáil Éireann has received an email with information about protected disclosure, PD17/2025. That protected disclosure was made by a conscientious health professional. I am raising it as a matter of utmost gravity because, as far back as June and July of this year, that healthcare professional has attempted to get the matters relating to public health addressed by HIQA, the Department of justice, the Department of Health and the Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland, to name but four. At this point, the lack of the issue being addressed goes to the heart of public trust in our democracy.

The submission is evidence based and contains a combination of clinical information and ethical common sense. Despite the seriousness of the allegations and repeated good faith to follow-up, no meaningful investigation has been undertaken to date. Fiosrú, the body tasked with examining such inaction, has received complaints about this failure to investigate crimes and has thus far failed to act. Government Departments and State agencies are implicated, yet all people in Ireland are equal before the law. Our Constitution does not allow the State to shield itself from scrutiny.

There is a profound conflict of interest here. The Garda cannot credibly investigate wrongdoing when those accused sit within the structures of direct Garda oversight and funding. Will the Taoiseach now commit to the establishment of an independent, external investigation into the handling, or non-handling, of these serious reports by An Garda Síochána, the

Department of Health and the Department of justice? Will he publish the correspondence and internal assessments, which thus far have resulted in no investigation being opened?

**The Taoiseach:** First of all, Ireland's whistleblower protection framework is governed by the Protected Disclosures Act 2014. There are set frameworks - legal and so on - in terms of governing the handling and management of protected disclosures. That Act was significantly strengthened by the Protected Disclosures (Amendment) Act 2022. This legislation commenced operation on 1 January 2023. It gives effect to the European Union whistleblowing directive. It provides protection against penalisation of workers in public and private sectors. The Act also introduced a number of significant changes, including that the burden now rests on the employer to prove that any action taken was justified and unrelated to the disclosure. There is much more. It expanded the protections to a broader category of workers, including contractors, volunteers, agency workers, board members, shareholders and job applicants. Section 7 protects against retaliation, unfair dismissal and so forth. Workers who experience penalisation have access to the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, and so forth.

The Office of the Protected Disclosures Commissioner, OPDC, was established in 2023. It plays a key role in ensuring disclosures are directed to the appropriate prescribed persons. This is important. There has to be a systemic approach to the handling of disclosures. In 2024, the OPDC received 262 reports, with the vast majority being transmitted to the relevant authorities. To support whistleblowers, the disclosures commissioner continues to fund Transparency International Ireland, which operates a free speak-up helpline and legal advisory centre. In 2025, funding of €368,000 was allocated to that.

The Deputy raised issues of how the protected disclosure in this case was handled by the relevant agencies. Fiosrú is there as an external, independent entity to handle complaints in respect of members of An Garda Síochána. It is there in that context. HIQA is there as an independent body that is focused on quality within the healthcare system and also carries out investigations, inquiries and so on. What the Deputy seems to be suggesting is that we should either add a new layer to this or reintroduce the Oireachtas or the Executive into examining every disclosure. I do not think that is feasible. It could be challenging as well, given the volume of disclosures.

Section 2A under the Protected Disclosures (Amendment) Act does-----

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Taoiseach

**The Taoiseach:** -----provide for a statutory review of the Act to be commenced not later than five years from the date of the Act. That review is due to commence in 2027-----

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

**The Taoiseach:** -----and a public consultation will be carried out prior to this review.

**Deputy Gillian Toole:** All of the processes have been followed, including contacting the OPDC. By referencing the other agencies, my point is that there is silence. This is a matter of serious public health. When I cross-check the criteria and scope with the Covid-19 evaluation

committee that the Department of the Taoiseach established, under scope and exclusions are the very matters included within this protected disclosure: the care of older people in nursing homes between 2020 and 2022; the administration of gene therapy to people during the same period; and various other evidential and research-based issues that have arisen since then, even in other jurisdictions, and have been the subject of parliamentary questions.

I would again ask the question - will there be an inquiry into this protected disclosure as a matter of urgency?

**The Taoiseach:** Two things. First of all, in terms of Covid-19, the Government has established an evaluation of the management of and the State response to Covid-19-----

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** Toothless.

**The Taoiseach:** -----which was an unprecedented public health event across the world that had the most significant and severe impacts on societies and on people. The more fundamental objective has always been to try to protect and save lives. People acted in very good faith to do that. I just want to make that point.

What we are reluctant to do is add a new layer now because this will go on forever. I do not mean that in any disrespectful way. There has to be a system to deal with protected disclosures. We cannot add new layers. I think we can review it in the context of how the Act is working but, ideally, we should be able to deal with protected disclosures within the legislation and people should respond.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Thank you, Taoiseach

**The Taoiseach:** The last thing we want is more and more public inquiries, including statutory-based public inquiries, which can go on for years. That is not satisfactory either.

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

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** I also welcome the Greybridge Classic Club. I would only love to be part of its Christmas lights run. It sounds amazing.

Property tax is going up for people and every household will be hit with a higher bill. Over the course of the weekend, I held a number of clinics - in the city, Clifden and other places in Connemara. At every single clinic, a pensioner came to say they were extremely worried about the cost going up because they could not make ends meet as it was and this would put further pressure on them. Many had not even heard this was happening and got a huge fright when they got the letter through the door asking them to fill out a form and they saw that their property tax was going to go up. They cannot believe this is going to happen. The Taoiseach must be aware of this. We are talking about pensioners who are extremely worried about paying this local property tax, LPT. They know it will go up and are asking if it can be changed or stopped. It is coming directly from the Government. House prices are out of control and it is only going to continue.

**The Taoiseach:** I think the Minister for Finance announced this quite some time back. It is part of a regular review of the LPT. The Minister has worked extremely hard to make sure that any increases will be modest, particularly in terms of the valuations and so on.

He did that a number of years ago and effectively managed it. Remember that the revenue goes to improving and enhancing services that people in this House come in looking for every single day. It is a balance. We have been warned, the Government has been warned, that it is spending too much. The Opposition does not think we are spending enough. Some in opposition think we are being reckless with the economy but then they want us to spend more. There are challenges and difficulties here. We are very conscious of the impact of this on people, and that was why we increased the old-age pension by €10.

**Deputy Marie Sherlock:** I want to raise the publication of the national framework for the management of endometriosis in Ireland. This was an eagerly awaited report, with a huge weight of expectation, given the enormous failing of thousands of women with this desperately debilitating condition. There are welcome aspects to the report in terms of the greater commitment to investment and training, but endometriosis sufferers reading this report have huge concerns. They are deeply hurt by the references to paracetamol. If paracetamol was sufficient to deal with this condition, we would not be talking about it here. They are outraged at the replacement of the endometriosis surgery abroad scheme. It does not look like progress when we look at the details. It looks like a monumental backwards step. There are no references to the hospitals in Romania and Greece to which Irish women are currently travelling, and there are new conditions. What assurances can the Taoiseach give that women will still be able to travel abroad to the expert clinics they need?

**The Taoiseach:** Yes, women will be able to travel abroad.

**Deputy Marie Sherlock:** They will not.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** Deputy, this is not a back-and-forth. You can email the Taoiseach.

**The Taoiseach:** The report is broadly welcome in terms of the progress that is being made and has been made in the past two to three years in particular, when compared to where we were. We will continue to work to enhance and improve services, particularly the specialist services required abroad. Women will be facilitated to avail of such services, and the HSE is clear on that. We can revert to the Deputy with the details.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** Uisce Éireann has recently been fined €3,500 for a pollution event that occurred in Cavan. This pollution event resulted in a 2 km stretch of riverbed being covered with sewage fungus and hundreds of brown trout dying. Unfortunately, this is not a one-off incident. If we look, Uisce Éireann is repeatedly fined for breaches of its licence and for causing pollution events. Unfortunately, the paltry €3,500 fine is laughable, considering the damage that is being done. This follows hot on the heels of a major and catastrophic fish kill in the Blackwater, County Cork. We need a complete overhaul of how the State deals with a pollution event. What we see is State agencies essentially treating our rivers like drains and

not protecting valuable river systems. We need a rapid response team, a cross-agency team, to be set up immediately to quickly respond to pollution incidents and with the ability to collect whatever samples are required. When incidents are found, there has to be enforcement and fines commensurate with the damage caused.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. It is a fair point that she is making. State agencies should not be polluting waterways and our rivers. Certainly, Uisce Éireann should not be. There should be severe penalties. To be fair, on the other hand, Uisce Éireann develops a lot of wastewater treatment plants, which are very beneficial to water quality. It has to put up with a lot of objections and judicial reviews to stop wastewater treatment plants being developed and so on, so the other side of the coin has to be acknowledged. However, it should be very vigilant in terms of not creating situations like the one in Cavan that the Deputy has outlined. I do not have the full details of that. The Blackwater fish kill was appalling. The EPA has not been in a position to identify who was responsible, but it was catastrophic in its impact on water quality, fish life and so forth. It is a matter we will keep under review.

**Deputy Paul Murphy:** There has been shockingly little coverage of the scandal of the illegal felling of over 30 acres of native broadleaf trees and mature hedgerows in Cork that date back to at least the 1800s, if not earlier. It was revealed by *The Journal* after an FOI to the National Parks and Wildlife Service last week discovered that nearly 2 km of ancient, long-established hedgerows with high biodiversity value for local wildlife were removed. Despite being refused permission to access the site via Coillte forestry lands, people continued to move their machinery onto the site for this illegal work through Coillte land. Is it going to be the standard that nature and biodiversity are to be sacrificed for profits in Cork? It is not far away from the Blackwater River, where there was an enormous fish kill, which I raised previously with the Taoiseach. How was this allowed to happen in the first place? How is the Government going to act to ensure it cannot happen again?

**The Taoiseach:** First, I have to get a report on that. It is not the standard, and it is unfair to say it is the standard by which we are going to deal with biodiversity and our natural habitats. We have doubled the budget. I was involved in the last five years with the then Minister of State with responsibility for the NPWS, Senator Malcolm Noonan, and the Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan. We have doubled the budget for the NPWS and have given it significant momentum. It has a strong organisational structure within the Department of housing and heritage. We are adding to our national parks. What happened here is wrong, fundamentally. I have read about it, but I need to get a comprehensive report on what transpired. It is unacceptable, in my view. We are consistently looking at ways to enhance our biodiversity, create greater opportunities for rewilding and add to our national park network. We did that successfully in the last Government and we want to do more in this Government.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Every day, on my way home from work, I pass by the Four Courts on the south side of the River Liffey. Every day, dozens of people are openly dealing in drugs and taking drugs. People are slumped on the pathway just feet from passing traffic. It is a human disaster. If I see this every day, the gardaí see it every day. Why do they tolerate it? In Meath, I talk to people who are being crucified by crime and antisocial behaviour that is happening every single night. If it is happening every night, the gardaí know about it. Why

are they tolerating it? I spoke to a taxi driver recently who told me of a drug dealer where people drive up, get their drugs and go home. It is a drive-through drug location. If he knows about it, the gardaí know about it. Why are the gardaí tolerating this type of crime happening on a regular basis? Is it because of the lack of resources, the lack of morale or poor management?

**The Taoiseach:** Gardaí do not tolerate it. I would respectfully say-----

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** They do. They see it every day.

**The Taoiseach:** I do not believe they do at all. The gardaí do very strong work in terms of the whole issue pertaining to drug abuse and the trafficking of drugs.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Drive down to the Four Courts any day.

**The Taoiseach:** In fact, we have increased resources and we will continue to increase resources. There are now record numbers applying for An Garda Síochána. Events like last night take gardaí away from the front-line and where they would ordinarily be. There were so many gardaí there last evening to protect people, and those kinds of events draw from our capacity. In the general, normal work of An Garda Síochána, gardaí are very focused on this issue. Unfortunately, there are too many consumers of drugs in modern society and too many people take it as being habitual. There is severe addiction, which has to be dealt with through a healthcare response, with which I am sure the Deputy would agree. I would not be undermining the Garda response all the time.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** Go down to the Four Courts any day, Taoiseach.

**Deputy Aindrias Moynihan:** I need to raise with the Taoiseach the drug Veoza, which is a non-hormone-based therapy aimed at supporting people with menopause. It is particularly useful to cancer survivors who would have HRT contraindications and who cannot use hormone-based therapies. This drug has been going through the process of qualification for some time. At this stage, the manufacturer has responded, and the ball is very much with the pharmacoeconomic centre to carry out the assessment. I would ask that this be prioritised to get it through the system. It is more than just Veoza, however, because various other drugs may also be useful to people who cannot use hormone-based therapies. There needs to be a review of the free HRT scheme to extend it and ensure everybody is able to access it in one way or another.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank Deputy Moynihan for raising what is a very important issue. I recognise that this medication is particularly important for those with a history of hormone-sensitive cancers, such as breast cancer, who cannot take hormone replacement therapy due to the risk of cancer recurrence.

1 o'clock

I understand the real difference that this medication can make to a person's quality of life. In relation to this drug, as the Deputy knows, the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics, NCPE, recommended a full health technology assessment, HTA, of Veoza to assess its clinical effectiveness and cost effectiveness compared with the current standard of care. Subsequently, the HSE commissioned a full HTA and then a pre-submission consultation. On 20 August 2025, 16 months after it was commissioned by the HSE, a full HTA dossier was received from the company. I am advised that the HSE said that the application remains under consideration. We acknowledge the importance of this. Seventy-four drugs for cancer were reimbursed between 2021 and 2024.

**An Ceann Comhairle:** The Taoiseach and the Deputy may need to correspond further.

**The Taoiseach:** We will come back to the Deputy on this. I take note of his comments on other products and the extension of HRT.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** I raise the issue of home help, particularly in County Mayo. There are 265 homes waiting for home help. These are people who are deemed to need home help to be able to stay in their own home, but they do not have it. Home and Community Care Ireland, HCCI, is asking for two things, which I too advocate. It states that waiting lists are too often treated as a HSE operational issue, and not a political issue like children's assessments of need, outpatient appointments or accident and emergency trolleys. That must change in relation to home help. HCCI also wants to see a waiting list task force, targeted funding for the black spot areas and block booking of home care hours. This has to be done, as does retention and recruitment.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell):** On the two points the Deputy raised in respect of Mayo, I met with the HSE to look at the waiting lists for each area. I want the numbers on those lists brought down. We have given additional funding this year for home care hours. On the waiting lists, it is about engaging directly with the HSE and looking at measures. The main focus of additional funding this year is to deal with the areas where we have waiting lists. I want those numbers brought them down and I am actively working on that with the HSE along with the officials in the Department.

**Deputy Ryan O'Meara:** Roscrea needs more gardaí. Last August, I was delighted to welcome five new gardaí to north Tipperary. They were going to Nenagh and Thurles, which is very positive and welcome. Unfortunately, however, Roscrea was left out. Roscrea Garda station essentially does not open any more, whether it is for policing or for someone to get a form signed for a passport. This is difficult for the town. A number of years ago, Roscrea had three sergeants, 18 to 20 front-line gardaí, two civilian staff and a detective. Today, the town has three sergeants, seven front-line gardaí and one garda on loan from Nenagh to fill basic staffing requirements. I am told that overtime and the loan of a garda from Nenagh are essentially just keeping gardaí out on the streets in cars in Roscrea. I have contacted the Minister and An Garda Síochána about this and Garda numbers in Roscrea. It is a town that desperately needs resources and representation. I ask for the Taoiseach's intervention to get more gardaí for Roscrea.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy has made a cogent and strong case for more gardaí in Roscrea. We are very conscious of this issue. I think about 11,000 applied to the Garda this year. We might have to look at training capacity to get more throughput. I think the Minister is looking at that. The Minister would acknowledge that in the past number of years, there was a concentration on Dublin. This was post-Covid and with the closure of the college during Covid. That has shifted now. Other cities have benefited. There is a stronger focus on the regions. In that context, I would hope that from the next throughput from the college, we could start allocating more gardaí to the regions and towns like Roscrea. I will certainly talk to the Minister. The Deputy has raised the issue and made a legitimate case, given the numbers he quoted. I will revert to him.

**Deputy Frankie Feighan:** Local government budgets will be challenging for many councils across Ireland this autumn. I am particularly concerned that the local authorities in both Sligo and Leitrim are awaiting payment from the Department of housing for the damage caused last January due to Storm Éowyn. I understand the figure is up to €1.5 million. The same local authorities have raised the local property tax, LPT, by 15% over the past six years and members have raised the commercial rates every year, including last year, by 5% to borrow money to meet the core funding obligations under capital plans for expansion. Local authorities in the north west, particularly in the north and western region, should not be left short-changed. I urge the Taoiseach to get what is owed paid and ensure the equalisation fund is not diluted for the smaller local authorities with a small rates and LPT base.

**The Taoiseach:** I appreciate the Deputy has raised this issue in terms of broader local authority financing and, specifically, in terms of Storm Éowyn. I will engage with the Minister for housing on this. Overall, in the past five years, significant resources have been allocated to local authorities. That has to be acknowledged. It is quite substantial on many fronts and a lot of work has been enabled because of that. However, demands, services and so on have created additional expenditure obligations. We are working with the Departments of Social Protection and community and rural development in respect of resourcing hubs and networks to deal with future storms. We saw in some areas where such networks were established that they were effective and played a huge role in helping the communities. I will come back to the Deputy on the specifics of reimbursement.

**Deputy Johnny Guirke:** The recently published Community Pharmacy Agreement 2025 outlines new service provisions and funding models for community pharmacies. Two areas of particular concern are the exclusion of blister packs or monitored dosage systems, MDS, from reimbursement under the agreement and restrictive provisions on phased dispensing, limiting its use and removing reimbursement in some cases. These omissions undermine safe medicines management for vulnerable patients and place additional strain on pharmacies, many of which currently provide these supports on a goodwill basis without funding. Blister packs or MDS help patients manage complex medication regimes safely and independently, reducing errors and hospital admissions. The new agreement explicitly excludes reimbursement for blister packs, despite acknowledging the importance of medicine optimisation. Pharmacies currently absorb the costs of preparing these packs, including time, staff and materials. This is not sustainable in the long term. Will the Taoiseach commit to recommendations to reinstate reimbursement for blister packs and amend the community pharmacy agreement to include

reimbursement for the supply and preparation of monitored dosage systems for patients on multiple long-term medicines or with cognitive impairments?

**The Taoiseach:** My understanding is that discussions are ongoing between the Department of Health and the Irish Pharmacy Union, IPU, in respect of these and other issues. I checked this with the Minister. I will ask the Minister to revert to the Deputy in relation to this. These agreements are hard negotiated. Huge resources go in now in terms of medical reimbursement and so on.

**Deputy Johnny Guirke:** The Government is hitting the most vulnerable here.

**The Taoiseach:** I will talk to the Minister in respect of where the negotiations are right now.

**Deputy Martin Daly:** I raise the issue of Scoil an Chroí Naofa National School in Ballinasloe, which serves one of the most deprived populations in the country. Some 300 children go to the school. The older school is from 1937 and the newer school is from 1973. When I had an occasion to visit in January, it was colder inside the school than it was outside. The difficulty we have now is that the school cannot take in any new students. People with means who can travel to other schools outside of the town are leaving. We are getting a concentration of deprivation in the centre of Ballinasloe. We need to progress the building of this school. It had planning issues for nearly 22 years. They have been resolved. The project is at stage 2b planning in the Department of education. I urge the Government to look at fast-tracking Ballinasloe's Scoil an Chroí Naofa National School given the circumstances it finds itself in.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. I know he is focused on increased services and facilities in Ballinasloe more generally. I will talk to the Minister for education in respect of Scoil an Chroí Naofa. Those buildings are clearly old. If the project is at stage 2b, I hope, with the capital allocation that has been given to education this year and through the national development plan, we will be in a position to progress this school on an accelerated basis. I will certainly talk to the Minister on the Deputy's behalf.

**Deputy Roderic O'Gorman:** Storm Éowyn was the largest storm ever experienced by ESB Networks. It followed less than two months after the previous largest storm, Storm Darragh. A total of 768,000 customers lost power.

One of the biggest gaps revealed by the storm response was the slow speed at which engineers from other countries were drafted in to help the ESB with repairs. Some homes did not see their power back until 18 days after the storm. The Government published the report on Storm Éowyn yesterday. There are plenty of good recommendations in it. However, there is only one line in a 100-page document about development of new mutual aid agreements with other European countries so we can boost the number of engineers we have working to restore power at short notice. A consequence of climate change will be more frequent and more severe weather events like Storm Éowyn. Is the Taoiseach confident that enough is being done to put in place agreements with other countries so we can get extra engineers quickly the next time we have a storm like this?

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising this. I agree with his points on the severity of the storm. Actually, I would be confident on that one, in terms of mutual aid assistance. I met with the ESB, Irish Water and others in the review and we did not pick up a sense that there was any foot-dragging or difficulty in terms of overseas engineers coming to Ireland from the UK or France, and crews coming to Ireland to help us in our hour of need. The French were particularly responsive. From memory, I think the United Kingdom was particularly responsive, just as we are via these mutual aid agreements when storms occur on the Continent. I will again check with the Minister and with the ESB. I would favour more mutual aid programmes, particularly with Europe, people who are near. That is the key in any major weather catastrophe, event or whatever. The most effective mutual aid programmes are those in close proximity to us.

**Deputy Malcolm Byrne:** We have worrying news from Arklow this morning. The Merck Life Sciences plant, which is located in the town, is scheduled to close in 2028. About 100 employes are impacted. I have been speaking with the company. There will be efforts to redeploy. Until now, Merck has been a very good employer. I know many of the people who are working there. It is critical, and I would like assurances, that every support will be given to those workers. Some will have to redeploy but I refer also to any necessary upskilling and retraining. I also call for us to seek a fresh plant for the site on the Vale Road. Arklow has a long and proud tradition in chemicals and pharmaceuticals. It is a vital sector for Irish society, so it is important that we can find a replacement plant there to provide high-value employment in Arklow as soon as possible.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising what is a very sad and challenging situation for Arklow and those working in the Merck Life Sciences plant. I will talk to the Minister, Deputy Peter Burke, and ensure the IDA and Enterprise Ireland respond - what normally happens now is that they do respond - and that each employee is engaged with in terms of their own individual choices regarding redeployment or alternative employment. That is important. I have witnessed it before where something can be created out of this, positively, I hope, in terms of future employment or creation of SMEs or smaller companies, but also then a replacement industry. It is an important facility that has potential. If an alternative company can be attracted into that facility, that would be very desirable. We will talk to IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland about that. The Department of Social Protection will also reach out to workers.

**Deputy Emer Currie:** Learner drivers never have to sit a driver test to roll over their learner permits. They just have to show they have booked or joined a waiting list for a test. Some have permits for years, contributing to a culture where learner permits are treated like full licences. The Road Safety Authority has had more than a decade to prepare for the closure of this loophole. The Minister of State, Deputy Canney, has made progress, promising learner drivers will have to take a test before getting their third permit, once test waiting times drop to ten weeks by September. That is a target that he achieved. Now we are playing another waiting game. The Department of Transport says regulations are effectively ready. The RSA says it is finalising an implementation plan and it does not have a timeline. I say no more delays. The Minister can and should intervene again to set a date to close this loophole once and for all.

**The Taoiseach:** I thank the Deputy for raising this. It has to be done properly and right. It has to be done on a phased basis. I think the Deputy was saying the regulations are nearly ready.

**Deputy Emer Currie:** The RSA is saying they are not.

**The Taoiseach:** The Deputy was also referring to the Department. I would prefer that they get it right. There will be a lot of people affected by this too, and we have to be conscious of that. The best way to do it is to phase it in in an orderly manner so that people know and there is no cliff edge. Inevitably there will have to be, but it has to be done properly. Also, the capacity must be there to do it. As the Deputy says, we do not want another waiting list developing in respect of that.

**Deputy Pádraig Rice:** At today's health committee, the Irish Cancer Society said there is a complacent notion that we are doing well in cancer but we are not. The reality is that the State's cancer services are deteriorating. A prime example of this is radiation therapy, which is beset with antiquated machinery and staff shortages. Radiation therapy machines need to be changed every ten years. That is their internationally accepted lifespan. In Ireland, 35% of machines are already 15 years old, while a further 40% will need replacement in five years. There is no national replacement programme in place. Alongside this, there are major staff shortages across radiation therapy services, with machines lying idle in public hospitals. Earlier this month, the Minister for Health told the Dáil that she is taking every step to attract radiation therapists into the public system. This is simply not the case. Radiation therapy graduates are not guaranteed HSE contracts, unlike graduate nurses. How can this be justified when we have vacancy rates of between 15% and 22%? Will the Minister make good on her word and take every step to attract these graduates? A good start would be permanent contracts for all of them.

**Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill):** I have literally just come from Crumlin where I met some of the new consultant radiologists who have come here from other countries in anticipation of the children's hospital. I am meeting the chief people officer after the statements on men's health in respect of some of the vacancies. On our cancer strategy, the Deputy is right to identify regional variance, which is one of the very many reasons we are shifting the funding model this year to a letter of determination to the HSE that focuses both on inputs and outputs, specifically trying to better achieve harmony, equity and regional equity of access around all the different areas, recognising that cancer services in particular are lagging too far behind in some areas while others are performing extremely well. The Deputy is right to identify it. As regards radiation replacement therapy, we have a capital programme more broadly and I will specifically look at radiation within that.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** Tá an ghéarchéim daoine gan dídean imithe thar fóir go hiomlán. The Taoiseach might have seen the launch of Cork Simon's annual report. He insists to us that the Government's housing strategy is working, whether it is Homes for All or Rebuilding Ireland, yet everything keeps going up in terms of homelessness. Cork Simon is operating since the early 1970s. In its 55 years, it has never had a higher average of people requiring its supports. There are more people in emergency accommodation than ever, with

679 in Cork. That is probably going to go up next Friday; we could nearly set our clocks by it. It is getting worse by every metric, with an increase in people requiring outreach and in those requiring meals. Does the Taoiseach accept that this is completely unacceptable and that it is a stain on our society that so many people are homeless? Will he reinstate the previous funding position of tenant in situ to stop more people going into homelessness?

**The Taoiseach:** Without question, tá fadhb ann ó thaobh daoine gan dídean de. Níl aon dabht faoi sin. It is a much more complex situation than it would have been five or ten years ago. There are far wider pressures on emergency accommodation today than there were. I do not want to go into all of the details but that is clear. It is a factor. We worked with Cork Simon and other homeless agencies in respect of Housing First, which was a very effective response to homelessness, and a better one perhaps than tenant in situ. Tenant in situ works when it is focused on the homeless and people who are just about to be made homeless, to prevent that. It got used more broadly than that, which was problematic, but now it is back on course. We are continuing to resource it.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** That is not the case at all.

**The Taoiseach:** We have.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** That is not what happened.

**The Taoiseach:** I have spoken to the various homeless agencies and they would acknowledge that the nature and composition of those seeking emergency accommodation is very different now. What the Minister is doing immediately is securing additional resources for families to make sure they are accelerated out of emergency accommodation as quickly as possible.

**Deputy Micheál Carrigy:** The Taoiseach will be aware the provision of home help services is vital support that allows many older people and those with additional needs to remain living independently in their homes. Recent rankings from Home and Community Care Ireland place County Longford second, with the highest number of people on a waiting list for a service. In my constituency office, I continue to meet families. Some of these have no service and some are grateful for a limited service. There are staff shortages particularly at holiday periods and we are seeing hours reduced or even missed in cases. I fully recognise that efforts have been made in recent times through the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, to expand it. We had a care provider that gave notice to HSE that it was no longer providing care. I know there was a consultation and the provider is back but we still have a major problem, particularly in north Longford. We have elderly people going into nursing homes for respite because the home help is not available in the house. I am looking for a commitment that we will look specifically at this and target this area in north Longford to make sure we have a sufficient service provided to those who are most vulnerable in our society.

