



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 5 Samhain 2025

Wednesday, 5 November 2025

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Catherine Ardagh) i gceannas ar 9 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

9 o'clock

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): 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 Michael Cahill - To discuss the wastewater infrastructure deficit in Kerry.

Deputy Albert Dolan - To discuss delays in school extension projects getting approved.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh - To discuss the introduction of a national lung cancer screening programme using low-dose CT scanning.

Deputy Michael Murphy - To discuss the loophole in the licensing system which allows learner drivers to renew learner permits without sitting a driving test.

Deputy Alan Kelly - To discuss the requirement for more gardaí to be allocated to stations across north Tipperary.

Deputy Mattie McGrath - To discuss ongoing water outages and boil water notices in Clonmel town.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly - To discuss the delay in commencing a school building project in Craddockstown, County Kildare.

Deputy Cathy Bennett - To discuss the lack of a HSE school-linked dental service in County Monaghan.

Deputy Erin McGreehan - To discuss the opening of an additional train station in County Louth.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil - To discuss lack of critical infrastructure and investment in Kildare North.

Deputy Joe Cooney - To discuss the recent court decision regarding the wastewater connection for the Ennis Plaza.

Deputy Colm Burke - To discuss provision of an integrated homeless health hub in Cork city.

Deputy Pa Daly - To discuss challenges to biodiversity in the upper tributaries of the Feale river in Kerry.

Deputy Marie Sherlock - To discuss the requirement for a drive through test lane in light vehicle CVRT centres.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke - To discuss the urgent need for additional SNA support at Scoil Cholmcille, Skryne, County Meath.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the impact of defective blocks.

Deputy Thomas Gould - To discuss the NOAC performance indicators 2024 and actions to improve local authority outputs.

Deputy Matt Carthy - To discuss the timeframe for delivery of a permanent special school in County Monaghan.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss the need for immediate intervention and humanitarian assistance in Sudan.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - To discuss the issuing of protective notice to staff at the CCTV monitoring centre at Moyross, Limerick.

Deputies Conor D. McGuinness and David Cullinane - To discuss Irish Coast Guard SAR aviation service.

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

Deputy Ruth Coppinger - To discuss the issues related to the insolvency of a company (details supplied)

Deputy Paul Murphy - To discuss funding for drugs and alcohol task forces

The matters raised by Deputies Cathy Bennett, Paul Murphy, Michael Cahill, Mattie McGrath and Michael Murphy have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Dental Services

Deputy Cathy Bennett: My question relates to the lack of a school dental programme in County Monaghan. I submitted a parliamentary question on this and the response I got was very disturbing, to be honest. We all know that in all areas of health care, early intervention is crucial. Prevention is preferable to treatment. Issues identified early allow for less intensive or invasive treatment. It is positive to introduce and reinforce positive dental hygiene and care from an early age. Dental is among the most basic of health services, so the Minister of State

will appreciate my shock to receive a response from the HSE to a parliamentary question which outlined that no children in County Monaghan received a dental check-up in the last academic year. Actually, shocked does not go far enough; I was disgusted, to be honest. The HSE informed me that the reason for this was staff retirements, maternity leaves and the paucity of dentists available nationally. It is not too much for the people of Monaghan to ask the Minister that this service would be put in place immediately. Retirements are generally foreseeable and should not lead to collapse in the services. Maternity leave is a fairly common life experience which should not leave to a collapse in the service. Will the Minister of State ensure that the people of County Monaghan get their routine dentistry requirements and check-ups in national school?

It is also a question of accountability for the HSE and the Government on this matter. This scandal that no children in County Monaghan are receiving dental check-ups has brought both me and the Minister of State into the House this morning. What has brought us to this point is a broader mismanagement and, given the latest revelation, I would say maladministration of our dental services. At the heart of the issue is Government's failure to train enough dentists and overreliance on private dentists who are under no obligation to deliver this critical public service. To go from 770 children in 2021 who did receive routine check-ups to zero children last year in County Monaghan who received a dental check-up, leaving 832 children on a waiting list, is undeniably a collapse of the service. Does the Minister of State accept that there has been another collapse in the HSE school-linked dental programme in County Monaghan? What is she going to do about it and when is she going to do it? How many children in Monaghan will receive a check-up in this academic year?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I thank the Deputy. This is a very serious issue for children who are waiting for public dental assessment in the Deputy's county of Monaghan. The HSE oral healthcare service aims to provide an oral examination and necessary treatment for children between second and sixth class and, in some cases, fourth class. Emergency care is provided for children of all ages up to 16 and for those with complex and additional needs. Due to the nature of the oral health examination programme, it does not meet the usual definition of a formal waiting list. However, children are deemed eligible on 1 September when they commence the relevant academic year.

The Department of Health engages with the HSE on an ongoing basis to understand and address any challenges arising in the provision of public oral healthcare services. The Minister for Health is aware that there are backlogs in the HSE's child oral health examination programme which has meant that sixth class groups are being prioritised. Currently, capacity in the Cavan-Monaghan area is impacted by maternity leave which is reducing service provision. I take into account what the Deputy has said about the children over the last year who have not had a check-up. She can be assured that it will go back to the Department and the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. The public dental service in Monaghan is currently targeting children in the 2023-24 academic year, 65% of whom have received assessments. There are 832 consents received from parents for children in the 2024-25 academic year who are waiting for appointments. So far in 2025, 425 sixth class targeted assessments have been completed in the Cavan-Monaghan area.

The Government acknowledges that more needs to be done to ensure these children can access their examination appointment. Building on investment of over €230 million per year in public oral healthcare services, an additional €2 million was awarded in budget 2025 to recruit 15 additional oral healthcare WTEs nationally. The Deputy is right that one of the biggest issues is recruitment. As she said, there may be staff out on maternity leave or there could be vacancies. That is an issue and a challenge for us. The good news for us is that there was funding in budget 2025 to recruit 15 additional oral healthcare WTEs nationally.

In the longer term, the Minister recognises that oral healthcare needs to be modernised in line with best international evidence and practice, as set out in the national oral health policy, *Smile agus Sláinte*. The €2 million budget 2025 investment will increase to €4 million in 2026. This supports the delivery of a three-year implementation plan for the policy, which is currently being finalised for publication by the Department of Health and the HSE. Service reform is vital to improve access to services in the long term, to ensure care is accessible from birth and is prevention based. The policy also highlights the need for strategic workforce planning to ensure a sufficient number of appropriately trained oral healthcare professionals, to include dentists, dental hygienists, dental nurses and other auxiliary grades. The Department of Health will continue to work with the HSE to continue to address any challenges arising in the provision of oral healthcare services and ensure the implementation of necessary reforms.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I want to reiterate that although 900 people were assessed in Cavan, in County Monaghan zero children were assessed. That needs to change and something needs to happen immediately. Sinn Féin outlined our proposals to address the crisis fostered by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in our dental services. A year ago, my party colleague and Sinn Féin spokesperson, Deputy Cullinane, published our health plan. It highlighted that between 2019 and 2024, nearly half of dentists providing publicly funded care to medical card holders had withdrawn from the dental treatment services scheme. Nearly 80% of those who remained were not taking on new patients. The Government's oversight of the denial of services has been seen in low-income households that have been denied the opportunity to save teeth and prevent oral disease. In the long term, it will cost households and the State more. The Government has not heeded the warnings from the Dental Council of Ireland, the Irish Dental Association or Sinn Féin and we are dealing with the consequences. We can now pay heed to Sinn Féin's plan. The Minister of State needs to do this. We need to hire more dentists and dental care teams to target school screening for children and medical card holders. Sinn Féin would expand dental training places by 32% from 185 to 245, develop a modern general dental services contract, crucially including a public-only contract, and make necessary reforms to the Dentists Act. A year ago, Sinn Féin said we needed to get dental screening programmes in schools back on track. In my county of Monaghan, the programme has come off the tracks entirely. Will the Government implement the necessary measures that I have outlined? Will the Minister of State give a guarantee that the schools programme will be reinstated in County Monaghan this year?

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I have taken the Deputy's points on board. She also spoke about Cavan, which was the one over the one-year period. I will bring that back to the Minister. The Government is committed to addressing immediate difficulties patients are experiencing in accessing oral healthcare services as well as fundamentally reforming dental services through the implementation of the *Smile agus Sláinte* programme.

The two key goals of the policy are to provide supports to enable every individual to achieve their personal best oral healthcare and to reduce oral health inequalities across the population by enabling vulnerable groups to access oral healthcare and improve their oral health. I can assure the Deputy that these are priorities for the Government. I do see the frustration. I am a mother and now have grandchildren so I know how important early access to oral healthcare is. Dental services are so important for us. I am very mindful of that.

The implementation plan will be published and will set out intended milestones and timing for the first phase and reform of the service for adults and children will be among the initial priorities. I am confident that by working together across relevant Department agencies and other stakeholders in line with their respective roles and responsibilities, the goals of the policies will be met to benefit children nationally and in the county of Monaghan. I thank the Deputy for raising a really important issue. I can assure her that the Government is committed to working on this.

Drug and Alcohol Task Forces

Deputy Paul Murphy: I appreciate the fact the Minister of State is here so I hope we can get some information for the local drug and alcohol task forces. These are the people who are doing the work on the front line in communities affected by drug abuse. I hope to hear differently from the Minister of State but it seems as though this Government is continuing the policy we have seen over the past ten years or so of what is the effective slow strangulation of our drug and alcohol task forces.

We know that between 2015 and 2025, the overall health budget increased by 94.7%. It has almost doubled and yet core funding for local drug and alcohol task forces decreased by 4.5%. In its new budget, the Government is saying that there is no cut to funding for community drug services in 2026 but when we dig into the detail, that does not seem to be the case. The first year cost of auto-enrolment for drug task forces will be 1.5%. That will increase year on year but in the first year, we are talking about a cost of 1.5%. There is no funding provided to enable the task forces to meet that. That is a crisis for them. These people want their staff to be able to access pensions but this needs to be resourced. Where are they meant to come up with this money? There is no uplift for these projects to cover the rising cost of living, so it certainly looks like a cut in core funding because extra costs are being put on them without extra resources being provided for it.

It is concerning that in the fact sheet on the budget from the Government, there is no reference to the drug related intimidation and violence engagement, DRIVE, project. This is an interagency project to respond to drug-related intimidation. This programme is rolled out in different task forces across the country. In Whitechurch in my constituency, the Whitechurch addiction support project, which is supported through DRIVE, caters to 75 families. These families are receiving threats from drug dealers. It is an horrific situation to be in. I have spoken to people in this situation many times. Because of DRIVE, the project was able to hire a dedicated worker for families experiencing drug-related intimidation. It managed to get two-year funding for this from the community safety innovation fund. That funding has now ceased and the project does not know what it will do from 1 January. What support will it be able to provide for the 75 families it was able to help in the past year? I hope it is just an error and

that funding is being provided for DRIVE, so I look forward to hearing the Minister of State's response on that.

A clear sign the task forces are being effectively run down from the top down is the fact they are not going to be included in the new reference group to support the implementation of the new national drugs strategy. The Department is saying that it will take a cross-sectoral approach as opposed to a representative one, so the people who are delivering these services on the ground in places like Tallaght, Whitechurch, Ballymun and other places across the country suffering from deprivation and experiencing drug abuse and all the problems that go with it will not be listened to. There is a saying from the disability rights movement "nothing about us without us" and yet here the people on the ground providing the services are not being included in the development of the implementation of the new national drugs strategy.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the Deputy for raising this very important issue. The national drugs strategy, Reducing Harm Supporting Recovery, sets out the Government's strategy to address the harm caused by substance misuse in Ireland up to 2025. Work is ongoing in the development of a successor strategy. We are working on that and it is to do with everybody. I am making sure that everybody is involved in it.

I am keenly aware that drug and alcohol task forces play a key role in implementing the national drugs strategy at the local level. They assess the extent and nature of the drug problem and initiate appropriate responses, so there is a co-ordinated approach involving all sectors to the problem of substance use in local communities and local communities are consulted in the design and delivery of services. I am very much aware of the work of the task forces and I can assure the Deputy that they will be very much involved in every part of our strategy. I compliment them on the great work they do. Officials in my Department have regular engagement with key representatives from the task force network. This presents an opportunity to discuss policy and operational issues affecting task forces and to hear first hand about issues of concern in local communities. We really know the role they play and are very appreciative of the work they do and the information they give us. This informs decision-making relating to the allocation of funding and provision of services. The Department allocated €161 million under the national drugs strategy in 2023. This represents an increase of 28% on 2017 funding levels at the start of the outgoing strategy so there has been an increase.

In accordance with a population-based allocation model, all new funding for drug services is distributed under the remit of the HSE health regions with service priorities to be identified in consultation with relevant stakeholders, including drug and alcohol task forces. The Department and the HSE provide approximately €28 million in funding to the 24 drug and alcohol task forces. I have met most of the chairs and am working with them because the Department and I appreciate the work they are doing. This funding provides for the operation of approximately 280 drug and alcohol projects across the country.

I remain committed to the strategic priority from the outgoing national drugs strategy to enhance access to and delivery of drug and alcohol services in the community. I am delighted that budgets 2024 and 2025 allocated a total of €10.2 million in new recurring funding for drug services. In 2024, an additional €2.3 million was provided for community-based services, including €1.5 million to sustain existing services and €0.8 million to support the recovery of people from drug dependency and their integration into everyday life. Recently, I announced

details of a further €1.89 million for community-based drug services in 2025 to be distributed through the health regions. This would be through the community services enhancement fund. The money will be used to improve access to services in unserved communities, to promote evidence-based innovations in service design and delivery and to enhance services for people who use stimulant drugs. I have encouraged task forces to apply for this funding. I will be working with all the task forces to apply for this funding. I am fully committed to the provision of drug and alcohol treatment services.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I appreciate the answer but the Minister of State knows as well as I do that it does not actually answer any of the points that I raised. I am hoping that in her two-minute supplementary response the Minister of State will address these issues. I appreciate that she gave the answer she was provided with but this is causing real concern for task forces across the country. I will repeat the basic points I made in my initial contribution. First, there is a cut to core funding of the task forces because no funding is being provided for auto-enrolment. Will the Minister of State clarify if any extra funding is going to be provided to meet the 1.5% increase in costs in the first year? Second, I asked about an additional ongoing funding uplift for the projects to cover the cost of living. Third, I asked about DRIVE, an important national project which was being rolled out across the country but appears to have disappeared in terms of funding. There is still a website talking about how good it is and there is a press release about it but currently, as far as I can tell, there is no funding provided for it.

In addition, I ask the Minister of State to address the exclusion of the local drugs and alcohol task forces from the reference group to support the implementation of the new national drugs strategy. She said that they are an integral part of the delivery of this, but it does not look like they are an integral part when they are not being included in it. I look forward to answers to those questions. I repeat the point that it certainly looks to me, and I think to many other people on the ground, that there is a slow strangulation of these task forces, which are providing vital services on the front line. Applications can be made for things like the community services enhancement fund, but that is not a substitute to core funding. That is what we hear from the task forces all the time. It is not a substitute because they cannot make long-term plans on the basis that they apply for this grant now. They need to be able to have permanent staff and be able to provide a future for people. They need to be able to pay for their pensions, so the key thing is core funding.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I am very much aware of the excellent work the task forces do. They are very much part of what we see when we look at what services are needed within the communities. The Department and I are working with the HSE to include the 24 task forces in everything. We have an all-together group. All of us working together is not about being excluded. I am making sure everyone is included. Anything to do with drugs and families is a huge concern to me in the sense that we are talking about people's lives here. I can assure the Deputy that everybody will be included.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Will they be included in the reference group?

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I will be working with the different groups. The reference group has been set up, but I will continue to meet the chairs of the task forces. This

needs to go back to the task force groups that the Deputy is working with. I can assure the Deputy that I appreciate the work they do.

Auto-enrolment is a whole-of-government approach, working through the Department. It is something the Department is working on. There have been no cuts to funding within my own sector. We got an increase this year.

I launched DRIVE recently. I am so proud of the work it does. As the Deputy said, in Whitechurch 75 families were able to access this. I have made this a priority. I will look into the issue with DRIVE in the Whitechurch area. I say "well done" to those who have done all the work to ensure 75 families have been getting help and support. That is what I am here to do. The Department and I are here to make sure we have those services for our vulnerable families that need that support. As I said, I will come back to the Deputy on that. I assure the Deputy that the new drug strategy is a key priority for me and the Government. I am very mindful that drugs are not just a Dublin issue. Drugs are also a rural issue. This is an issue all around Ireland. With the great work that the 24 task forces do, I have to make sure I look at all services around the country to make sure that the families in need get assistance. I thank the Deputy again for raising this really important issue.

Wastewater Treatment

Deputy Michael Cahill: I welcome the announcement by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Browne, regarding the new initiative that will allow private sector involvement in developing wastewater systems for smaller housing developments of up to 40 homes. This initiative is a crucial step towards addressing the infrastructure deficit in rural areas, particularly in County Kerry, where housing development has been long restricted by a lack of adequate wastewater facilities. By enabling developers to collaborate with Uisce Éireann on low-volume wastewater systems, the Government is providing a much-needed solution that will accelerate housing delivery in areas that are currently stifled by infrastructure bottlenecks. This will help to alleviate some of the pressure on our smaller towns and villages where housing demand has far outpaced the availability of wastewater treatment options. In my own county, over 40 villages do not have any wastewater treatment facilities, while a number of others have been at capacity for 20 or 25 years. Constructed wetlands, as I previously mentioned in the House, are a cheaper and faster way to provide wastewater treatment and they are environmentally friendly. However, this is a positive move.

It is essential to recognise that wastewater infrastructure alone will not solve the broader housing crisis in rural Ireland. In counties like Kerry we also face significant policy challenges that prevent many families from building homes on their own land. The national planning framework and the 2005 sustainable rural housing guidelines currently restrict many rural applicants from building family homes, especially when their land is located outside designated areas for housing development. There is a circle around most towns and villages in Kerry where no development is allowed unless you are actively farming. These are towns and villages that are supposed to be under strong urban pressure. This has to be removed or at the very least, the planning restrictions must be eased. These guidelines, though well intentioned, have often led to unintended consequences in rural communities. Many families who want to build on their own land or buy a site to build a home are unable to do so because of restrictions that were designed for a different era, when rural populations were much smaller. Kerry's rural

communities in particular are struggling with these outdated policies which have hindered housing growth and caused unnecessary hardship for local families and communities.

While the Minister's initiative on wastewater infrastructure is an important part of the puzzle, it must be complemented by a more flexible and forward-thinking approach to planning policy. Local authorities must be given greater discretion to approve developments based on local needs rather than being bound by rigid national guidelines that fail to reflect the realities on the ground. We are in the middle of a housing crisis, as we all know, and we must not lose sight of that. The current planning policy and conditions and the lack of infrastructure is forcing applicants onto our housing lists. Many of these are in a position to build a house and they can afford it, and they can afford also to get a mortgage, but we are forcing them, through these policies, onto our housing lists. The Minister's announcement yesterday is an important step towards addressing the pressing need for infrastructure development in Kerry. It is critical that we continue to look at innovative solutions for wastewater systems that will allow for faster, more sustainable development in rural areas. As I have referenced already, constructed wetlands are a far speedier and cost-effective option. Where necessary, two or three can be constructed, for example. In Beaufort, just outside Killarney, two years ago, €6 million was announced for a sewerage scheme. I was told recently by Uisce Éireann that it will take at least another seven years. That is almost ten years, which is not good enough and needs to be addressed. As I have outlined, we must also address the broader issue of planning restrictions that continue to prevent many families in Kerry and throughout Ireland from building a family home on their own land.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Deputy for raising this important matter. At the House's discretion, I think the Deputy would like to join me in a note of sympathy on the death of his former colleague in Kerry County Council and former mayor of Tralee, Jim Finucane, who was a good friend of mine and I know of the Deputy as well. I am taking this Topical Issue on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Browne.

The recently approved revised national planning framework retains the national policy objective, NPO, of supporting the sustainable development of rural areas. This NPO makes a clear policy distinction between rural areas under urban influence, that is, those areas within the commuter catchment area of cities, towns and centres of employment where there is a need to facilitate rural housing on the basis of demonstrable economic or social need, on the one hand, and rural areas where population levels may be low or declining and rural housing may be facilitated on the basis of siting and design, on the other. In line with the programme for Government commitment to continue to support one-off rural housing, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage is considering how best to proceed with updated rural housing guidelines in the form of a national planning statement on rural housing. This work will replace the current rural housing guidelines and will continue to enable development plans to provide for housing in the countryside based on the considerations detailed in the national planning framework. This will be balanced with the need to manage development in certain areas, including areas around cities and larger towns and environmentally sensitive areas, to avoid overdevelopment.

The development of these new guidelines is a priority for the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, recognising that nationally, rural housing continues to be an important component of overall new housing delivery. The vast majority of one-off houses - well in excess of 90% - are built in rural settings. Notwithstanding the need for updated rural housing guidelines, planning permission has been granted for almost 6,000 one-off houses on average every year since 2020. One-off houses constituted 20% of housing completions over the past five years, with an average of 5,200 completed per annum. It is also important to assure the House that both current and future planning guidelines will continue to enable county development plans to provide for rural housing. Furthermore, the Department is a key participant in the development of the new Our Rural Future policy, which will take effect from 2026, and regularly engages with the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht on housing and the necessary infrastructure to support housing development.

Deputy Michael Cahill: I thank the Minister of State for mentioning my late colleague on Kerry County Council, Jim Finucane. Jim was a great Kerry man. He loved his county and his town of Tralee. He was involved in everything, big and small, in Kerry. I extend my sympathies to his wife and family and his wife's nephew, Councillor Mikey Sheehy. I was deeply shocked and saddened to hear this news late yesterday evening. He will be sadly missed by all. He left an impact on Kerry and that will forever be remembered. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam.

The national planning framework and sustainable rural housing guidelines 2005 were introduced at a time when rural areas had different needs. These policies now need to be reviewed and updated to reflect the current housing crisis and the demands of rural communities. Another area that must be addressed is the restrictions on national primary and secondary roads where unless a person's application for a house is in a section of road with a limit under 60 km/h, then they are out. The Ring of Kerry is an example of this. Other examples include the roads from Castleisland to Tralee, Castleisland to Farranfore, Tralee to Dingle, Tralee to Listowel and on to Tarbert, Killarney to Rathmore, and many others. The Government must reform these national policies to ensure that families in rural Ireland are not locked out of the opportunities to build homes where they live. We need a planning system that can be responsive to the needs of local communities and provide the flexibility to address the housing shortage in a meaningful way.

We must allow modular homes. As I have previously stated in this House, applicants and their families who attend my clinics and whom I meet on a daily basis in their homes would be more than happy with a good-quality modular home. After all, in many cases, it is all they can afford. I plead with the Minister of State to look closely at opening up our county and country to modular homes. It is the only option for many families today, sadly, but they would be more than happy with such a house. In many cases, they are of such a high quality that they would last 60, 70 or 80 years.

While yesterday's announcement is a positive step forward in addressing some of the infrastructure challenges in rural Ireland, we must not lose sight of the need to reform planning policy. The combination of streamlined wastewater solutions and updated planning guidelines will help us deliver the homes that are so desperately needed in Kerry and rural communities across the country. I want to see couples around Killarney, Killorglin, Cahersiveen, Dingle, Kenmare and Castleisland being allowed to build a family home. Fianna Fáil is committed to

ensuring that no community is left behind. We will continue to work towards a more flexible and responsive planning system that allows families to build homes on their own land and contribute to the growth and sustainability of our rural communities. We must provide housing. We must provide the infrastructure, such as constructed wetlands. We must provide affordable housing, social housing and low-cost sites.

Deputy Neale Richmond: The updated rural housing guidelines in the form of a national planning statement will set out relevant planning criteria to be applied in the local authority development plans for rural housing on a consistent basis based on the high-level policy framework set out by the national planning framework and recognising that obligations under European directives and international agreements relating to the management and protection of the environment and adapting to and mitigating climate change has become more central to the operation of the planning system. I assure the House that due care is being taken to ensure that this work will not conflict with the fundamental EU freedoms, will comply with EU environmental legislative requirements and will have dual regard to decisions of the European Court of Justice.

To ensure compliance with all these considerations, the draft will need to be subject to environmental assessment and legal review, following which it is intended that it will be published for a period of public consultation. This is a key part in relation to the asks and reasonable suggestions that the Deputy put forward in order to drive housing provision in County Kerry and beyond. This is the window to make sure that this is submitted and a full part is played. In addition to supporting rural housing, the programme for Government includes a significant number of commitments in relation to the development of housing in rural areas which the Department will address where necessary in conjunction with agencies, such as Uisce Éireann and other Government Departments as required and, indeed, as alluded to by the Deputy. In particular, the Government is committed to the provision of infrastructure to support housing across the country in order to meet housing need and looking at reasonable, realistic and common-sense approaches that can unlock the potential for housing in counties such as Kerry and many others.

Water Services

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Ar an gcéad dul síos, ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil for allowing me to table this Topical Issue today. I declare an interest in that a company I am involved in does some work for Irish Water. No disrespect to the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, but I am disappointed that the Minister or the Minister of State with responsibility is not here. That is the real problem. There is absolutely zero accountability with Irish Water to us public representatives or, never mind us, to the public who depend on this water. Clonmel town - Deputy Murphy was here and he is as well aware as I am - is a chronic situation. I spoke to a company five minutes ago. They have been onto me every week. Sixty-five jobs are about to leave the town because the company cannot use the water. It has to bring in tankers to have clean water to use for its manufacturing product. The jobs are leaving and going to the northeast - just imagine. This is chronic. There are people in charge who do not have a clue and do not seem care.

I meet engineering staff who I talk to, and they understand the water. I meet executives, different executives and more executives. They are bamboozled talking about investments. There are investments going on - we accept that - but there is also damage being done to the water services that have supplied Clonmel for a century and a half. Clonmel, before Irish Water took over and until recently, was using 220 cu. m of water per hour. That was being supplied from Glenary and the reservoir south of the town up on the Comeraghs. That was being supplied by one 10 in. main in around Kilmacomma and one 7 in. main going to the reservoir. They took out the 7 in. main, with a big investment, put in a 9 in. main and increased the water into the reservoir, but they would not listen to anybody and increased the pipes going out. Then what did they do? They sabotaged the 10 in. main, which had been laid about 22 years ago. I remember it well. It could supply so much of the water into the town and now we are depending on the reservoir and the plant. It is under pressure. Every evening it is down, down, down low. It cannot maintain this. I argued this with Irish Water, as did others, prior to it doing this work. The contractors that did it knew it was madness. Imagine that they capped the main going into Kilmacomma, County Waterford. It is a 10 in. PVC main, but other mains have asbestos and suffer from other kinds of poor quality. This is a perfect main. It supplies two thirds of the town, including the hospital. For the first time ever, the hospital ran out of water two weeks ago and it had to get in tankers. This is sinful and shameful that Irish Water can do this kind of blackguarding with no recourse to anybody. It has men there who know the system, but it does not want to engage with them. It has transferred one of them to Carrick-On-Suir. He knows the water intimately, but this is the kind of blackguarding. It does not know and does not want to listen, but it is shocking that it can sabotage the main and people then have dirty water and boil water notices for months in the Ardfinnan regional water scheme. They have been on it since early September. The agency now intends to move on to the Galtee's plant, which it is going to wreck as well. Somebody has to rein it in, make it accountable and not give it copious more billions to put in infrastructure. I welcome the millions that will be provided for infrastructure because we cannot wait for Irish Water. It is unfit for purpose. It is a monstrosity that was created here by the Fine Gael Government and the sooner it is disbanded and taken down, the better. The businesses that are paying a fortune to this company for water are entitled to a service. Households are entitled to have clean drinking water that is reliable and safe, as are the hospitals, doctors' surgeries and other such places.

I am in the centre of the town. In my office we have a lovely water supply from Poulavanogue. It has been there for 200 years. They are going to disconnect that even though the supply flows down into the town and never gives trouble. That is the case at the moment, and it was also the case in the summer and last year when there was trouble all over the town. We had a water supply in the centre of the town. However, they are going to disconnect that. They tell us they cannot upgrade it to meet the standards. It is sabotage and nothing else. If they are not stopped soon, they will drive away employment and jobs and drive people to insanity.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister. The Deputy will appreciate that the supply of public water and the provision of water services in general are matters for Uisce Éireann in the first instance. Uisce Éireann has statutory responsibility for all aspects of water services planning, delivery and operation at national, regional and local level. The Minister has no function regarding the specific Uisce Éireann operations to which the Deputy refers. The Environmental Protection

Agency, in turn, as environmental regulator, is responsible for setting quality standards and enforcing compliance with EU directives and national regulations for the provision of drinking water. As the public health authority, it is the HSE's decision regarding issuing a boil water notice.

To be helpful, the Minister has made inquiries of Uisce Éireann on both the Deputy's behalf and that of Deputy Michael Murphy, who raised the matter directly with him. Uisce Éireann acknowledges that aspects of the water treatment plants and network infrastructure in Clonmel are aged and fragile and the resulting impacts that water supply issues have on businesses and residents in the Clonmel area.

Uisce Éireann is committed to investing significantly in Clonmel to deliver a more robust, resilient water supply that will include upgraded treatment facilities, storage and an upgraded network. Uisce Éireann has confirmed that the delivery of a strategic multimillion euro investment to modernise and upgrade the water assets across the town is well under way. When complete, this will provide local homes and businesses with a safer, more reliable water supply into the future.