**Deputy Kieran O'Donnell:** I thank Deputy Carrigy. I know the particular interest he has in this matter. Specifically, on north Longford, he raised an issue about one provider that has now restored its service. I am working with the Department officials and the HSE to look

specifically at north Longford and other areas where there are large waiting lists. Some €82 million additional funding has gone into home support this year. With 1.7 million additional hours, I want to focus on those specific areas. I will continue to work with the Deputy and with my Department and the HSE to look at how we can address those issues in the Deputy's particular case in north Longford and in other areas as well.

## Men's Health: Statements

**Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill):** I welcome this opportunity to speak on men's health, which is a priority in the programme for Government. In 2009, Ireland was the first country in the world to develop a national men's health policy. The men's health policy sets out a comprehensive and, I hope, ambitious framework with a series of objectives aimed at improving men's health. It was followed by two action plans. One was published in 2017, with a more recent one published in 2024. A clear commitment in the programme for Government, which I was proud to be involved in negotiating, is to increase literacy and raise awareness among men and boys about the important of physical, mental and emotional health. We know men in Ireland today are living longer and healthier lives than previous generations but they continue to bear a disproportionate burden of illness and premature mortality and, as a recent report published by Movember stated, "too many men are dying too young." While the gap between male and female life expectancy has narrowed in recent times, male life expectancy still falls behind women by 3.5 years in Ireland. The research tells us that 40% of all male deaths, prior to 75 years of age, in 2022 were considered premature. These deaths were 40% higher among males compared to women in Ireland. These are not just numbers, however. They are our fathers, our brothers, our sons and our friends. The impact of male-specific cancers is also well-documented and the incidences of both prostate and testicular cancer, particularly in young men, are on the increase. Therefore, we have a lot to recognise.

We have to acknowledge that some groups of men experience a disproportion burden of ill-health compared to other men. Men in the most deprived communities of Ireland are one and a half times more likely to die prematurely, compared to the most affluent men, which is not right. They are also almost three and a half times more likely to die by diseases of the respiratory system, diseases of the circulatory system, accidents and suicides. For example, life expectancy of a Traveller man is 15 years less than the general male population. This is a reality that we must confront with action and compassion. It really is a conversation that matters.

The men's health action plan targets specific issues like men's mental health and suicide prevention, men's chronic disease preventing and improving the health service uptake among men. It also places a stronger focus on health equity, meaning we will prioritise interventions for men who are most vulnerable, whether due to socioeconomic disadvantage, social inclusion or minority status. While Healthy Ireland leads on the implementation of men's health, there is also a significant focus on men's health within the national cancer control programme, the national screening service, and the National Office for Suicide Prevention. Male pelvic cancer survivorship and rehabilitation programmes are a key part of cancer survivorship pathways and they significantly improve patient outcomes.

Funding for the male pelvic cancer survivorship programme was funded through Healthy Ireland and is currently being piloted in Cork and Dublin. Over the past year, close to 180 patients across both areas have been enrolled in survivorship clinics. These services are advanced nurse practitioner-led with clinical nurse specialists and consultant urologist supports. Work is under way at a European level on prostate screening which aims to explore the feasibility of a risk-stratified screening programme to help reduce morbidity and mortality caused by the disease. We will consider any proposed expansion of the screening through the established evidence-driven protocols which we use, namely, the national screening advisory committee, which is our independent expert group that provides advice to me on screening programmes and their expansion. I am determined to support our screening programmes which are a valuable part of our health service enabling early treatment and care for many people and improving the overall health of our population.

We know, however, that rigid gender norms can harm everyone. Sometimes, they can discourage men from seeking help and from expressing vulnerability, or they can reinforce inequalities that negatively affect women, families and communities. By engaging men in conversations about gender equality broadly, we create opportunities for men to become the same partners in building a fairer, healthier society, which is of benefit to everyone.

Just like women's health, men's health is everyone's business. Men's health matters because improving men's health benefits not just men but has important ripple effect for women, for children's health and for wider communities. By improving men's health we aim to ensure our policies not only improve men's health outcomes but also help shape a more equitable and a more compassionate nation. We have witnessed notable improvements in the health and life-expectancy of our male population but men's health remains an area that requires really focused attention and sustained policy action which we will take.

Today, I ask all the men listening to take a step, book a checkup, talk to a friend and seek support. They matter and their health matters. Men's health matters and I am very glad we are having statements on this today.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** I welcome the opportunity to address the House today on the vital issue of men's health, and in particular, men's mental health. This is not just a health issue; it is a societal issue, a family issue and a personal issue. It affects every community in Ireland. When we speak about men's health, we are speaking about fathers, sons, brothers, grandsons, partners and friends. We are speaking about the people who build our homes, teach our children, run our businesses and serve in our Defence Forces. Yet, too often, men's health, especially men's mental health, remains a taboo.

In Ireland today, approximately 80% of all suicides are among men. That is not just a number; it represents lives cut short, families devastated and communities left grieving. We know men are less likely to seek help for mental health difficulties. Cultural norms, fear of judgment and the perception that asking for help is a sign of weakness all play a role. While women make up two thirds of those who use counselling services, men remain under-represented. Yet, when men do engage, they benefit greatly. Research shows that men who access therapy often report significant improvements in well-being and resilience. This reluctance to seek help contributes to higher rates of suicide, substance misuse and untreated

depression among men. It impacts families, workplaces and the wider economy. It is time to change that narrative and these outcomes.

In the previous Government, and continuing in this Government, the Minister for Health announced a revolution in women's health services. I believe we need to have a similar revolution in men's mental health services. The Government has made mental health a priority. Our national mental health policy, Sharing the Vision, sets out the roadmap for a modern, recovery-oriented mental health service. Its second implementation plan, which I launched earlier this year, focuses on improving access, reducing waiting times and embedding mental health supports in primary care and community settings.

Alongside this, Connecting for Life, our national suicide prevention strategy, continues to guide our efforts to reduce suicide and self-harm. It recognises that men are a priority group and calls for targeted interventions to reach those most at risk. We have also introduced the National Men's Health Action Plan 2024–28, which is the first plan of its kind in Europe. It acknowledges that men experience health differently and that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work. It addresses gender-specific risk factors, promotes early detection and seeks to dismantle the barriers that prevent men from seeking help. Legislatively, we are progressing the Mental Health Bill, which will modernise our mental health laws, strengthen rights-based care and ensure that services are delivered with dignity and respect.

In budget 2026, we have made mental health a priority, with a major focus placed on crisis support and suicide prevention. There is over €15 million in new funding for crisis support and suicide reduction measures, which include specialist nursing teams in all model 4 hospital emergency departments out of hours to support people in crisis and three new crisis resolution services, including drop-in Solace crisis cafés as community alternatives to emergency departments in areas with model 3 hospitals. We know already from the five Solace cafés we have opened that presentations by men and women in distress to the emergency departments have reduced by 18% as a result of having those cafés as people's first point of call. We will also have additional suicide crisis assessment nurses, SCANs, to support people in crisis who present to GPs in their communities. We have increased funding for the suicide prevention community and voluntary organisations, including Pieta, and there is €1 million in funding to start the implementation of the next suicide reduction strategy.

The mental health budget for 2026 will be almost €1.6 billion. Mental health funding has now increased by over 50% since I took up my role in 2020. I have also secured with the Minister an unprecedented 300 additional new staff for mental health services next year, representing over 9% of the total growth in health service staffing in 2026. We still have a way to go but significant progress has been made.

A significant initiative is the provision of over 15,000 free counselling sessions for men every year, backed up by €2 million in dedicated annual funding. The programme started on 1 September last and will be delivered in partnership with trusted providers such as Connect Counselling and MyMind, an organisation that offers supports in 20 different languages. Men can access these counselling sessions for free through GP referral and *yourmentalhealth.ie/men*. Why is this important? Because cost should never be a barrier to mental health supports. Too often men delay seeking help because they fear the financial burden. By removing that barrier we are sending a clear message: help is available and it is free. These sessions will be delivered both in person and online, ensuring flexibility for men

in rural areas, men with busy work schedules and men who may feel more comfortable starting their journey in a private setting. Sitting at your kitchen table, you can self-refer to Counselling Connect from 5 p.m. until 9 p.m. seven days a week and speak to a professional counsellor about whatever is going on for you. You can have up to six phone calls, and if you feel at that stage you would like to meet the counsellor in person, that will be arranged.

We are funding dedicated services for men who have worked in our Defence Forces through ONE, the organisation for ex-service personnel. We are also investing in targeted outreach for Traveller men, ethnic minorities and LGBTQ+ men, who face additional barriers and higher risks. This is about equality as well as equity. Once again, the website is *yourmentalhealth.ie/men*. I hope everybody working in members' constituency offices will become aware of this in order that they can signpost people to supports that are available free of charge. We will run an online campaign very shortly to get the message out there. It will be a national awareness campaign aimed at breaking down stigma and encouraging men to take that first step. Included will be a targeted media campaign using the full range of communication channels available, including social media, paid search and local radio as well as a co-ordinated approach to stakeholder engagement with a range of voluntary and community partner organisations.

I was very keen to have MyMind on board because it provides counselling supports in 20 different languages around the country. We now have lots of people in the country whose first language is not Irish or English. They come in on permits and they might need access to mental health supports as well, so having MyMind providing those supports is really important. I hope that this campaign will feature real stories from men who have benefited from counselling because nothing is more important than hearing from someone who has walked the same path.

We have also partnered with the Irish College of GPs, which is aware of all these supports. My team in the Department met with over 1,200 GPs online in September to let them know that these supports are available and free of charge and that there are 15,000 counselling hours available and they are recurring.

This is about saving lives. It is about creating a culture where men feel it is okay to say, "I'm not okay." It is about ensuring that when a man reaches out for help, the help is there quickly, locally and without judgment. It is also about knowing that recovery is possible. We know that early intervention works, we know that talking saves lives and we know that when men engage with mental health services, outcomes improve dramatically. We also know there is no health without mental health.

Of course, we cannot stop here. This initiative is a major step forward but it must be part of a broader journey. Over the coming years, we will continue to expand community-based mental health supports, including peer-led programmes and men's sheds initiatives. We will continue to tackle health inequalities, ensuring that marginalised groups are not left behind. We will invest in digital mental health solutions to reach men who may never walk into a clinic but will engage online. We will strengthen collaboration with employers, sports organisations and community groups to promote mental well-being in every setting and for everyone. Everyone in this House and beyond has a role to play in changing the conversation about men's mental health. We need to challenge outdated notions of masculinity that equate vulnerability with weakness. We need to create spaces where men can talk openly and seek help without fear of judgment. To the men listening today: your mental health matters. Asking for help is

not a sign of weakness; it is a sign of strength. Whether you are struggling with stress, anxiety or depression or simply feeling overwhelmed, help is there. Take the first step. It could change your life.

I thank the many organisations, advocates and individuals who have worked tirelessly to improve men's health in Ireland. Their efforts are making a difference, and together we can build a society where every man feels supported, valued and able to thrive. The Government is committed to that vision. We will continue to invest, innovate and lead the way in mental health policy because every life matters and every man matters.

I acknowledge the important role of initiatives like Movember. Every November thousands of men across Ireland and around the world grow a moustache - not just for fun but to spark conversations about men's health, raise awareness of mental health challenges and fund vital research and support services. Movember looks at mental health through a male lens, focusing on prevention, early intervention and health promotion. The movement works towards a world where men take action to be mentally well and are supported by those around them. I encourage everyone to support Movember and similar campaigns in order to keep men's mental health a national priority.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** I welcome the Minister and the Minister of State. Men's health is not a topic which gets proper attention. There is a silent crisis in men's health which is devastating families and communities across the State. Both the Minister and the Minister of State are correct to appeal to men to look after their health, to seek support, to get checks and to make sure that if there is a difficulty they go to a GP and so on.

It is also the case, however, that far too many people generally, but particularly men, in relation to cancer and cardiac care, very often are left waiting even for a simple diagnostic scan or a scope and so on. The length of time public patients are waiting for scopes and scans is far too long. I know the stress that can place on people who, for example, might fear that they have a cancer or an illness. They will go to the GP, the GP will refer them on for a scan and, unfortunately, they wait far too long.

We all have experience of people contacting our constituency offices, mine in Waterford is no different, and saying that they have been with their GP and are concerned about the possibility of cancer or whatever. These people are waiting for scans and do not know when they will be called. They could be waiting months in some instances. While it is right to say that men should reach out, we also have to make sure that when they reach out - if they go to a GP and if there is a fear of an illness, whether it is cancer or cardiac disease - there is rapid access to a diagnostic scan. That is not always the case.

The facts are very stark in relation to men's health, as laid out in the recent The Real Face of Men's Health report commissioned by Movember - which was mentioned by the Minister and Minister of State - and by the Men's Health Forum in Ireland and research carried out at the South East Technological University in Waterford and Carlow. The HSE's men's health action plan says much the same. Men are dying younger than they should. Two in five men in Ireland will die before the age of 75. Men are 34% more likely to die from cancer and much more likely to die from lifestyle-related illnesses. Men account for four in every five deaths by suicide.

This burden, unfortunately, is not spread equally. Men from lower income backgrounds live, on average, five years less than men from well-off backgrounds. This is a major societal problem that demands a comprehensive Government response. The HSE's action plan acknowledges this emergency. It notes that men are more likely to die from the four main cancers, from circulatory diseases, from respiratory diseases and from external causes of injury. It highlights significant challenges in the area men's mental health, particularly among younger men from lower income or Traveller backgrounds.

Critically, the report highlights the disparity in how the Government resources healthcare. Important funding has been given in recent years for vital women's health services and we still have a long way to go in that area but the HSE is also calling for a commensurate response for men's health. Where was that in the budget? The budget for health seems to be one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Nobody knows exactly what are the new measures or the new money, or where the latter is going. It seems to be the best kept secret in the Department of Health and the HSE. In fact, we had people from the Irish Cancer Society and the national cancer control programme before us today. None of them was able to tell us if there was any additional funding for cancer services or the national cancer strategy in budget 2026. We suspect that the vast majority of whatever additional funding was put into health this year was for existing levels of service and not for new measures.

That is the important point we have to make. What is really important in healthcare is referral pathways. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler rightly called on men to step forward, to go to their GPs or whomever and to talk to somebody if they have a mental health issue. However, we also have to make sure the resources and the referral pathways are there. That is not always the case. We have heard some horrendous stats today in relation to cancer for both men and women from the representatives of the Irish Cancer Society. We have a responsibility as legislators. The Government has a great responsibility to ensure that resources are put in place in order that when people reach out, they get the care they need.

Across all of these areas, while I welcome the chance to have a debate with the Minister, I have to reinforce the point that it is very frustrating that this year - and I have spoken to senior officials in the Department about this - there was a very clear departure from the normal budgetary process. It has not been not made clear where any of the additional money in health will be spent. I do not believe that is right or the best way to fund a health service. I have no idea. I cannot tell my constituents or any advocate groups that come to me where any additional money is for cardiovascular or cancer services, mental health treatments or any of the matters we are talking about. That is wrong.

**Deputy Mark Ward:** I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak on men's health. As a person living with multiple sclerosis, MS, I am going to speak in a personal capacity in order to raise awareness. I will also speak as a TD and use my platform to call for additional resources. I have mentioned it before - and I do not talk about it too much - but at least once a year I come in here and talk about being diagnosed with MS 18 years ago. MS is an autoimmune disease that affects the central nervous system. Males and females often have similar symptoms, but there are some differences. As we are talking about men's health today, I will focus on some of those differences. Some of the symptoms that affect men are: vision problems; numbness or tingling; persistent aches and pains; involuntary movements, such as twitches and spasms; difficulties with mobility, walking and balance; fatigue that is not due to

physical activity or lack of sleep; and changes in cognition, including brain fog. I have experienced all of these symptoms over the years. I still experience some of them today.

The reason I am talking about this matter is to say that for other men who have been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, MS, it is not the end of the world. Once you get into the system, you get the care. The problem sometimes is trying to get into the system and getting that diagnosis. Treatment has dramatically improved over the years and there is no doubting that since I was first diagnosed.

I always advise men, especially men newly diagnosed with MS, not to do what I did at first and do Dr. Google, because it brings you down a kind of dark path towards the worst possible outcome. They should take medical advice from their neurologists and link in with MS Ireland, which - I have to say this now, and I have always said it - has been a tremendous support to me regrading my journey with MS. I have managed to live a really active life and have enjoyed a good quality of life. I manage my symptoms to the best of my ability. I am on the third year of a four-year cycle of treatment at the moment, and the prognosis is good.

Deputy Cullinane mentioned the budget. I am trying to decipher where some of the money is going. I support the Neurological Alliance of Ireland in its call for an increase in the number of rehabilitation beds at Peamount hospital in my area from 15 to 25 . That small investment would make a huge impact for people who have MS.

**Deputy Louise O'Reilly:** I welcome the opportunity to say a few words. I have often stood in this Chamber when we had statements on women's health and looked around to find that there were mostly women present, so I am delighted to make a contribution this afternoon.

I am speaking as a wife, daughter and a granny to a grandson. I am very lucky. My dad is living well. My husband is a cancer survivor and my grandson is thriving. However, I am acutely aware of the Movember report into men's health. It is really worrying that the rate of premature death is 40% higher among males than females in this State. That statistic should give the Government serious pause for thought. Those are preventable deaths. That is exactly what they are. They are preventable, premature and avoidable, and focusing on helping men to live well longer will benefit us all.

As the Minister stated, 80% of suicides involve men. That is phenomenally shocking and speaks to a real lack of services and supports. It should prompt us, as a society, to perhaps reflect on how we deal with and speak about men's mental health.

As a woman, I get very frustrated when women's health issues are discussed as if we are somehow all the same. In other words, that all women have the same physical make-up, the same issues and the same access. That is not true. The Movember report shows us it is not true for men either. A one-size-fits-all approach does not work. We know that 73% of men aged 18 to 24 are concerned about the state of healthcare for men. That is very worrying ,but it is clear that more targeted interventions are needed.

GPs tell us they are concerned and have difficulty engaging with marginalised groups. However, we know that the Government does not monitor health among marginalised groups sufficiently, so it is very hard to intervene when the Government is not actually assessing the level of the issue.

In the few seconds remaining to me, I acknowledge the Marie Keating Foundation's campaign, No Bum Hole Needed. Forgive my use of that language but it is important to say No Bum Hole Needed. The PSA test is a simple blood test. It will save your life. It saves everyone's life, and I encourage any man, when offered the opportunity, to have that test.

**Deputy Paul Donnelly:** There are a couple things that are really stark in the Movember report. One is that 46% of men from deprived or disadvantaged areas are more likely to die prematurely compared to women living in the same communities. I know the report is 15 years old but, most shockingly, it shows that a lot of work needs to be done. Among male members of the Traveller community, there is a life expectancy of 61.7 years. That is 15 years lower than the life expectancy among member of the general male population. It is stark for such a small community to have such a level of life expectancy, and a lot of suicide.

The rate of suicide among members of the Traveller community is seven times that of the general population. It is important to highlight that fact.

Our mental health services are operating on a shoestring. I want to give a shout out to a couple of people. I refer to Gerry Murray and Gerry Kavanagh who opened a wellness cafe in St. Brigid's hall in Blanchardstown. We were there recently. Those involved with the cafe do incredible work for absolutely free. They get no money other than a little from the HSE. They pay for a lot of what is done out of their own pockets. They do incredible work.

I have raised Genesis mental health services, a counselling service, in the House on many occasions. With just a relatively small amount of funding, Genesis could double the number of people it sees for counselling. It has had to close its waiting list because things are so bad, which shows the level of need that is out there.

I also want to mention the likes of Foróige, Jigsaw Youth Mental Health, Dublin 15 Community Drug Team, Tolka River Project and the Recovery Café. There are so many people out there who are doing incredible work and who are all looking for extra funding. I also want to give a shout out to all the GAA coaches, soccer coaches, teachers, cricket coaches and all of those who are helping and who, in many cases, do so on a voluntary basis. They do just incredible work helping and supporting young men in particular. We have to be so conscious that when we are talking about funding, we mean adequate funding. Otherwise, people are going to die.

**Deputy Seán Crowe:** I am probably not going to say anything that is much different from what many other Members said. As others stated, there is a lot of really good work being done around men's health. This month, we have seen it most publicly in sport, with Movember and the OddBalls Foundation are becoming familiar to a lot of fans.

As we all agree, men are still reluctant to go to the doctor and share personal information about their health. This could be the difference quite literally between life and death. We still have not cracked the old-fashioned mentality of "Ignore it and I don't have to deal with it." Irish men have to be more proactive about their health, particularly in the context of prostate cancer, as they face unique challenges relating to lifestyle factors and genetic predisposition.

Prostate cancer is one of the most common cancers among Irish men. Research shows that the incidence rate has been steadily rising. Despite this, many Irish men remain hesitant to

seek medical advice or undergo screenings. This is often due to a reluctance to address health concerns until the symptoms become too severe. This can steal precious weeks and months away. When prostate cancer is caught early, the survival rate is higher. Although, the idea that if you get cancer then prostate cancer is a good one to get is absolute nonsense. That really annoys those of us who have had it. Many men delay seeing a doctor until it is too late, which can reduce treatment options and outcomes. In February 2015, I was told, after years of getting biopsies, that I had cancer and that it had to be removed. It was an aggressive cancer. The cancer came back a number of years later and I had to undergo radiotherapy. I am still being monitored for cancer cells by means of PSA blood tests.

Cancer can be life-changing but the longer you delay, the harder it is to treat. That is my message here today. By becoming more proactive, Irish men can enjoy a healthier quality of life and increase their chances of a healthier future.

I have long advocated for a prostate screening cancer programme. Programmes like BreastCheck and BowelScreen have saved thousands of women's lives, but there is no similar programme for men. I appeal that such a programme be put in place.

There is an expense to cancer. That impacts negatively on people who do not have money. One thing we could do is speak to the big shopping outlets that sell the likes of incontinence pads for men. They can be seen stuck in one corner of a shelf, but there will be a whole row of women's pads. We could ask the likes of Aldi, Lidl, Dunnes Stores and other stores to ensure that men are not treated any differently from women when it comes to accessing these products.

**Deputy Marie Sherlock:** I welcome that we are having statements on men's health. I also acknowledge and pay tribute to Deputies Mark Ward and Seán Crowe for talking about their personal experiences. Leadership is important in terms of a lot of the things we are talking about, namely, breaking down the stigma that exists and helping people to overcome the inability to talk about their experiences. That inability is closely related to so many issues around to men's health. Often, there has been a failure to believe and recognise women's health conditions. For men, it has been about a huge failure to put themselves forward and the stigma and shame of seeking medical help, which we have to change. I acknowledge the Movember report that was published a number of weeks ago. It cast in very stark terms the premature deaths that occur, particularly in deprived areas, and the mental health issues that exist among men.

There are two issues I want to speak about. The first relates to mental health. It is absolutely shocking to think that 80% of those who take their lives in this country are men. We do not want to reduce them to a statistic. Each of those men had a family, a story and a community. That it is so heavily weighted towards men is really shocking. The Samaritans report, Out of sight, out of mind, from 2020 indicated that men in Ireland are three to four times more likely to die by suicide than women. While there is a crucial focus on young men, we know middle-aged men actually have the highest average suicide rate of any age group. Inequality, of course, and disadvantage also play a crucial part. Research from Scotland shows that men living in less well-off or more deprived areas are up to ten times more likely to die by suicide than those from more affluent areas. It is important to say that the suicide rate among Traveller men is over six times higher than the rate for the male population in general. Those are very stark figures. There is a need for real support. The Minister of State, Deputy Mary Butler, and I

have spoken about this, and I welcome her efforts. Certainly, however, a huge amount more needs to be done in this space.

On cancer care, Deputy Cullinane referred to the difficulties in trying to understand how much extra funding is being allocated in respect of cancer care. It is a bit like the third secret of Fatima. I do not know whether we are going to find out or not, because we suspect that maybe there is not any additional funding for cancer care in the budget for next year, and that it will all be down to increased productivity. The reality is that cancer is the leading cause of premature death among men. I know from replies to parliamentary questions we have submitted on prostate cancer, which is, of course, the most significant cancer among men, that just under 39% of all patients get the treatment and care within the national cancer control programme timeframes. That is a serious concern. I have one constituent who got a heightened PSA result in summer 2024. It took until November to get an MRI. It was April by the time he got a biopsy and a diagnosis only happened in June. Surgery took place in September. I took a whole year for that care pathway to play out for him and for him to get the surgery he so badly needed. That is not acceptable.

The other critical point relates to access to drugs. There is a fundamental inequality regarding access to drugs, particularly oncology drugs, between the public and private sectors. I want to reference access to Pluvicto, which is an end-of-line therapy for metastasized prostate cancer. In April, 30 oncologists wrote a letter to the HSE to effectively plead with it to reverse its decision in respect of Pluvicto. This is a drug that is available publicly in Italy, Belgium, Switzerland, Austria, Czechia, Slovenia and Greece. In other words, it is widely available in many countries across Europe. It is approved by the European Medicines Agency, EMA. Not only is it a last line of therapy in the US, it is also seen as an appropriate therapy for earlier intervention. Yet, the HSE's clinical decision unit, CDU, has rejected the use of Pluvicto in the public system. The National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics made the submission for approval. Those who work at the centre are supposed to be the experts on cancer care. They submitted an application for approval, and it was rejected by the CDU. The HSE and the Department of Health need to issue a direction to ensure that this lifesaving drug is made freely available to men within the public system. It should not just be just be available in the private sector.

2 o'clock

**Deputy Eoghan Kenny:** Men's health deserves serious attention in this House. Across Ireland, men are struggling with mental health, access to care and a culture that too often tells them to stay silent. I must commend the good work of Pieta House, the Samaritans, Men's Aid and the Irish Men's Shed Association and the fantastic work it does for men struggling with mental health, loneliness and exclusion. Words are easy, but I would like to encourage everyone and advise any man struggling with his mental or physical health to talk to someone. You are not alone.

When we talk about men's health, we must mean all men, including trans men. Their well-being, safety and access to healthcare are part of men's health. That is why recent remarks from certain quarters of this Chamber are deeply concerning. To suggest that the Minister might breach the code of conduct for simply supporting healthcare for trans people is unfounded and unfair.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Eoghan Kenny:** Supporting healthcare is not activism. It is governance. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler's commitment, first and foremost as a mother and as a Minister, to ensuring trans young people receive appropriate evidence-based care is exactly what we should expect from a Minister for mental health.

While I agree with the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, I must also highlight the shortcomings in healthcare in this regard. Wait list times for the National Gender Service are in excess of ten years. If a cis man was experiencing a hormone imbalance, he would not be expected to wait ten years. The attempts of some politicians to politicise trans healthcare is not leadership. Rather, it is an attempt to sow division where instead we should lead. Trans men are men. Their health is men's health. Compassion in public office is not a breach of conduct; it is our duty.

**Deputy Duncan Smith:** I fully support what my colleague, Deputy Kenny, said regarding supporting the Minister on her work in this area. It is very important that work takes place on that side of the House, as well as the Government being held to account. I was present in the Chamber when the Minister made one of the most impactful speeches to the House I have ever seen. We will not allow this to stand in our Parliament or out on the streets regarding what has been done on trans healthcare.