Clonmel and the surrounding areas are currently supplied with drinking water from three water treatment plants - Poulavanogue, Glenary and Monroe. The area has been subject to ongoing operational issues impacting homes and businesses, including intermittent boil water notices and unplanned interruptions to supply. While these works are ongoing, Uisce Éireann has been in contact with the customers in question to keep them informed of progress being made to lift the boil water notice. The Uisce Éireann water charges plan sets out a compensation mechanism when water quality is compromised and unfit for human consumption such as when boil water and drinking water restriction notices apply. Business customers who pay charges can follow up with Uisce Éireann as they may be entitled to a rebate. The Department's priority is to ensure that people's health is protected and that adequate water is available for all consumers. We all want to see this notice lifted without undue delay, but only when the HSE and the EPA have confirmed the water supply is safe.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Normally, I welcome investment. They keep telling us there is a lot of investment. There is investment, but normally investment improves the situation. The investment here has done awful damage to the situation. We hear the buzzwords "resilient" and "continuous supply" but it is not resilient. We have had resilient supplies for generations at Poulavanogue - a gravity supply. Now, they must turn around and pump the water back up there. That does not make sense at all. I told the Minister of State we need 220 cu. m per hour and that has been restricted because we moved the 10 in. pipe. They put a 4 in. pipe into a housing estate in County Waterford, Kilmacomma, and they tapped it, which means that it cannot be used any more in an emergency. The hospital was never without water until two weeks ago. Imagine our hospital having to get in tankers. Business are crippled with enough charges and they need a supply of water. They are paying dearly for water in and water out.

This is the situation. There is no Minister. He has no responsibility. It is the EPA and the HSE. The HSE is another body that is unfit for purpose. The EPA has set the standards too high. The problem is mechanisation and computerisation of the plants. No physical persons are going out there when we have heavy downpours of rain and cleaning the screens, which they always did. I refer to Mr. Hartigan, the late P.J. Cullinan and Joe Carrigan, who is still

with us. Many other people went out and cleaned the sieves and the water went. Now we are waiting for a computer to send a message to somebody who may or may not answer his phone. The workers are fatigued and disgusted. The Minister is trying to move them over to Irish Water. There are good workers and excellent county council staff over the country. We could not have better in south Tipperary than the team of people we have. They are being bullied to go into a company in which they no faith. They are ashamed to drive the vans with the names on the side of them. That is what they tell me. They have no intention of going to Irish Water. We will have a worse situation when their expertise, knowledge and capability to fix the mains and look after the network is gone. We are going from bad to worse unless someone takes a hold of this. We will lose jobs and business people. People's health is being damaged, including their mental health, because they have no water and then they have dirty water.

Deputy Neale Richmond: Both our water and wastewater systems require substantial and sustained investment over a number of investment cycles to bring the systems up to the quality and resilience standards required of a modern service to provide for population growth and to build resilience in the face of climate change. The preferred long-term approach for Clonmel, as set out in Uisce Éireann's national water resource plan, is the construction of a new water treatment plant with water sourced by abstraction from the reservoir. The overall plan sets out strategic options to ensure a more secure, reliable and sustainable water supply for almost 370,000 customers in the region over the next 25 years, supporting future growth in population and industrial development.

The updated national development plan has secured record levels of investment of €12.2 billion for the water sector, of which €11.7 billion will be invested by Uisce Éireann to support the delivery of key strategic projects in our cities and regions to deliver the additional water services capacity required for the new housing targets while prioritising public health and safeguarding the environment. This investment will deliver significant improvements in our public water and wastewater services, support improved water supplies right across Ireland, including rural Ireland, and support a range of programmes delivering improved water quality in our rivers, lakes and marine area, making a significant contribution to addressing Ireland's needs.

As per the very specific concerns in relation to Clonmel, as raised by Deputy McGrath and previously by Deputy Michael Murphy, the Minister remains available to be contacted directly to address this issue in tandem with Uisce Éireann, the EPA and the HSE. I thank the Deputy for his intervention this morning.

Driver Test

Deputy Michael Murphy: I thank the Minister of State for taking this important Topical Issue. I raise this issue today because there is an urgent need to finally close the loophole that allows drivers to continue renewing learner permits indefinitely without ever sitting a driving test. Of course, this is not a new problem. It was identified more than a decade ago in the RSA's Road Safety Strategy 2013-2020. Action 33 of the strategy clearly commits to addressing this loophole with a completion date of quarter 1 of 2014. Eleven years later, this loophole still has not been closed.

I acknowledge the Minister's ongoing work, and that of the RSA, in improving waiting times for driving tests. We know that waiting times have been reducing steadily and additional testers have been recruited. This progress deserves recognition. The current waiting time is averaging ten weeks and we need to get it lower. There is a capacity in the system to do 7,200 tests on a weekly basis.

However, the issue of multiple successive learner permits remains a glaring gap in our road safety framework. I acknowledge all those who have lost their lives this year - 147 people. I also think of their families today. I also want to acknowledge the work of PARC, the road safety advocacy group, in particular Susan Gray, with whom I work very closely in my role as Chair of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport.

According to the RSA, more than 56,000 people currently hold three or more learner permits and many of them have never once sat a driving test. The situation is deeply unfair to the majority of learners who do the right thing - those who complete their lessons, prepare properly and take the test when they are ready. It also undermines public confidence in the system. The RSA confirmed before an Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport committee meeting in June that draft regulations have been prepared to deal with this issue and the process with the Department is at final engagement stage. The RSA expects implementation to be imminent. These regulations will, as I understand it, limit renewals to three learner permits and require a person to sit a driving test before a further renewal is granted. I believe that is a fair, balanced and long overdue reform, but it needs to happen now. A related issue, which must be tackled at the same time, is the growing number of no-shows for driving tests. In July and August alone, over 6,000 hours of testers' time were lost because candidates simply did not turn up. In fact, it was 2,000 candidates. That is the equivalent of hundreds of extra tests that could be carried out, tests that people who are desperately waiting could have taken. I understand efforts are being made to reduce waiting times but unless this loophole is closed and the no-show rate is addressed, the system will continue to face unnecessary pressure.

The Department's own statement from earlier this year said that secondary legislation is being prepared to give effect to this change and the RSA is finally finalising its implementation plan. I urge the Minister of State to bring those regulations forward without delay because every month that passes is another month where this loophole continues to undermine road safety and fairness. This reform has been promised for over a decade; it is now time to deliver it.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am very grateful to Deputy Murphy for raising this issue. The Minister of State, Deputy Canney, would also like to thank him for raising this matter and he looks forward to continuing a very close working relationship, given the Deputy's role as Chair of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Transport.

The Department of Transport is committed, under action 7B of the road safety strategy phase 2 action plan, to addressing the issue of learner drivers with multiple successive learner permits and, in particular, those who have never taken a practical test. In 2019, the Road Safety Authority, RSA, made proposals on reducing the number of multiple subsequent learner permit holders. However, with Covid-19, driver testing shut down and was then greatly restricted, leading from 2023 on to significantly longer waiting times for tests. Accordingly, there was not sufficient capacity to cope with the additional initial demand for testing that might arise from these measures. As alluded to by the Deputy already, the average waiting time for a B

car test is now ten weeks, a significant improvement on the 27-week average in April and a return to the service level agreement target. There is now no barrier in testing capacity to the introduction of these changes.

We know, however, from RSA data that a significant number of learners renew their permits for many years without ever taking a test, rather than going through the learning process and becoming qualified drivers. As of September 2025, nearly 63,000 people, or 19% of all learners, have renewed their car permits three or more times. Of those 63,000 learners, 60%, or nearly 38,000, have never taken a driving test.

Under this proposal, a learner, after holding a permit for four years, must take a practical test before renewing their permit. For most learners, this will be for their third permit. After seven years, the learner, to continue learning to drive, begins the process again - theory test, learner permit, 12 essential driver-training lessons and the practical test. A learner permit is not a driver licence. It allows the holder to drive on public roads, accompanied by a qualified driver, while learning to drive. Until a learner completes the process and becomes a qualified driver, they cannot be judged safe to drive unaccompanied on public roads. As learners may not currently drive on public roads unaccompanied, these changes will not affect the independence or mobility of any learners who comply with road traffic law, including older and rural learners.

The learning-to-drive process sets out the knowledge, skill and competency needed to become a licensed driver. These changes will improve road safety by encouraging learners to become qualified drivers and not remain in the learning process. It is considered that seven years is more than enough time for the vast majority of learners to achieve this.

The Minister of State, Deputy Canney, intends to sign the regulations for these changes very shortly. The RSA will then contact those directly affected with information on the changes. The Minister of State remains extremely grateful to the Deputy for raising this in the Chamber this morning.

Deputy Michael Murphy: I thank the Minister of State. I have a reply in front of me and perhaps he could give clarification. It says that the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, signed a regulation yesterday. If that is the case, I welcome that. I also welcome the reply the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, has just given and again acknowledge the Department's efforts to improve driving tests overall. As the Minister of State knows, this issue has been flagged repeatedly by the RSA and by the transport committee, of which, as he said, I am Chair, but more importantly by the public and road victims advocacy groups, in particular Promoting Awareness, Responsibility and Care, PARC. The commitment dates back to 2014 but we still have a situation where tens of thousands of drivers can legally stay on the road without ever proving they are competent to drive. Some of those 60,000 are in receipt of learner permits on more than 20 occasions.

The Minister of State might give clarification on the timeline. As I said, the reply in front of me said the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, signed this yesterday, which I really welcome. Is there any further clarity around any transitional arrangements? I know the RSA published its action plan to reduce waiting times back in May. I suggest now that this action plan is updated with this significant additional load of 60,000. It is really important that we maintain waiting times at around ten weeks and that capacity in the system to do 7,200 tests on a weekly basis.

On the issue of no-shows, can the Minister outline what measures are being considered to reduce the rate of missed tests? As I said, there were 1,000 missed tests in July and another 1,000 in August. I am still waiting for the figures for September. Will it be through improved notifications, rescheduling, flexibility or perhaps penalties for repeated absences? Again, this is not about punishment. It is ensuring that the learner system works as intended, that it promotes good driving habits and that it protects all road users. It is about implementation. I welcome that either the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, signed the regulations yesterday or that the signing of the regulation is imminent. The RSA is ready. It is time to act now.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am very grateful to Deputy Murphy for raising this. From a road safety perspective, it is vital that learners are encouraged to complete the learning-to-drive process and become fully qualified drivers, and that people do not hold learner permits without ever taking a driving test. The RSA has a communication plan to engage with multiple learner permit holders. This will provide clear, targeted information to affected learners setting out the changes and providing information regarding testing options and supports available. It is important to remember that learners must always be accompanied by someone with a current driver licence for the same type of vehicle. They must have held that licence for at least two years and display L plates on the front and rear of the vehicles they are driving.

As stated, it is illegal for anyone with a learner permit to drive on a public road unaccompanied. The following penalties apply to a learner convicted of driving unaccompanied. If you are unaccompanied and the vehicle owner, you are liable to have your vehicle impounded. If you are unaccompanied but not the vehicle owner, the owner faces their vehicle being impounded and being fined up to €1,000. In addition, there are penalty points and fines for unaccompanied learners - up to four penalty points and a fine of up to €160.

In closing, the safety of all road users is a guiding principle behind driver licensing law. Road safety is promoted by ensuring that all learners meet a high standard of ability, attain sufficient driving experience and training and prove their ability to drive safely by passing a driving test. With regard to the two specific queries raised by Deputy Murphy, I will, of course, pass them on to the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and ask him to reply to the Deputy directly.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): That concludes the debate on Topical Issues and we will proceed with Private Members' business.

Decriminalisation of People Who Use Drugs: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

recalls:

- the Labour Party Motion re Drugs Policy and Decriminalisation of the User, agreed by Dáil Éireann on 30th November, 2022;
- the report of the Citizens' Assembly on Drug Use, published in January 2024;

— the interim report of the Oireachtas Special Joint Committee on Drugs Use, published in October 2024; and

— the commitment in the Programme for Government to a health-led response for people found in possession of drugs for personal use, with diversion to health services, and the commitment to work collaboratively on any recommendations issued by the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Drugs Use;

notes that:

— there has been little progress on achieving these objectives, while use of controlled drugs continues to rise;

— since the opening of Ireland's first medically supervised injecting centre in December 2024, nearly a decade after being first proposed and legislated for, there has been no further progress on the provision of safe consumption spaces;

— the use of cocaine has rapidly increased in Ireland, and Health Research Board (HRB) figures show it is now the most common drug treated, accounting for 40 per cent of all treatment cases in 2024, a 7 per cent increase on 2023, and a 250 per cent increase over seven years since 2017;

— the potency of drugs being sold for consumption is increasing, and new synthetic drugs continue to be introduced with unknown long-term health impacts; and

— the European Drug Report 2024: Trends and Developments, showed Ireland had the highest level of drug deaths in Europe in 2020, while HRB figures show 286 drug-induced deaths in Ireland in 2021, and 352 in 2020; and

calls on the Government to:

— designate the forthcoming National Drugs Strategy as an interim strategy, recognising that the final report of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Drugs Use, mandated to respond to the Citizens' Assembly, is due in June 2026;

— establish a dedicated Cabinet Committee on Drugs Use, to prepare a whole-of-Government response to the policy and legislative changes that will be necessary following the final Committee report;

— swiftly move to develop additional fixed and mobile safer consumption spaces, including Mobile Overdose Prevention Centres in our main cities;

— as a matter of absolute urgency, implement a comprehensive health-led response to the possession of drugs for personal use;

— decriminalise the possession of drugs for personal use by repealing Section 3 of the Misuse of Drugs Act, 1977;

— commit to multi-annual funding for harm reduction services, and the resources necessary to support people who use drugs, in accessing health, social and recovery supports;

- ensure appropriate, meaningful, and sustained involvement of people with living and lived experience of drug use in the design, implementation, and evaluation of all drug-related policies and services; and
- ensure regulatory oversight of all drug treatment services, with a commitment to person-centred and evidence-informed support programmes.

Drugs mean different things to different people from the person who has a serious addiction to the recreational user to the families trying to support their teenager to the grandparents having to step in and to the communities suffering with dealing and drug-related and violent intimidation. While each of these groups may have a different perspective, I think all would agree that the current war on drugs has not worked.

As the Minister of State knows, drugs are in every community across this country. They are almost in every bar and sports club and even workplaces. Whether people like it or not, drugs are all around us. Some people get away with using them on a recreational basis whereas others do not, falling into spiral of vicious addiction that robs many of their basic dignity, their health, their family and, sometimes, their lives. The reality that trying to police our way to a drug-free world has not worked. This has been the experiment of the past 50 years here in Ireland and in most developed countries across the world.

This morning, I am proud to be introducing our Private Members' motion on behalf of the Labour Party. I welcome campaigners and advocates from a range of organisations to our Public Gallery. They have been at the coal face for many years, working with those in addiction and those who use drugs and dealing with the failures of our system that we currently have. For many years, the Labour Party has been campaigning for a radically different approach to drugs and to reducing harm in this country. I want to pay particular tribute to my colleague, Aodhán Ó Ríordáin, for his pioneering campaigning on this-----

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Hear, hear.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: -----often when it was not popular to be talking about it.