I would like to use my time to talk about the impact of cardiovascular disease on men's health. Each year, 9,000 to 10,000 people in Ireland die from cardiovascular-related illnesses and diseases. Some three quarters of them are men. Of the men aged between 51 and 64, 42% are obese and a further 44% are overweight. One in five men, or 21%, are currently smokers, which significantly increases the risk of heart attack and stroke. I spoke during the debate on the budget and said we have failed in the State's target to make Ireland tobacco free. We are miles behind. Tobacco consumption and smoking rates in this country are still far too high. This is a contributory factor to cardiovascular disease.

Men are more likely to be dependent on alcohol and experience alcohol-related injuries. Mortality rates are greater among men - 36% of adult men drink alcohol regularly compared to 27% of adult women. Blood pressure is higher in men compared to women. The intake of cholesterol is higher in men compared to women and 78% of men aged 45 and older have high cholesterol.

Cardiovascular disease is one of the biggest killers. The Irish Heart Foundation is doing sterling work in trying to educate people in this House and change health policy and attitudes while trying to ensure that we have the necessary screening programmes, education and health supports to reduce cardiovascular disease rates and deaths down. We need the Government to take this far more seriously.

Deputy Sherlock referred to prostate cancer and screenings. We need a State-run prostate cancer screening programme up and running as soon as possible. Screening saves lives and saves the healthcare system time and money. It must be implemented.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** I welcome today's debate on men's health. Ireland was the first country in the world to adopt a national men's health policy in 2009 and we have followed through with action plans in 2017 and again in 2024. We have seen progress, with the number of premature deaths down, stronger partnerships across voluntary, academic and health sectors and a far better evidence base to guide what works for men.

However, there is more to do because men in Ireland still die younger than women. The life expectancy for men is 80.5 versus 84.1 for women and 40% of male deaths are still premature. That is the challenge facing us. The agenda is clear. Men carry higher risks in key areas: cancer now accounts for 30.8% of male deaths; 63% of men are overweight or obese; 37% report binge drinking; and men made up 78% of road fatalities in 2023.

We also know men's mental health needs are real and under-treated. Some 16.7% of men aged 40 to 44 report mental health difficulties. Yet men are less likely to seek help early. Our job is to lower the threshold to care and meet men where they are. That is why I particularly welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Butler's targeted investment this year of €2 million to deliver over 15,000 free counselling sessions for men, with simple referral routes via GPs, *yourmentalhealth.ie* and trusted partners like Connect Counselling and MyMind. It is practical, stigma-busting and fast to access, exactly the kind of intervention that turns help seeking from a good idea into an easy step.

Policy is also delivering locally . It was great to join the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, at Mount Carmel last week for the official opening of Riverside House Community Eating Disorder Services. It is a state-of-the-art hub for specialist community mental health services for people with eating disorders across south Dublin and Wicklow. In my constituency, men's sheds in Dalkey, Dún Laoghaire, Blackrock and Loughlinstown are doing quiet, life-saving work, building friendships and developing life skills. There is a project on a bench, and the conversation that follows. You do not have to call it therapy for it to be therapeutic.

Government backing through the Irish Men's Sheds Association, the Sheds for Life programme and Healthy Ireland funding is money well spent, because connection is often the first and most important intervention. Sometimes the best early intervention tool is the cup of tea someone else makes for you.

We are also targeting high-risk settings, including the Construction Alliance to Reduce Suicide, CAIRDE, project in construction, On Feirm Ground for farmers and the national engage training programme, to name but a few. We can add to that the men's health action plan 2024-2028 now being implemented by the HSE, a newly appointed national lead for men's health, and a dedicated combined budget of €1.3 million across Healthy Ireland and the HSE to keep momentum.

I want to commend the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, on her efforts. I know she is committed to keep funding services locally, with counselling and talk therapies for men, supporting groups like men's sheds and, of course, supporting specialist services so men can get the help and support they need when they need it.

**Deputy William Aird:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the important topic of men's health, an issue that touches every parish, home and family in Ireland. Today's debate is a milestone for the House. It is the first time that men's health is the sole focus of statements in

Dáil Éireann. Often, men's health is discussed when it is too late, such as when a neighbour is ill, a farmer collapses or a family grieves a father, brother or son who did not put his hand out for help. Men's health matters not just to men but to their families, communities and society.

I am happy to acknowledge that Ireland was the first country to adopt a national men's health policy in 2009. Since then, progress has been made but we must build on this work. The HSE action plan Healthy Ireland men 2024-2028 is an important step. The report, The Real Face of Men's Health, highlights the challenges. Premature death among men is 40% higher than women. Men in deprived areas live five years less than those living in other areas. Some four out of five deaths by suicide or road traffic accidents are men.

In rural Ireland, we face specific challenges, including long distances to healthcare, a shortage of GPs and the reality that many men on farms or in trades put their health last. They will bring a tractor for a service before they book a checkup for themselves. That is why organisations like the Irish Men's Shed Association, Macra na Feirme, the Irish Farmers' Association and other community groups must be applauded for the work they are doing.

They are bringing health checks and awareness campaigns straight to the men's communities. It is a simple but very powerful idea. These outreach programmes need more support and funding.

Community initiatives are most important, but a strong health service is critical. In Laois County Council's area and across the midlands, nursing home capacity is under pressure. Families are struggling to find local care. I want at this stage to acknowledge the exceptional work of staff in St. Vincent's hospital in Mountmellick, St. Brigid's Hospital in Shaen and Abbeyleix district hospital, which the Leas-Cheann Comhairle knows about well, but we need more capacity in County Laois. Today, I urge the Minister of State and the HSE to prioritise my request. Mental health is a critical aspect of men's health. Stigma still remains around asking for help for mental health issues. Mental health support must include involvement in local counselling, outreach and community mental health teams and support for programmes like On Feirm Ground and Ahead of the Game. We need to bring services closer to men, tackle the stigma, expand the capacity and support community groups on the ground.

**Deputy Malcolm Byrne:** I echo the remarks of Deputy Eoghan Kenny with regard to trans healthcare and, indeed, condemn outright the appalling personalised attack on the Minister of State for her compassion. I have known the Minister of State for a long time, and she is somebody who wears her heart on her sleeve. It is important to have that within the Department of Health. I will always have her back, as I think will nearly everybody in this House, on how she seeks to ensure that Ireland becomes a fairer society.

I would also echo that I think we need, as has been raised, a State-run prostate screening programme for men. The quicker we can roll that out, the better. The risk of prostate cancer is well articulated, but a State-run programme where men would be encouraged to take part is critical.

A lot of colleagues have raised the question of mental health services. The Minister of State has been a champion in that space. I would certainly echo the importance of engaging in rural Ireland, particularly with men on farms in rural communities who are often reluctant to go to their GP. There is fabulous work being done by Macra na Feirme in terms of Make the Moove

and so on. There is that difficulty with regard to getting men to talk. The Minister of State will be familiar with Talk to Tom, which was founded in Gorey and works in my community. We also have the Samaritans based in Arklow. They face a particular challenge that unlike a lot of other Samaritans, they are renting a premises. Therefore, I would suggest that when core funding has been taken into account for organisations, regard can be had to where an organisation has to rent premises as opposed to where it may own it. The Minister of State knows only too well the importance of simply being able to talk about mental health issues, particularly for men. It is critical.

Too often in many ways, we actually come at it too late when we try to talk about health. We do not sufficiently invest in health promotion or talking about positive health. As the Minister of State knows, I am a big believer that if we invest in sport, the arts and community activity, that is vitally important for people's physical and mental well-being. As she also knows, I regularly sing the praises of park runs all around the country, and I know people who take part within the park run community. Many of them do it for physical health reasons, but also for mental health reasons. The sense of community that has provided is critical. The Minister of State will be aware that I have urged for quite some time that we look at the introduction of tax relief for gym membership and membership of sporting organisations. As a State, we need to encourage people to be as physically and mentally healthy as possible, and engagement in community activities, whether those are the arts, sport or whatever else, contributes very positively to physical and mental good health. Not everybody is going to run a marathon, although many will be running it this weekend, yet engaging people in sport is a very positive development.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** We all know men can be very reluctant to do anything about their health. Very often, they suffer in silence until it is too late to help. That is both their physical and, very often, mental well-being. We also recognise that men are 34% more likely to die from cancer than women, and that is because they seldom seek help in time. They wait and wait, and there is a little bit of that macho element there. That is something that needs to be dealt with and needs to be acknowledged as well. Waiting lists are getting longer for everything across the country. That is one of the problems we have. When people get a scare or have something wrong with them, a lot of them think to themselves that nobody will be able to see them anyway. That has a knock-on effect on the long waiting lists we see across the State.

I want to raise with the Minister of State examples of two people in my constituency. One constituent, who we will call "A" for Albert, had a history of cancer up to about ten or 15 years ago, so that history was there. He attended the outpatient medical team in University Hospital Galway in March of this year. He was seen, and they said he had a prostate issue and that he would have to have a follow-up and need a biopsy. Nobody came back to him. He contacted the consultant's office several times. The last time he made a call to them, they told him that there were no theatre slots available at that time to have a biopsy. At the end of May, we made representations in respect of this and he was put on the cross-Border medical care list. At that stage, he had been waiting for 12 or 14 weeks to get the biopsy. Nothing happened, though. On 1 September, we finally made more representations in relation to it. At that stage, he had lost two stone in weight. He was getting very worried and very anxious. He had the biopsy on 16 September and now he is in the system. The point I am making is that it takes so long for

people to get into the system. In fairness, that used not to be the case with cancer patients. Usually, they were dealt with efficiently and quickly.

We have another situation that is very similar. We will call this man "B" for Bernard. Again, he was referred for a scan for his prostate. He waited from 14 April. He had a phone review on the results. Again, they told him he would need a biopsy to proceed and, again, the waiting list continued and continued. He has been waiting 21 weeks to get the biopsy. This situation is totally unacceptable and we need to do something about it. He had to travel to Galway but he has no transport. It costs him €300 for a taxi to go to that appointment. Those are the kinds of issue that people have out there. That is why a lot of men do not say anything when something is wrong. They hear these stories. At the same time, though, we have to tell these stories because we have to get action on them.

I also want to talk to the Minister of State about mental health issues. I raised with her several times previously the case of Jimmy Loughlin in Sligo, of which I know she is aware, and what happened there. I hope to hear something back from her very soon in respect of that. However, I have another case of a man in my constituency who has a son who is in the care of the mental health services. He is violent and dangerous. When he comes home, he does not take his medication. The man refused to take him home. The HSE services put his son in a taxi and sent him home anyway without a care plan, without any medication. These dangerous situations need to be dealt with. A lot of them are dangerous because the service is not up to the standard it needs to be to provide care for people who have acute mental illness. A lot of those are men, unfortunately. These issues need to be dealt with. I have raised that case with the Minister of State specifically because I know of her remit in regard to mental health. However, we really need action in respect of all of that.

**Deputy Liam Quaide:** I thank the Minister of State for her attendance. I would like to use my time today to highlight the particular and very serious mental health challenges experienced by Traveller men. While the data on mental health outcomes for the Travelling community is in urgent need of updating, we know from the comprehensive All-Ireland Traveller Health Study of 2010 that, at that stage, Traveller men were at much higher risk of death by suicide than probably any other cohort of people in our society. The study showed that suicide accounted for a staggering 11% of all deaths in the Traveller community and 82% of Traveller suicides were among men. Suicide rates among Traveller men are estimated to be six to seven times higher than among settled men. We also know that 59% of Traveller men reported poor mental health in any given month, and that was within a context of persistent discrimination, educational disadvantage, poor housing or accommodation and high unemployment.

I have some experience as a psychologist working with young Traveller men in the Cork mental health services, and I found that experience very rewarding. It clarified to me that the services need to adapt much better to the Travelling community and, in some cases, adopt more of an assertive outreach approach that goes outside a standard therapeutic frame. I very much welcome the establishment of the specialist group for Traveller mental health under Sharing the Vision, and I commend the aims of the national Traveller health action plan.

It is important that the Government matches words with real implementation. We need ring-fenced investment in culturally appropriate, Traveller-led mental health services, designed in collaboration with the Traveller community; the recruitment of dedicated Traveller mental

health workers into primary care and community mental health teams; and crucially, we need to update the national dataset on Traveller health in general with clear targets, timelines and accountability mechanisms. I echo Deputy Byrne's endorsement of the Samaritans and the really invaluable work that they do. I was a volunteer with the Samaritans for a number of years in my 20s and I found it to be one of the most formative and fulfilling experiences, particularly working with young offenders in St. Patrick's in Dublin.

**Deputy Pádraig Rice:** As the Minister of State and the Leas-Cheann Comhairle will know, every time we have health statements, I question their value, particularly given the backlog of legislation we have relating to the right to home care, legislation relating to CHI and much other legislation, but I see real value in this. It has been great to hear the consistent messages across the House about particular parts of our communities that are affected and the need for an intersectional approach, particularly relating to Traveller men, LGBT people and disabled people. That is important and hopefully it is a message the Department will take away, about focusing on those groups in particular.

There is a shocking statistic that Traveller men live 15 years shorter. It should really concern us about the life expectancy rates. In 2008, the life expectancy of a Traveller man was 61, similar to the life expectancy of the general population in the 1940s. It should be a real cause for concern, in particular given the high levels of suicide among Traveller men, as Deputy Quaide mentioned. I am a member of the Oireachtas Traveller committee. Last week, we had IHREC before us. I will read from its opening statement, because it should be setting off alarm bells in every Department. It quotes from the Council of Europe, which states:

> We must confront the injustices faced by Roma and travellers, the racism and discrimination that we allow to persist on a massive scale. This is one of Europe’s greatest human rights scandals.

That is coming from the Council of Europe, echoed by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission. We need to take really seriously our treatment of Travellers, particularly health outcomes for Travellers.

Similarly, I will touch on the experiences of gay, bi and trans men. Trinity College published a study this year, entitled "Being LGBTQI+ in Ireland", that set out the mental health experiences. Some 27% of people experienced severe or extremely severe levels of depression, 34% experienced severe levels of anxiety, 23% experienced extreme levels of stress, 52% had self-harmed, 64% reported suicidal thoughts and 26% had attempted suicide. There are really concerning levels of poor mental health in that community and it really needs to be a priority. I echo the calls made by others earlier about the importance of trans healthcare. It is lifesaving. We would save people's lives by having better trans healthcare. I support the Minister of State in her efforts to do that. We will always have her back on that. We want to see progress together on that. I would also like to see an expansion of the gay men's health service that currently exists in Dublin. I would like to see those expanded at a regional level across the country. Each region should have a version of that service. It should not just be Dublin.

In the final minute, I would like to touch on the experiences of disabled men. We know from the Disability Federation of Ireland that 43% of disabled people over the age of 15 have reported some level of depression. There are really high levels of depression among people who are disabled. Similarly, of those unable to work because of disability, one in five lives in

consistent poverty. We know the real impact that living in poverty has on people's overall health and health outcomes. I hope that, out of today's statements, we get a focus on men from these communities who have much poorer health outcomes. We need to put more resources, focus and energy into reversing some of these trends and changing these stats so that we can have better outcomes for men across Ireland.

**Deputy Jen Cummins:** Before I start, I have some visitors in the Gallery from a school who are on leaving certificate applied, LCA, work experience. I want to say thank you to them. They have done excellent work so far this week.

I would like to pay tribute in this debate to a group of my constituents in Dublin South-Central, the Dublin 12 Men's Shed. I had the pleasure of going to visit them recently with my constituency manager, Amy King, who is also in the Gallery. We had a really inspiring discussion with them. They have become embedded in their community. They have provided a safe, welcoming space for all men to go, meet and share their skills, work on community projects and support one another. It is playing a crucial role in reducing social exclusion and isolation, improving mental health for the men and building a stronger sense of community across Dublin 12. They do a number of projects. They work on wood projects, from planters to Christmas decorations to pens and bird boxes. They showed us amazing stuff. That is when the magic happens, because when they are busy doing things, they are able to talk, listen and create a place where they can cry and laugh. It is a happy and concerning environment. They are so good at it now that they have a waiting list. To that end, I am going to be very cheeky and say that this group really needs funding to build a tiny extension out the back so there is extra workspace. They are working outside. They have an inside space but want to be able to use another part, to be able to work there, to include more men. If at all possible, I would love for the Government to invest in this men's shed. I am sure there are other men's sheds that I just have not visited yet that are equally as important, but I want to pay tribute to those men. They are saving lives. It is so important but it is so simple. That is what makes it brilliant. It does not have to be complicated. Reaching out to one another, being with others, sharing your story and listening to others is what makes us human.

**Deputy Eoin Hayes:** I will discuss an epidemic in this country that one in five of us experiences, which is loneliness. A report recently came out from the European Commission that said that Ireland was the loneliest country in Europe. The effects of that on young men and older men are significant and have far-reaching consequences. The former US surgeon general said that loneliness was the equivalent of smoking 15 cigarettes a day. That is how damaging it is to our mental health and our social health. There is a strong correlation between the loneliness that young men often experience, the antisocial behaviour that sometimes occurs on our streets, and the massive social costs that we see across our country. In this moment, as we are coming to the close of 2025, we went through the Covid pandemic, which I think exacerbated the major risks of loneliness for many people. The social media environment is not helping for young men.

The housing crisis and inequality in our society have exacerbated the loneliness that many people are feeling, to the point that 40% of 16-to-24-year-olds in this country experience some strong level of loneliness. Marry that with the highest difficulty in the EU of accessing mental health services. I know the Minister of State cares very much about that and she is working

hard on it, but we need to do much better. In the context of that, the last Government had an action plan on loneliness and did not deliver it. It had committed to that in its programme for Government. This Government does not have the same commitment. We need to do so much better. If we do not, we will see an exacerbation not just of loneliness but of all those social costs. Young men will turn to blaming women, immigrants and people from the LGBT community and we will all be suffering from that. History is littered with memories of young men doing harmful things to themselves and others because of these kinds of deleterious effects. I encourage the Government to focus on it.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** On behalf of Deputy Michael Cahill, I welcome the South Kerry Development Partnership to the Gallery. I hope they, like Deputy Cummins' group, will enjoy the day here in the Oireachtas and have a pleasant trip.

**Deputy Joe Neville:** First of all, I want to reference Danny Hanley and the Movember Ireland team that are here today. They represent many of the issues that we talk about. For too long in this State, men's health, and I suppose health in general, has not always been the topic that it should have been and it has been underdiscussed. I welcome the fact that I am able to speak on it today. I think it is the first time in the history of the Dáil that there has been an opportunity for statements such as this. The recently published Movember report outlined that premature death was 40% higher among males compared with females.

It also pointed out that the stigma around seeking help was seen as the biggest barrier to men accessing support for their mental and physical health. We as a Government, and Members on all sides of the House, have a duty to ensure that we do our best and improve these statistics.

My uncle was a TD before me and a spokesperson for Fine Gael on mental health. Mental health is something that wen need to be conscious of as part of this. Indeed, he introduced the Bill to decriminalise suicide and was at the forefront of leading the mental health discussion in modern Ireland. I think of him today in that regard.

I want to speak about a number of different topics, such as the importance of our community and of the role sport can play in our community. Even last night, our under-14s team in Leixlip, which I am a coach for, won a county championship. It was a great win but it showed the importance of community. Not only were there 13- and 14-year-old boys engaging as a team, but it also brought the community and coaches together and provided an outlet. They have the ability to go that way but not everybody is involved in sport and that is something we would be conscious of. I have become more and more conscious as time has gone on of the elderly. A previous speaker spoke about loneliness. If anything, loneliness became an even bigger issue during Covid. That is something we should constantly be conscious of. Things like Meals on Wheels can make a massive impact on someone's day and that is something we are all very aware of.

The other day, I spoke to someone in Leixlip. Ms Bracey Daniels talking about walking football, what they are able to do with walking football and how that had transformed the social side for many elderly people. I also see a bowls club developing in Leixlip GAA club. These are the sorts of interaction from a community side that we can really get behind to change individuals' lives.

With men's health, we are always thinking about what we can do better. What we need to do is continue to raise awareness among the young, but also among the elderly, about raising these issues with their doctors. Men from all sides are often the last ones to say they need help and to go to a doctor. Today provides us with the opportunity to raise awareness.

I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for giving me this time. I thank the Minister of State for giving us the opportunity to speak on this.

**Deputy Martin Daly:** I am pleased to contribute to the statements on men's health. As a GP, I have seen the reality of men's health in practice. We have come a long way in recent years since the publication of the national men's health policy in 2009 but Movember's "The Real Face of Men's Health" report shows that many challenges remain. I do not want to rehash some of the figures already put out here but we know about the premature deaths in the male population, with men dying earlier than women. A stark statistic is that men in deprived areas are 150% more likely to die before 75 than men in the least deprived areas. There is also the whole issue of Travellers' health and issues of gay health where these communities are particularly susceptible to ill health and premature death.

We know many of the causes surrounding these diseases are preventable with the right focus. From my own perspective as a GP, I have witnessed that quiet hesitation before a man decides to open up. It is a salutary reminder of how difficult it can be for some men to report and share. Time, discomfiture discussing personal matters, stoicism, a fear of inadequacy and work concerns are barriers. Some 97% of GPs have spoken to a man with suicidal thoughts in the past year, with only 14% feeling very confident supporting that man. This is not because of lack of care or confidence but because of time pressures and the need for easily accessible care pathways, recognising that suicide remains the single biggest killer of young men in this country, most especially in the Traveller community. I acknowledge my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, for her sustained leadership in this area and her announcement of €2 million in new funding for community-based mental health supports, which will make a tangible difference.

The physical picture is equally alarming. Men are three times more likely to die prematurely than women. They drink more, they smoke more, and they carry a high blood pressure burden. With the increased prevalence of diabetes, high cholesterol and poor diet, this is creating a perfect storm. The five leading causes of morbidity and mortality among men are coronary artery disease, stroke, chronic obstructive pulmonary airways disease, lung cancer and suicide. All of these can be mitigated with lifestyle and medical modification. The chronic disease management programmes for secondary prevention are an exemplar in general practice internationally and have been shown to help. The forthcoming national men's action plan 2024 to 2028 offers an opportunity to build and expand programmes like Engage and Men in Mind, targeting high-risk groups and scaling up initiatives such as men's sheds On Feirm Ground and Ahead of the Game, which enables men to take ownership of their health. I must recognise the high morbidity and mortality among the farming community in rural areas, often surrounded by loneliness and an inability to go and seek help.

Encouragingly, three out of four adults now express concern about men's health. That public awareness should help us and empower us towards real change. If we continue to invest in

prevention, training and community-based supports, we can deliver better outcomes not only for men, but for their families and for the well-being of Irish society as a whole.

**Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire:** Fáiltím go bhfuil na ráitis seo ar siúl inniu. Is gné d'ár gcóras sláinte é nach bhfuair an méid airde thar na blianta is ar cóir go bhfaigheadh sé. Is léir go bhfuil difríocht mhór ann ó thaobh na ngalar a tholgann fir agus cé chomh tinn a éiríonn siad, go mór mór ó thaobh na meabhairshláinte ach freisin ó thaobh go leor ábhar eile. Tá an dá ghné thábhachtach ó thaobh na mban agus na hábhair sláinte atá tábhachtach dóibh siúd - tá ábhar sláinte faoi leith atá an-bhainteach leo, agus is gá go mbeadh plean faoi leith ansin - ach tá sé fíor d'fhir freisin.

I welcome these statements. This is an area of our healthcare - men's health - that has not got enough attention over the years. It clearly should. There are clearly significant differences and particular issues that relate to men. It is appropriate that we have a focus on women's health and the various issues particular to women, for example, reproductive rights and supports for that, but it is right that the particular issues facing men are focused on as well.

We see two in five men in Ireland will die before the age of 75. Men account for four out of every five suicide deaths in Ireland. Men are 34% more likely to die from cancer than women. It is clearly right that there is a particular strategy and set of policies that are required. I acknowledge "The Real Face of Men's Health" report, published by the National Centre for Men's Health at SETU, which identified the extent to which men died from preventable diseases and that the preventable diseases in men cost Ireland more than €700 million in 2023 alone.

Several of the issues relate to cancer and the extent to which particular cancers affect men. While men die from them, mortality is not the only thing we should be looking at. Sometimes, the treatment and effects or side-effects of that can cause huge quality-of-life issues, and this needs consideration. I also acknowledge the very welcome initiative that exists in terms of Movember and the work that has been done in that context as regards prostate cancer and other cancers.

To briefly make two further points, it is worth saying that, ultimately, we will continue to have these issues unless we tackle the social issues underpinning them. An awful lot of men I meet in my constituency office are struggling with housing issues, which is contributing to the mental pressures and the loneliness they face. They are either not able to begin their lives or they have ended up in emergency accommodation towards the end of their lives. We have to tackle the social issues. Like so many other issues in terms of men's health and men's mental health, the housing crisis has a huge impact on that.

**Deputy Peter Roche:** I welcome this discussion. I commend the Minister of State on bringing this to the House. It is astonishing when you read that males represented 72% of premature deaths, which is most stark. In 2022, 79% of all deaths by suicide were among males and young men suffering from depression are diagnosed at half the rate of women, which is another stark figure. It is fair to say that men's health is a national issue and demands a co-ordinated, compassionate and courageous response. One of the things I have often said is that we can have all the conversations we like here today about men's health, remaining positive and all the things that go with it.

For those people who are harbouring thoughts of isolation, depression or suicidal ideation or all of these things, though, I encourage them to seek help by telling a trusted friend. That might be the person's wife, daughter or next-door neighbour and then, more importantly, for that trusted friend to know exactly how to respond - not to judge them, not to add to their woes, but to be prepared to offer support, help, direction and guidance. That is all any of us can do. If I had a euro for every time I had that conversation with people who felt that maybe I would understand, I would be able to go and have a good drink for myself. They think and feel that it is perfectly okay to speak to someone who has a knowledge perhaps of what it is like to be devastated as a consequence of an early death, be that suicide or otherwise. This is the big plea I am making today. Let us do more and let us not be afraid to ask somebody if they are in trouble emotionally. They may be very quick to say that they are and then they are on the first steps to recovery. I cannot say that often enough or loudly enough. It is a fact. For those people sitting at home today listening to all the contributions and hearing all the statistics, I believe that is what we should be aiming towards. I urge the Minister of State to continue the good work and let us have more conversation on this.

**Deputy Shay Brennan:** Four out of five suicides in Ireland are male. This figure is deeply distressing and behind every number is a man, often young, often in the prime of his life, whose loss devastates families, friends, and communities across the country. Every one of these deaths leaves a ripple of grief that stretches far beyond the immediate circle. It not just a statistic; it is a husband, a son, a brother, a team-mate or a colleague. Ireland has shown leadership in this space before. We were the first country in the world to publish a national men's health policy in 2009. This initiative made a real and measurable difference. Premature deaths among men declined, awareness approved and the national framework for action began to take shape. More than 15 years on, we know there is still a long way to go. The report entitled "The Real Face of Men's Health", published by the Movember earlier this year, makes it clear that mental health remains a most urgent and worrying issue. GPs across Irish are telling us the same story of stigma, silence, time pressure, and of a continuing reluctance among men to seek help. Ninety-seven percent of GPs said they had seen male patients in suicidal distress last year, most between the ages of 18 and 51, yet only a small fraction feel they have the full training or capacity to respond as they would wish. That is why the new €2 million initiative providing 15,000 free counselling sessions for men is such an important and timely step forward. Delivered through trusted partners like Connect Counselling and MyMind and accessed directly through GPs, it means men can reach support earlier, before a crisis escalates. It recognises that services must reflect how men actually seek help, and that the pathway must be simple, affordable and free from stigma.

We also know that community-based initiatives work. Initiatives such as men's sheds, On Feirm Ground and Engage have proven their ability to reach those who might otherwise remain isolated. Time and again, we see that connection is the first step towards recovery. Investing in men's mental health is not just about reducing suicide rates. It is also about restoring hope, rebuilding confidence, and ensuring that men of all ages feel seen, supported and valued.

**Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí:** Thankfully, the issue of men's health has received a lot more attention in recent years, as the statistics are pretty stark. According to the Movember report, 42% of all male deaths in 2022 were premature, with the male death rate higher across all five leading causes of death. These are members of our families dying prematurely and leaving

behind an irreplaceable hole in their communities. The impact of Covid should not be underestimated. The pandemic was a perfect storm for many who suffered from or were susceptible to poor mental health. We all know the people who suffered during Covid. Active communities were suddenly isolated and the essential links that people had to one another were severed. Thankfully, we are all in a much better place now but we cannot ignore what happened in Covid and the lasting impact it has had on so many. Those unprecedented times may make for great history books but were potentially catastrophic for the health and well-being of our communities.

Unfortunately, many men are still reluctant to seek care or treatment, or even speak about mental health challenges. This reluctance is often rooted in stigma and old societal norms that are still with us. This is especially problematic in deprived areas where men's life expectancy is five years lower than those living in affluent areas. Increasing awareness and access to mental health resources is important if we want to make progress. That is why the implementation of the men's health action plan, as outlined in the programme for Government, is an important step in raising public awareness of men's physical, mental and emotional health and the importance of adopting healthier lifestyles and behaviours.

The previous speaker mentioned the men's sheds, which are a really positive and practical movement. Many of these in my own constituency are funded by central government. They bring men together and give them an outlet. Ireland was the first country in the world to publish a national men's health policy in 2009. We led the way then and we can do so again by making sure that men's health gets the attention, support and priority it deserves.

**Deputy Catherine Callaghan:** I welcome the contributions on the topic of men's health. To hear that this may be the first time in the history of the Dáil that this issue has been discussed on its own is a good sign of the direction we are travelling in. I want to thank the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, for all her work on mental health and men's mental health in particular. I was recently at an event in Carlow, as was the Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor. It was really heartening to see such a strong light being shone on men's mental health and men's health and well-being in general by both of those fine politicians. I thank them for doing that in Carlow.

In my constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny, I am proud to say that communities recognise how vitally important it is that we address the challenges facing men's health and well-being. Carlow County Council has been very proactive in this regard. It launched a farmers well-being initiative in 2024, which continues this year. This is highlighting the health and well-being challenges faced by members of the farming community. Last year, 340 local farmers were engaged in conversations on farm succession, will making, gambling addiction, time management and farm safety. It is important that men and farmers feel able to openly discuss their well being and their mental health as well. Elsewhere, the National Centre for Men's Health is based in SETU in Carlow and is led by Dr. Noel Richardson. It is important to highlight the hard work of local community organisations and initiatives that have innovative approaches to men's mental health. In particular, I would like to mention Carlow Mental Health Association of which I was a committee member for many years. It ran a Mensana Festival two years ago that was exclusively focused on talking about men's health and well-being. I want to give the association a shoutout for all its hard work.

I know there are now more counselling supports available for men and I once again would like to congratulate and thank the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, for ensuring that the €2 million allocated in budget 2025 will now be rolled out year on year. Work is being done on initiatives that destigmatise men's mental health in Ireland. I commend the Minister of State for ensuring that we have the six-week mental health promotion, entitled "Minding Your Wellbeing". I also want to mention the funding that is being provided to ONE Veterans, the organisation for ex-military personnel.

**Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin:** There is certainly a crisis in men's health and it is great that we are having this discussion today. It is quite an historic occasion. A recent report for the South East Technological University, SETU, revealed that 40% of male deaths that occurred before the age of 75 were premature and many were preventable.

County Wexford ranks second in this State in terms of premature male mortality rates per county. This could affect someone's husband, brother, father, grandfather, uncle or nephew and, of course, me or anybody here. The leading causes of death among Irish men are coronary heart disease, stroke, pulmonary disease, lung cancer and, of course, suicide. These are not just numbers. They represent lives cut short, families devastated and communities left grieving. Cancer, particularly prostate cancer, remains a major concern. Neoplasms or tumours, cysts, etc., are the leading cause of death among men, yet early detection rates remain low. We must ask why this is this the case. Respiratory diseases, often linked to lifestyle factors, are claiming lives at alarming rates.

Perhaps most concerning is the state of mental health. Suicide is now the leading cause of death among young men in Ireland. Four out of five suicides involve men. Why is this not viewed as an emergency? Are men's lives expendable? Why is this the first time in the history of the Oireachtas apparently that we have had this discussion in Leinster House? That tells us something. Depression, anxiety and substance abuse are widespread, yet in 2025, when we are supposed to be a very enlightened society, the stigma continues causing those who need the services most to suffer in silence. Too many men delay seeking medical attention until it is too late.

Service gaps are leaving men behind. It is certainly evident in the constituency of Wicklow-Wexford. Trojan work is being done by a number of community-based groups such as Talk to Tom but they have never received one cent of statutory funding, even though they have saved numerous live across the south east. The Samaritans in Arklow are under pressure. They are renting a premises. These services should be State-funded. There is a real shortage of male-specific counselling and outreach programmes and many men still view their symptoms as minor complaints that they do not want to trouble a doctor with, so we have very low engagement.

Men in poorer areas are 150% more likely to die before the age of 75 than those in wealthier communities. We need to target services properly and we need proper targeted awareness campaigns, better access to screening and mental health services and a cultural shift that encourages people to seek help. We must empower our GPs because they are often the first port of call in a storm. One GP quoted in the report said, "97% of us spoke to a man with suicidal thoughts last year, but only 14% felt confident supporting him", which is quite

worrying. We need to invest in preventative care and dismantle the stigma because behind every statistic is a story and behind every story is a life we need to save.

**Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty:** I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. In some ways, there will be a certain amount of repetition because we have all been asked by the Movember movement to reference its report titled, "The Real Face of Men's Health", and its key findings and recommendations. If there is repetition, it is no harm because it is sending a message. I will repeat that men are dying prematurely in Ireland and that the figure is 40% higher than the rate for females. This is something that has happened over a long period of time. We need to recognise that men's health is a specific issue. I am not in any denigrating issues relating to women. I have to note that. However, men's health has been the poor relation in terms of discourse. All five leading causes of death are substantially higher among men than women.

It is also worth pointing out that deprivation gives someone five years less life compared to someone in a more affluent area. While men are 40% more likely to die prematurely than women, the rate is 46% for men in deprived areas. These are the stark consequences that we need to look at. They are nearly 1.5 times more likely to die prematurely because of deprivation.

Other speakers referred to the supports needed by GPs and the difficulty of engaging with males aged under 17 and marginalised males from ethnic minorities, members of the Traveller community, those who are LBTQI+ and members of the farming community. It is worth referencing that we need an updated study for members of the Traveller community because I think the last survey was done in 2008. That survey recognised that life expectancy for male Travellers was 15 years lower than the general male population. That needs to be looked at as well.

The report mentioned more than eight in ten Irish people think that a men's health action plan is a good idea. That is why they have a number of key asks for the men's action plan from 2024 to 2028 and wish to see progress on that and for an additional €10 million to be invested, in tandem with the commissioning of a full cost analysis because we do not want to just waste money. They want an outreach approach to engage boys, men and carers in the community in adopting healthy lifestyles and self-management.

In that respect, one thing the report did not mention, but which is hugely important, is the increasing toxification on social media. We have had different discussions on that. What it means to be a man and what masculinity is have been toxified - deliberately, in many cases - and people are afraid to expand and be true to themselves in terms of what it means to be a man in Ireland in 2025. We need more discussion of that. Men come in all shapes and forms, and more power to them.

**Deputy Peadar Tóibín:** I also pay tribute to the men's health campaigners who have worked so hard to get this issue debated in the House today. Again, I am shocked by the fact that this is the first time that we in Leinster House have had a debate solely on men's health. In many ways, the fact that we have not had the necessary focus on this issue is really telling.

A month ago, Movember launched The Real Face of Men's Health report. This is a significant milestone in the battle to save lives. The results are startling. It has been mentioned that premature death among men is 40% higher than it is among women. This is an astounding figure. It is a figure that should be in everybody's heads already. The fact that it is invisible is amazing.

Members know that economic circumstances play a massive role. The lives of men living in deprivation are, on average, five years shorter than men on upper incomes. It has to be mentioned that Traveller men have a life expectancy 15 years shorter than the average man, which is incredible. Deprivation is a significant player in this. Men in deprivation are 46% more likely to have a premature death than women in the same communities. A total of 66% of overdoses and accidental poisonings happen to men. Men suffer far more from addiction. Men suffer from the crisis of loneliness far more and, if we are honest, men are very unsure of their role in society at the moment. A total of 80% of traffic accidents happen to men. Approximately 80% of suicides involve men. I attended two funerals over the summer where men in their 50s committed suicide, leaving heartbroken families behind them. The rate of suicide among Travellers is six times higher than it is among the rest of the population. These are eye-watering figures. This is an emergency, an invisible one.

The truth is that these issues are fixable. I also offer support for making sure the key asks of The Real Face of Men's Health are implemented, in terms of the necessity for the report to be progressed, for necessary funding to be implemented and for a cost analysis to be developed. Education is necessary. I had cancer in the past five years and I have also had a stroke. Thank God, I had the necessary and speedy treatment to be able to deal with those issues but lots of men, for many reasons, do not access treatment and we need to educate them to do so. However, we also need the treatment to be there and, if we are honest, in many ways the treatment is not there, even when men seek to access it. Figures in the report show that only 14% of GPS are confident in helping men with suicidality. We need to tailor those services to the needs of men who are suffering.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Today, for the first time in the history of the Dáil, we are giving men's health the attention it urgently deserves. Ireland led the world in 2009 with the first national men's health policy but the latest version of the report, The Real Face of Men's Health, shows we are at a crossroads. In 2022, 40.2% of all male deaths were premature. Men in the most deprived areas are 150% more likely to die before the age of 75 than those in affluent areas. The leading causes of this - heart disease, stroke, lung cancer, suicide and chronic respiratory diseases - are largely preventable. The economic cost of men's ill health exceeds €1 billion annually, of which €760 million is considered preventable. Heartbreakingly, four out of five deaths by suicides in Ireland involve males. Most of us in this House have been touched by suicide and those of us who have know the devastating effect it has on those left behind.

3 o'clock

We need to do more for men who feel they cannot talk and that they have nowhere to go. These are preventable deaths. There needs to be more investment in services for men. Too many are dying by suicide.

This is not just about men. It is about families, communities and the future of our nation. We must act now. Movember calls for €10 million investment to implement the national men's health action plan and a cross-government strategy to address this crisis. Recently, a man who is not from my constituency, contacted me. His doctor told him he had a tumour in his head but he could not get a scan. This man pays for private health insurance, believe it or not. He was told he could be waiting weeks for the scan and he knew it was urgent. We worked with him to go to Kingsbridge Private Hospital in Belfast and he rang me after he had contacted the Belfast hospital, which had him up within a week, with a treatment plan started. It is not good enough, whether it is men's or women's health. However, we are talking about men's health and it is hard enough to get most men to doctors or hospitals. For them then to be told that they could be waiting weeks or months for a scan could cause unknown torment to their mental health.

The Irish Men's Sheds Association describes the sheds as places where the greatest tool is a kettle, emphasising the power of a chat over a cup of tea. It also supports national health campaigns such as sheds for life, which brings health checks, mental health, workshops and lifestyle advice directly into the shed. I give a shout-out to the men's sheds in west Cork, including in Bantry, Bandon, Castletownbere, Dunmanway, Clonakilty, Kinsale and Skibbereen. If people are in west Cork, I encourage them to pop into these men's sheds for a cuppa and a chat. They are great places for people who need to get out.

I also commend the people who deliver meals on wheels services in rural communities because a lot of people who get the dinners tell me that is the only person they meet during the day. The postman is also a gift from God. These are people who are delivering to people in different ways and they need to be commended.

**Deputy Albert Dolan:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on men's health. I commend the Minister of State on the investment she made in August to provide more than 15,000 free counselling sessions to men. This is really welcome because quite often men, and particularly young men, are afraid to speak about how they are doing, how they are coping with the pressures of life and how things are going. It is important that young men, and all men, are aware that these sessions are available and that they can avail of them through their GPs. I commend the Minister of State on that investment.

One thing we need to do is to move away from the mindset of "I will be grand". There is still a mindset of "It will be fine" or "I will be grand; don't worry about me". Men need to be encouraged to avail of services, engage with prevention and early detection and ensure they mitigate risks as and when they arise. There is also an onus to tackle isolation. The men's sheds movement and what it has achieved are incredible. I have met many of its members in my constituency, including in Athenry and Monivea. They provide an incredible service that leads to people having a space where they can meet, talk, engage and get the social connection that is being lost in our communities. It is important we meet men where they are. Many men are engaged in different activities such as in men's sheds or in their GAA clubs. We need to send information to these organisations to ensure as many men as possible are availing of relevant supports.

Another thing it is important to discuss briefly is the effect social media have on the mental health of young people, particularly the negative effects. Young people are under greater

societal pressure than ever before because everything they do is being watched and they are also watching everything everyone else is doing. As a result, there is a huge comparison effect, which is having significant negative mental impacts on young people because they are not sure where they are supposed to be or what they are supposed to be doing.

**Deputy John Lahart:** I thank the Minister of State. I echo the comments that were made about her tenure in charge of mental health policy and delivery in the Government. I also echo what the previous speaker said about the role of men's sheds and give a shout-out to ExWell.

Dr. Noel McCaffrey has been very involved in sport for many years. I am recovering from a pretty important medical intervention. ExWell is an exercise or kind of physical rehabilitation programme for anyone who is recovering from heart issues, cancers or chronic diseases. It has been rolled out and in my constituency there are three or four venues where scores of people turn up. It is essentially a kind of aerobics that is free for the first ten or 12 weeks. The older people who are there talk about the difference that exercise has made to their quality of life. It is subsidised by the HSE and is a positive thing. Social groups, choirs and golf societies have grown out of it. There has been a strong social dimension to it.

My experience is that I had open heart surgery a few years ago and thankfully I am recovering well. However, the one lesson I learned from that, one which I pass on to people whether or not they are willing to listen, is one sentence, not a long paper. It is that the doctor is your friend. When I talk to male colleagues who are talking about their health, I condense it to that one sentence - the doctor is your friend. Many male colleagues I chat to wince at the thought when I ask them whether they have spoken to their GPs.

It is probably not a fair analogy, but when I searched for analogies, it is the one I found. A lot of men would know pretty quickly if there was a problem with their cars from the sound and would address it, generally pretty quickly. We are not the best at self-diagnostics, because there are many times when things are going on inside our bodies and without a blood test or check, we cannot know something is wrong. Often, we have a physical, emotional or psychological sense that something is a little amiss and we need to check it out. I have distilled it for physical health - I will repeat it - as "the doctor is your friend".

I can only speak for myself, but I think we are all afraid of getting bad news. That is understandable, but I suspect that in a huge proportion of cases things are treatable. Is it not better to get news about something and have it treated, than not seek help and find that whatever has been ailing you has got to a point where it is untreatable or the invention required is far more acute? The doctor is your friend.

In mental health, as a practising psychotherapist, for men I reduced the idea to this sentence - I do not like oversimplifying things, but I have said this to the Minister of State before in the Chamber - "lack of expression leads to depression". It is a simple message about the talking cure, talking to people. What is interesting about the statistics that were presented, and which I will not restate, is that at one end of the scale, in our youth, we probably have the fittest generation of people we ever had. Someone mentioned sport and I was in Parnell Park last Sunday. On the other end of the scale, we have an explosion of chronic illnesses. There are a lot of interventions that can be made policy-wise. The Government cannot do everything, but it can look at addressing a bit of the fear, sending the message that the doctor is your friend and exploring what frightens people out of taking steps.

As a slight aside, women were patronised terribly in advertising over the years, but I notice that men are often stereotyped as stupid in a lot of modern advertising.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** Please conclude, Deputy.

**Deputy John Lahart:** Will the Leas-Cheann Comhairle please repeat that?

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** The Deputy has to conclude.

**Deputy John Lahart:** Is there another speaker? I apologise. I did not realise Deputy John Connolly was after me.

**An Leas-Cheann Comhairle:** I was so interested in what the Deputy was saying, I let him talk.

**Deputy John Lahart:** I want to finish with the positive line that the doctor is your friend. I will have to leave it to another debate to finish the other thought.

**Deputy John Connolly:** I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. To echo some of the sentiments of Deputy Lahart, there is a sense that men do not look after their own physical health and, possibly, mental health as well as they should. Opportunities like this to highlight the need to make sure people are aware of the supports that are available, and that it is important to look after their health, are appropriate. This is particularly the case because, as I understand it, November is a month where there is an organised campaign to promote awareness of men's health.

I will speak about one health issue that affects men disproportionately, as the data has shown us, and that is the issue of addiction and substance abuse. According to the Health Research Board, men are more likely to use illicit drugs, binge drink and engage in high-risk gambling behaviours than women. Alcohol remains the most common substance for which people seek help, and the majority of those presenting for treatment are men. The annual report of the Coolmine addiction centre in 2025 stated that in Dublin, cocaine accounted for 36% of all treatment presentations in the first half of 2025, with alcohol at 30%. This trend is particularly strong among young men aged 25 to 34, who are also more likely to engage in polysubstance abuse. The Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, has stated that problem gambling is far more prevalent among young men, especially those aged 25 to 34, and men are also more likely to gamble online and suffer financial harm. The Coolmine centre also provided the data that men are twice as likely as women to use drugs. There is, therefore, an issue that is clearly affecting men disproportionately.

I have a particular concern. The whole area of addiction treatment is another aspect of our healthcare provision where we rely a lot on agencies and bodies other than the HSE to provide primary care and secondary care. It is something we need to look at. In my constituency office recently, I met two people who were waiting to get into the addiction treatment centre at Cuan Mhuire, Coolarne. I can only imagine the mental trauma it would cause for somebody, when

seeking help to try to deal with an addiction, to be told there is a waiting list. I contacted Cuan Mhuire and the staff there were very helpful.

Another issue that is prevalent among young men who suffer addiction is the necessity to rely on emergency accommodation, so they are possibly suffering disproportionately in terms of housing as well. We need to look at the whole area of addiction. We need to ask whether we can resource the services better and bring more of them into the sphere of the HSE.

**Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan:** When we read the stark figures on men's health in Ireland, they should be ringing alarm bells across the Government. The statistics we have are not just numbers; they are a national crisis. Every one of those numbers represents a family member, friend or loved one. Let us be clear about the reality facing men in Ireland. Men account for four in every five suicide deaths in Ireland. Men are 34% more likely to die from cancer than women. Behind these figures are tens of thousands of men suffering in silence. The harsh truth is that Government inaction is accelerating the crisis.

Yesterday, I telephoned my GP for an appointment. I was told it would take 20 days just to see a nurse, with the wait list for the GP even longer. Let us imagine a young man struggling with anxiety or depression who finally gathers the courage to ask for help. For him, a delay like this is not just an inconvenience. It can be lethal.

Yet, once again, where the Government is found wanting, it is the local community that steps up. The most powerful example I have seen is the incredible work of the men's sheds across Carlow and Kilkenny. These sheds provide a unique and vital level of support. In the Ferrybank men's shed, I witnessed a warm and welcoming environment for older men with disabilities while I was working with the Brothers of Charity. The Tullow men's shed has a diverse mix of nationalities sharing a wealth of life experience. In Thomastown, the men's shed runs a fantastic shop that breathes new life into old furniture, giving the men a profound sense of joy and achievement in their labour. It is where I have picked up many bits and pieces over the years for my own family home.

Beyond the projects, there is one constant, and that is the role of the kitchen, the hub where men gather to have a chat and a cup of tea, and talk about life, the struggles they may be facing and the advice they can share. It is a space that goes far beyond its core purpose. The Castlecomer men's shed and so many other men's sheds across Carlow and Kilkenny take on project after project where the support goes beyond supporting one another and ripples out into the wider community. These men's sheds have become a crucial base for getting information on health and well-being directly to men. It is encouraging to see this movement grow with the recent official opening in Ballyraggett. I hope that shed and all the men's sheds continue to grow from strength to strength.

As the mother of four boys, I am acutely aware of the effect that social media is having on children like them. It is so important for children's mental health for people to encourage their children to talk. Even though we are all busy, I always take time to talk to the children and ask them if they are okay. That should be encouraged more. It does not take a lot out of somebody's life to chat to their children.

**Deputy Carol Nolan:** I am delighted to have this opportunity to speak on such an important issue. It is welcome that we are discussing this. I find it odd, and it is noticeable, how little we discuss men's health in this House. Maybe that is something we all need to work on to make sure we bring the issue more to the fore in the Chamber. It is an issue that needs attention. It is certainly one form of gender imbalance that we need to address, given it is discussed so little in the House. There seems to be a preference, unfortunately, to demonise men and boys in our society. We know that men are vastly and disproportionately more likely to commit suicide. Indeed, the CSO has pointed out, in the most recent available data, that in 2021, both males and females aged 50 to 54 years had the highest crude suicide rate per 100,000, yet this rate was 29.5 for men and 9.2 for females. That is very concerning. It justifies the need to raise mental health issues more often in this Chamber, in particular the impact it can have on men, and to discuss ideas and solutions.

I also want to refer to farmers' mental health. I bring this up because at the Tullamore show recently, I spoke with the Irish Cattle and Sheep Farmers Association, ICSA. It is a fantastic farming organisation and I commend it on its work. Any time I visit its stand, it has a section on men's health, in particular mental health, and it is constantly promoting the need for more supports, particularly for men engaged in the farming community who need support.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** This is a very important debate. Men are slower to go to doctors than women, especially men on their own. I know that when men have wives and partners, they see after them and make them go. Men are tough and they persevere with pain, and they often let themselves go. I have known of too many cases where they waited too long, and they were at stage 4, where little could be done for them. I saw a man who eventually jumped out of his machine and sought help, but it was too late. He stayed at it too long. He was a great man.

There are fellows milking cows and even younger men who are waiting to be called in the public system. What I say to those fellows who are waiting is this: if the wait is too long when something important is diagnosed by their GP, they should put their hands in their pockets themselves. There is no one as badly off as that. Maybe they are leaving it after them and minding it for someone else. That is a mistake. If they have it at all and if the wait on the public list is too long, they should do it. We all decry having to wait because people should be seen after medically, whatever about anything else. Men have to take it upon themselves to see after themselves first.

**Deputy Gillian Toole:** I am grateful for this opportunity. I acknowledge the "him" in my life who contributed greatly to getting me in here. I am grateful to the Movember organisation which provided us with recent research into the whole area of men's health. It is an area that I have a particular interest in. I found a module on men's health from 2003 from the North-Eastern Health Board. Despite criticism, I acknowledge how far we came between 2003 and the policy in 2009, but also how much further we have to go. Pivotal to that is the contribution of men's sheds, On Feirm Ground and the local sports partnerships that now deliver specific men-orientated programmes, in particular Men on the Move and programmes for those aged over 55. I acknowledge those. A couple of speakers made a point about accessibility. The recently formatted and agreed community pharmacy agreement, which will take effect from 1

January next year, will provide affordable and accessible men's healthcare and, indeed, healthcare for everybody. That is an opportunity to access help on the main street.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor):** I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak about men's health and describe some of the initiatives that my Department and the HSE have in place to improve men's health. As a society, we are living longer and Ireland has one of the highest life expectancies in the EU. This should be celebrated, but it also brings challenges. We need to help people to enjoy good health and well-being at every stage of life and try to close the life expectancy gap between men and women. The Healthy Ireland vision is one where everyone can enjoy physical and mental health and well-being to their full potential and where well-being is valued at every level in society. Achieving this vision requires a whole of government and whole of society approach. My Department supports a range of programmes and partnerships to improve men's health.

The HSE has recently appointed a national programme manager to implement the men's health action plan. Alongside the voluntary sector, the HSE has led out on the development of a number of tailored programmes and campaigns on men's health. Engage, the national men's health training programme, provides health and community professionals with insights and skills on how to effectively engage men. This pioneering programme aims to improve the gender expertise of our health and social care workforce in relation to engaging men on their health. This training is delivered by HSE health promotion and improvement and co-ordinated by the Men's Development Network. Each year, the HSE provides funding for men's health week, which aims to raise awareness of men's health issues through public campaigns and community events across Ireland.

I acknowledge the invaluable work of the Irish Men's Sheds Association. My Department, along with the Department of rural and community development and the HSE, allocates funding to the association which does such excellent work in our communities. Men's sheds offer a supportive social environment for men, leading to reduce isolation, a stronger sense of community and improved health and well-being. There are over 450 men's sheds now established throughout the country. The sheds also deliver the sheds for life programme. This involves health workshops, screenings and wellness activities over a ten-week period. Topics such as healthy eating and physical activity are covered, along with mental health and chronic disease prevention. The aim is to support men in more open and meaningful discussion around their physical and mental well-being.

I also mention programmes, such as Moving On, which is a community-based physical activity programme delivered by the local sports partnerships. It has been successful in reaching men who might not otherwise participate in exercise classes and similar classes. It gives them a chance. As someone who is learning in my role, I agree with other speakers that it is about communication and information, and letting men know what is available for them. We have such good schemes and services in place and other things we can help with. On Feirm Ground is another successful initiative. This is a partnership programme between my Department and the Department of agriculture. It trains agricultural advisers and veterinary staff to recognise signs of stress, mental health issues and ill health among farmers and make referrals to their doctor and talk about it. This is an excellent example of cross-government work. I acknowledge the leadership demonstrated by my colleagues in relation to improving farmer health and well-being.

Another area that I am passionate about is reducing the gender gap in life expectancy and improving the health and well-being of men. This means driving programmes such as those I outlined and encouraging greater participation in screening and health checks, which are vital. I am mindful that men account for over 70% of the cases treated for problem drug use last year. As Deputies know, the topic of drugs is within my remit. Men have also accounted for the majority of drug poisoning deaths every year since 2012. While it is positive that men engage with drug services in large numbers, it is important that we focus on prevention and address the root causes of problematic drug use in men's lives at earlier stages. We must make health services more accessible to men, expand our models and encourage men to seek help. That is one area we are promoting. We need say, "Seek help; it is there." I am committed to supporting the implementation of the men's health action plan in the HSE. I will be exploring the opportunities, with Healthy Ireland, for further cross-government work in 2026. I will seek to place a real focus on prevention and education in our upcoming national drug strategy. I look forward to updating the House on this as the drafting progresses.

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell):** I welcome the opportunity to speak on men's health, which is a priority in the programme for Government. I thank all Deputies from their contributions to this important debate. They showed a genuine interest in this hugely important topic and the Government will very much take that on board.

I will refer to the commitments set out in the programme for Government in relation to mental health, which is a priority. It includes the implementation of the men's health action plan to increase health literacy and raise public awareness of boys' and men's physical, mental and emotional health. While there have been improvements in men's health overall, men still have a lower life expectancy than women and have higher mortality rates for the leading causes of death, such as heart disease, cancer and suicide. The publication of the Health Service Executive's action plan for men's health 2024-2028 is a significant and important step in continuing the momentum and excellent progress that has been made in the area of men's health practice in Ireland in recent years. I wish to progress and build momentum into the future.

The programme for Government also calls for funding to carry out research into the gender life expectancy gap and develop appropriate responses. There is also a commitment to research, implement and evaluate cancer prevention and early detection initiatives, including in prostate cancer, and promote the uptake of the HPV vaccine for young men and boys. It also calls for the expansion of mental health initiatives targeting men and the implementation of strategies aimed at reducing suicide and self-harm among men. It highlights the need to continue to fund and support local groups like men's sheds and active retirement communities. As everyone has said, we cannot overstate the importance of men's sheds and what they have brought. They provide a safe environment for men to meet up and discuss their issues. They are hugely important.