As a proud TD for Dublin Central and the communities of Dublin Central, it is unconscionable to me that we have people dying in our streets and in our communities from drugs overdoses and that Ireland has one of the highest number of drug-induced deaths when compared with every other country across the European Union. To me, it is the antithesis of our Republic and our values to respect the dignity of every individual that people are shamed and stigmatised into not seeking and getting the help and support they need. Addiction must be recognised for what it is - not a criminal justice problem, but a social and health need. This is not some perceived stigma. It is very real. It is real when mothers with an addiction go to ground and hide away for fear that their children will be taken away from them; it is real when we hear from young people of their fears of lifelong convictions if they seek help; it is real when people across the greater Leinster area have to travel to Dublin for opiate stabilisation programmes provided by a small number of GPs, and indeed that happens right across the country; and it is real when I look at the people in my community and the communities across Dublin Central - across Dublin 1, 3, 7 and 9 - who have been ravaged for years by deprivation, poverty and trauma and who see no hope, no future and no opportunity.

That is why we are passionate about introducing a comprehensive health-led approach for drug use in this country, and that is why we feel so strongly that decriminalisation of the drug user has to be a crucial part of that process. The powerful work of the citizens' assembly made clear that decriminalisation was one of three parts in moving to a comprehensive health-led approach alongside health diversion and dissuasive sanctions. My question to Minister of State and Government this morning is: is this Government committed to decriminalisation of the drug user? Is it committed to implementing the full intent of the citizens' assembly report to this Oireachtas? To date, it is not clear that it is. As Mr. Paul Reid powerfully told us last year when he appeared before our Oireachtas joint committee on drugs reform, the members of the citizens' assembly were stunned by the length of time it has taken to introduce the most modest of changes to drug policy, and that commitments made back in 2017 - almost a decade ago - on a health diversion approach are still not implemented.

Now, in 2025, we have those clear recommendations from the citizens' assembly. We have detailed recommendations from the Oireachtas joint committee on drugs reform, of which I was privileged to be part in the previous Oireachtas, yet we see them effectively ignored in the programme for Government. There is not a single mention of decriminalisation. All this year, we have been hearing that we are finally going to get a health diversion scheme but we still have no detail and, crucially, we have no clear sense of whether decriminalisation is part of a future plan. We need the Minister of State to be straight with us because if the health diversion approach is as far as this Government is preparing to go, then she needs to tell us. She needs to tell everybody in the Gallery, and she needs to make it known because there is an expectation that decriminalisation should and must happen in this country. I want to say to her that I do not believe a health diversion approach will work. The citizens' assembly clearly rejected that approach. We know from the experience of Portugal and many other countries that a halfway house will not work because as long as gardaí remain involved in stop-and-search operations and spending precious Garda hours prosecuting personal possession in actions that are corrosive to building good community relations, we will make no progress towards a comprehensive health-led approach.

I would like now for us to be in a conversation about how we do decriminalisation in Ireland. How do we make it work for individuals and for their communities? That is the work of the Oireachtas joint committee on drug reform that is currently meeting and that will report next June. However, everything that we have heard from Government this year makes me feel that we are going backwards, not forwards. The reality - the beauty for Ireland - is that there are so many lessons we can learn from the many countries that have adopted decriminalisation, from Portugal to Switzerland to Vancouver and the failures in Canada as to what worked well and what did not. We know from the work of the previous Oireachtas joint committee and from the current work, and we need to build on that, that there should be no legal limit for personal possession. To introduce one would be to undermine the very process of taking away the judgment, profiling and targeting of those who use drugs.

Decriminalisation has to be accompanied by a dramatic increase in investment into services. Our public spaces must remain public and safe for everyone to use. We do not accept that large groups should be consuming alcohol in public and the same should apply to drugs. I am very conscious that there are so many residents in this city and in communities across the country who are dealing with the impact of dealing on their doorsteps, drug consumption in back lanes and on our streets and all that goes with that. The thing is, however, that those buying and

consuming are also suffering a huge shortage of dignity and a lack of safety. That is why we have to have the safe injection centre in Merchants Quay made permanent. That is why we need to have safe consumption centres rolled out in Cork, Limerick and all those other major urban areas. The reality now, of course, is that drug consumption is no longer predominantly about injecting; it is about smoking, and we need to incorporate safe smoking facilities in the future. We know Merchants Quay saved something like 65 lives in the first six months of this year. That is life-changing to those individuals and that needs to be rolled out across the country.

In just over a year, we will be marking 30 years since the establishment of the drug and alcohol task forces in this country, a groundbreaking initiative introduced by then Minister, Pat Rabbitte. They have been the backbone of organising service provision and identifying local need in that time. I am proud to be a member of the north inner city drug and alcohol task force, under the great work of Dr. Austin O'Carroll and Brian O'Reilly. However, it is important to say there are very serious concerns about the Department's attitude to the task forces and the groups working at the coalface, a cut in the most recent budget to the task forces and the exclusion of organisations from the steering group on the new national drugs strategy. That is not how it should be done.

To its credit, the Department has recognised the need for investment. It is wonderful that it backed the need for the addiction treatment facility in Usher's Island to be built last year and that €37 million of taxpayers' money went into this wonderful 100-bed facility. However, it is unconscionable and shameful that this Government is leaving 37 beds empty this winter for the sake of a small amount of money that could save lives. I ask the Minister of State to make that direct intervention to ensure the Simon Community facility on Usher's Island, which helps those in addiction and who are homeless, get the care and services they need.

To the future, we know what a health approach looks like. We need to make sure that naloxone is available across our communities and that families and pharmacists can easily and readily administer it. We need to make sure testing is widely available. At music festivals during the summer, we saw the HSE promote that, and that was wonderful, but we need to ensure that is much more widely available. In Paris and in other cities across Europe, people can walk in with their drugs - they do not know the potency of them - and get them tested. We know we need to have much greater investment into harm reduction and recovery.

I pay tribute to the incredible work being done in the communities in my constituency and across the country, to SAIL, which is celebrating 30 years of its existence this morning, and to the other organisations that work day in, day out for those who use drugs and who are in addiction. They are often not properly recognised and do not get the resources they need. They need to be supported to ensure those who need help get it.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I commend Deputy Marie Sherlock on proposing this important motion and pay tribute to our colleague, Aodhán Ó Ríordáin MEP, who has led on decriminalisation for so long. I welcome campaigners and students to the Public Gallery and I thank them for their support on this.

It is three years since Labour brought forward a motion on decriminalisation in November 2022. The Government's response then was to give it time. It has had lots of time – three years. In that time, 30,000 people will have been arrested for personal drug use. We have seen

thousands of overdoses, hundreds of deaths and families, communities and individuals behind those figures, trapped in cycles of addiction and stigma.

I practised as a criminal defence barrister for many years. I represented people who were charged and prosecuted for possession of small quantities of drugs. That experience convinced me our system is broken. People are stigmatised and not supported through addiction and people's lives have been changed irrevocably by criminalisation and yet the last major policy breakthrough was brought about when Aodhán Ó Ríordáin was Minister and who successfully legislated for safe consumption areas. The long-promised first medically supervised injecting centre finally opened in December 2024 in Dublin, nearly a decade after Aodhán's initiative. However, as our new motion notes, no further progress has been made on additional safe consumption spaces or on a change in policy. Yet, more and more people are seeking treatment for problem drug use, new synthetic substances are emerging and the 2024 European Drug Report shows Ireland's rate of drug deaths is among the very highest in the EU.

We need change and we need an evidence-based policy. We need to look at other countries like Portugal where they redirected users from the courts to the health services and reduced overdose deaths. We need to look at the blueprint for reform offered in this motion. We call for a dedicated Cabinet committee on drugs use, for a comprehensive health-led response to possession and, crucially, for the decriminalisation of people found with drugs for personal use through repeal of section 3 of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1997. We want to see funding for harm-reduction services and genuine involvement of people with lived experience.

These are not radical ideas; they are the natural continuation of what health experts, families and communities affected have been saying for decades. Our healthcare system already embraces elements of harm reduction, so we need to move our criminal justice system. On the one hand, the State acknowledges the illness of addiction but on the other hand endorses sending people to prisons where drug use is rife. We are telling people to use safely on the one hand and then criminalising them for doing so on the other.

Decriminalisation is about saving lives. The Government's response was that we should wait. We have waited long enough. It is time to act on the evidence and change the law; healthcare, not handcuffs.

Deputy Ged Nash: My colleague and Labour MEP for Dublin, Aodhán Ó Ríordáin, has led the charge - as has rightly been said - on this issue in Ireland for a number of years now and he is continuing to lead the way in Europe.

The most obvious example to follow in a European context is that of Portugal. One thing is crystal clear from the Portuguese example, that is, moving to a health-based and approach away from punishment, reduces serious harms from drug use. Portugal has more than 20 years' experience under its belt and in the first two decades of this approach, it saw deaths from drug use and incidents of HIV tumble, as well as a fall in prison the population. In 1999, it saw 369 people lose their lives due to overdose. By 2016, that figure had tumbled to just 30. HIV diagnoses due to drug injection also fell dramatically over the same period. In 2000, there were 907 such diagnoses, falling to just 18 in 2017.

Another benefit to this approach to drug use will be to reduce the pressure on prison places. As long as the change in policy is matched by multi-annual resourcing of health and addiction

services and supports for people who use drugs, we have a chance here to take a transformational approach to drug use and make a meaningful reduction in the harm caused by drugs.

The endless Garda hours used chasing people who use drugs can be turned on those who profit from the misery caused by the sale and trafficking of drugs. The citizens' assembly has done tremendous work on this issue. Recommendation 17 from its report argues for the introduction of a “comprehensive health-led response to possession of drugs for personal use.” While possession of controlled drugs would remain illegal, people found in possession of illicit drugs for personal uses would be afforded “extensive opportunities to engage voluntarily with health-led services”, the citizens' assembly recommendation explained.

For this policy to work, the citizens' assembly laid out the supports that need to be in place in the following recommendation, that is, recommendation 18. It says very clearly:

Government should allocate significant additional funding on a multi-annual basis to drugs services across the statutory, community and voluntary sectors, to address existing service gaps, including in the provision of community-based and residential treatment services, to support the implementation of the recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly.

Quite frankly, this has not been the case and has not been so for successive governments. Without that funding, any policy change will be set up to fail. The services are already in place on the ground in many communities but by God they are stretched. They need certainty and multi-annual funding. Services like Red Door in my hometown of Drogheda provide vital support to those in addiction and are ready - they stand ready, willing and able - to do more if given the resources to do so and if we can introduce the kind of transformational change we need in drugs policy in this country to support people who need it most.

Deputy Alan Kelly: We need a comprehensive new plan on drug use in this country. The dial has not moved in a number of years. Many of us have come on a journey over the past 20 years with regard to how we deal with this issue, myself included. I acknowledge my colleague, Aodhán Ó Ríordáin, who has certainly influenced me and I would say many others on this issue. His interventions as a former Minister are the interventions we are still looking at today. We finally have a centre for consumption here in Dublin but nowhere else in Ireland.

What has happened in the past is simply not enough. We need a complete dial change in relation to this issue and Government needs to be brave and make those changes. My colleagues have outlined them. We need a mature strategy on this. It is important to say that when we come to the issue of drug use, decriminalisation does not mean legalisation. Once we cross that line as a Legislature, then we can collectively work together. That is the most important line many people need to get their heads around.

Criminal-based and justice-based actions in relation to this have not worked. This needs to be health-led. It is obvious now. With 10,000 people arrested every year for having drugs on them for personal consumption reasons, the number of man hours being taken up for An Garda Síochána is absolutely crazy. We need a policy change, and the Government needs to be brave about it. I raise the volume of drug-induced deaths purely because people are often so helpless that they will not seek help. That is the bottom line. There is a stigma. There is a lack of pathways. There is a lack of empathy in some cases. We need an holistic approach across

justice, across health and across community to help people. What has gone on in the past has failed. We have to acknowledge that as a country. I hope the Minister of State will be brave enough to come along with us. As a party we do not have to own this. We are just so empathetic on this issue we have to use our Private Members' time to push this forward as something that, as a country, we need deal with.

Finally, I want to address the issue of cocaine use. Cocaine use in this country at the moment is at an all-time crisis. We need a plan, as a country, not just on the criminal side and not just dealing with those bringing cocaine into this country but as a society we need to educate young people. I have gone to too many meetings at sporting clubs and met too many young people, and friends and neighbours of mine, who have become addicted to cocaine because of a lifestyle choice. In many cases these are middle class people who are purchasing this drug. I say as Chair of the sports committee that collectively as a society and all sporting organisations need to say enough is enough because it is in every sporting organisation in this country. Many young people think taking cocaine means they do take on calories, they do not have pints and do not drink as much, they do not have hangovers, etc. However, there are additional costs later on in life caused by the addiction I have seen in young people in my club, clubs around me and all over this country. We need a plan, particularly being led by sporting organisations, to actually address this.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I am delighted to inform the House on recent developments and achievements on drug policy. The Government will not oppose the motion. It is not helpful to get into a political dispute about drugs policy. It is important not to argue over something that affects the lives of so many. As new Minister of State, I assure Members that I am very mindful that we are talking about families and people's lives. It is my absolute aim to make sure I work with the Department and other Members to work together on this. The previous Government set up the Citizens' Assembly on Drugs Use, and the Joint Committee on Drugs Use has been re-established in this term. I have engaged with the Seanad and next week I will meet with the joint committee, and I am looking forward to that. I intend to continue to work with all stakeholders to develop the next drugs strategy. It is very important for me that all of us work together to achieve this. This is not just a Dublin issue; this is a countrywide issue. I have seen it myself since becoming a Minister of State.

I would like to reaffirm the Government's commitment to a health-led approach to drug use. People experiencing problematic drugs should be met with compassion, dignity, and care. I am very mindful of that. The health-led approach to drug use is set out in the national drugs strategy and the Government priority is to develop a successor strategy to cover the period 2026 to 2029. The work on a successor strategy will advance and I have established a time-bound, independently chaired steering group to provide oversight, guidance and expert advice in the drafting of the strategy. I have asked the group to complete their work and present a draft strategy for consideration by December 2025. That is my aim. We can see how important this is. This is what I have to do. As Deputy Kelly said, "be brave". I need to be brave now. I need to have the first draft of this strategy by December. That is what I want as Minister of State.

The steering group is a technical group brought together to distil the citizens' assembly recommendations, independent evaluation and stakeholder consultations into a comprehensive

successor national drugs strategy. The strategy will guide the development and delivery of a health-led approach to drugs over the next four years. The membership is drawn from Departments, associated agencies and people with lived experience. I am very mindful that we work with people with lived experience and clinical and research expertise. The steering group is supported by a reference group of stakeholders who compliment the technical expertise, ensuring the new strategy is informed by real-world knowledge and lived experience. That is what I am going on now. I totally agree with Members that it is all about families and people with lived experience. The membership is drawn from civil society, task forces, community-based service providers and family support services from around the country. A significant proportion have lived and living experience of drugs. Both groups are well advanced in their work and are on track to deliver the draft strategy by December 2025. I am committed to publishing the successor drugs strategy in early 2026 and I am determined to avoid delays, as was emphasized by the chairs of the citizens' assembly and the joint committees.

The Government allocated over €300 million on drug-related public expenditure in 2023, including €160 million on drug services. This represents an increase of 28% on 2017 funding levels. A further €4.2 million and 34 posts for drug services and initiatives was secured in budget 2025. Additional investment of €11 million was secured in budget 2026 to address gaps in service provision. I am very mindful about services as well. It is very important that we have the services for anybody that needs to access services around the whole country. This funding will enhance access to and delivery of drug services in the community. It will also strengthen the prevention of drug use among children and young people and minimise the harms of drug use for families and communities.

In developing the new strategy, we must consider the wide prevalence of problem drug use across society and provide appropriate services to meet the health and social needs of the diverse population groups who use drugs. A record figure of 13,295 cases were treated for problem drug use in 2024. This represents a 50% increase in the capacity of treatment places since 2017 and reflects our ongoing investment in expanding services. Demand for drug treatment is across all regions of the country, all age groups, men and women, people with children and those without, and those who are unemployed as well those in employment. We are looking across all the sectors. A supervised injecting facility opened in Dublin city in December 2024. I am delighted that during its first seven months, staff have assisted over 1000 clients and there have been over 120 interventions to prevent a fatal overdose. I have seen how the facility is helping to save lives. The facility will be evaluated over the 18-month pilot phase, and this will inform decisions about the continuation of the Dublin facility and the development of facilities in other regions. We are looking at that too.

The programme for Government commits to divert those found in possession of drugs for personal use to health services. This will be done through the health diversion scheme. This scheme embodies the health-led approach to drugs and it will lead to better outcomes for people and communities. Along with the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, I have agreed that the scheme will start on an administrative basis. While the possession of controlled drugs will remain illegal, people with drugs for personal use will be given the opportunity to engage voluntarily with healthcare services. Health and well-being are something I am mindful of. An Garda Síochána and the Director of Public Prosecutions are finalising the operational details. Once we have sign-off, the scheme will start at a national level. The scheme is in line with the recommendation of the citizens' assembly.

I am very aware of the loss and grief felt by the families who have lost loved ones to drug overdose. Each life lost is one too many. The risk of drug overdose deaths can be reduced further by getting people into drug treatment and increasing access to Naloxone, which is the antidote for opioid-related overdose. My Department is working closely with the HSE to increase awareness and accessibility of Naloxone. That is really one of our key issues going forward. It is important that this lifesaving medication is made more accessible to support workers, peers, and family members.

In 2024, 1,758 people participated in naloxone administration training and 6,944 units of naloxone were supplied by the HSE to services. I reaffirm my intention to publish as soon as possible the successor national drugs strategy covering the period from 2026 to 2029, accompanied by a two-year action plan. I will have an action plan every two years. That will be worked with all of us. There are several more actions we need to take. Drugs are changing all the time. This is a changing world. All of us in this House are very mindful of that. We cannot be complacent about the harms and dangers associated with illicit drug use and a volatile drugs market. It is imperative that we have a drugs strategy relevant to the times we live in that responds to the continuing health and societal problems presented by established and new illicit drugs; it is always changing. We also need to align our drugs strategy with the forthcoming EU drugs strategy and to reflect the urgency given to drugs by the Citizens' Assembly on Drugs Use. It is my intention to continue to engage with the Oireachtas, including the Joint Committee on Drug Use, in implementing the successor strategy so that there is cross-party support for the strategy.

I am glad to be here. As I said, we are not opposing this motion. All of us need to work together. Drugs are a huge challenge across the whole country. It requires all of us working together through services and the drugs task force which was brought up earlier as a Topical Issue. We have 24 drug task forces around the country which do excellent work and are on the ground in communities and the different agencies attached. My aim as Minister of State is to work together to get the solutions, get the strategy right and get the services right for those who need them. That is what I intend to do.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I thank the Minister of State for that response. I am glad she acknowledged we need a step change in how we treat problematic drug users. I represent Limerick city, which the Minister of State knows well. Our city has been absolutely destroyed by drugs, whether the drug barons who prey on vulnerable communities or the crack cocaine epidemic that has ripped through our city. Limerick is unfortunately the crack cocaine capital of Ireland. It has ravaged so many people, even people I went to school with. When talking about drugs more generally, my colleague, Deputy Kelly, referenced cocaine. I cannot go on a night out without seeing people off their heads on cocaine. In fact, I have been routinely offered cocaine in pubs in my own city of Limerick. You see people filing into cubicles. They are not going in there to use the bathroom. I have even seen the effects of problematic cocaine use knock on my own front door. It destroys everything. It destroys people financially, relationally and sexually. Crack cocaine is the most evil and insidious of all drugs. Limerick, as I said, has unfortunately become the crack cocaine capital of Ireland. People travel to Limerick because the crack is cheap and they can buy it in some of the poorest estates in this entire country. There is a house in St. Mary's Park that the locals refer to as Aldi because people are bussed in from outside Limerick. We have another issue because we have an epidemic of sex work. Crack

cocaine is so addictive that women are forced into sex work to pay for it. Now, we have an issue with a lot of pregnancies resulting from that.

When it comes to treatment, bar the 30 detox beds in Bruree, people are often forced to travel to Dublin, Carlow or Athy, if they are lucky. When they finish treatment, they are often back into the 9 p.m. to 9 a.m. hostel in Limerick and the vicious cycle begins again. Drug use and problematic drug use are changing. The level of poly drug use in Limerick is incredibly worrying. There are certain treatment centres you cannot get into if you are in benzos, methadone, etc. That needs to be radically changed. That change starts with language. Calling sick, vulnerable people the j-word or "druggies" should not be considered acceptable. This comes from social inequality across the board. We have no psychiatric service in Limerick Prison. We had 92 drug overdoses in our prison system last year. While we have a recovery worker and a dual diagnosis team, we need much more. People from the most deprived areas are disproportionately impacted by this. We need an all-of-government approach to this issue. That starts with taking it out of the courts and into the healthcare system. Nearly 100 people in our prison system nearly died last year due to problematic drug use. That is shocking. It says clearly where we are going wrong.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: Today, the Labour Party is calling for the urgent adoption of a comprehensive public health approach to the decriminalisation of possession of drugs for personal use and the development of safer consumption spaces. I thank my party colleague, Aodhán Ó Ríordáin, for his work over the past number of years. I thank the Minister of State for not opposing this motion. The purpose of this motion is clear - to highlight the failure of Ireland's current drugs policy, to see through the work of the citizens' assembly and, most importantly, to seek decriminalisation of people who use drugs. We have to be honest about drugs and addiction in Ireland. Drugs are in wide use in every community and, as referenced by a number of my colleagues, in every income bracket. This is not an issue confined to certain areas or disadvantaged communities. It is a nationwide issue and we need to change our approach. Criminalising the person has not worked. It has not reduced drug use. It has not reduced drug harm. Instead, it has trapped people in cycles of stigma, poverty and punishment. Current policy is a barrier to treatment, to rehabilitation and to people moving on with their lives. It is not grounded in evidence or respect for human dignity.

When we talk about people who use drugs in our communities, too often the conversation starts with stigma and ends with punishment. The evidence from most other, progressive European countries tells us something different. It tells us that criminalisation does not solve the problem; it just drives people into further harm, stigma and isolation. When someone struggles with alcohol or gambling, we offer treatment and support but when it is drugs, we reach for punishment. That double standard has to end. In countries that have taken a different path, decriminalised possession for personal use and focused on a holistic approach, people are no longer dragged through the courts. Instead, they are referred to health services and social support panels. The results speak for themselves - drug-related deaths have dropped dramatically, rates of serious addiction have fallen and crime has dropped which in itself frees up the criminal justice system. People have rebuilt their lives without fear of being branded a criminal. This has been achieved alongside safe consumption spaces, heroin-assisted treatments and strong social supports. Crucially, overall drug use did not rise.

Decriminalisation makes practical sense. It can reduce pressure on the courts, the Garda and our prison system. It was reported last month that it costs €99,000 to house a prisoner for a year. The current approach does not work. We know that addiction is not a choice, but recovery can be an option if we redirect services and funding into treatment and community supports. This would be a far better use of public money. We have an opportunity to build a model rooted in public health, housing, education and social support that saves lives instead of wasting them in courtrooms and prisons. Right now, too many people are caught in a revolving door in and out of prison and never given a real chance to recover. That cycle has to end but only if we have the courage to change our approach and to treat drug use as a health issue instead of a handcuffs issue. This motion is, above all, is about people.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank my colleague, Deputy Sherlock, for bringing forward this important motion. I also acknowledge our MEP, Aodhán Ó Ríordáin, for his considerable work. He has brought many of us in the Labour Party on a journey in relation to drug education and its effects on society. It is an education we can all be part of and need to be part of. The Minister of State mentioned in her remarks a political dispute on the drugs issue. We cannot have a political dispute on a drugs issue. We must all, as she said, work together because this is about people and families. That is the language we must start using when talking about a drugs strategy. As has been said by many of my colleagues, decriminalisation of drugs for personal use puts the person in addiction at the centre and offers opportunities for recovery. That is the most important item we can discuss today. The Minister is right. Drug addiction, which used to be an urban issue, is now in every corner of this country. In every small village, every rural area and every small town in this country, drug addiction is an issue. There is absolutely no doubt about that and it is communities that are being affected day in, day out. We need to take a health-led approach to this but we also need to take a whole-of-society approach. It was my colleague, Deputy Kelly, who spoke about sporting clubs and I want to concentrate on that as well for a moment. I am glad that he, as committee chair, will lead on this because we have to have a discussion in our sports clubs about addiction. Too many of our athletes are suffering from drug addiction. It is only when, as another colleague of mine said, you are in a pub, you see it seems easier now to get your fix than it is to get a takeaway in most of these places. It is just a matter of a phone call and then that addiction is fed. That is a problem.

It is also very important to talk about services today. The Minister will be aware, being next door to us in Athy in Kildare, that I am a director of Willow Community Counselling Services, which is just up the road from her. However, the problem with Willow Community Counselling Services is that we are going cap in hand begging for funding. Sharon Malloy is doing absolutely tremendous work there and yet we are getting knocked back every time we go looking for funding. When it comes to our meetings, which we have regularly, the one topic is funding.

In the time I have left, I also want to mention Cuan Mhuire and Nicola Kelly and Sr. Consilio, who do great work. That is the type of service we need to have because they give people hope. These services are in every village and every town and community groups are coming together now to support those with addiction.

We must treat this as a human story and we must use the language that these are our brothers, our sisters, our cousins, our aunts and our uncles. That is the new strategy to which we must talk when we are talking about drug strategy in this country.

Deputy Ann Graves: In the last Dáil, the Government established the Joint Committee on Drugs Use. The focus was to implement the findings of the Citizens' Assembly on Drugs Use. The work of the joint committee is ongoing and has yet to be completed, making this motion somewhat premature. Sinn Féin, however, will not oppose the motion but both Government and Opposition must allow the committee to do its work without interference.

Sinn Féin supports a comprehensive health-led response to drug use. This ensures the State responds to drug use as a health issue and not a criminal issue. Sinn Féin policy does not align with the repealing of section 3 of the Misuse of Drugs Act, however, those caught with drugs for personal use should be offered every opportunity to engage with health-led services. This will keep people out of the criminal justice system. The establishment of the citizens' assembly was a major step in the right direction. The assembly allowed people to engage with experts, families, services and learn about international best practice. The final report was testament to people's commitment to an important and sensitive issue. Out of the assembly came the establishment of the joint committee. The committee was empowered under the terms of reference to consider the report of the Citizens' Assembly on Drugs Use and provide a response to the subject matter of the report, including a reasoned response to each of the 36 recommendations contained in the report. The recommendations are varied. They include calling on the Government to prioritise drug misuse, a whole-of-government response tackling the drug crisis and demanding that the Government must include key stakeholders when developing policy. However, when it came to the issue of responding to personal drug use, the assembly was crystal clear. It voted for a comprehensive health-led approach to drug use.

A comprehensive health-led response diverts people towards health services and away from the criminal system. This response will greatly reduce or eliminate prospects of people being charged and convicted. The citizens' assembly recommendation of a comprehensive health-led response is focused on decriminalisation, diversion and dissuasion. It would ensure the State response to drug use as a health issue and not a criminal issue. Controlled drugs would remain illegal but those caught with drugs would be offered extensive opportunity to engage with health-led services. This is not to be confused with legalisation. The importation, sale, distribution and possession of a controlled substance would remain illegal.

Reports early in the year confirmed that the Government would be introducing a long-awaited diversion scheme for people caught with drugs. This scheme does not in any way reflect the comprehensive health-led approach to drug use agreed by the citizens' assembly. The announcement is an attempt by the Department of justice to claw back control of drugs rather than allowing it become a public health issue. This will undermine the work being done by the joint committee, which is yet to complete its work. The three strikes and you are out referral system fails to recognise the complex and long waiting lists for residential treatment. A simple referral by a judge will not always allow someone gain access to the service they need. Imposing an arbitrary number of referrals to treatment services fails to recognise the causes and complexity of addiction. It also fails to recognise that it often takes several attempts at rehabilitation before somebody addicted to drugs will get into recovery.

While acknowledging that every family may be affected by drug addiction, it does not affect every family or community in the same way. It moves from drug addiction to a drug crisis when playgrounds become open drug markets, when the school gates becomes sites of drug violence and when streets are held to ransom by violence and lack of policing. The issue is compounded by drug-related intimidation, waiting lists, lack of mental health services and poor housing conditions. Each of these issues highlights the total failure of governments to adequately respond to the drug crisis.

Tackling the causes and consequences of the drugs crisis must be a political priority. Consecutive governments have allowed it to slip down the agenda and that must, and can, change. We need a whole-of-government approach to prepare and implement policies that tackle the causes and consequences of Ireland's drug crisis. The national drug strategy must reflect the work of the Joint Committee on Drugs Use and be informed by service users and providers. While Sinn Féin will not oppose this motion, it is pre-emptive of the outcome of the work of the committee.

Deputy Thomas Gould: In the last Dáil, I was very honoured to be the party spokesperson on addiction, recovery and well-being. It was a privilege for me to meet all the different groups and organisations who were working at the front line, supporting people in recovery and those in the throws of addiction and supporting their families. I commend my colleague, Deputy Graves, who has taken over this role now. She has hit the ground running and is doing a huge amount of work. A huge amount of work is needed here, especially for those who are in the throws of addiction, for those who are trying to start the recovery journey and for those who are well into that journey.

The Minister has to be honest as to the attitude of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael over the years. We saw it in the Chamber in the last Dáil. There were some appalling and stigmatising comments about people who are in the throws of addiction. Even the last Minister, when I made the point that at least one person with lived experience of gambling should be on the gambling board, said they would not be able for it or that it would be too challenging for them. How patronising is that for a person who has the lived experience. The thing here is that we need to listen to people with the lived experience about what they have gone through.