In my area within the Department of Health, I have secured an extra €2 million for meals on wheels and an extra €82 million for an additional 1.7 million of home support hours. This will benefit men as well.

I take the opportunity to reflect on the challenges highlighted today in relation to men's health, which we must tackle through policy and practice. The recognition of men's health as a distinct policy priority has evolved significantly over the past two decades. In 2009, we

became the first country in the world to publish a men's health policy. That has been succeeded by two health action plans, in 2017 and 2024. The Department of Health, the HSE and numerous community and voluntary organisations have been working in close partnership over the past 20 years to implement men's health policies and action plans to improve the health and well-being of boys and men in Ireland. This reminds us that mental health is not just a matter of individual lifestyle, but is shaped by the social, economic and environmental factors in which we live, work and grow. We must, therefore, take a broad, inclusive approach, one that engages men themselves, but also addresses the wider determinants of health.

This is why addressing the social determinants of health and targeting men most in need are listed as key priorities in the recent mental health action plan. By aligning closely with broader health system reforms and community initiatives, we must endeavour to ensure that men's health is not treated in isolation but as an integral part of all health policies. Any effective men's health policy must target those subgroups of men who are most at risk and most underserved by existing services. It is crucial that we maintain momentum and funding for men's health initiatives. Government support for men's health remains firm. Recent funding for male counselling supports and men's sheds further establishes this commitment.

Ireland has shown strong leadership and innovation in the area of men's health. We have to build a foundation through policy and practice. Moving forward, our focus will be on supporting those men most in need and engaging men and boys as allies in health. This must also include improving the well-being of families and communities connected to men. That is a crucial factor in terms of support, in terms of partners and family. Ultimately, it has to be an inclusive model. Today's debate is quite significant. We are supportive of these matters in government and we want to work on them on a cross-party basis.

## Fisheries: Statements

**Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Timmy Dooley):** I will try not to use my full time because I am conscious that a number of Members want to contribute, and I will facilitate that. I thank the Deputies for seeking the opportunity for statements on fishing. It is timely considering the recent developments in the discussions and negotiations for fishing opportunities for 2026 but also as a chance to discuss other important issues and concerns affecting the fisheries sector.

I will deal with the recent developments for the pelagic stock first. On 13 September, the International Council for Exploration of the Seas, ICES, published deeply concerning advice for widely distributed pelagic stock in 2026. The advice recommended a 70% reduction in the total allowable catch for mackerel in 2026, as well as a reduction of 41% for blue whiting and 22% for boarfish. Regarding mackerel, this follows a reduction last year of 22% compared with advice for 2024. This is also on top of a 26% reduction as a result of Brexit. The Celtic Sea whitefish fleet faces an even bleaker prospect, with cod, haddock and whiting quotas facing zero-catch recommendations. What is facing the Irish fleet in 2026 is a reduction in opportunities right across the sector. We must consider the socioeconomic implications of these recommendations. If the cuts proposed are translated into fishing opportunities for 2026, this will challenge the economic viability and the scale of the Irish fishing sector. These cuts will starve fish processing businesses of raw material. They will impact the services industry that

supports the seafood sector in coastal communities. Service industries include engineering, net mending and factories that have built up over 50 years around ports like Killybegs and Castletownbere.

Following the publication of the advice, I met with fishermen and fisherwomen in Killybegs on Sunday, 5 October, to hear those concerns. They are very clear that years of unchecked overfishing by Norway, Iceland, the Faroes and the Russian Federation have pushed mackerel to the brink. The North Atlantic Pelagic Advocacy Group, NAPA, represents global seafood buyers and retailers. It confirms that over 1 million tonnes of mackerel have been caught above scientific advice over the past five years. This is not a new problem. It is a failure of enforcement. On 8 October, I met with relevant stakeholder groups as part of the annual sustainability impact assessment process. This provided a further opportunity to discuss the scientific advice.

The issue of unsustainable fishing of key pelagic stock such as mackerel by certain coastal states outside the EU has been raised by Ireland repeatedly over the years. At the Agriculture and Fisheries Council in June and again in September I highlighted Ireland's concerns regarding Norway's actions in setting excessive and unsustainable mackerel quotas. We could be looking at an even more serious scenario in 2027 for mackerel, so it is important that we take a co-ordinated approach now. We cannot accept a business-as-usual approach in dealing with Norway. The EU Commission needs to identify and adapt suitable measures to respond to this crisis and bring forward measures regarding third countries that fail to co-operate and that allow unsustainable fishing of stocks of common interest to the European Union. There are tools under Regulation (EU) No. 1026/2012 to impose trade restrictions on countries undermining stocks. The programme for Government recognises the valuable role of fisheries in this country and the communities that rely on this activity for their livelihoods. Furthermore, it notes the commitment of this Government to defend Irish interests in the context of fisheries negotiations between the EU and third countries.

Last week, I presented a sustainability impact assessment to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Fisheries and Maritime Affairs. This assessment, which involves a public consultation process along with expert contributions from the Marine Institute and BIM, is an essential step in Ireland's preparation for the autumn negotiations on fishing opportunities for the forthcoming year. The sustainability impact assessment highlights the potential for significant impacts on the Irish fishing industry. While we have seen clearly the potential impact on the catching sector, the recent ICES advice, particularly in respect of mackerel, is of significant concern to a number of processors who process pelagic fish and ship their product to markets across the world. Mackerel is Ireland's most valuable catch, worth about €94 million in exports last year to premium European and Asian markets. It is now below the safe biological limit. Next week, together with colleagues, I will visit China on a trade mission to support that fishing sector, as well as pork and dairy products. It is a very important market for us and one which, with the assistance of Bord Bia, we continue to promote. The pelagic processors account for €122 million of the €947 million value of the overall sector and ten of the 95 seafood processing companies in the industry. Together with departmental officials, Bord Iascaigh Mhara and Bord Bia, we will work with the pelagic processors to fully assess and analyse the impact of reductions that will take effect in 2026, and to identify ways in which these processors may be supported. In the meantime, a range of supports continue to be available to the sector to support

seafood promotion, capacity building, new product development, new market opportunities and capital investment.

As I said, I will be visiting China next week. Our seafood exports to China are particularly strong, showing growth of more than 50% in the year to date. I am committed to working with other Departments to assess what supports may be available to the seafood sector in this very difficult context. I have had discussions with the EU Commissioner for Fisheries and Oceans. I have raised the matter with the Taoiseach and intend to have further conversations with him. The senior Minister, Deputy Heydon is here and he has been appraised of the issues. Together we will work to assist insofar as possible. The Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation has also been briefed on this, as has the Tánaiste, by people from the sector, to explore options within the constraints of both the EU and national Exchequer funding and the relevant EU and national legislation, in particular taking account of the constraints imposed under EU state aid rules. I am acutely aware, too, that processors require fish, not handouts. The reality of the situation requires emergency interventions. I have spoked to fisheries Ministers in other member states since my appointment and have consistently worked towards building common positions on issues that are of relevance to our sector and its specifics. A strong and common European position is in the best interests of all fishing parties. It is critical to ensure these stocks are fished in a sustainable manner and that comprehensive agreements can be reached governing fishing opportunities for the coming year.

Also of paramount importance is that third countries do not set unjust unilateral quotas that deplete this precious resource. The emerging situation is extremely challenging.

I wish to reassure the House that, as Minister of State with special responsibility for fisheries and the marine, I recognise the importance of maintaining a vibrant fishing sector, both for the communities that rely on them and for the wider economy. The programme for Government, Securing Ireland's Future, reflects this approach by committing to securing a sustainable future for the fisheries sector while supporting coastal communities that rely on this activity for their livelihood.

To reflect, for a moment, amid the current challenges, I refer to the BIM Business of Sea Food Report 2024. This offers a comprehensive assessment of the economic impact of the seafood sector. The report tells us that the Irish seafood industry is valued at €1.24 billion. That is an increase of 4% on 2023. I am conscious that some of these numbers can be somewhat distorting of the facts, particularly when we are facing a crisis, but it is important to put those headline figures on record. The sector employs almost 8,000 people directly across fishing, aquaculture and processing, and a total of almost 17,000 people when indirect employment is included. Fish landings in Ireland were valued at €461 million in 2024, with €325 million coming from the Irish vessels and €136 million from non-Irish vessels. The report shows a value growth of 25% in the aquaculture sector, which is also encouraging. I have made it a feature of the role I hold to try to see where we can continue to grow the aquaculture sector. I am conscious that the licensing issue is currently an impediment in that regard. We are working with officials in our Department to try to find a resolution to that so we can ensure, where possible, the aquaculture sector is explored to the greatest opportunity and extent in a positive way that ensures we get increased exports and additional employment at home at a time when we are facing very particular constraints within the catching sector for those pelagic stocks. These metrics clearly demonstrate the resilience of the sector despite the significant challenges

in recent years and its capacity to pivot and adjust to a changing environment. This progress would not be possible without strategic and well-targeted investment, both public and private.

I also recognise the appetite for the investment community to continue to put moneys back into this sector. That really needs to be recognised and welcomed. Through the seafood development programme the Government is delivering essential support to strengthen competitiveness and support sustainability and employment across the sector. More generally, funding for supports for the commercial seafood sector are provided under the seafood development programme. The programme is co-funded by the Irish Government and the European Commission under the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund, EMFAF, 2021 to 2027.

Schemes for industry under the SDP are primarily implemented by Bord Iascaigh Mhara. Separately to the SDP, the Department also funds and supports services provided by Bord Bia and the agrifood sector, including seafood. These are assessed by seafood processors, in particular marketing, innovation and new product development, etc. Funding supports are also provided to the commercial seafood sector by Enterprise Ireland and Údarás na Gaeltachta. Fourteen schemes have been, or will be, implemented by BIM this year on behalf of our Department under the SDP and the majority of these are co-funded under EMFAF. Two are Exchequer-funded - specifically, the fleet safety and marine tourism schemes.

Many Members will be aware that I have placed a heavy emphasis on personal engagement with the seafood sector since I was appointed to this role in February. The engagement has never been more important than it is now and I am finding industry representatives more united than ever before. They make their case with professionalism and clarity and I thank them for the way in which they have engaged with me and with the Department over recent months, particularly at a time of great crisis for them. I can understand their frustration at times but at all times I see in their professionalism and steadfastness a desire to work through the current crisis.

The programme for Government commits to publishing a five-year fishery sector strategy that will include an examination of the processing sector and to continue to support and promote improvements in fisheries and aquaculture. To progress this, I have engaged a facilitator, Mr. Kieran Mulvey, to work with seafood representative groups in order to identify and articulate issues, priorities and opportunities for the sector. These will be considered when I am setting out the terms of reference for the fisheries sector strategy. Mr. Mulvey is currently engaged in a series of meetings with stakeholders and I look forward to meeting with him to consider his insights as the development of a strategy for the long-term future of the fisheries sector has never been more important. To that extent, we expect to be finalising that work in the coming months. I thank the office of the Secretary General which has engaged with Mr. Mulvey over the summer months and more recently in an effort to put in place capacity to facilitate, understand and to try to bring forward a comprehensive strategy there.

The allocation of stocks between members states was established as a principle of the first CFP in 1983 and was based on the average catch of member states over a period of reference years which is referred to as track record. The only exemption to this relates to the Hague preferences based on a special recognition agreement of the underdeveloped nature of the Irish fleet and the heavily controlled responsibility on us when Ireland joined the EU. This arrangement is a mechanism for limited increase in the annual quotas for Irish fishermen. Any

changes to the existing system of quota allocations would require a majority of member states to agree under the qualified majority voting system. Deputies will be aware that this would require other member states to give up existing quota shares. Any change to relative stability would involve a loss for some other member states and, therefore, present particular challenges in a qualified majority voting context. I am also conscious that there are some countries that do not fish their entire quota allocation but retain them anyway. I would like to see that changed but I am conscious of the challenges associated with that.

I would hope in any review of the CFP that we could have a fairer, more balanced and collegial approach at European level to try to find solutions that benefit all of us. However, I caveat all of that by saying it is a challenge in negotiations but I will certainly not be found wanting. With the support of the Minister, Deputy Heydon, we will fight the case of Irish fishermen and women to the greatest extent possible, notwithstanding our full understanding of the constraints we face. As I said, I will use all opportunities to seek additional access to quota for the Irish fishing fleet where this is possible.

In 2024, Ireland successfully invoked the Hague preferences for mackerel. This is the first time that the Hague preferences had successfully been invoked for this species. This has caused a considerable amount of disquiet among the impacted member states and I anticipate strong opposition in the December Council meeting. To that extent, a number of member states have sought - and we have afforded them - bilateral discussions, either through their embassies or directly with relevant Ministers. We have, at every possible opportunity, set out the importance of this mechanism for us to protect our sector. I believe we will need to invoke the Hague preference mechanism to protect Ireland's share of key stocks through a co-ordinated and all-of-government approach at EU level. It is for that instance that the Minister, Deputy Heydon, and I are engaging with our colleagues in government so that we can use whatever other contacts are there at member state level to try to ensure we get what is required in the December Council meeting.

The last issue on which I wish to update the House today is the review of trawling inside six nautical miles. The programme for Government commits to maintaining support for our important inshore fishing sector and promoting the sustainability of fish stocks. In December 2018, a transition period to a ban on vessels over 18 m trawling inshore waters within the six nautical miles zone and the baselines, was announced. The measure, however, was the subject of extended legal proceedings resulting in it being overturned in 2023. In February 2024, the then Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, held a new public consultation and a review of trawling activity inside the six nautical mile zone and baselines, and this consultation took place without prejudice to what went before. Over 5,500 submissions were received. These submissions, along with updated scientific and economic advice from the Marine Institute and Bord Iascaigh Mhara, were used to inform a review of trawling activity inside the six nautical mile zone and baselines. Together with the Minister, Deputy Heydon, we carefully considered all issues before making a decision. Given the history of litigation in relation to this matter, it was critical that all the necessary procedural and legal steps were taken.

On 30 September, I signed policy directive 1 of 2025 to give legal effect to the decision that the Minister, Deputy Heydon, and I, announced on 22 July last, to place certain restrictions on trawling activity by larger vessels, that is, vessels over 18 m in length, inside the six nautical mile zone and the baselines.

On 1 October 2026, trawling activity, that is, the operation of trawl or seine nets, by fishing vessels over 18 m in length overall inside the six nautical mile zone and the baselines will be prohibited. In addition, a catch limit of 2,000 tonnes of sprat will be permitted for vessels over 18 m in length inside the six nautical mile limit and the baselines from 11 October of this year to 30 September next year.

There has been much commentary on sprat. I can confirm at this time that there is no proposal from the European Commission for a total allowable catch or a quota management arrangement for sprat in the waters around Ireland. Ireland will, of course, have regard to a possible TAC and quota regime or other appropriate conservation measures going forward if recommended in the scientific advice to support the sustainable management of sprat. This Government committed to maintaining support for our inshore sector in the programme for Government. I have no plans at this time to introduce a sprat quota limit for vessels under 18 m. I made a decision to support the fleet of smaller vessels and those deriving an income from the inshore waters within six nautical miles. The new restrictions apply, as I said, to larger vessels only. I am confident that restricting trawling access to the six nautical mile zone to smaller vessels was the right decision to help to deliver on the promise made by this Government and the previous one to support our crucial inshore fishing sector. I am mindful of the opportunity that these measures will provide for our important small-scale fishermen and fisherwomen. I am confident that these measures will help to re-establish links between local fish resources, local fleets and local communities.

I look forward to listening with intent to the rest of the debate.

**Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher:** I am very pleased that the House agreed to take these statements at this very appropriate time, namely prior to the run-in to the December Council and the negotiations that will take place, particularly in respect of coastal states, over the coming weeks. I have been in this House since 1981, with the exception of a few short periods, and I believe this is the worst fishing crisis that will have been experienced since the foundation of the State unless something drastic happens in the next few weeks. I can only describe it as a real Armageddon, with no sector safe from the impacts and devastating fallout that will follow. Over the past five years, Norway, Iceland and the Faroe Islands have overfished mackerel by 1 million tonnes. In some years, Norway alone has overfished by 55%. These are the countries that are telling us we need a sustainable fishery. We are the custodians and we must ensure that there are stocks for the future, but that is not the way those to whom I refer are implementing the TACs and quotas in their countries.

In its scientific advice for stocks for 2026, ICES has called for a reduction, as the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley outlined, of 70% for mackerel, 41% for blue whiting and 20% for boarfish. This has the potential to cost Ireland between €130 million and €150 million in areas along the coast and in rural areas where there is no alternative source of employment. Our catching sector is facing the biggest cut to its fishing opportunities in history in real terms, as proposed in the 2006 recommendations. That cut is equivalent to the accumulative impact of four years' worth of Brexit transfers. I can state very clearly - and I mean this genuinely - that the fishing industry was thrown under the bus to secure Brexit. Had we threatened to veto Brexit, we would not have a problem today. We would have had a problem with Europe, but we certainly would have the mackerel we gave away to secure Brexit.

The processing sector will be severely impacted. As stated, numerous jobs will be lost in rural areas where there is no alternative source of employment. The processing sector could contract in the next 12 months to the tune of between €180 million and €200 million. The scale of the job losses and impacts is unprecedented and catastrophic. Between 2,200 and 2,400 jobs - I believe that is being realistic - could be gone inside the next six months.

The Department, the Minister of State and his colleagues in government must firm up. We must take Europe on. The Minister of State will not succeed unless he goes out to the various member states. It is not enough to negotiate with the maritime states. I do not believe that the Minister of State or the Minister, Deputy Heydon, will have time to visit each capital, but I suggest to the former that he call in the ambassadors of all these countries - not just in the coastal states but in all the other states in western Europe - because they will have an input. I know from experience over the years that they will go along with the Commission's recommendations. However, the Minister of State or the ambassadors could meet their counterparts or those responsible, highlight to them the implications for us and request them not to vote in favour of what is proposed. The latter should be made that very clear to them. They will go for a qualified majority, of course. I hope that the Tánaiste, who told me he is quite interested in resolving this, as is the Taoiseach, will call in the ambassadors and get them to go to the various capitals. The Minister of State should go to the maritime state capitals and the commissioners should do the others.

No disrespect to the Department - I was held this brief for years - but I believe we are all out of our depth on this. That is not just my fear; it is the fear of the industry. While I accept the Minister of State's bona fides and commitment, I am not fully convinced that all of his team are on top of this crisis. I believe that he and his team do not fully appreciate the detrimental effects of the proposed reductions. Have we the capacity to deal with the challenges ahead? This needs to be dealt with by an all-government approach, and I have made a recommendation to the Minister of State in that regard.

Europe has been weak when it comes to coastal states. Norway, which is the chief architect of the destruction of the mackerel stock, will again attempt to gain access to coastal waters off the west of Ireland over the coming weeks. I am pleased that the Minister of State has taken a very strong view and has instructed his officials to oppose the entry of Europe into the waters off the west of Ireland this year. I am grateful to him for that, and I hope he will follow through on it. We need a strongly united no from Ireland and the EU to Norway to stop supporting the industry and, moreover, the recovery of these shared stocks such as blue whiting and mackerel. We must also ensure that the Minister of State can convince Europe and that the market access and trade restrictions for fish products will be fully applied against Norway. That can be done against Norway, against the Faroes and against Iceland. It can be done under Regulation (EU) No. 1026/2012. That needs to be fully implemented, because Norway needs the European Union market to sell its products.

We could lose up to 40% to 50% of the value of our national quotas in monetary terms inside the next three months. Let that sink in. This is very serious for the country and, in particular, for the coastal counties, whether they are in Donegal, Galway or Mayo, right down to Cork and Kerry and across to Waterford and upwards. The proposals from ICES relate not just to mackerel but also to blue whiting and boarfish. Other species of demersal fish are also affected. I hope this will not have to happen, but if it does, the Government needs to immediately draw

up a financial framework and a support package to cover the affected sectors, from catching to processing. If we are serious about this, then this needs to be done over the next four weeks. It is not good enough to say that the budget is over now and we have to look ahead. This is unprecedented and this financial framework should be drawn up.

The Government needs to address the weaknesses of our Department. For too long it has been too weak and out of touch with the fishing sectors and communities. It is being allowed to meander as it did before. We are weak within Europe and our presence needs to be strengthened there. Ireland's permanent representation in Brussels has to strengthen its representation there to look after our interests.

4 o'clock

The big date is the Council meeting but it is done and dusted at that stage. A lot of the work has been done. It is over the next number of weeks that we want to ensure the officials get the additional support they need to prepare for that important meeting.

The Government needs to address the overregulation of fishing and processing. At times, we are so proud because we are implementing European legislation, rules and regulations but I believe that is killing the industry. I know full well that the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority, SFPA, have driven away foreign landings from this country. They are not landing. They could be landing here but it has driven them away. Factory ships that work the waters around the country are unregulated with absolutely no oversight. No one knows what they are at out there and we do not have the capacity in the Defence Forces to try to ensure we stop that overfishing.

The Sea-Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act 2006 needs to be redrafted from scratch. I remember when I was on the other side of the House. It was the first time in the history of the State that a statutory instrument was rescinded in all those years, and I was the one who pioneered that because fishers were getting penalty points. If they went to court afterwards, the court might have overturned it but the penalty points still existed. If you drive down the M1 road and you get penalty points, you go to court and the penalty points are scratched whereas in this case, they are not. No sooner was I out of this House in 2020 than the penalty points were reintroduced. I was told by people on this side of the House; I did not even have the support of my own party. I had the support of Sinn Féin, Labour and the Independents. As soon I was gone, it was changed like that. It was wrong to that do that. I did not even get a telephone call to say that my rescinding of the penalty points was being undone, but I will deal with that on another day.

In the pelagic sector, we need, as a national policy of Government, to reintroduce in-factory weighing. I can take credit that I went to the then Commissioner, Mr. Joe Borg, when our pelagic fish were being weighed on the pier in ambient temperature, affecting the quality of the fish. I brought him over to Killybegs and he saw the futility of that. He introduced weighing in factories and now the factories are full of cameras. You do not have to leave the office in Killybegs, Castletownbere or wherever. You can see exactly what is going on. This is futile and the quality of the fish is being affected. That is something that has been looked at. There is an attitude that all of those in the fishing industry are criminals. I can state very clearly, having spent a lifetime in it, that they are good, honest, decent people who get very little support and create jobs in areas where there are no alternative sources of employment. In the pelagic sector, we need, as a national policy of Government, to reintroduce that in-house weighing.

That is for another day but if it goes the way it is going, there might not be much need to weigh, given that there may be so little as a result of the cuts.

Year in, year out, we witness the effects of blue whiting being processed for human consumption. It was a fishery that we in this country pioneered. It was Ireland that pioneered it. I can also take some credit. I remember 1972 very well. We were going out the road to fish meal and at that time and I sent samples to a number of factories in Europe. They opened up the markets there and they are still continuing to this very day. I can take some credit and I fully understand it. Coming from a rural constituency, I realise the importance of fishing.

If we fail to get our house in order and we face into the greatest fishing and processing crisis in our history, we will pay the greatest price due to our own incompetence. I would strongly recommend that the Minister of State take up my suggestion and call in the Minister for foreign affairs or whoever and instruct the ambassadors to go to the various governments and make it very clear to them the implications of this. This demands immediate action, a completely new direction and new leadership.

I wish the Minister of State well in his endeavours. It is a difficult time and a lonely place to be. I was there for many years. It is a lonely place when you are in there but if you can secure the support of the some of the European maritime states, particularly those states with no interest whatsoever in fish, and convince them we are being done down, I believe he will get support from them.

**Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn:** There is a story online on *theskipper.ie*. It is the Bord Iascaigh Mhara, BIM, annual fisheries report and it has caused outrage in the fishing industry because, essentially, the report says it is all fine. It is good; it is all fine. It is data from 2023.

This has to stop. We have to stop denying what is happening. My party conducted a survey late last year of hundreds of fishers and their families. They did not just respond to the survey; they could make some commentary. What was in that report, which I have emailed to the Minister and Minister of State, is absolutely harrowing. It is heartbreaking. People are talking about having fished for generations. It is a tradition and a heritage and it is ending with them. I met fishers, face to face, who were in tears because they were fishing single-handed. There is no future for them and their families.

I am now going to get into the unprecedented crisis we face, an "economic Armageddon", to quote Mr. Brendan Byrne of the Irish Fish Processors and Exporters Association, IFPEA. We need to wake up once and for all. The Chinese - the Minister of State is going to China next week - tell us that a crisis is also an opportunity. This is an opportunity for a reset of our whole mentality in Ireland, in the Government, in our Department of the marine, in Bord Iascaigh Mhara, in the SFPA and in every single agency interacting with our fishing communities. There has to be a whole change. It is outrageous that BIM let that report go to print at a time like this. It is outrageous, offensive and unacceptable.

With regard to mackerel, it is a precious resource to our fishing communities. It was an industry that the ingenuity and ambition of our people built up. We built it up. It was a world-class industry we built up here with thousands of jobs created on the back of it. It is a migratory species that spawns off our west coast and works its way up the Atlantic, so it is a shared resource. As we are in the Common Fisheries Policy, our fishers must follow the science. They

must follow the advice from ICES every year and quotas are allocated on that basis. That is right - our fishing should be based on science. It should be sustainable and responsible. I absolutely agree with that. The problem is that there are rule breakers and rogues out there who have been utterly reckless and selfish, and they have paid no price whatsoever. I am sad to say they are a country I admire, Norway, another country I admire, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands. Complicit in this and supporting them are the Russian Federation and the United Kingdom. They are complicit in this practice and they are rewarded. The UK has had its trade and co-operation agreement extended for 12 years. There is no price to pay for this.

When I learned about the absolutely devastating impact of these cuts, which are clearly coming because they are based on science, I asked the question: who benefits from this within the European Union? There are major fishing corporations based in the European Union that invested heavily in the fleets in Iceland and the Faroes. They have been actively involved in this strategic overfishing. They are based in the European Union and I believe they have a huge influence in the European Commission. Ireland has, yet again, been utterly shafted by those at the top of the European Commission. They did it to us in Brexit.

There was no burden sharing. There were just some financial resources, but that was allowed to happen, and here we are again. This has been warned about, and we have been hearing about it, for years. Our producer organisations have been talking about what is coming down the line. Last year, we had a very significant cut in mackerel. This year, what is being suggested is devastating. It is not just mackerel, as the Minister of State knows, but blue whiting and boarfish. This has a knock-on impact on the inshore sector, which needs blue whiting and mackerel for bait. Its prices are going to go through the roof. Remember, the inshore sector is dealing with prices it had 30 years ago for its fish but its costs have increased tenfold. To be clear, it is not just the offshore sector that is impacted by this, but also the inshore sector.

What are we talking about here in terms of impact? I have spoken to the Irish Fish Processors and Exporters Association, which has provided me with its impact assessment. When I go through it, it shows mackerel is important to the producer sector and the factories. It is a huge part of their profits. I have been provided seven examples. Looking through them, the impact of the mackerel cut will be absolutely devastating. We are going to lose hundreds of jobs here, there is no doubt about it. It is not just pelagic, as we know, but also white fish, nephrops and various seas. We are talking about an estimated potential loss of €200 million next year. It is really unprecedented in scale. It is absolutely scandalous that BIM published the report it did today at a time we are dealing with this.