The only promise the Government has made is in relation to the citizens' assembly. This report had detailed recommendations. Not all were agreed and more work was needed. That is now what the Joint Committee on Drugs Use is doing. We need to support that work and to tease out these issues because we have a crisis. I know from personal experience of my own family members and friends. I have friends and family members who have died. I am not going to go into it here but I get it. I understand it. It comes from trauma, from poverty and from a lack of services and supports. There needs to be a fundamental change by this Government when it comes to funding task forces, drugs services and rehabilitation services, supporting people in recovery and how it perceives people in addiction. If you walk the streets of any city or town, or even some villages, you will see people in the throes of it. People walk past them and do not even look at them. It is not like they are not human beings. Every one of them has a family, their own story and their own voice and we have to support them. One of the really important bits of work that was done in the committee in the last Dáil was that we heard from experts from Portugal, America and British Columbia. In British Columbia they were very forward-thinking in relation to decriminalisation, but after 15 months they had to

row back because suddenly people were taking drugs in playgrounds, in parks and on the streets. There was a free-for-all. We need to get these experts in. I am thinking of the work that has been done in Portugal. Our joint committee on drugs can get all these experts in and come up with a plan. We can learn from what has been done in other jurisdictions - both the mistakes made and the good work done – and bring forward a policy.

I will finish on this. We want to work with people. Deputy Kelly said a while ago that the Labour Party Members are bringing this forward because they think it is a really important piece of work. I think the vast majority of us feel we can work together on this but there has to be an open agenda and an open attitude to it.

Deputy Mark Ward: I thank the Labour Party for bringing forward this really important motion. I apologise to Deputy Sherlock for interrupting her photo opportunity earlier as that was not my intention.

What underlies addiction is poverty, and a symptom of poverty is trauma and a symptom of trauma is addiction. It is a circle that keeps going around. I am from north Clondalkin. I grew up there in the eighties. It was a time of economic hardship across the country but areas like mine suffered the most. We grew up in poverty. This is not me standing up and saying "poor me", because when I say I grew up in poverty I did not know it because everybody around me was experiencing the same thing. We simply did not know any better. What we did know was not to ask our parents for too much because it simply was not there. North Clondalkin is an area of high disadvantage. I have seen the devastation drugs have inflicted in my area since I was a child. I live in the community still and I have seen the intergenerational addiction and trauma within families. This trauma, as I said, comes from poverty but also from parents of my friends being products of the industrial schools, the Magdalen laundries and the mother and baby homes. I can speak to this from personal experience because my father was sent to work in the Magdalen laundries at the age of 12. He is 72 now and is only starting to speak about it. This is the trauma people experienced and he knows I am speaking about this today. This trauma was unwittingly passed down by parents to the next generation.

When I say "area of high disadvantage" I am speaking about the government policies of the time, like putting people from the same socioeconomic background into the same area at the same time without having the necessary infrastructure there. When I say we were disadvantaged and in poverty we were not in poverty because of a lack of character or of strength, because the people from my area – my parents, neighbours and friends – had to get out and fight for every single thing our area had, whether that is schools, something simple like buses, health centres and everything else. My very first interaction with activism was fighting for a school in my area. We were sent to a school that was deemed inappropriate for other pupils in a more affluent part of the constituency but it was okay for the students of Greenfort, Shancastle and Harelawn to attend that school. That is what you are being put against. You had to fight that all the time. A lot of my family, friends and neighbours succumbed to addiction over the years. That is just a simple fact of things. While you cannot physically change the environment you are living in people look for alternatives and one of the alternatives they had to was to look at drugs, because they give people the ability to self-soothe and give calm to an anxious inner world. It is called getting out of your head for a reason. If you cannot get out of your estate you can get out of your head in a different way without having to move. It stops a problem for that very short time and then that problem turns into addiction.

I have only got half a minute left, which I will use to speak about local services. I have worked for years in front-line addiction services in my area. I do not know how long we have been calling for multiannual funding for. It is so important because it would allow agencies that are dealing with the front line to forward plan to deal with things when they arrive at the door. We knew the crack cocaine problem was an issue long before it was being discussed in this House because the front-line services were seeing it, but they had not got the resources to go out and tackle it. We need multiannual funding. If I could get one thing out of today, it would be that.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion and thank the Labour Party for proposing it. I restate Sinn Féin's support for the recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly on Drugs Use. That report was crystal clear. It said Ireland must adopt a comprehensive health-led response to drug use, one that treats addiction and substance misuse not as a criminal issue or set of criminal issues but as a public health issue. We in Sinn Féin support recommendation 17 of the report, which calls for the introduction of a health-led approach to possession of drugs for personal use. This recommendation represents a major step forward in reforming how the State responds to drug use. It is rooted in compassion, is supported by evidence, is pragmatic and aligns with international best practice which, as Deputy Gould said, we must rely upon the mistakes and successes of.

The Government established the Joint Committee on Drugs Use following the citizens' assembly's report. The focus of that committee is to implement the assembly's findings, especially in relation to a health-led diversion approach. We are actively involved in supporting that process. We want to ensure Ireland moves away from criminalisation and punishment towards prevention, treatment and recovery. A health-led approach means while controlled drugs would remain illegal, people found in possession for personal use would be diverted into health services rather than the criminal justice system. The State would respond to drug use and misuse primarily as a public health issue and this model would ensure those struggling with addiction are met with support and opportunity, not the stigma and criminal records that can further entrench addiction, hamper recovery and have lifelong impacts for them. We also acknowledge the assembly left the detailed legislative and policy design to the Oireachtas, and that work is now under way through the re-established joint committee. I commend my party colleagues for their engagement on that and the leadership they are showing.

The assembly identified key issues we must balance, including health diversion, decriminalisation and dissuasive sanctions. We believe that balance is possible. It will take some work to design but it is work that is under way and needs to continue. To give credit where it is due, the assembly was a vital democratic process. That was very important and the findings bear that out. It brought together experts, families and service users to look at international best practice and to learn from it.

Our policy position is clear. We support the *de facto* approach that has been referenced already. The offence of simple possession should remain in law, but we should have a much more pragmatic response where cautions and health interventions are the order of the day, rather than court appearances and convictions. The Garda caution scheme must be reviewed and modernised. Prison sentences for simple possession should remain technically possible, perhaps, but used only in the most exceptional of circumstances. It should not be the norm and our district courts should not be full to overflowing with these cases. Convictions for

possession should be treated as spent and ultimately expunged. We do not need this following people around for the rest of their days. For those who repeatedly offend, dissuasive sanctions such as restorative justice, community service or diversion programmes are probably the most appropriate avenue. The courts – potentially specialist courts – and professional regulatory bodies should apply these sanctions fairly and proportionately. This is a really important debate. It is something that will continue to happen on Committee Stage but it is something we will need to return to in the House.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Once again we are going to have a lot of agreement in here. I welcome the Labour Party bringing this motion forward from the point of view of having an opportunity to speak, because we do not talk sufficiently about this issue and the impact drug addiction has on our communities. It is welcome that there is an element of people coming around to the health-led, trauma-led, harm reduction methodology that is required for dealing with drug addiction, that we accept it is based on poverty and intergenerational trauma, and that there is an understanding that if we continue doing what we are doing, it is not going to work. The war on drugs, whether carried out by Ronald Reagan or by Donald Trump today, is a failed enterprise.

11 o'clock

Show me your budget and I will tell you what you value. It was said to me previously by someone in the Minister's position that until it is sufficiently important that this issue is at Cabinet, nothing is going to change. We can all mention the really good projects we have in our constituencies such as The Red Door Project, Turas, FASN and MQI. Even homelessness services have to deal with a huge cohort of people who have drug issues but the regional drugs task forces are just about keeping the system going; I would describe it as keeping the engine going with baling twine.

We have not got real in any way on this issue. Drug addiction is everywhere. We all know there is not a bar in operation that does not have a well-functioning toilet facility, and cocaine is everywhere. You just cannot avoid it. I welcome the work that has been done by the GAA and other sporting groups on it, but with all of that and the need to tackle the issue, the fact is that the biggest impact is still in disadvantaged, working class areas. We can walk up and down the streets and we will know who the drug dealers are and the houses they live in. It has gone on for far too long. That is with all the really good work that has been done at times by the Garda and the Criminal Assets Bureau, and we need to see more of that. We need to protect those who fall into addiction and give supports to those families who require them at an early stage. We need to make sure we invest in the likes of The Greentown Project and move people away from criminality in every way we possibly can.

I have also said before that we need a real conversation. It is also about the chaos that impacts on people's lives, the deaths that have occurred, and the drug debt and intimidation that have impacted on a generation of drug addicts' families. We also have to deal with the chaos that is caused to communities. Whether we are talking about Tusla, the Garda, the local council or all those other powers, educational services and everything, the tools and the powers are not there to deal with what is needed in supporting the addict, supporting their family and those communities that are impacted. I ask that we get real and that we have a holistic conversation.

We talk about whole-of-government approaches but we generally do not see them. This is just too costly to individuals and to society in general.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I thank Deputy Sherlock and the Labour Party for bringing forward this motion. The opportunity to discuss decriminalisation can never come too soon. I welcome the opportunity to speak on it today. The motion states that we recall the Citizens' Assembly on Drugs Use, the interim report of the Oireachtas Committee on Drugs Use and the Misuse of Drugs Act. All we are doing is recalling them, because all of these measures, debates and conversations have been had, but the same policies remain largely in place despite the evidence the various initiatives have brought forward. We are stuck remembering promises that have never yet become policy. While successive Governments have talked about a health-led approach, what they have actually been giving us is a criminal justice system pretending to be healthcare policy. Any day of the week at the Circuit Court, there are people facing charges and offences and, in the vast majority of cases, if we could look over that person's life, we would see substance misuse, trauma and a form of substance misuse that is about self-medicating for traumas that may go back generations in some part. Every single day in this country, people of all ages are stopped and searched, charged and shamed, often for having been caught with a small amount of drugs for personal. In reality, that should be a matter for a GP and not a garda.

Since our inception, the Social Democrats have always been clear that if a Government truly believes in a health-led approach, then it is time to act like it. That absolutely starts with the repeal of section 3 of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1977. We cannot have a decriminalisation-lite model subsequent to winning the argument, hopefully, on decriminalisation. Decriminalisation actually means removing the criminal offence of possession for personal use. The citizens' assembly was clear on that, as was the previous Oireachtas committee on drug use. Everything else, the sale, supply, cultivation, manufacture, remains illegal. That is the distinction between decriminalisation and legalisation. Decriminalisation does not mean the free-for-all that some people fear, as has been expressed in the Chamber already. It does not mean drugs are sold in shops. It means people are not dragged through the courts or branded as criminals simply for struggling or making a personal choice that harms nobody else. I will talk at the end about the mechanisms we can put in place should we repeal section 3 of the Act. We have all heard the scare stories. We have been told decriminalisation will make things work, use will skyrocket, dealers will thrive, communities will become less safe. The evidence internationally tells a very different story. In Portugal, where they decriminalised over 20 years ago, injection-associated HIV infections have fallen, the number of people in prison for drug offences has dropped, drug-related deaths have declined and, crucially, drug use did not increase. That is because when we stop treating people like criminals, we create a space for them to be treated like human beings.

I represent communities where drugs have done untold damage, families are devastated, people are living in fear of drug-related intimidation and organised crime feeds on poverty and despair. I understand why some people ask how this will make things better where they live. The answer is that criminalising the drug user has never made communities safer. It has not stopped dealers, dismantled networks or brought down levels of violence. All it has done is fill our courts, ruin young lives with criminal records and make recovery harder. When Portugal decriminalised, the police did not lose power, they refocused it. They shifted from

arresting people with tiny amounts to targeting those higher up the chain. The weight of drugs seized actually increased. Far from helping dealers, decriminalisation takes away the smokescreen that lets them operate in plain sight. Some people say it is too complex to repeal section 3 but I would argue that is not the case. Section 3 is a stand-alone offence that can be repealed by a single Act of the Oireachtas. There is nothing complex about it except the political courage required to do it. In Oregon, for example, it was pointed out that after removing possession, drug use operated without sanction, which led to drug dealing and consumption in parks. That was their model, however; it does not have to be ours. If we were to repeal section 3 of the drugs offences Act, as expert testimony has indicated, we could and should replace it with council by-laws much as we have for alcohol. If somebody were to leave the Chamber now and buy a bottle of alcohol, the possession of that alcohol is not illegal. If they walked into St. Stephen's Green and opened the alcohol, it would be illegal under the council by-laws. If they consumed the alcohol and their behaviour became erratic, that would fall under the intoxication Act. We have mechanisms in our jurisdiction that would be suited to decriminalisation without the free-for-all that has been referred to. The removal of section 3 and innovative practices within the Irish model are there, have been argued for and would suit our Republic really well.

Repealing section 3 would not legalise drugs. It would simply stop the State from wasting Garda and court time and prison resources chasing people for small amounts. Those resources could be redirected to addiction services, outreach, housing and harm reduction. That is what Portugal did. Multiple UN bodies have urged us to do this. It is what the Citizens' Assembly thought it was voting for, until a flawed process left decriminalisation off the ballot entirely. The chair of the assembly has been crystal clear. Members wanted decriminalisation and voted for decriminalisation. The only reason it did not appear that way on paper was how the question was written. We have an opportunity now to finish the job they started and to respect the democratic process that this Government says it values. That is why I will keep calling for the national drugs strategy to be designated as an interim strategy. The Committee on Drugs Use, of which I am incredibly proud to be the Cathaoirleach, is still doing the hard, detailed work of building a policy that reflects the evidence and the voices of people living in this reality every single day. To push ahead with a final strategy before that report is complete would be to bypass democracy entirely. We owe it to the people who have come before that committee - the experts, workers, families and most importantly the people with lived experience - to get this right. We must ensure that their voice, when they came to a committee established by this Government, is actually catered for in the work it charged the committee to do. It is essential that it is an interim strategy. We are clearly nowhere near where we should be. It took nearly a decade to open a single medically supervised injection centre - a decade. Now, almost a year after opening, we are seeing how effective it can be. In just seven months, it has taken thousands of injection events off the street, has saved lives and is preserving people's self-respect. In the absence of safe injection facilities, what we had for over 40 decades in this country was unsafe injection facilities in our laneways and parks. These have left the user incredibly unsafe but they also leave all of us unsafe. That is what a health-led response looks like in practice - not rhetoric, results. We should be scaling that up, not patting ourselves on the back for opening one facility a decade late.

The criminalisation of people who use drugs is one of the greatest policy failures of modern Ireland. It wastes Garda time; fills our prisons with people who need healthcare, not

punishment; stigmatises people who are already struggling; and traps them in cycles of poverty and exclusion. The evidence is overwhelming. Decriminalisation does not increase use, does not empower dealers and does not erode communities. What it does is save lives, restore dignity and bring honesty back into our drug policy.