In terms of the organisations dealing with this issue, I have with me submissions from the Irish Fish Producers Organisation, IFPO, and the Killybegs Fishermen's Organisation, KFO. Obviously, those two groups are particularly impacted by the pelagic cuts. According to the submissions, under the model quota scenarios, up to 837 direct jobs could be affected in some manner in the pelagic catching sector. That is not talking about indirect jobs. That is the threat. When including indirect and induced effects, the potential total impact goes up to 2,361 jobs across the wider seafood economy. That is what we are talking about here.

If we look at the supports needed, we clearly need to see the Hague preferences. That has to happen this time. Burden sharing did not get delivered to our people. We were left carrying the weight of Brexit. The Hague preferences are absolutely essential. They will reduce some of the blow.

It is time for BIM to step up. It has offended the industry unbelievably with the report it has issued. However, it can heal those wounds by doing a strong impact assessment, working directly with the industry on the real figures and the real data in the here and now. It needs to do an impact assessment looking at all the scenarios - short, medium and long term - in terms of what supports are needed. We are going to need financial supports. I am glad the Minister of State said it. When we talk to any fishers, they say they want to fish. They want fish. That is what I want. Right now, though, we have to deal with the reality. Of course we need to bring in the Hague preferences. Of course we need to see a review of the Common Fisheries Policy. Of course we need justice. Of course the huge factory ships hoovering up the fish and the industrialisation of fishing has to end. In the here and now, though, we are going to need financial supports to save our industry and save as many jobs as possible. That means emergency short-term financial support. In terms of the quota management and licensing, we need reform of the Common Fisheries Policy. All of that has to be looked at.

I defer to my colleague, Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher, who was a Minister of State with huge experience. I agree with everything he said about the need to talk to everybody. We need to tell our story. Our fellow member states need to understand the injustice the Irish people have suffered under the Common Fisheries Policy. I am sorry to say that Norway, Iceland, Faroe Islands, the Russian Federation - there are huge sanctions in place against that last anyway - and the UK have in this case been rogue players in overfishing mackerel. They need to accept that this is utterly wrong. They need to stop the overfishing and there needs to be a real approach from Europe in terms of justice for our people. We are a small country and we deserve that support right now. I trust the Minister of State will engage strongly on that. We need to have very strong representation in Europe. In terms of our permanent representation and the Department of the marine, we need to up our game on. I proposed a fish Ireland" office, where the industry and our Department would be hand in hand, permanently based in Europe, promoting our seafood industry. That needs to be looked at right now and how we can turn this around and turn a crisis into an opportunity.

I want to talk about the issue of third-country vessels from Norway and Iceland. It is very clear to me that if they refuse to act responsibly and do what is right for all of us with the mackerel resources, they should not be allowed to fish blue whiting in our waters. It is utterly offensive. Any country that is not being responsible and not behaving right should not be rewarded. Clearly, that needs to be dealt with. There needs to be proper control of those vessels.

In my remaining minutes, I want to talk about the inshore sector and the islands sector. They cannot be forgotten about. The inshore sector is looking for financial supports for their fishers. If we look at the farmers, they have always, and rightly, had financial supports under the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, because they could not live on what they earn from the produce. Similarly, we recently had a basic income support for the artistic community. I welcome that, too. We need to see proper financial supports for inshore fishers. They are fishing single-handedly and putting themselves in real danger, so they need supports. In terms of the islands, we need to look at Article 17 of the Common Fisheries Policy. We need fairness for our island communities and fairness for our inshore communities as part of this overall process. I will continue on this matter another day.

**Deputy Johnny Mythen:** The Irish fishing industry is in a state of flux and is on course for a full-scale collapse if the proposed 2026 quotas are accepted and implemented. These crippling quotas represent a 70% cut in mackerel, a 41% in blue whiting and a 22% cut in boarfish. These quotas will financially sink every fishing boat in Ireland, whereas on the other side we have non-EU fleets from the likes of Russia, the Faroe Islands, Iceland and Norway continuously overfishing. Not only that, but they are being rewarded for it through the unilateral setting of quotas. For example, in one week, the Norwegian fleet caught 40,000 tonnes of mackerel, equivalent to the entire quota allowed for the Irish fleet. This begs the question: who exactly are the Europe-based fishing corporations, which make millions of euro and benefit from the reciprocal access to the fish in Norwegian water? Maybe the Minister of State will use his office to investigate these corporations and publish the findings.

We know this is a very difficult situation and by no means an easy task. The fishers of Ireland are sending out a clarion cry for the Minster of State to call on the Commissioner to invoke Regulation (EU) 1026/2012, under which the Commissioner has the power to legally address and respond to unfair competition through trade and market restrictions. The irony of this is that the Irish fleet has followed the science and played by the books, yet these countries outside the EU are rewarded while our fishing industry is facing financial ruin. We in Sinn Féin, through our spokesperson on fisheries, Pádraig Mac Lochlainn, and the Chair of the fisheries committee, Connor McGuinness, are asking the Minister of State to create an emergency financial rescue package for the next couple of years. We believe the Minister of State has a vital role to play in supporting Irish fisheries in this. We ask him to work towards establishing a stand-alone "Fish Ireland" office in Brussels, to consider real-time closures, to examine the Brexit adjustment reserve and unspent funds, and to vigorously negotiate the quota allocations.

My county of Wexford is a seafaring country, with fishing villages totally depending on the industry, from Rosslare to Kilmore Quay, Duncannon, Slade Harbour and Ballyhack, and these are villages that need the Minister of State's support and help. I appeal to him again to negotiate new fishing quotas and to use the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund to support our fishing industry and coastal communities.

**Deputy Conor D. McGuinness:** Ireland is an island nation with a proud maritime tradition. Our coastal communities, fishing harbours and seafaring people have long sustained the life of this country in hard times and in a good. For too long, the fishing and seafood industry has been treated as an afterthought, a bargaining chip in European negotiations and a casualty of short-termism at home.

Across every coastal county from Louth to Donegal, down to Waterford and Cork, fishers and processors now face the perfect storm of quota cuts, rising costs, loss of traditional fishing grounds and continued overfishing by external states. The result is a crisis or, more accurately, an emergency. Earlier this year, Deputy Mac Lochlainn and I published a survey of Irish fishers. Its findings were stark. Some 98% do not believe the Government is protecting the industry or has its back. The survey also found that 91% believed that, without a radical change in direction, it would not survive the next three to five years.

While this debate is welcome and I commend Deputy Mac Lochlainn on seeking it, it is long overdue. The collapse in mackerel stocks has simply exposed a decline that was already

well underway. We now need to move beyond tea and sympathy and towards a national strategy that is ambitious, assertive and unapologetic in its defence of Ireland's national interests.

Tá earnáil iascaireachta na hÉireann i ngéarchéim. Tá iascairí agus pobal cósta faoi bhrú de bharr laghduithe ar chuótaí, costais arda agus ró-iascaireacht ó thíortha eile, an Iorua, an Íoslainn agus na hOileáin Fharó san áireamh. Éilíonn Sinn Féin go gcuirfear straitéis náisiúnta láidir le chéile a chosnóidh ár gcuid acmhainní, a neartóidh calafoirt agus a thabharfaidh tacaíocht cheart d'iascairí cladaigh. Caithfidh Éire seasamh suas ar son a cuid pobal cósta san Aontas Eorpach.

For decades, successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments have gone to Brussels to manage, not to lead, and to accommodate, not to assert. The results of that failure speak for themselves. Ireland controls 12% of EU waters, yet receives less than 6% of total EU quotas. Since Brexit, that imbalance has worsened, with about 40% of the quota value transferred from Britain coming from stocks historically caught by Irish vessels. The Brexit deal was catastrophic. The decision earlier this year to extend it to 2038 brought certainty, but it is the certainty of collapse and catastrophe. We need a fundamental reset and radical new approach that recognises the strategic, economic and cultural importance of fisheries to our coastal regions. That means pressing the European Commission and Council for an urgent review of quota allocations, building the Department's capacity to fight our corner, including through the office mentioned by Deputy Mac Lochlainn in Brussels, and reforming the Department of the marine and Bord Iascaigh Mhara, BIM. It would be great if we had someone with a background in the fishing industry appointed as the new chief executive of BIM. I ask the Minister of State to reflect on that and consider it as he looks towards the appointment of a chief executive.

We now have a Committee on Fisheries and Maritime Affairs. As Chair, I want the committee to be active and assertive, give voice to coastal communities, hold the Government to account, propose policy innovations, where appropriate, and demand delivery for the Irish fishing industry.

Our inshore fisheries have been mentioned. They are the beating heart of Ireland's coastal communities. Small family-owned vessels sustain employment and tradition in areas with few alternatives, yet they are too often forgotten about. When they are at the forefront of the minds of the State, it often seems that it is with a view to criminalising or penalising them for simply carrying out their work. With almost 2,000 vessels, the inshore fleet provides over half of all seafood employment but receives only a fraction of supports and quota access. Most are confined to shellfish like crab, lobster and shrimp and young people face major barriers, limited licences, tiny quotas and high costs. The next generation is being driven out. They do not want to take over the boats and they do not want to enter the industry. We need a fairer allocation of a national quota to support small-scale sustainable fisheries. We need targeted investment in coastal infrastructure processing capacity and proper implementation of the Irish inshore fishery sector strategy, backed by real funding and continuity grants to keep small operators afloat. If we value our coastal communities, we must value our fishers and inshore sector not as an afterthought, but as the cornerstone of our rural and regional economy.

Harbour infrastructure, a topic the Minister of State and I have discussed at length, is the backbone of our fishing economy, yet across the country, in particular Waterford, it is crying out for investment. In the quay in Heilbhic, dredging has been identified as a dire need by local

fishers, the local authority and, indeed, those who volunteer to save lives at sea. Progress has stalled for want of State funding. The local authority harbours programme is dysfunctional. I do not think it is fit for purpose. It is inadequate. I said this yesterday at a committee meeting and I will continue to say it. It will not fund the engineering or environmental studies needed to reach a shovel-ready stage. That is its intrinsic failure and must change.

The quay at Heilbhic and other local authority harbours are vital infrastructure. We acknowledge and accept that they belong to the local authority, but that does not give the Government, Department or Minister of State for fisheries the ability to say that it is not part of the responsibility of the State. In Dunmore East, one of the State's six designated fishery harbour centres and the most important fishing port in the south east, serving the east coast, north and south, critical safety works remain underfunded. Fishers have raised real concerns about berthing safety, quay conditions and overcrowding in the harbour. The promised capital works have yet to materialise and we need immediate approval and funding for the Dunmore East capital programme. That would include dredging, quay realignment and safety upgrades. It is not just a Waterford issue, as I said. This is about protecting lives, jobs and the long-term viability of one of Ireland's major fisheries ports.

Ireland's offshore fleet in ports like Dunmore East, Castletownbere and Howth are central to our seafood economy, supporting hundreds of jobs in fishing, processing, engineering and exports, yet our fleets are allowed to catch less fish in our own waters than ever before. Under Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, Ireland has been a soft touch in quota talks. Time and again, our share has been traded away in favour of stronger member states who negotiate harder in their own countries' interests. That must end. We must demand fair and equitable access to fish stocks in Irish waters.

We need to rebuild pelagic and demersal fleets. We need to secure a fair quota of prawns in the Irish Sea. We need to ensure access to finance for vessel modernisation and keep value-added processing in Ireland. The Common Fisheries Policy has failed our coastal communities. It rewards those who overfish and punishes those who act responsibly. Sinn Féin will press for reform that puts sustainability, fairness and Ireland's national interest at its core.

Nowhere is that failure clearer than in the mackerel and wider pelagic fishery. Scientific advice for 2026 recommends a 70% cut to the EU mackerel quota and a 41% cut to blue whiting, not to forget boarfish. These drastic reductions are not caused by Irish mismanagement, as my colleagues have said. They are a result of rampant overfishing by third countries, in particular Norway, Iceland and the Faroe Islands, which are, of course, under Danish sovereignty and, therefore, I thought would have been part of the European Union. This activity has often been aided by EU-based companies using those flags. That is not to let the Russian Federation and Britain off the hook for their gross overfishing in the North Atlantic.

The European Commission has known about this for years. We and others, including industry and environmental groups, have raised this. More than a million tonnes of mackerel have been caught above scientific advice in the past five years. Instead of sanctioning offenders, the EU has rewarded them with access to western waters, or is certainly proposing to do so. This has plunged Ireland's pelagic sector into crisis, in particular Donegal, but across the coast. Our entire seafood economy is looking at losses that could exceed €200 million next year. We need an emergency survival fund now. As has been noted by the Minister of State

and my colleague, Deputy Mac Lochlainn, fishers do not want handouts or a bailout, but they need that as this crisis will affect them.

The EU must act decisively to end this reckless overfishing. The Government must demand sanctions and compensation and show leadership. It is indefensible that Irish fishers follow the rules and face ruin while others profit with the consent of their governments and the silence and acquiescence, if we are being honest, of Brussels. The mackerel issue is a test of whether Ireland has any real influence in Europe and we cannot afford another year of hand-wringing.

In a few weeks, the Minister of State will be in Brussels with the Council of Ministers to set the 2026 quotas. Expectations in the industry are not high or buoyant at the moment because of the crisis, but there is a weight of expectation on his shoulders as he goes there because of the great urgency involved. The Minister of State must go to Brussels with a clear mandate not simply to manage, but to fight for Ireland's corner. It cannot be on his shoulders alone; it has to be on the shoulders of the Taoiseach, as Head of Government, and the Tánaiste, in his role as Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade.

A failure to deliver on the reasonable demands of the Irish fishing industry would be a collective failure for the Government to assert Ireland's sovereignty in Europe. For decades, fishers have correctly believed that Irish fisheries were sacrificed to secure wins elsewhere and that must stop. The balance has to be reset. We need the Minister of State to secure a fair share of quota allocations reflecting the scale of waters, along with concrete EU actions to sanction overfishing by third countries and European corporations which operate in vessels under the flag of third countries.

We need to see funding for harbour infrastructure and fleet modernisation, and we need to see a renewed commitment to Ireland's coastal communities. Our fishing industry is not asking for favours. It is simply demanding fairness. Fishing communities have endured decades of neglect and now they need delivery. Ireland's fishing heritage, our economic potential, thousands of livelihoods and hundreds of millions of euro of economic growth are at stake here. The time for caution and niceties has passed. What we need, and what Sinn Féin will continue to demand, is action that is firm, co-ordinated and in the national interest.

**Deputy Robert O'Donoghue:** I welcome the announcement by the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, of €27.75 million for capital projects at Ireland’s publicly owned harbours under the 2025 fishery harbour centres and coastal infrastructure development programme. While welcome news for our coastal communities, the way this funding is being divided is far from equitable. To touch on a point just mentioned by Deputy McGuinness, let us talk about harbours. This year, €19.5 million, or the lion’s share, is going to just six Department-run fishery harbour centres, while a mere €4.3 million is being allocated to the local authority marine infrastructure scheme, which must stretch to cover every other small harbour and pier in the State.

Let us put this in context. In Donegal, the Killybegs fishery harbour centre received over €11.2 million, while Donegal County Council, which is responsible for 155 piers and harbours, received just €450,000 towards projects costing an estimated €660,000. That is an unequal partnership, a drop in the ocean for our coastal local authorities which are struggling to maintain essential infrastructure that sustains their local fishing and tourism industries. To make matters worse, the six fishery harbour centres receive 100% of their project costs from the Department,

while the local authorities receive only 75%, leaving the remaining 25% to be found from already overstretched local budgets or, ultimately, from local ratepayers. This is unfair. They should be receiving 100% funding. The result is that the smaller harbours, where most of our inshore fishers actually operate, are being left behind. These are the fishers who use the most environmentally sustainable and friendly methods of fishing. They are the backbone of our inshore fishing sector. They deserve modern, safe, well-maintained facilities just as much as any national harbour. Fishermen in the Donegal constituency have been in touch with Labour Party representatives in the county, including representatives from two local fishing co-ops, to tell us that they feel the Department is spending the lion's share of harbour funding on itself, promoting projects that local fishers neither want nor need, simply because the Department has to use up its budget or risk losing it next year. That is not strategic investment; it is box-ticking.

We need a fairer, more balanced approach, one which recognises local authority piers and harbours as an intrinsic part of our national coastal infrastructure. Ireland's network of piers, slipways and harbours supports not just fisheries, but marine tourism, recreation and local enterprise. Tourism and recreation in coastal areas are now the largest contributors to employment among Ireland's marine industries. Marine tourism alone accounts for 10% of our overall tourism sector, with over 260 enterprises involved in marine leisure, from angling and diving to kayaking, surfing and visiting our offshore islands. The Wild Atlantic Way has shown what can be achieved when we invest in our coastal infrastructure and build a world-class destination brand. However, this success cannot continue if local marine infrastructure is left to crumble.

Fáilte Ireland continues to highlight the opportunities in coastal marine tourism, eco-tourism and sustainable growth, but these opportunities can only be realised if our piers and harbours are up to standard. In my constituency of Dublin Fingal West, Skerries and Balbriggan are both under the management of Fingal County Council. There have been consistent calls for capital works, including dredging, breakwater repairs and enhanced facilities for both the fishing and leisure sectors. Notably, Balbriggan Harbour forms a central element of the Balbriggan rejuvenation plan, which seeks to revitalise the town and its coastal infrastructure. The smaller harbours in Rush and Loughshinny continue to play an important role in supporting local fishermen and recreational users. However, these facilities also require upgrading, particularly in relation to safety measures, lighting, slipways and pontoons. Overall, there is a clear and ongoing need to invest in Fingal's harbour infrastructure to improve safety and accessibility for all users; strengthen support for coastal tourism and local fishing activities; enhance resilience to climate impacts and coastal erosion; and ensure compliance with modern environmental and waste management standards. Fingal's harbours are critical coastal assets, supporting both local economies and community life. However, they now require targeted investment and modernisation.

I am, therefore, calling for a fairer division of funding, with a 50-50 split between the fishery harbour centres and local authority marine infrastructure until a proper national assessment of needs is completed; 100% funding for all marine infrastructure projects, recognising their national importance; and a national framework that ensures every harbour, large or small, is safe, modern and fit for purpose.

We also need to address climate change as it is having a profound impact on Ireland's harbours and coastal infrastructure. Rising sea levels, intensified storms and more frequent

flooding events are already damaging vital port facilities and coastal defences. All over Ireland, harbours are experiencing increased erosion, structural damage to quays and slipways and siltation that hampers navigation and marine operations. These challenges threaten not only our maritime heritage, but also critical sectors such as fishing, aquaculture, tourism and trade, all of which are industries that sustain coastal communities and contribute significantly to the national economy. Local authorities and harbour boards are facing costs for repairs, maintenance and emergency works following extreme weather events.

To safeguard all these assets, we must prioritise investment in climate-resilient infrastructure and adaptive coastal management. This includes strengthening breakwaters, modernising drainage and flood protection systems and integrating climate change risk assessments into all future harbour development plans. Furthermore, we must trust our policies are adequately resourced and implemented at local level to ensuring a consistent, science-based approach is undertaken. By taking decisive action now, we can protect our harbours, not only as centres of economic activity but as lifelines for our coastal communities, ensuring they remain safe, functional and sustainable for generations to come.

This is about fairness. It is about recognising that the vibrancy and sustainability of coastal communities depend on investment in the infrastructure they use every day, and not just in the six harbours managed by the Department. Let us ensure the smaller harbours, the beating hearts of so many coastal towns and villages, finally get their fair share. However, this will be completely useless if our fisheries sector is wiped out. Overfishing and the management of our shared marine resources, which have been ongoing issues for years, have already been addressed by previous speakers. Yet, despite years of engagement and submissions, the fishing sector now faces an unprecedented crisis. If we account for the cumulative cutbacks, Ireland's seafood industry could face losses of up to €200 million next year, and conservative estimates suggest 2,000 jobs could be at risk. The impact on coastal and fishing communities would be devastating.

I thank the Irish South and East Fish Producers Organisation, which got in touch with my office yesterday regarding the seriousness of the situation. The latest scientific advice for 2026 paints a deeply worrying picture. Drastic catch reductions are being recommended, including 70% in mackerel, 41% in whiting and 22% in boarfish, with zero catches for cod, haddock and whiting. If these cuts are implemented, the implications will be severe. The economic viability of the Irish catching sector will be in jeopardy and fish processors will be starved of raw materials, particularly in the pelagic sector, where closures could occur. The service industries that depend on fishing will also be hit, affecting livelihoods right across our coastal communities. To put this into perspective, the loss of income from these cuts could exceed €60 million compared to 2024.

Around 200 fishermen's jobs would be directly at risk. When we add the quota transfers to the UK from Brexit, Ireland's mackerel quota will have fallen by 85% since 2022. Mackerel alone was valued at €82 million in 2024, our most valuable fish stock for both catching and processing. To manage this crisis, the sector will urgently need cash resources to reduce pressure on quotas and share limited fishing opportunities fairly throughout the year. Unlike the Brexit schemes, these supports must be linked to the processing sector to avoid repeating past mistakes that left processors stranded without supply. The processing industry employs

3,800 people across 91 companies and has already been struggling since Brexit. Further cuts in 2026 could force closures.

This is not sustainable, economically, socially or politically. The EU's management of these resources must respect scientific limits but also fairness. Ireland has consistently been on the losing side of these negotiations. We cannot continue to lose. The term "economic Armageddon" was used in the fisheries committee only last week. This is not an exaggeration; it is reality for our fishing sector. I am calling for a comprehensive support framework for the catching and processing sectors to be designed and delivered. Ireland's fishing and seafood industries are the lifeblood of many of our coastal communities. We must ensure their survival and sustainability.

I highlight the work of my colleague and party leader, Deputy Ivana Bacik, on the Dublin Bay Bill. This legislation would go a long way to protect biodiversity, enhance water quality and restore and regenerate amenities along our coastline.

**Deputy Eoghan Kenny:** As a first time TD, I meet many people across many different sectors. Meeting those people, particularly volunteers in various groups and organisations, and learning from them is possibly one of the best parts of this job. In August this year, fisheries, the importance of fish, wildlife and our rivers landed on my desk. To be totally honest with everyone in this House, I knew very little about fish, wildlife and our rivers, despite living in and being from Mallow, which the River Blackwater flows through. The River Blackwater was the scene of the greatest fish kill ever seen in this country. In excess of 40,000 fish were killed by a chemical irritant. The cross-party agency group came to a conclusion that no definite source could be found.

I again thank the Minister of State for coming to Mallow. The people of the town appreciate that. The Minister of State well knows that the fish kill caused significant hurt and anger in my home town and its environs. To get this conclusion is a cause for significant and serious concern. Following the joint committee on the environment meeting, I am shocked to hear IFI chairperson and the workers themselves believe that they do not have strong enough enforcement powers within their organisation to stop companies, individuals or State agencies from polluting our rivers. My understanding is that the Minister of State, his Department and IFI have begun conversations to give IFI further enforcement powers but my firm belief is that that must be sped up or more events like what we saw on the Blackwater in August will continue to happen across this country.

The essential issue that members of our communities have, which they have directed at me even though I am not even in government, is that there is a serious lack of accountability when it comes to protecting our environment and pollution in our environment. If we are serious about protecting our environment, rivers, fish and wildlife, enforcement powers must be increased. EPA licences must be withdrawn if constant pollution happens, because I can think of a number of organisations, private and public, which have polluted rivers in and around my own town of Mallow for many years, and which are making millions of euro in profit, that continue to pollute. My firm belief is that the reason for that is that it will cost them far less to take the slap on the wrist and the few thousand euro of a fine than to put in the infrastructure.

I thank the Minister of State again for visiting Mallow. He is well aware of the fishermen he met that day and the significant hurt and anger that continue to be felt. It does not matter

whether I am in the Opposition or the Government, the lack of accountability remains an issue for the people in Mallow. I ask the Minister of State to speed up those conversations that have begun with IFI and give it those enforcement powers because unless we do that, events like that on the Blackwater will continue to happen on our waterways across this country.

**Deputy Tom Brabazon:** I welcome the opportunity to participate in this debate. I welcome John Lynch from Howth, who is the CEO of the Irish South and East Fish Producers Organisation. I thank him for the hard work that he does in this area.

Ireland has a very proud fishing tradition right across our island. I was glad to see that a stand-alone Minister of State for fisheries was re-established as part of the programme for Government, reflecting the Government's commitment to this sector. It is important that, as Members of these Houses, we acknowledge that our fisheries are vital, not only for our economy but for our food security. We must ensure that those working in the sector are supported to the absolute maximum. In my constituency, Dublin Bay North, we are proud of Howth Harbour and Howth's tradition as a fishing village, dating back to the Middle Ages. This is my second time raising this matter on the floor of the House. Last month, I tabled a Topical Issue matter to discuss the urgent works required at the harbour. The harbour has not been dredged since the 1970s, half a century ago, and vessels are experiencing significant issues with the harbour's depth. A number of weeks ago, a vessel became stuck in the harbour for a number of hours at low tide. Vessels have a narrow window to get in and out of the harbour, particularly larger boats with a clearance of 5 m or less.

Planning permission has been granted for a wonderful new park off the pier using the dredged material. However, consent is awaited from the Environmental Protection Agency. We urgently need this approval so that vessels can utilise the harbour with ease, get in and out and do what they want and need to do. It is not just fishing vessels which use the harbour, but also commercial and leisure craft, and, extremely importantly, RNLI rescue craft. This delay could have serious implications for lifeboats in the future in the event of an emergency. I urge the Department to do what it can to get this project moving as soon as possible. Other improvements are required at the harbour, such as the boat repair shed. Currently, it is only accessible for part of the year. Greater sheltering of the shed would allow vessel owners to make repairs and improvements to the vessels all year around. I ask the Department to have a look at this and to offer definitive support in this regard. Also at the harbour, the Syncrolift which was built in the 1980s is long overdue an upgrade. I ask the Department to give this the attention it deserves.

Howth, as we all know, is a major centre for tourism, and contributes to the local and national economy. Each year, hundreds travel to Howth to celebrate Ireland's maritime heritage and our seafood tradition at Howth Maritime and Seafood Festival. However, it is vital that the local fishermen and women and the harbour receive the support they need to sustain the rich fishing tradition.

At a broader level, we are witnessing growing fragility in our food systems from impacts of war, climate disasters, rising costs and supply shortages. Ireland cannot take its food security for granted. We must provide every support that we can to our fisheries and those in the sector to protect our livelihoods and our national food security. Those in our fishing sector have raised their real concern about conditions they will face in 2026, which Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher

has so eruditely put. This entails reductions in catches of mackerel, blue whiting and boarfish, and zero catches for cod, haddock and whiting stocks. Such cuts would seriously impact the viability of our catching sector, prevent fish processing businesses from having access to raw material, and impact the service industry that supports the seafood sector in coastal communities like Howth. The Irish South and East Fish Producers Organisation has put forward a number of measures to support the sector, including subsidies or tie-up schemes to reduce fishing effort where stocks require a period of rebuilding, and has also called for Ireland to invoke all its Hague preferences where its quota is below the threshold. I know the Minister of State is familiar with those proposals.

I welcome that budget 2026 provides a significant €157.7 million to support the fisheries sector. This funding will provide much-needed financial assistance and essential investment in infrastructure. I strongly urge the Department to continue to work with the sector to meet the significant challenges ahead and to ensure the long-term viability of our fisheries and coastal communities.

The Department, however, needs to seriously up its game, as was so well put by Deputy Gallagher.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** Sinn Féin has long called for this debate and I am glad to finally have the chance to stand up for coastal and fishing communities. I thank our fisheries spokesman, Deputy Mac Lochlainn, for pushing for this debate.