If the Government truly believes in a health-led response, it must prove it. For me, that starts with the repeal of section 3. It would designate the national drugs strategy as interim, listen to participants of the citizens' assembly, fund harm reduction services properly and most of all, bring the voices of people with lived experience into every decision we make. This is a really welcome debate and I am very interested in hearing the viewpoints of people across the Chamber. The work of the committee is ongoing. We are hearing some incredible stories that are empowering and heartbreaking. The stories we have been replicating for four decades of failed policy not only in this jurisdiction but elsewhere. At the end, we can have a document that contains evidence, reason and the heart of people who have given of their time to appear before the committee. I believe it should be respected. We need a new approach. Nobody is underestimating the task but every single day, lives are being eroded because of what is often the self-medication of trauma, poverty, harm and hurt. If we get this right, we can get it right for the next four to five decades. I thank the Labour Party for bringing forward this motion today. It is a really worthy discussion.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I thank the Labour Party for bringing forward this motion. Decriminalisation of all drugs has been the policy of People Before Profit for very many years. We were delighted to see that this was finally adopted as a consensus cross-party position in the interim report of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Drugs Use, which was then chaired by Gino Kenny. The report was published last October. The interim report recommended that decriminalisation of possession for personal use should apply equally to all illicit drugs. Importantly, it also made clear that this should be done by repealing section 3 of the Misuse of Drugs Act. In other words, we should adopt a *de jure* as opposed to merely *de facto* approach to decriminalisation to ensure we have a consistent application of the health-led approach that everyone in this House pays lip service to. I am doubtful about their actual commitment to it. The benefit of that is to remove the risk of discriminatory discretion being given to An Garda Síochána in respect of whether it prosecutes marginalised individuals or not.

That was the position. All the parties agreed to that position after discussion and after looking at the evidence. We then went into the general election where Fianna Fáil promised in its election manifesto to decriminalise drug possession for personal use, making no distinction between cannabis and other drugs, only to be then criticised by Fine Gael for effectively being soft on drugs, abandoning the position it had arrived at through a discussion based on evidence for cheap right-wing populism. Fine Gael said that it would continue to implement with An Garda Síochána a health-led approach for people in possession of drugs for personal use, criticising Fianna Fáil for its position on decriminalisation. Fianna Fáil then engaged in backsliding in the face of that criticism from Fine Gael, saying that when it wrote about decriminalising drug possession for personal use, it only meant decriminalisation of cannabis, which clearly makes no sense. It meant what it wrote, which was the agreed position of all the parties and is the evidence-based position, but backslid in the face of leaning into right-wing law-and-order populism by Fine Gael. There was backsliding in the general election that is reflected in the programme for Government, which makes no mention of decriminalisation and

uses similar language to the Fine Gael manifesto saying it will commit to a health-led approach to drug addiction and divert those found in possession of drugs for personal use to health services.

In every debate on drugs in which I have been involved over the past number of years here, we see the words "health-led approach". They say it every time they speak about it but with no real content because the language could mean decriminalisation or it could mean - I suspect it does mean - continuing with the flawed health diversion approach where drug users can be diverted to health services the first two times they are caught in possession of small amounts of drugs for personal use but after that, they are dealt with under section 3 of the Misuse of Drugs Act and condemned to be another victim of the failed war on drugs.

"Three strikes and you're out" is a stupid approach to take to people suffering from drug addiction. The experience with addiction is that it can take far more than two or three attempts to get off drugs, particularly when addiction treatment and rehab services are so massively underfunded and massively oversubscribed that, in reality, they are non-existent for many people in addiction. It is why we have the highest levels of drug deaths in Europe - a disgraceful situation for one of the wealthiest countries in the EU. That is an expression of the scale of inequality in this country. It is also why more than 70% of people in prison suffer from some form of drug addiction. That is at least 3,889 people out of a total prison population of 5,556. The entire repressive system of courts and prisons could be radically reduced if instead of criminalising people for their addictions and expanding the prison system like the Government is doing, it prioritised addiction prevention and treatment. It costs €99,000 to keep one person in prison for a year. That is €385 million per year that we are spending to keep people with addiction problems in prison. Imagine what a massive expansion that would be if we instead put that money into prevention, treatment and rehabilitation programmes and tackled the inequality, trauma and adverse childhood experiences that draw people into addiction in the first place. Instead, we have a situation where there are only 20 addiction counsellors working across the entire Irish Prison Service, with one addiction counsellor for every 277 prisoners, of whom about 200 are likely to be addicted to drugs. That means there is no chance of getting access to treatment if someone is serving a prison sentence of less than one year, which is the case for many prisoners on drug offences.

I urge the Government to reconsider its backsliding on this vital issue. In the US, President Trump is relaunching the failed war on drugs but we do not have to follow him blindly over every cliff he goes over. The Government is backsliding as part of this rightward trend in politics in terms of military spending and abandoning climate targets. It must not do this with drugs policy as well. We should be going in the opposite direction - not just decriminalisation of drugs for personal use, which still leaves drug distribution and supply in the hands of criminal gangs, but full legalisation of them with State control and regulated distribution and supply. It is the only approach that would allow for Government regulation to ensure safety for users and eliminate profiteering on misery by either criminal gangs or private corporations.

The committee's interim report also made proposals in that direction through a cross-party consensus recommendation that steps be taken to introduce a regulatory model for certain drugs with particular reference to the development of an Irish not-for-profit regulated cannabis market. The recommendation to develop not-for-profit cannabis clubs is a sensible idea that should be pursued by the Government.

There are two aspects to a health-led approach to drugs, neither of which have been taken by the Government. One is to actually have decriminalisation or legislation, while the other is to invest in the health supports for people suffering from drug addiction, to whom the Government pays lip service. I had a Topical Issue earlier with the Minister of State on the funding of our local drug and alcohol task forces. The evidence is there. What is happening is a slow strangulation over the years of our task forces. When the rhetoric has shifted towards having a health-led approach, the Government has cut funding over the same period of time. Over the past ten years, while total funding for the health service has almost doubled, funding for local drugs and alcohol task forces has fallen by close to 5%. We had a back and forth earlier with the Minister of State about the impact of the latest budget on funding for the task forces. It seemed clear to me at the end of our discussion that the truth is that funding is being cut again. The task forces are the people who are doing the work on the front line. They are being asked to pay an extra 1.5% in the first year for auto-enrolment and no funding is provided for that. That is a cut in real terms. There is no ongoing core increase in funding to address the cost of living or the issue of inflation. That is a cut in a real sense. There was the presentation of the important DRIVE project. Earlier, the Minister of State talked positively about it and there is a website promoting it. It is vital that we assist families who are facing horrendous intimidation over drug debts. The Minister of State is going to come back to me, so I welcome that, yet in the budget fact sheet, there is no reference to any funding for it whatsoever. There is the announcement of a new project, for example in Whitechurch, in my constituency, where 75 families have been supported by WASP Ireland, from money that was accessed under the community safety and innovation fund, but that money is over. On 1 January, they will be asking if they will be able to support these families any more because no funding is provided under DRIVE. It is not just a question of funding, but that is kind of where the rubber hits the road.

The Minister of State spoke earlier about how the task forces are an integral part and they will not be excluded and so on, but the bottom line point is that they are being excluded from the reference group to support the implementation of the new national drugs strategy. Again, the people who are on the front line in the communities most affected by drug addiction are being left out of the vital conversations on shaping the national drugs strategy. Unfortunately, none of this augurs well for an approach that takes the words "health led" seriously and actually follows that up with decriminalisation and funding for all of our drug services.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: One of my first political experiences was canvassing in a block of flats in Dublin. As I walked up the stairwell in the block of flats, I noticed, first, a pair of women's tights on the stairwell. When I got higher, I noticed a discoloured spoon near the top of the stairwell and when I got to the very top, there was a 17-year-old boy lying on the ground, practically unconscious, foaming at the mouth. We did our best to try to help him. It was clear that he had taken heroin and was suffering as a result. A few minutes later, a young boy in a Christian Brothers school uniform walked around the corner and stepped over him like it was nothing. It was very clear to me that unless there was some kind of intervention in this area, in these families, the seven-year-old boy would be in the same position as the 17-year-old boy in a number of years.

There are two major problems with that. First, if there is no intervention on a human level, these individuals are being left to an horrendous life of ill health, addiction and likely death as

well. Even if you did not give a damn about the human aspect of this, there is a societal problem too. The sale and supply of these drugs is ravaging whole sections of Irish society with deaths and of people spending decades in prisons as well. There is a real need for the State to actually get serious about drugs. It is not serious about drugs at all. To a certain extent, if many of these individuals in such situations were from the leafy suburbs, it would be an issue of far more importance here in Leinster House. Any drugs policy needs to have as its objective the reduction of harm. That has to be the absolute objective in relation to any issue on an individual basis and on a societal basis as well. Drugs cause harm. The consumption of drugs leads to significant harm, even if there is no criminality involved. Even the consumption of cannabis leads to significant mental health issues. It leads to psychosis and schizophrenia and it can lead to significant physical health problems as well, never mind other drugs. The objective of any policy has to include the reduction of the use of drugs. It is often said in this House that there is a dichotomy and that it is either a health-led issue or a criminal approach and that is not the truth. We could actually have both running in tandem. There is no real health-led element in this Government. In my own constituency, there are no residential rehabilitation beds for young people who want to get off drugs. A 17-year-old kid in my county at the moment who is addicted to drugs and actually wants to get off them has no real help whatsoever.

I have heard other people say that there is evidence in certain areas that the decriminalisation of drugs can lead to increased use, increased damage to health and increased overdoses, as has happened in certain jurisdictions. It is easier for parents to warn their kids off the consumption of drugs by telling them that it is illegal rather than just harmful. The use of illegal drugs on a regular basis is at about 10% within society at the moment, which is far lower than drugs that are completely legal, such as alcohol. It strikes me as strange that we are having a big discussion about the potential decriminalisation of, I think, nearly all drugs at this stage, and at the same time trying to reduce access to cigarettes and vapes, knowing that even these could create difficulty for individuals' health. Our party would not be in support of the decriminalisation of drugs. We believe that the Government actually has a bigger job in making sure that the law is implemented. We have no ships to patrol the seas to check the people who are bringing drugs in on the seas to this country. There are 53 Garda stations in Ireland with no gardaí assigned to them. In any block of apartments in any area where kids are taking drugs on a regular basis, the Garda is not touching that because it simply does not have the resources to do so.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Nobody wants to see people with addiction punished while the dealers get rich. In Limerick, Sr. Concilio in Cuan Mhuire has done an amazing job trying to help people with addiction. The centre has opened a farm and a garden centre to reintroduce people into the workplace. She has done brilliant work. A former hurler from Limerick, Ciaran Carey, has counselling services doing the same, using people who have suffered from addictions themselves, because they know what they talking about. We see people doing all this great work and then we are talking about punishing people who have addictions and we are letting the dealers go free. They go free because they are able to get the drugs into this country, the same way as food can be imported. There is nothing stopping them coming in. We need to try something different. I believe Portugal has tried something slightly different. There, certain drugs have been legalised in a controlled way. Here, it was shown that people who were suffering from serious illnesses could be helped by medicinal cannabis after every other drug had been tried. In some cases, the only thing that actually worked was medicinal

cannabis to give that person a quality of life. Under tight legislation and under tight laws, I would like to see those people have a quality of life if that is the only quality of life that is there, if the other drugs are not there to help them. We have legalised drugs in this country through our chemists and others, which are prescribed drugs for people. If none of them works and the medicinal cannabis does work for people to give them a quality of life, I would be for that, as long as it is legislated for tightly and controlled. We should look at the Portuguese model. If we take control away from the dealers, we might actually halve the problem. Something has to be done differently. All we are doing at the moment is punishing people who are addicted. Recently, Deputy Conor Sheehan said that Limerick was the cocaine capital of Ireland. It is not.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: It is the crack cocaine capital of Ireland.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: It is not and putting out such a statement about Limerick does not help.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: It is.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Sorry, we are here to help people. Branding Limerick like that is not nice. We are here to help people all the time, and Deputy Sheehan should not say such things. The whole country has a drug problem. Naming one place by itself is not right

Deputy Michael Collins: The motion invites us to consider a shift in how society addresses drug use, not through the lens of criminal justice but through public health. Decriminalisation does not mean legalisation; rather, it reframes drug use as a health issue, potentially reducing stigma and encouraging access to support services. While there are diverse views on its effectiveness, this debate offers an opportunity to explore evidence-based approaches that prioritise harm reduction and rehabilitation and community well-being.

Deputy O'Donoghue mentioned medicinal cannabis a while ago. I note the journey that one individual had to go to get medicinal cannabis to save her child's life. Today, I wish to acknowledge the extraordinary journey of Vera Twomey, a mother whose courage and determination have left a lasting mark on Ireland's healthcare landscape. Her daughter, Ava Barry, suffered from Dravet Syndrome, a rare and devastating form of epilepsy that caused her to ensure up to 20 seizures a day. Traditional medications failed to ease Ava's suffering and Vera was left with no choice but to seek alternative treatment. That treatment, medicinal cannabis, was not legally accessible in Ireland at that time so Vera did what no parent should ever have to do; she uprooted her family and moved abroad to the Netherlands, where Ava could receive the care she needed. This was not a decision made lightly. It was a desperate act of love driven by the need to save her child's life and it worked. Ava's seizures dropped dramatically and her quality of life improved in ways that conventional medicine had never achieved. Vera did not stop there. She walked literally from Cork to Leinster House twice to demand change. Her campaign was not only for Ava, but for every family facing similar struggles. Eventually, Ava was granted a special licence to access medicinal cannabis in Ireland, a breakthrough that came only after immense public pressure and personal sacrifice. Tragically, Ava passed away in 2023, but her legacy lives on. The inquest into her death led to

the recommendation of Ava's protocol, a proposed national framework to guide the safe and compassionate use of unlicensed medicines, including medicinal cannabis. This protocol is a vital step towards ensuring that no other family has to fight so hard for care that should be accessible. Today, I call on every Member to support Ava's protocol and help make it national policy. Vera Twomey's fight was for her daughter but her impact reaches far beyond one family. As I said, I am conscious of the difficulty we had at the time to get that message across to the Government that there are medicines, in this case, cannabis, that could help somebody. If there is a drug out there that will help somebody's health, we should be there willing to help that, but decriminalisation is an area where we are going down a dangerous route on other drugs.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I welcome the debate on this issue as I have on many other occasions and acknowledge Deputy Sherlock for bringing the motion forward. I also acknowledge how appreciative I am of participating in the debate. I remind my Opposition colleagues that they fought tooth and nail to exclude Government backbenchers from participating in Private Members' Bills being brought forward by the Opposition but on the day that is in it, let us be collegiate. The reason I say that is it is important that people from different perspectives contribute to this debate.

Deputy Kenny's contribution earlier was important because he talked about going on a journey. There are lots of people that we need to expose to the medical evidence. We need to expose them to the work of the citizens' assembly and the Oireachtas joint committee. There is a huge body of work. Deputy O'Donoghue's contribution was important as well. We can have a law-and-order approach on this and a compassionate health-led and, I believe, decriminalised approach to the possession of personal drugs because the people who are the problem here are those who are trafficking, selling and manufacturing large quantities of drugs, making millions of euro out of it and exploiting people with an addiction.

Something I thought most informative from the Oireachtas joint committee hearings was the Portuguese police contribution stating that more of their time was now available to tackle the drug gangs and the people selling drugs in large numbers as a result of not prosecuting small personal possession. The Minister of State mentioned the Department's position on this and in some ways, I wish the joint committee engagement had happened in advance of this debate. We can tease things out at the committee.