**Deputy David Cullinane:** Hear, hear.

**Deputy Pa Daly:** These fishing communities have played a critical role in our economy and culture for generations but are now facing an existential threat following proposed cuts to our fishing quota and the Common Fisheries Policy. Just as we must protect marine life and biodiversity, we must also prioritise the communities that have lived alongside them for generations. Science and sustainability are not incompatible with thriving coastal communities; both can exist harmoniously. However, due to decades of EU inaction and diplomatic failure by governments, Ireland's fishing industry is facing a crisis. Devastating quota reductions, combined with the loss of traditional fishing grounds, represent serious threats. Quota cuts could wipe out over €200 million in value next year, with mackerel losses up to €80 million alone.

To add to this, some of the most egregious damage has and continues to be caused by the rogue actions of other states through overfishing. Overfishing by states such as Norway, the Faroes, Russia, Iceland and Britain have had a devastating impact on Ireland's fishing stocks. Over 1 million tonnes of mackerel have been caught above scientific advice in the past five years according to the North Atlantic Pelagic Advocacy Group. These are not just numbers; these are livelihoods, communities and a proud heritage under threat. What has the European Commission done in response? Worse than nothing. Not only has it failed to impose sanctions, these same states have been rewarded with greater access to water off the west of Ireland. In one recent deal, Norway was granted 200,000 tonnes of blue whiting in Irish waters while Ireland received less than 60,000 tonnes. That is worth €50 million for Norway versus €15 million for Ireland. This is unjust and it is outrageous. It is not like the EU is unaware of the

devastating consequences of its actions in response to such rogue state behaviour. It has admitted that continued overfishing could force a zero-catch mackerel quota by 2027, given the scale of these inflated quotas. This is a cliff edge that is simply not surmountable without decimating livelihoods and communities as things stand.

We have also heard from fish producers that over 2,000 jobs could be lost. This will also affect the inshore fishers. Let me make this clear: Sinn Féin stands with fishing and coastal communities. We admire their resilience and commend their calls for fairness and accountability. We are calling on the Government to stand strongly with them. We need a firm stance in Brussels. It is high time the EU does what is right, acting decisively, and where rogue behaviour exists, it must stand firm. The Government must make it clear that if this overfishing continues, sanctions, trade leverage and access restrictions will be on the table.

We also call for an urgent financial aid package to support the industry through the crisis. Sinn Féin has proposed a €10 million contingency fund and €10 million in capital for harbour improvements. Speaking to our local councillor in west Kerry, Robert Brosnan, he has also called for the tuna fish quota for inshore grants so that they can diversify and more infrastructure for fishers in west Kerry. We believe the Government must back our coastal communities, not abandon them. The system also needs major reform, including a dedicated Minister for fisheries and marine, a fish Ireland office in Brussels and a root and branch review of the department. BIM also needs to do an impact assessment in order to protect the industry and a long-term strategy to sustainably support the fishing industry. Our offshore, inshore and agriculture sectors must be supported. We must ban destructive factory vessels, ensure fair quota distribution and promote sustainable growth.

When it comes to Ireland's offshore energy ambition in particular, fishing and coastal communities must see the benefits. Community benefit funds should be expanded and ring-fenced for this purpose specifically. In addition, they should be treated as experts and partners they have the potential to be, but many fishers are locked out. Under the Government's current plan, in order for a fishing vessel to be used as a guard vessel, the fisherman must deregister the vessel, apply to go on the commercial register and then, should they wish to fish again, reapply both for a load line certificate and to go back on the fishing register. This is bureaucracy that, in practice, stops the communities in the major economic and infrastructural developments in their area. It is not a just transition. It is not like this in other EU countries.

Will the Minister of State commit to breaking down the barriers for fishing vessels to act as guard vessels? I also take this opportunity to ask once again where is the marine protected areas legislation. We have been waiting far too long. It threatens marine life and biodiversity but also creates significant uncertainty for our coastal and fishing communities. They need to be seen as partners, co-producers and active authors of this process. It is the only way it will work.

**Deputy Jennifer Whitmore:** It is clear at this stage that the Common Fisheries Policy, as it is currently being implemented, is not fit for purpose. Something that was established 40 years ago to provide for a co-ordinated management of fish stocks has failed. It has failed to protect fish stocks, to protect our marine and to protect Irish fishing industry.

Our Irish fishing industry is one that is core to who we are as an island country. It is core to our coastal communities and to our identity. Rather than being part of a process in Europe

that protects that, what we have seen happen is the sustainability of the fishery itself being completely eroded by the systems that have been put in place. Fishermen have been squeezed further and further. Their quotas are being squeezed and these fishermen are being squeezed out of their boats, out of their jobs and probably out of a history of generations of working in that area.

Unfortunately, the Common Fisheries Policy as it is currently being managed is also putting our fish stocks at huge risk. This policy is not working for any element of the stakeholders it was essentially set up to protect. This is not something that has happened recently. There has been updated information from ICES regarding stocks of certain species but this is not something that has happened recently. Twenty years ago, when I was fishing out of Howth, I would have gone down with the Marine Institute to fish from there. We used to go up to particular boats and ask could we go out with them for the week to catch some samples. I was working on a cod project at the time and I would talk to fisherman who would ask what I was trying to sample. When I would say cod - cod and haddock - they would laugh in my face and say I was not going to get any cod out there. That was probably 20 years ago and we can see now that has continued to play out. When we are looking at the state of our whitefish stocks at present, we have a zero catch TAC for cod in the north west, the Irish Sea and the Celtic Sea, and for haddock, whiting and pollock in the Celtic Sea. That in itself is a clear illustration that the system we are currently operating on is not working. We are seeing the collapse of stocks.

There are two particular stocks that have been a large part of the discussion today, namely, mackerel stocks and the blue whiting stocks. It is important when we talk about these stocks' collapse to state that this is not just a problem for Ireland. The collapse of this stock is catastrophic. Again, this is because it has not been managed properly. The ICES advice regarding the mackerel stocks is that the total allowable catch must be no more than 174,000 tonnes. That is a 77% reduction compared with the estimated catch in 2025. That advice is driven by the maximum sustainable yield. Essentially, what that says is there will be a 50% probability that the spawning stock biomass can recover to the absolute minimum biological limit by 2027. That is only a 50% chance. If we manage to keep to that 77% reduction, there is still only a 50% chance that the stock will be recoverable. That is just incredible.

Decades of overfishing have caused this crisis. Since 2010, the collective quota set by the coastal states, which include UK, the EU, Norway and others, have resulted in actual catches that have exceeded the scientific advice by an average of 39% every year. Fish stocks do not work this way. If you overfish them, there is not enough mature fish to reproduce to keep that stock going. That is the fundamental basis of it. If we continue to allow and facilitate overfishing, we are wiping that species out.

5 o'clock

We are looking at a 41% reduction from the previous year's advice. Norway, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, the UK and the European Union have consistently exceeded the advised catches. We have discussed in the committee how Norway, the Faroe Islands and Iceland are particularly problematic in that they are allowed and facilitated to overfish a species to which they really should have no right. As a country, we need to get this message across to Europe. Even though the framework as it is set up is not working properly, I believe there are tools within the system that Ireland can use. I do not know why we have not been able to negotiate more strongly on the quotas in recent years and why Ireland has not been getting a fair share.

There are two important principles here. One is that the overall quotas stay within the species' biological limits and that they are evidence- and science-based. That is the primary thing. If we do not get that right, there will be no fish for anybody. Within the quota, that is, the large cake that is determined to be there, Ireland needs to get its fair share. This is the fundamental thing we need to be fighting for. If it is the case, we need to make sure that we have alliances going in Europe that will fight and stand by us on that. That is really important. I do not know why we have always got the short end of the stick, I just do not understand it as I am not in the room. Previous Ministers might have a better understanding but it is time for that to stop and it is time for us to get our fair share.

Even within the system, I believe there are tools that we can use to ensure a more sustainable fishery and a better way of managing the fishery, particularly for our inshore fishers. They have been ignored for far too long. They are being squeezed into smaller and smaller geographical areas and are being confined to fewer and fewer species. That in itself is putting huge pressure on the species that are there. They need to be a core focus of the Minister of State's work. We need to start looking at Article 7 of the Common Fisheries Policy and actually start implementing it. This allows for fishing opportunities and for states to use transparent and objective criteria with a focus on social, environmental and economic criteria. This means that within the Common Fisheries Policy, the Minister of State can enable a much clearer focus on inshore fisheries and the low-impact fishers, which is what we really want to have. More resources can be directed to them under this provision. I do not understand why we have not used it. I ask the Minister of State to look at this seriously.

Previously, there was an issue with hake off the south west of Ireland, which is a nursery ground for this fish. In 2003 Ireland established, under the conditions of the EU, a biologically sensitive area. This enables restrictions on certain types of fishing within an area, based on its importance as a nursery area. Perhaps the Minister of State can look at this to deal with the blue whiting issue because the nursery area for that is currently in trouble. The provision could be used for that. The biologically sensitive areas seem to be a precursor to the marine protected areas. I strongly urge the Minister of State to get the marine protected area legislation in place. If that is done properly, not only will it protect our stocks, it will also protect our inshore fishers. If it is done well, it will increase fishing potential for people, so it needs to be done urgently. I plead for the Minister of State to have it as stand-alone legislation and that it is not just tacked on to something else. That would not give it the focus it requires. Please, get that done. We have been too long waiting and in the meantime, we are seeing stocks collapse and we are seeing our fishing industry collapse as well.

In his speech earlier, the Minister of State mentioned sprat. He referred to the fact that the banning of vessels over 18 m was an inshore-fishery measure. It is reckless of the Minister of State not to put in a quota for boats of under 18 m. He can still ensure a proper fishery for the boats under 18 m. They can still be prioritised but there needs to be a quota. The Marine Institute was very clear on this in the committee. Its representatives said that in the absence of any other data or information, the quota set by ICES, which was 2,240 tonnes, was the one that should be used. The precautionary principle needs to be used here. If the Minister of State does not get this right there may not be a fishery for some of those inshore boats and it is short-sighted not to apply a quota.

**Deputy Sinéad Gibney:** I welcome the opportunity to speak on this vital topic. I also acknowledge Deputy Mac Lochlainn for his continued efforts to push for this and the Minister of State's attendance here as the relevant member of the Government. I want to make a few points today. This is a community that has been consistently left behind. It speaks to an area of my portfolio, which is the trade and sustainable industry element. I am coming at this as our enterprise spokesperson. Overfishing, as we have heard from many contributors today is compounding these problems. I want to focus not just on the industry itself but the lived reality of fishing communities across Ireland, the challenges they face and the policy failures that are simply squeezing them out of their business. Ireland is an island nation with 12% of the EU's fishing grounds and people along our coasts have made their livelihood from the sea for generations and it is vital that they continue to do so for many more generations. Sadly, however, overfishing has led us to a place where the scientific advice is recommending drastic reductions in quotas, including zero catches for cod, haddock and whiting. We cannot have a fishing industry without fish, and we need to see a policy which makes sure that we have plentiful stocks for years to come. We also need to fix the pattern of overfishing that has brought us here in the first place. We face immense challenges in this area when it comes to protecting our oceans, fishing communities and the jobs of people who live along our coasts. These are challenges that we need to take seriously and which we need to resolve as a matter of urgency. Inshore fishers have been a community that we have consistently left behind. Up and down our coastlines, we have communities that traditionally were full of people who made their livelihood on the sea. For many of those communities that way of life has been almost entirely wiped out in the past 50 years. Those who still do so face decreasing incomes, depleted fish stocks and lack of support in a job that is increasingly perilous.

The Common Agricultural Policy has been a huge support to Irish farmers but the Common Fisheries Policy has left Irish inshore fishers with the short straw on European fishing quotas. This has been compounded since Brexit, where Irish inshore fishers lost another quarter of that quota. These communities, particularly along the Atlantic coastline, which were never the most economically advantaged to begin with, are being pushed further to the margins. As I said, I come at this topic as my party's enterprise spokesperson, so I want to speak about the trade and sustainable industry components of that. In this context, I have heard and said many times in this Chamber that we need to find an economic model in Ireland that is not so reliant on foreign direct investment, FDI, and that is stable and sustainable. That means building up an indigenous industry and protecting it into the future. We need a stable economy and a tax base that we can rely on in good times and bad and which is guaranteed into the future in a world where few things are.

There is a version of our fishing industry that can be all of those things, namely, indigenous, stable and sustainable, but this vision is not yet the reality. Instead, the reality is a way of life that is being squeezed out of existence. It is galling to Irish inshore fishers and their communities, who are also dealing with the rising cost of living and hearing how wonderful our economy is, that their margins are being squeezed tighter and tighter. They certainly do not feel that their interests are being represented and fought for at national and EU level. We have seen the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea call on the EU to significantly reduce fishing quotas and our fishing stocks have drastically reduced. We are in a dangerous situation where fish cannot repopulate at the current rate of fishing. While small fishers struggle to get by, huge factory trawlers are hoovering up fish stocks inside and outside of our

waters. We need a common-sense approach to fishing that protects our environment, fishing stocks and Irish inshore fisheries, because right now we have a situation which does not do any of those things.

Tá an saol ar chósta agus oileáin na hÉireann crua. Tuigeann daoine go bhfuil an saol seo crua. Tuigeann siad go bhfuil sé deacair agus contúirteach. Is é an rud nach dtuigeann siad ná cén fath nach bhfuil aon chabhair ar fáil dóibh.

We cannot ignore the crisis as it worsens year on year. We are facing a cliff edge of dwindling fish stocks, dwindling quotas and an industry and community pushed further towards the margins.

**Deputy Cormac Devlin:** Given that Ireland is a maritime nation, our waters are a strategic asset. Our fishing communities are a living heritage and our policy choices now will decide whether the next generation will be able to make a livelihood from the sea. I welcome today's debate and the Government's continued investment in the sector.

Since 2020, over €180 million has been invested in seafood, with a further €50 million for local piers and harbours and €157.7 million provided in budget 2026 to keep that momentum going. That money matters on the ground in the form of safer harbours, modern kit and real supports for crews and processors. I welcome the re-establishment of the role of Minister of State for fisheries and marine. Since his appointment earlier this year, the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, has moved quickly. His work has encompassed capital works in our fishery harbour centres, reciprocal access with the UK out to 2038 with no change to quotas, the launch of the FLAG coastal communities scheme and a dedicated skills plan through BIM to bring new entrants into a modern, professional seafood industry. These are practical measures that build resilience when margins are tight and crews are hard to find.

There are major challenges for the sector ahead. ICES advice points to sharp reductions next year, with a 70% cut signalled for mackerel, 41% for blue whiting and 22% for boarfish. In the context of Ireland's most valuable species, that is very worrying. The Government has committed to work with the industry on a pathway through this. Let us be honest, however. An adjustment of anything close to this level will bite. It will bite hardest where communities are most dependent on a narrow species mix. That is exactly why targeted investment, fleet efficiency, skills and local value-add are not just nice to have, they are also survival tools.

Let me turn to Dublin and the east coast, where the pattern is distinctive. Howth is our designated fishery harbour centre in Dublin. It anchors a significant processing cluster and sustains hundreds of jobs across the value chain. Continued capital investment there involving dredging, safety, berths and utilities is essential to keep output high and to secure processing jobs that support families right across the Dublin area. That work is already funded this year under the national capital allocations for fishery harbour centres, so let us keep it moving at pace. However, Dublin's story is bigger than one harbour. Along the coast, we have small inshore fleets working pots for brown crab and lobster from Skerries and Clogherhead down to Bulloch Harbour in Dalkey, Kilmore Quay and Dunmore East. The decision to prohibit trawling by vessels over 18 m inside the six-mile zone helps restore that link between local resources and local boats. We support that policy and we want to see the benefits land locally.

I have two practical asks for Dublin Bay. The first relates to Dún Laoghaire Harbour. Dún Laoghaire is not a fishery harbour centre, but it is a major harbour with slipways, a public boatyard, fuel, water and easy logistics. I want to see it utilised further for inshore activity. That means designating a modest working area in the Coal Harbour or the Old Harbour for time-limited commercial landings by small craft, providing hose points and shore power, securing gear storage in order that pots will not be competing with leisure users or those engaged in boat and craft repairs. None of that would turn Dún Laoghaire into a second Howth, but it would make a real difference for inshore crews and for restaurants that want local catch on local plates.

My second ask relates to Bulloch Harbour. The tradition of lobster potting from Bulloch is part of our coastal identity in Dún Laoghaire. Let us back it with targeted micro-measures, such as small-gear grants, safe haul-out and storage, a seasonal conservation plan developed with fishers and young entrant supports tied to BIM training, in order that new skippers can step aboard with competence and confidence. If we want the tradition to endure, we should make it a little easier and a lot safer to work from Bulloch Harbour.

Across the east coast, there is a wider co-existence agenda. Offshore renewable energy is coming. Survey vessels are already using our ports, and the build-out is going to intensify. The State's seafood-offshore renewable energy working group is the right forum. We need its outputs to be nailed down in practical protocols involving charted corridors, fair compensation for disruption and opportunities for fishing vessels to earn income on surveys and guard-duty work without being lost to the fleet. Dublin Bay and Dún Laoghaire Harbour can be national exemplars of good practice here, with climate action and coastal livelihoods rowing in the same direction.

We also need to keep pulling EU levers. Ireland must keep fighting for fair outcomes under the Common Fisheries Policy and in annual quota rounds. With European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund moneys already underpinning our seafood development programme, we should ring-fence the next multi-annual financial framework in order that fisheries supports are stable through the cycle.

As we prepare for the 2026 review milestones under the UK-EU trade and cooperation agreement, Ireland's bottom line is clear - defend our access, defend our share and make sure landings support processing and jobs at home.

Regarding skills and safety, BIM through its plan, The Next Wave, is investing in the people we need, such as skippers, engineers, processors and those with business skills. That must continue. If we want young people to choose this life, we owe them modern kit, predictable income and a harbour they can come home to. We keep the knowledge alive by ensuring that people know how to set a string, read a tide and bring a boat and a crew back safe.

We must keep investing in Howth, unlock practical inshore facilities at Dún Laoghaire, safeguard and support lobster potting at Bulloch, manage offshore renewable energy in order that fishers will be partners and hold our line in Brussels and London while we ride out the stock cycle. If we do that, we will ensure that the next generation in Dublin, on the east coast and at ports around the island will see a future at sea.

**Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh:** For months, we in Sinn Féin and our colleague Deputy Mac Lochlainn have been calling on the Government to allow statements on fisheries to take place in this House. In that context, I welcome the opportunity today to finally debate the future of an industry that is at breaking point. This is an industry that has been failed by successive Governments and abandoned by Brussels, but we have reached the point, as a result of years of neglect, where it is in crisis. Across our coastal communities from Donegal to Cork and from Mayo to Wexford, families that have fished these waters for generations are facing devastation. The latest international scientific advice has confirmed what many feared, namely a 70% cut to the mackerel quota alongside severe reductions for blue whiting and boarfish. These are not abstract figures. They are the difference between survival and collapse for Irish fishing communities, so let us be clear about what has happened here.

For years, fleets from countries such as Norway, Iceland and Russia among others have engaged in reckless overfishing of mackerel and other shared stocks. The European Commission has stood idly by. Year after year, it has expressed concern but taken no action. Now the punishment falls not on those who broke the rules but on those who played by them. Ireland, which controls 12% of EU waters yet receives less than 6% of the quota, is once again being made to pay the price for the failures of others. The reality is that the Common Fisheries Policy is broken. It is unjust, ineffective and fundamentally anti-Irish. It rewards those who over-fish and over penalises those who protect the resource. It has allowed foreign super-trawlers to plunder our waters while our own fleets are being decommissioned. If the EU continues down this road, our seafood sector could collapse within a year, wiping out 2,000 jobs and hundreds of millions of euro in exports. For fishing communities such as in my constituency in Mayo and around the coast, this is a crisis, which is why Sinn Féin is calling for urgent action.

The Government must immediately enter negotiations with the European Commission on an emergency financial package to sustain our fishing and seafood industry through this crisis. Those that have been punished for compliance must not be left to sink while the EU dithers. Second, we need a radical reset of the Common Fisheries Policy and for the Irish Government to fight for a fair share of quota in our own waters. We also need sanctions against the rogue states that continue to overfish and we need transparency around who within the EU benefits from these cosy arrangements.

It is vital for our fishing industry that our voice is finally heard loud and clear in Brussels**.** Our message is simple, enough is enough. The days of polite diplomacy and weak negotiation are over. Ireland's coastal and island communities deserve fairness, sustainability and respect. Our fishermen are not asking for favours. They are asking for justice and a future in the industry that built their communities and fed our nation. Sinn Féin will continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with them in Brussels, in this House and in every town and village across the island.

I will say a few words about the inshore sector. The inshore fleet is a vital part of our fishing sector, with almost 2,000 vessels. It provides more than half the employment in our seafood industry, sustaining coastal communities across the island. We will continue the proud history and tradition of Irish inshore fishing by collaborating with the sector and putting in place supports to ensure its growth. Sinn Féin's priorities for the inshore sector include revisiting, relaunching and implementing the Irish Inshore Fisheries Sector Strategy 2019-2023 in full,

theme by theme, objective by objective and action by action; adequately resourcing the recently established inshore and islands producers organisations, the National Inshore Fishermen's Association and the Irish Islands Marine Resource Organisation; working with all sectors of the fishing industry to ensure a fair and reasonable distribution of the mackerel and herring quota and the quotas of other species as they arise; working with inshore fishermen and their representatives to identify new quota and non-quota fishing opportunities to build and grow new markets and identify financial and other types of supports that can be availed of during these turbulent times; developing a continuity grant that can be accessed by the inshore and islands fishing sector to promote growth and revitalise communities; and enacting and implementing the Islands Fisheries (Heritage Licence) Bill 2017.

We have to take seriously what is happening.

**Deputy Charles Ward:** It is hard not to feel completely hopeless about the fishing industry at the moment. What was once a prosperous industry is now facing complete collapse. It is utter devastation, as the Minister of State is well aware. The numbers have been outlined multiple times already, but it is important they are repeated until we get to grips with what we are facing and its potential impact. The International Council for the Exploration of the Sea has advised the following cuts, starting next year: a 70% cut in mackerel, a 41% cut in blue whiting, a 22% cut in boarfish, a 71% cut in Irish Sea whiting, a 59% cut in Irish Sea plaice and a 30% cut in Irish Sea haddock. As well as these cuts, a cut in Dublin Bay prawns is expected next week. The fishing industry faces losing up to €200 million.

The Minister of State knows about these numbers. We have discussed them at length over recent months in the fisheries committee. The response from the Government has been extremely underwhelming. It is an attitude of deafness regarding fishing. It is as though these cuts and the industry's decline have already been accepted. We have no control over what happens in our waters, but we should. We have spent so long pandering to Europe that we have completely forgotten our value and the value of our fishing industry.

Ireland holds about 12% of EU waters but is allocated less than 6% of the fishing quota. We are getting back half of what we have and we allow it. We allow Europe and other countries to consistently take and take, which they do. In 2010, Iceland and the Faroe Islands increased their mackerel quotas without consulting the other countries that have a shared interest in these stocks, and we let them. In 2021, the Faroe Islands and Norway raised their mackerel quotas without agreement with the EU, despite Ireland being the most reliant on them, and we let them. In 2013, the Faroe Islands increased its allowance for herring by 229% and we allowed it. In 2020, following the Brexit trade co-operation agreement, 40% of the total value of European quotas was transferred to the UK from Ireland, and we let Europe sell off our half. This deal has been extremely damaging and has cost the fishing industry an estimated €180 million to date. In 2024, the UK signed an agreement with Norway and the Faroe Islands, dividing up 70% of the mackerel between them without involving the EU. We let them get away with that too.

Today, vessels from EU states, as well as fleets from the southern hemisphere, fish bluefin tuna, a lucrative species, in our waters, while Irish fishermen are forced to observe this because Europe has not allowed us to access this stock. French and British vessels continue to fish seabass on our doorstep while we have not been able to fish it since the 1990s and yet again,

we let them away with this and much more. For how much longer will we let Europe and other countries take advantage of us?

If this was happening in any other industry, there would be complete uproar. However, the fishing industry gets ignored and is undervalued again and again, despite being a massive part of the country's culture and heritage, as well as a massive economic asset. Bord Iascaigh Mhara, BIM, reported that in 2024 Ireland's seafood economy generated €1.24 billion in GDP. The sector sustained more than 16,800 direct and indirect jobs across fishing services and other services, yet the Government fails to take action. It fails to protect this industry and the jobs of people of who have made this industry their livelihood.

Worse than that, it continues to support the very mechanisms and policies that actively hurt the industry. In its budget announcement at the beginning of the month, the Government stated it intends to support fully the implementation of the Common Fisheries Policy. Basically, it seeks to support the very outdated policy that is causing these significant cuts. I understand the total allowance catch numbers are set annually at EU level for each region and each fish species. Ireland then receives its percentage for these through the total allowable catches, TAC, system. The percentage reflects the size and scope of the Irish fishing industry during the 1970s, which is half a century ago. That is why we have no bluefin tuna quota as there were no recorded landings over 50 years ago. Quite frankly, that is ridiculous in this day and age. The country and fishing industry have changed astronomically.

It is clear this policy holds us back, yet the Government calls for the full implementation of the Common Fisheries Policy. This speaks of a Government that is completely out of touch with the fishing industry. The European Commission is currently evaluating the Common Fisheries Policy but the review has been going on for far too long. The cuts we face are due to take place in less than three months. We do not have time to wait. Armegeddon is coming. There is no doubt our industry will be completely wiped out if any further quota cuts are enforced, never mind the 70% cut in mackerel. Ireland's TAC share of mackerel is more than that of any other species and its value supports more of the fishing industry than any other significant margin, yet it seems tthe Government's negotiation strategy is not to reject such devastating quota cuts but to allow a lesser cut and apply for the Hague preferences, a small additional allowance, to patch it up, rather than try to fix the root problem.

It is disappointing that the Government consistently takes such a weak negotiation stance when it comes to fishing. We are so desperate to please Europe that it is to the detriment of our fisheries and citizens. It is not fair that Irish fishers are forced to bear the brunt of a weak Government that does not seem to have the best interests of the fisheries at heart. As I come from a coastal community, an island community, I can tell the House that further cuts to quotas will cause catastrophic damage and we should not be immune to hearing this. Fishing communities are barely surviving as it is. In Donegal, I see at first hand every day that it takes entire towns and communities to make towns successful. Killybegs is one example. It was a thriving town, but it is in decline. The next few months and decisions will determine the future of that place. Killybegs has a history of fishing. It has raised families on fishing, but right now as we speak, fish factories are not operating and boats are tied up. I come from an island, Arranmore, where fishing has been an important part of the island's history. That history is being erased with every cut and every time we are treated unfairly. Many of our island piers and harbours lack basic services such as electricity, waste collection, lighting and water supply.

There are problems and on top of that many inshore fisheries face discrimination against smaller fisheries. Inshore fisheries are denied funding from the Brexit adjustment reserve.

That almost the entire mackerel and herring quota is given to just 50 large vessels, owned by about two dozen, is extremely unfair. These people face an uncertain Christmas and an uncertain future. This is solvable with the right Government and political will. The Minister has the will to do this. He will have to do it because if he does not, we are facing Armageddon for the fishing industry all over Ireland. I believe the Minister will have to go in hard and fight for the people and the fisheries.

**Deputy Mairéad Farrell:** The Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, knows and has spent time in the coastal communities I represent in Galway. We talk about Connemara and the four offshore islands in Galway West where the lifestyle is completely interwoven with the sea and fishing. It really is a way of life. Anyone who is familiar with fishing communities knows the importance of European fishing quotas and of states respecting these quotas. This is why it is so important for the Government to represent the interests of hard-working Irish fishers when negotiating quotas and representing their interests in Europe.

I am regularly contacted by fishers who ask for a bluefin tuna quota, which I have previously raised with the Minister of State. Understandably, our fishing communities are furious that non-EU third states are overfishing with no repercussions. This has led to recent scientific recommendations to cut fishing quotas of species like mackerel. Mackerel is very important to our fishing communities and any cuts will be devastating for them.

This is why it is so shameful that certain Irish MEPs voted for the agreement that would hand over Irish fishing territory and quotas to Norway and Iceland in return for funding. Meanwhile, Ireland will not see a red cent of that money despite these concessions. This is bad for Ireland and turns its back on our fishing communities. Along with Independent, Labour and Independent Ireland MEPs, all four Fianna Fáil MEPs supported it. This is particularly concerning, considering that Fianna Fáil holds the Ministry responsible for fisheries.

Our fishing communities need us all to stand up for them internationally to protect our quotas and negotiate deals that will support coastal communities and not leave them on their own. We cannot reward states that overfish our waters with higher quotas. We need the EU to take action to ensure that all states fish responsibly based on the science. We need a better deal for Irish fishers. We need justice and fairness for our Irish fishing communities, once and for all.

Tá a fhios ag an Aire Stáit go maith cé chomh tábhachtach is atá cúrsaí iascaireachta i gConamara agus ar na hoileán amuigh ón chósta thar timpeall na Gaillimhe. Tá ceithre cinn acu. Tuigeann muid cé chomh tábhachtach is atá an iascaireacht ní hamháin don gheilleagair, ach do shaol na ndaoine sin chomh maith. Cuireann sé frustrachas uafásach ar iascairí nuair a fheiceann siad céard a tharlaíonn ar bhonn leibhéal na hEorpa agus an Aontais Eorpaigh. Mothaíonn siad nach bhfuil an méid atá ag teastáil uathu á chur in iúl ag an Rialtas, ná ag Feisirí Eorpacha áirithe, ag leibhéal an Aontais Eorpaigh. Níl sé sách maith go bhfuil siad ag fulaingt agus ag streachailt mar gheall air seo. Tá sé fíorthábhachtach go n-oibríonn chuile dhuine sa Teach seo le chéile chun cinntiú go mbeidh deal níos fearr ag iascairí na hÉireann. Tá sé thar am go ndéanann muid é seo mar tá a fhios againn nach raibh sé déanta le 20, 30 nó 40 bliain

anuas. Anois, áfach, tá Aire Stáit againn. Tá an tAire Stáit ann agus tá sé thar am go mbainfear úsáid as an ról sin chun é sin a chinntiú.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I thank the Chief Whip for making the statements possible today. Deputy Mac Lochlainn and I pushed hard for this debate, which is of huge importance at the present time. I would like this to be an honest debate. I do not want to stand here speaking and not getting answers. I would like to get answers to the questions I am putting to the Minister. I want us to work together to save our fishing industry. This is where we are at.

The proposed 70% cut in the European Union's mackerel fishing quota will wipe out the industry in Ireland. I was at a meeting of TDs and Senators the other night. I will tell the Minister that the fishers of Ireland are well pissed off - pardon my language - with successive Governments hanging them out to dry. The word that was used when describing what was happening in the fishing industry was "Armageddon", as Deputy Ward mentioned. In the fishers' own words, they are saying it is a total collapse of the sector. If current trends continue, there will be irreparable damage to coastal communities, livelihoods and the marine economy. The fishers say it is a point of no return and that, without immediate and decisive intervention, recovery may be impossible. They use the word "Armageddon" to wake up policymakers, including the Minister, unless the policymakers want to see the end of an era for Irish fishing.

My God, does the Minister know what is one of the biggest costs for Cork County Council at present? It is repairing the road into Castletownbere. From what? It is from damage done by Spanish lorries going into Castletownbere numerous times weekly to load Irish fish on Spanish boats, while our Irish boats are tied up with empty tanks. Those trucks driving out of Castletownbere are causing a world of damage to the road. It is astonishing. You could not make it up in a cartoon or a comedy because no one would believe it.

Today, I am not just a representative of my constituents. I am a voice for the coastal communities of Ireland that are being systematically dismantled by the failures of fishery policy at home and in Europe. The figures speak for themselves. In just the past seven years, the Irish fleet has suffered estimated losses of €90 million to €100 million. This is not just a financial crisis. It is a cultural and community catastrophe. Mackerel quotas have been slashed by 77%, costing us €66 million. Blue whiting is down by 41%, a €7.5 million blow. Prawns have been reduced by 12% to 13%, costing €4.8 million. Entire fleets are being shut down. The Celtic Sea fleet is effectively grounded. The Irish Sea fleet is barely operational. Ports like Castletownbere, Union Hall, Dunmore East, Clogherhead, Howth, Kilmore Quay, Killybegs and Greencastle are facing existential threats. Seventeen boats were taken from Castletownbere alone in the most recent decommissioning scheme. They are not just boats. They are our livelihoods, traditions and futures.

Despite Ireland contributing 12% of EU waters, we receive just 6% of the fish. This is a grotesque imbalance. Our fishers are being asked to stop fishing in their own waters while foreign vessels continue to exploit these stocks. Where is the fairness? Where is the sovereignty? The Common Fisheries Policy, compounded by the Brexit trade and co-operation agreement, has failed Ireland. Stocks are declining even though our fishers have reduced their catches year after year. ICES now describes the situation in the Celtic and Irish seas as particularly concerning, with many stocks falling below critical biomass thresholds.

We are being punished for our compliance. We need, first, immediate financial aid to support our fleet and communities, second, a succession plan to ensure the future of Irish fishing and, third, a legal challenge to the EU's policy failure, if necessary. The legal mechanism exists, namely, Articles 263, 265 and 340 of the TFEU, to challenge unlawful conduct and the failure to act, and to seek damages. If our Government will not act, then we on this side of the House and the fishers must consider doing this ourselves. We also demand the application of the Hague preferences to allow our fishers to remain legal in their own waters.

What of bluefin tuna? Despite a massive recovery in stock numbers, Ireland receives no quota, only a bycatch allowance. This is unacceptable. What about our fishing rights off Rockall? Have we got those rights back? Are we going to get them back? Is this another kick in the you-know-what for Irish fishers? This is not just about fish. It is about fairness. It is about the survival of our coastal communities. It is about Ireland's right to fish in Irish waters.

First, can the Minister confirm what emergency financial aid package is being considered to address the estimated €90 million to €100 million in losses suffered by the Irish fleet? Second, what is his response to the fact that 17 boats were removed from Castletownbere alone under the most recent decommissioning scheme? What continued support is being offered to those families and communities? Third, why does Ireland, which contributes 12% of EU waters, receive only 6% of the fish? What steps are being taken to correct this imbalance?

I wish the Minister would take this down because these are very serious questions that come from the fishers, not from me. If the Minister can answer them, they and I would greatly appreciate it.

**Deputy Martin Heydon:** My officials are taking note of all the questions.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Fourth, will the Minister commit to pushing for the application of the Hague preferences to ensure Irish fishers can legally fish in their own waters? Fifth, why is Ireland being denied a dedicated quota for bluefin tuna despite a clear recovery in stock levels and historical fishing effort? Sixth, does the Minister accept that the Common Fisheries Policy and the Brexit trade and co-operation agreement have disproportionately harmed Ireland's fishing sector? Seventh, will the Government consider initiating a legal challenge under Articles 263, 265 or 340 of the TFEU to seek redress for these policy failures?

Eighth, how does the Government explain the continued decline in fish stocks despite Irish fishermen reducing their catches over the past seven years? Ninth, what is the Government's position on ICES recommending zero TACs for key species in the Celtic and Irish Seas, effectively shutting down entire fleets? Tenth, what is the Government's plan for succession and recruitment in the fishing industry to ensure its long-term survival? Eleventh, will the Government commit to a full review of Ireland's share of blue whiting, given the massive biomass and the unfair allocation of just 59,000 tonnes from a TAC of over 1.4 million tonnes? Twelfth, are the Minister and Minister of State going to agree on the 70% proposed cuts on mackerel quotas? What is their plan for other quotas for these fishermen who want to work in the sea?

I urge them to stand with these fishermen. I had a meeting with them. It is at crisis point. It was at crisis point without ever a worry of a 70% mackerel cut. That is game over for them. People have invested in fishing. I have been down in Wexford and in different ports meeting with fishermen. It is the same down in west Cork. People have spent millions of euro investing in their boats, fleet and staff, and to think this is what is facing them. They are facing ruination. It is a serious crisis. I urge the Government to stand with us, fight for our fisherman, demand reform and if reform is denied then let us challenge the injustice in the courts of Europe.

**Deputy Paul Lawless:** I raise a very serious issue that is happening in my constituency in Mayo. That is the proposed closure of the Cong hatchery. This facility is one of the most important pieces of infrastructure in Mayo. It is fundamentally important. It is the jewel in the crown of the tourism sector in south Mayo. Cong, Ballinrobe, much of south Mayo and Galway rely on this important angling and tourism sector. The IFI is proposing to close this hatchery. Why is this important? It is important that the Minister of State understands that the hatchery was established in the 1960s. It was established as a result of a near wipe-out of salmon stocks. The IFI created the hatchery. It imported genetics from abroad. It has been hugely successful in replenishing the near wipe-out of salmon stocks across the Corrib. Many of the smolts that are produced have a huge success rate in leaving our shores, travelling across North America and returning.

The IFI decided to close without any environmental assessment. In fact, I have written to the Minister of State. I have submitted parliamentary questions. I was amazed at the response. I asked what analysis was done on the fish stocks in the region. There was no analysis done. I also asked what analysis was done on the impact on the tourism sector in south Mayo and Connemara. The reply was astonishing. It stated that because, in the 1960s, the hatchery was not established for the purposes of tourism, no impact assessment would be done. What kind of response is that? Cong and south Mayo have developed on the back of this really important piece of infrastructure, but no impact analysis is done. There are hundreds of jobs and businesses that rely on tourism in south Mayo. This is an important aspect that must be considered. I ask the Minister of State to consider the impact on tourism and the impact it will have on fish stocks in the region.

The report that was published by the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation, NASCO, is being used to essentially close the Cong hatchery, but the fact is that NASCO recognises that well-managed hatcheries can play an important role in conservation of our fish stocks. The science used to justify the closure manipulates the international guidance and overlooks Cong's valuable service. I asked about the assessment that was done on the fish stocks that are produced in Cong but no data was provided. This hatchery should be used as flagship hatchery. It should be a model to follow, a place we can go to learn and research and an education facility. I have no doubt that if we see an epidemic like the environmental disaster we saw in the River Blackwater, we will rue the day that we close this. This will cost millions of euro to re-establish down the line.

Before this hatchery is closed, I ask the Minister of State to join me in Cong, visit the facility and see the valuable contribution. It is just two hours from County Clare. I will join him at the facility in Cong at any point of his choosing. I am asking him to pause, reflect, intervene and understand what is at stake here for the entire region, not just for tourism but in term of the

salmon stocks in south Mayo. It is fundamentally important. Will the Minister of State commit to visiting Cong hatchery before the IFI closes this facility?

**Deputy David Cullinane:** A lot of issues have been raised by my colleagues, particularly by Teachtaí Mac Lochlainn and McGuinness, in relation to quotas, an existential threat facing fishermen and European and State policy. I support all of that and all the points that they made.

I wish to concentrate on infrastructure because it is important. The Minister visited Waterford recently. One of the points of the discussion was Helvick Harbour. The need to the develop those harbours is quite clear to anybody who is looking at this. We in Sinn Féin have been raising this issue for years. Helvick pier falls under the local authority harbours programme. The problem is that it does not get enough funding and is not able to do the engineering or environmental studies. That creates problems for projects to be done. Everybody gets sent around the houses. We go around in circles and the work does not get done. There needs to be a reform of how funding is provided in the first instance, particularly to those local authority harbours. Helvick is one of them, but there are others across the State as well.

I raise the issue of Dunmore East Harbour. It is an issue that I have been raising for a long number of years in relation to the development of that harbour. It is a shining example of what can be done regarding marine tourism and water sports activity. There is lots going on there during the summer. There is an adventure playground where young children can go out and swim in the harbour. There are fishing boats. Sometimes, we have cruise ships that come in. It is all fantastic. The problem is that they cannot all coexist in the current harbour because it is just not sufficient. There was a study commissioned by the Department a number of years ago. It was a very good study; it was a feasibility study on what needed to ensure that we can maximise the potential of Dunmore East Harbour. It outlined four options ranging from €17 million to €45 million. Nothing was done, not a thing. It dropped off the face of the earth. It dropped off a cliff. I have not seen anything from the Government or the Department since. Despite the fact I was submitting parliamentary questions well before the most recent general election, trying to get a sense of what happened there and where it went, we did not get any response. I ask the Minister to look into that feasibility study.

**Deputy Pat Buckley:** As a coastal TD, I have seen at first hand the decline in the fishing industry. The sector has suffered quota cuts, fleet reductions and fuel pressures. The input of cost increases in recent years has left them facing crisis after crisis. This is following decades of neglect, mismanagement and weak negotiations on their behalf by successive Fianna Fáil- and Fine Gael-led Governments. I want to touch on something because people have mentioned quotas and different stocks. I am going to give a real-life story. A gentleman named Mr. CJ Gaffney is the perfect example of the incredible damage that has been done and continues to be done to the Irish fishing industry. It has literally been gutted – pardon the pun. In 2007, CJ purchased a Dutch trawler, the *Mary Kate,* and subsequently found that it had serious stability issues that made the boat uninsurable.

After trying to take legal action in Holland and in Germany, as it was German registered, without success, he took out a loan to cover the considerable cost of fixing that boat. Despite finishing the repairs in 2012 at an eye-watering cost to himself, CJ had been unable to earn a living fishing the boat for so long that he was forced to sell it. A UK buyer was found, but due

to the boat's history it could not be registered in the UK as part of the fishing fleet. He had to surrender the boat to the bank in 2012 along with his fishing licence, and was left with debts of over €1 million. The decade-long crusade has left CJ emotionally and financially spent with petitions to the European Commission and to the Irish Government to see if they could draw down EU funds from the European fisheries fund in compensation, but that is falling on deaf ears. Now dismantled, her fate has resonated deeply in many coastal communities across the country who have been ignored by consecutive Governments. Questions need to be answered by this Government and by the EU as to how this beam trawler was issued with a stamped stability book from a renowned international classification society. This had serious maritime safety implications. The Gaffney family deserve compensation for this ordeal. We need to ensure that no other family will ever face the same injustice.

**Deputy Barry Heneghan:** Táim buíoch don Aire Stáit as a thuras chuig Bhaile Átha Cliath thuaidh. It was great to see him with the local fishermen and the people who are engaged with local businesses i mBinn Éadair. It is very important to have been at that table to talk to the local fishermen. He witnessed how greatly the local economy is based on fishing. Howth is a huge tourist attraction. Americans come to this beautiful capital city, get the bus out to Howth, go on the walk, see the fishermen and eat the fresh fish. There are so many jobs based on that. The main thing the Minister of State heard about from that meeting is the dredging of the harbour. There is a serious delay at the moment. I understand the EPA has a reason and there are issues that need to be examined. Can the Department speed that up? Some estimates show that nearly 220,000 cu. m. of material needs to be removed. We have to do that sensitively as there is a lot of marine life around the area. Clearance of this material would restore depth and safety and ensure navigation of all craft. Residents in Howth are saying there have been incidents where the lifeboat was having difficult in certain areas of the port. Could the Department look at ways to expedite the environmental authorisation along with the rigorous safeguards?

I also want to reinforce the long discussion we had on the Syncrolift boat lift that is currently there. It is 40 years old and sadly the parts for that lift are not available any more. If that lift was out of service, all the local fishermen, boats and businesses, the fishmongers, restaurants and boat developers would not be able to work and the local economy would be damaged. I was on the phone to a local fisherman today. It is essential that this infrastructure be upgraded.

Returning to the dredging, the issue of boat access is linked in that there have been cases where it is inefficient at low tide on certain channels. Other Members have commented on EU fishing laws. We saw how the fishermen spoke to the Minister of State that day. I know that he engaged with them and that we do have our hands tied when it comes to EU laws. Is there a way he could look into the matters those fishermen asked him to expedite? I look forward to welcoming him back to Howth to open a new boat lift in the next month or two.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I am glad to get an opportunity to talk on behalf of the fishing industry and coastal communities in general. When fishermen cannot make money, coastal communities are adversely affected. We have to give credit to the British going back to the 1600s. They built up the fishing industry in Ireland and gave the local people at the time the wherewithal to get the fishing industry going, which we carried on through thick and thin for many years. Since our accession to the EU, we have lost much of our fishing quotas to the

detriment of Irish fishermen and the coastal communities that I mentioned. All that has been done for them was to pay some of them. We saw the grand presentations they made to us in front of national conference centre where the Dáil was sitting during Covid. We saw the orderly fashion they came in, so many of them, and made their presentation. Each and every one of them was hurting and I always think of them for the meticulous way they made their presentation. There was no repetition. Each of them had their own amount to say and said it eloquently. We have not done enough for them. We need to.

There is one thing that I know anyway. I have not seen or tasted a mackerel for almost three years. Like all of us, I was very fond of them. They are not to be seen any more. Where are they gone? I do not know. I remember even people from Kilgarvan used to go back down to Valentia and fish off the rocks there. We lost one great man there, Ned Carey, from Coollick in Kilcummin. It was such a thing at the time but I am told there is no mackerel to be had now. There are serious concerns as well as we are losing our quotas to pair trawling in Kenmare Bay. When is that going to be addressed and fair play meted out? The larger trawlers are coming in and cleaning the whole thing out, every kind of fish. I am blaming that for the fact that I cannot get a mackerel or the people of Kilgarvan or anyone else around us. Where are they going? It is not fair. No one person should own anything like that and no large entity should be able to clean out a place like that. All I am asking for is fair play. I do not want to put those people out of business either but we have to see after the smaller people, the Joe Jims who are now dead and Donal Shea who braved the elements. They always said the fishing was better on the bad day when the wind and rain were blowing. That is when they were out at their best because they seemed to get the fish in those conditions.

We need to address that. We have been promised for so long. There are so many people along Tuosist and back the way to Ardgroom and back to Berehaven and there is concern about that. People around Kilmakillogue are always mentioning it. The one thing I have pride in is that these fish lorries go up through Kilgarvan village late at night getting fuel. We liked to see them passing. They would go back empty and go up full. There is not as many of them now. Why is that? We have lost our quotas, I am told. We need to ensure the continuation of the people in the rural communities down along the Iveragh peninsula and all the way around to Dingle. We need to retain the coastal communities and keep them going. Fishing did keep those people traditionally in business and kept the local shop and pub going. It is not just the fisherman; it is whole communities that depend on and take pride in their fishermen. We are losing that. I am asking the Ministers to fight harder for quotas and get what rightfully belongs to us. We seem to have left a lot of it slip under successive Governments. I am not blaming the two Ministers but this is their time to get into action and make a mark for themselves and ensure they get the respect we need them to get for the fishing and coastal communities. They are very important to us. We seem to have a shortage of housing everywhere but the biggest cry is here in Dublin. We need to spread out and diversify and have enough people living in the rural parts of Ireland as well. It cannot be all about Dublin. We must remember the people who are braving the elements on the western seaboard and trying to eke out a living. We have to see after them as well.

6 o'clock

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell):** I call the Minister to make his concluding statement.

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon):** I thank Deputies for their engagement in what is a really important debate on the issues in respect of fisheries. The concern in all our coastal communities, as raised by Deputies, is very evident, particularly in Donegal and Cork where fishing is such an intrinsic part of our economic activity, as it is in Waterford and Dublin - the latter which is sometimes forgotten in terms of costal communities and economic activity - and, as the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, knows all too well, Clare.

Deputy Lawless raised specific points which relate to inland fisheries that the Minister of State, wearing his other hat, will come back to from the other Department's side. Regarding the specific questions Deputy Collins raised, in my ten minutes here I do not have time to go through them all but the Minister of State will engage with the Deputy in correspondence on those very detailed, specific points.

I flag here that the waters around Ireland's 7,500 km coastline have always been a source of remarkable seafood. Fishing remains of significant social and economic importance to Ireland and for many of our coastal communities, it is intrinsically linked to their identity and way of life. The sector employs over 15,000 people on fishing vessels and aquaculture sites, in processing operations and in the distribution of seafood. It helps to sustain vibrant rural and coastal communities across Ireland. Right now, however, the sector is under significant pressure. The Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, and I share many of the concerns raised during the debate, particularly those in relation to the setting of fishing opportunities in 2026.

As has been outlined, on 30 September, the International Council for Exploration of the Seas published deeply concerning advice for widely distributed pelagic stocks in 2026, including mackerel, blue whiting and boarfish, which were said to be depleted. This has caused deep and understandable concern in the sector. Given the urgent nature of these concerns, Ireland will bring a point to the agenda under "any other business" at the EU AGRIFISH Council next week, calling for urgent EU action to save north-east Atlantic pelagic stocks. We will call for the European Commission to identify and adopt suitable measures to respond to this crisis and, in particular, to bring forward measures regarding third countries which fail to co-operate and allow unsustainable fishing of a stock of common interest for the Union. Ireland will support the EU in taking a stand to engage constructively and as an equal partner with our fellow coastal states in the north-east Atlantic on the sustainable management of our shared fisheries resources. However, we must send a clear signal that the EU will no longer tolerate actions which threaten the sustainability of this vital natural resource or the viability of the EU's seafood sector. In addition, we are committed to working across government to assess what supports may be available to the seafood sector in this very difficult context. Discussions are ongoing to explore options within the constraints of both EU and national Exchequer funding and the relevant EU and national legislation.

As regards bluefin tuna, I fully understand the very strong lobby among Irish fishermen for Ireland to receive an allocation of the EU's bluefin tuna quota. Ireland has a national quota for northern albacore tuna. Annual catch limits are set by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas based on scientific advice. Ireland does not have a national quota for bluefin tuna. The available bluefin tuna quota is allocated each year to member states based on relative stability, as established in the late 1990s. At that time, Ireland did not have a track record of commercial fishing for bluefin tuna and, accordingly, did not receive a quota

allocation. However, a small bluefin tuna by-catch quota is available to Ireland, primarily for use in our important northern albacore tuna fishery and Celtic Sea herring fishery, where there can be bluefin tuna by-catch.

In 2018, Ireland was successful, for the first time, in securing an agreement that allowed it to set up a catch-tag-release fishery to contribute to the collection of scientific data for the bluefin tuna stock. This catch-tag-release science-based fishery for authorised recreational angling vessels has been in place since 2019 and supports the collection of valuable data on the migratory patterns of bluefin tuna in Irish waters. This fishery is most beneficial to Ireland, as it increases our knowledge of the behaviour and abundance of bluefin tuna, while also providing a small but valuable tourism benefit to peripheral coastal communities. Ireland has made it clear to EU member states and the European Commission that there is a case for an allocation of the EU's bluefin tuna quota to be made available to Ireland. The case is supported by the data collected in the catch-tag-release science-based fishery for authorised recreational angling vessels. Ireland has requested the opening of discussions at EU level to progress Ireland's case and has made formal statements on the matter at numerous fisheries Council meetings in recent years. Opening up this issue is difficult, as other member states are resistant to any discussion on amending relative stability for this stock. As is the case across quota stocks in the EU, any change to relative stability would involve a loss for some other member states and, therefore, would pose particular challenges in a qualified majority voting context. However, the case for a national quota for bluefin tuna is supported by the data collected in the catch-tag-release science-based fishery for authorised recreational angling vessels. The Minister of State and I will continue to support our efforts on this at every available opportunity.

The ongoing impacts of Brexit to the sector and the extension to the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement, TCA, has also been raised in the House. I know it was a significant frustration to the sector that Ireland did not get some quota back from the UK in the discussions which ended in May this year. The challenge we have faced in this area has been the comparative strength of the UK's negotiating position *vis-à-vis* the EU's. UK vessels do not rely on access to EU waters to fish to the same extent that EU vessels do. North Sea member states such as France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark and Sweden are particularly reliant on access to the UK's exclusive economic zone, EEZ. While Irish vessels are not as dependent, we fish approximately one third of our catch in UK waters. Therefore, in the 2020 EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement, a strategic link was established between fisheries and energy. Without the agreement at the May summit, we faced the possibility of the UK either refusing to agree to a multi-year reciprocal access arrangement or seeking further quota transfers in order to agree to continued access for EU vessels. This was especially relevant as we approach the end of the adjustment period. This was critically important for Ireland as we suffered disproportionately on quota transfers in the TCA and we were determined not to lose one more fish. Given the number of fish stocks shared between the EU and UK - over 80 - it would not be feasible to negotiate and agree on access to waters and quotas on an annual basis. Therefore, the priority was to secure a continuation of the current arrangements with continued reciprocal access and no further transfers in quota from the EU to the UK. Ireland sought the longest possible extension to the *status quo*, on condition of there being no additional quotas transferred to the UK. The fisheries agreement reached sees an extension of 12 years of the *status quo* to June 2038, significantly longer than the four years previously sought by the United Kingdom. The certainty of an agreement to extend reciprocal

access for EU and UK vessels to fish in each other's waters for a period of 12 years, with no change to existing quota shares, is therefore welcome and a much better outcome than some of the other possibilities.

I also welcome the commitment to the negotiation of a sanitary and phytosanitary, SPS, agreement between the EU and the UK. This will be based on dynamic alignment by the UK with EU food safety standards and rules. There are long-established and mutually beneficial trading relationships between food producers in Ireland and food businesses and retailers in the UK. A comprehensive SPS agreement would greatly reduce the administrative burden on agrifood businesses exporting to the UK.

Many Deputies have raised the issue of Rockall, both today and in previous debates, and the desire of Irish fishermen to return to fishing in the waters around Rockall, especially for squid. Rockall is a small, uninhabitable rock located approximately 160 nautical miles west of the Scottish islands of St. Kilda and 230 nautical miles to the north-west of Donegal, as we all know. Ireland has not sought to claim sovereignty over Rockall. The UK claimed sovereignty over Rockall in 1955 and sought to formally annex it as part of Scotland under its 1972 Island of Rockall Act. The consistent position of successive Irish Governments is that Ireland does not recognise Britain's claim of sovereignty over Rockall. Accordingly, Ireland does not accept that a 12 nautical mile or 22 km territorial sea exists around Rockall. We understand that the UK takes a different view. In addition, Rockall, and similar rocks and skerries, have no significance for generating an exclusive economic zone or establishing legal claims to the continental shelf. We believe this position is reflected in the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which provides, at Article 121, paragraph 3, that, "Rocks which cannot sustain human habitation or economic life of their own shall have no exclusive economic zone or continental shelf." I assure the House that reaching an agreement on issues relating to Rockall remains an important issue for the Government and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is in ongoing contact with the relevant Scottish and UK authorities in this regard. This is an area to which the Minister of State has committed to contributing constructively in the months ahead, as he has in his time in this portfolio to date.

The programme for Government recognises the valuable role of fisheries in this country. As Minister, I am committed, alongside my Government colleagues, to defending the interests of the Irish fishing sector and securing a sustainable future for the sector. It is a sector that makes an invaluable contribution to our coastal communities and the rural economy. We will continue to work on addressing the issues it faces on behalf of the communities that rely on that activity for their livelihood. I thank the Office of the Ceann Comhairle for facilitating this important debate today.

## Teachtaireacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad

**An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell):** Seanad Éireann has passed the Housing Finance Agency (Amendment) Bill 2025, without amendment.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 6.10 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 4 Samhain 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.10 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 4 November 2025.