Paul Reid clearly said that the citizens' assembly was clear it wished to remove the possession of drugs from the criminal justice system. The difficulty with not removing the criminal sanction is that if we leave any element of discretion under that principle, we will leave ourselves in a difficult position and we will not move forward on it. If, for example, we give gardaí the ability to have discretion as to whether some type of people would be prosecuted or other types of people would not, we would put an unfairness and an injustice at the heart of our drugs policy. We should have an approach were we decriminalise the person and not legalise the substance and if we did that, we would be able to progress a strong health-led approach. I welcome the wording in the programme for Government, which was also welcome by CityWide, the respected organisation, but there is an expectation that we do exactly what Paul Reid said and remove the criminal justice system from the possession of drugs.

Whatever system comes forward on that, we cannot leave any type of discretion with individual gardaí. The reason I say so is that while we could say, "Surely you would leave that

to the discretion of the local gardaí", drugs policy will be policed differently in different communities. In some areas, gardaí might penalise people who are sleeping homeless. They might decide that they are going to penalise working communities that have high levels of drug sales when there might be the same level of drug use in middle-class communities. We cannot leave an element of discretion in the law. We would not do it in other areas. I have seen it compared, for example, with the decriminalisation of sex workers where we put the criminal sanction on the person procuring the service, not the person selling it. Let us imagine we had said, "but we will leave a discretion so that the person who was selling the service might be prosecuted". It would not work. If we believe that vulnerable person has an addiction, we should not have the criminal justice system involved in that; we should only have health-led approaches. I urge the Minister of State to examine that section as she goes before the Oireachtas joint committee to examine and tease out all of the provisions.

The joint committee made clear that it wanted to repeal section 3 but it must be replaced. Members were also clear on the point about removing the criminal justice system from possession itself. The key people that we have to target are those who are selling drugs and who are exploiting people who have experienced trauma or living in poverty or who perhaps tried this on a recreational basis and became addicted because of other factors.

Deputy Tóibín stated that it makes it easier for parents to dissuade people from drugs use by it being illegal. If the Deputy were correct, we would not have the drugs problem we have at present.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Hear, hear.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: That is the policy we tried in 1977.

I urge us to continue to work on this issue because there is a lot of cross-party work on it. I acknowledge former Deputy, Aodhán Ó Ríordáin, who worked on it as well.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Aontaím go láidir le go leor rudaí a bhí á rá ag Deputy McAuliffe ansin. Tá ár Dáilcheantair an-ghar dá chéile agus bímid ag obair ar na rudaí céanna. Míle buíochas le Páirtí an Lucht Oibre as an rún seo a thabhairt isteach sa Dáil. Tá sé thar a bheith tábhachtach dom.

I rith an toghcháin bhí mé ag dul ó dhoras go doras agus bhí go leor páirtithe sa Teach seo ag rá go mbeadh siad ar son an rud seo. It is important that what we said during the election is brought in to this House and carried through. Parties across this Chamber said that they would be for decriminalisation and some that said they would be for reducing the current system.

I also acknowledge a former Deputy in my constituency, Aodhán Ó Ríordáin, for the work he did on this. In November 2022, the Dáil agreed to move towards the decriminalisation of people who use drugs. We all remember. I have read the record of the Dáil from that time and the strong statements of that day.

Deputy McAuliffe mentioned the citizens' assembly report in January 2024 and the Oireachtas joint committee report in October last, but a lot of what we see in this House is report after report but no action.

As Deputy McAuliffe said about Deputy Tóibín mentioning the legalisation and how it would reduce use, the definition of "insanity" is doing the same thing again and again and expecting a different outcome. Clearly, the system we have is not working. I grew up with the current system. I have witnessed the amount of drug use in my Dáilcheantar. It is important to say that the current system is not working. We need to put in education and preventative measures and treat this like a health issue because these people who have addiction need to be treated as such.

The programme for Government promised a health-led approach. That is the programme for Government I signed up to support. I also favour decriminalisation and the possible legalisation of medical cannabis. Constituents of mine who have been diagnosed with cancer would like to be able to use it as an easier measure. It has been shown it can help with appetite and anxiety for those going through chemo. It is something I will continue to push for.

In the meantime, drug use has been exploding. In 2024, the Health Research Board reported that cocaine accounted for 40% of all treatment cases. We are also seeing a dangerous increase in potency and synthetics. Going back to cannabis, the cannabis currently on the streets has a synthetic cannabinoid sprayed on it. Natural cannabis is not physically addictive but when synthetic cannabinoids, which are generated and sprayed by drug dealers, are used, it makes the stock they are giving to young teenagers physically addictive. Not only that, it is completely frying their brains. People are getting schizophrenia and psychosis, which is really bad. If we could look into what other countries, such as Canada and the Netherlands, have done, and look into reducing the amount and making it a regulated system, it would be very much better for young children and anyone going into it. It would bring them out of criminal connections. That is something we need to look at.

When we talk about reform, it is important to look at Portugal, which Members spoke about, and the change it made to personal possession in 2001. The evidence is clear. It is not just about statements. There is clear evidence that decriminalisation does not lead to a surge in drug use. In the years that followed Portugal's change, the use of most substances fell below the original levels in 2001. What changed was the stigma around it, the access to care, and people stopped dying alone. I have always used this analogy about the homeless crisis when I worked for Peter McVerry, but it goes hand in hand with drug use; if you see people floating down a river, you eventually stop just pulling them out of the river. You go to the top of the river to see why they are getting in there in the first place, to prevent them falling into homelessness and drug use, and to give them that support at the start of their lives. That is something I really support.

Ba mhaith liom míle buíochas a ghabháil le Páirtí an Lucht Oibre for bringing this back in. It is something I signed up to support during the election, with multiple people. I look forward to voting for this motion.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I express our gratitude to Members, particularly those in the Labour Party, for their valuable contribution to today's discussion on drug policy. I acknowledge the depth of their interest and commitment to this critical issue. As was stated by the Minister of State, Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor, the Government will not oppose the motion.

This Government remains committed to a health-led approach to drug use, firmly believing that individuals experiencing problematic drug use should be met with compassion, dignity and appropriate care. The health-led approach to drug use is set out in the national drugs strategy. The Government's priority is to develop a successor strategy to cover the period 2026 to 2029. The development of the successor strategy is informed by an evaluation of the current strategy and consultation with stakeholders. In addition, we will take into account the recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly on Drugs Use, which many have referenced today, the interim report of the Joint Committee on Drugs Use, the programme for Government and the EU drugs strategy.

The Minister for Health and the Minister of State with responsibility for the national drugs strategy, Deputy Murnane O'Connor, published the independent evaluation of the drugs strategy, which was a commitment in the programme for Government. During this evaluation, 68 stakeholders participated in consultation sessions and additional written submissions were received. This inclusive process aimed to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives, including those of service providers, statutory bodies, civil society organisations and individuals with lived experience. The independent evaluation assessed the strategy on four areas; impact, governance, performance and coherence with international policies. I note the opportunities and challenges outlined in the report's findings.

The national drugs strategy has made progress in advancing a health-led approach, particularly through the expansion of harm reduction initiatives, such as naloxone distribution and drug checking services. The evaluation identified a number of positive findings including: the introduction of strategic implementation groups; strengthened interagency collaboration at local level; and improved data collection and monitoring, which enables sight of the changing profile of drug users and how prevalent cocaine use has become in Irish society. The strategy is well aligned with international frameworks, particularly the EU drugs strategy.

The independent evaluation also notes some challenges, including delivery of prevention and early intervention initiatives and the need for alternatives to coercive sanctions. The report presents ten strategic recommendations for the development of an integrated, equitable and outcome-focused strategy. These include the right to help for people who use drugs; providing culturally sensitive and appropriate services for all groups; equitable access to services; and strengthened prevention in early intervention initiatives. These will now be incorporated into the new strategy. To further inform the development of the next strategy, the Department held a number of in-person consultations with key stakeholders. Over 240 people attended the consultation. They included representatives of drugs and alcohol task forces from across the country, drugs service providers and civil society organisations. The consultation report has been published and circulated to the Joint Committee on Drugs Use.

The Citizens' Assembly on Drugs Use recognised the value of listening to the citizens of Ireland in relation to our approach to the issue of drugs. The Government has committed to responding to the recommendations of the assembly. The Department of Health has engaged with all relevant Departments to develop a considered response to each of the recommendations, which will in turn be incorporated into the successor national drugs strategy. At the high-level segment of the sixty-seventh session of the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs, the Government submitted a Pledge4Action by stating: "The Irish Government commits to carefully consider and respond with urgency to the assembly's recommendations

for reform of the legislative, policy and operational approach to drug use, and to indicate the timeframe for implementing those recommendations which it accepts."

We cannot underestimate the importance of prevention and education in tackling drug use. A wealth of international evidence shows us that by investing in evidence-based drug prevention interventions, we can reduce the negative impact of drug use for the person and their families and communities. The Department of Health has made significant strides regarding its approach to drug prevention. In 2023, a funding scheme totalling €1.5 million was awarded to five projects to implement a range of evidence-based drug prevention interventions across the country. In line with the citizens' assembly, the Department of Health is currently working with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime to implement its review of prevention systems project to assess our national approach to drug prevention. We have rolled out training developed by the European Union Drugs Agency and effective approaches to drug prevention to over 50 people.

Drug-related intimidation is a serious and insidious issue impacting individuals, families and communities nationwide. It is a complex problem that manifests differently across regions, often leaving victims fearful and powerless. Intimidation can involve demands for repayment of perceived drug debts or opportunistic extortion. Its relentless nature poses a significant risk to health and well-being. In May, the Minister of State for the national drugs strategy and the Minister for justice launched a major awareness campaign to reduce the stigma surrounding drug-related intimidation and violence by promoting the range of supports available to those affected. The DRIVE project, which is supported by the Departments of Health and justice, An Garda Síochána and many other stakeholders, aims to build community capacity to support victims and tackle the root causes of intimidation and violence. DRIVE reflects the partnership approach at the heart of the national drugs strategy and aligns with the recommendations from the citizens' assembly.

The Government is fully committed in its support for An Garda Síochána's efforts to dismantle criminal gangs involved in the supply of drugs and its work with international partners to tackle the trafficking of drugs for the Irish market. The Garda National Drugs and Organised Crime Bureau has seized over €627 million in illicit drugs and made over 1,700 arrests for drug trafficking, money laundering, possession of firearms and other offences since its establishment ten years ago. Last year, the Criminal Justice (Engagement of Children in Criminal Activity) Bill was enacted. This legislation criminalises adults who either force or encourage children to engage in any criminal activity, recognising the lifelong impact on a child of involvement in criminal activity. Ireland is playing an active role in the development of the next EU drug strategic framework and action plan. The Irish delegation has contributed strongly to thematic debates on various aspects of drug policy at meetings of the EU Horizontal Working Party on Drugs. These meetings will inform the next EU drug strategy which is currently being drafted by the European Commission and is due to be presented by the Commission to member states before the end of the year.

The Government will carefully consider and respond to recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly on Drug Use. Oversight of the implementation of the programme for Government commitments related to drug policy will be provided by the Cabinet committee on health. A steering group has been established to guide the development of the successor national drug strategy. This process is supported by a reference group comprising service providers and

individuals with lived experiences. A draft strategy is expected to be submitted to Minister of State responsible for drugs strategy by December. It is intended that the successor national drug strategy along with a two-year action plan will be published in 2026 with a subsequent action plan envisaged for 2028-2029.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: This Private Members' motion is very personal for many people across the country. In each and every community, urban and rural, a significant number of people are now using drugs in their daily lives, in their nightlife activities or as their coping mechanism. This motion at the end of the day is about people. It is often a conversation that is taboo. People do not speak about it. I am very proud to be in the Labour Party which has led on this in calling out our country's failed drug policies.

I wish to speak about the great mother who suffered so badly because of the harm of drug taking, overdosing and the lack of support. Ms Christine Kavanagh is a mother from Cork who has lost three sons to drug overdoses. A number of months ago I watched her interview on RTÉ and her deep emotion struck many people across the country. Christine lost her three sons, Dillon, Damien and Leon, to drug overdoses. Christine outlined that more services need to be offered to help people with addiction and mental health. I will just read some of what Christine said, "Mental health always comes with addiction... I just feel there's nothing being done for people with addiction and mental health [issues]". On a supervised injecting centre for Cork, Christine said, "My two children might have been saved if they were inside in a centre." This story gripped many people's attention - a mother who had been through what no mother should have had to go through, calling for increased supports, a reform of our drug policy and a drug-injecting facility for Cork. That is exactly what I am calling for here. Along with this, a key recommendation of the Citizens' Assembly on Drug Use was a greater focus on prevention and recovery, and greater supports for family and children impacted by drug use.

This motion is also quite personal to me. Two family members of mine have been in rehab facilities in Cork, most recently my own brother this year. I see the amazing work being done in these facilities. However, if a family cannot cope with the exorbitant figure to enter this facility, the individual must wait up to eight months in some instances to be referred by the HSE. I know of a treatment centre in Cork that my brother went to. Some weeks, it only has ten recovering patients because people cannot afford to get in and for those who are waiting to get in, when the time comes around for them to take a place in the recovery programme, they do not want to help anymore. When a person makes a decision to seek help, they need it there and then. They have had a realisation that they want a better life. We should not be placing them on a waiting list because of the affordability of services.

Recently at the Simon Community in Cork, I spoke to the nurse there who told me she started working for Simon 20 years ago when the issue was 100% housing need. She now believes it split 50:50 between drug addiction and housing needs. We make it unequivocally clear that those who sell and distribute drugs should be treated as the criminals they are. They are making easy money off vulnerable people. Based on what some in this House say on this motion, the phrase "running with the hare and hunting with the hounds" is quite appropriate. Some people have offered sympathy and empathy to some families, but along with that they are not man enough to stand up and have a real debate on how we must be progressive on our drug policy and absolutely take a health-led approach to drug users.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: Decriminalisation is an issue that the Labour Party and my colleagues have been raising consistently over a number of years. I am proud to be in a party that has been pushing consistently for reform of our societal attitudes to drug use, from Pat Rabbitte 30 years ago establishing the drug and alcohol task forces around the country to the steadfast leadership of Aodhán Ó Ríordáin, now our MEP for Dublin, when it has come to the issue of decriminalisation.

I pay tribute to the Tallaght drugs and alcohol task force. I am consistently bowled over by the tremendous work it does on the ground in Dublin South-West, from Tallaght to Whitechurch, in terms of prevention, support outreach and the innovative approaches it takes involving youth work. There is a Connect 4 project in the area that I am particularly impressed with. It is important that these task forces and the projects they are involved in continue to get the funding they need over the coming years.

As others have said our motion today is not even about drugs. At its heart this is a motion about people, vulnerable people, marginalised people and people who are sick, and the value we place on their lives or more accurately the lack of value because if we truly valued the lives of people suffering from addiction, we would have changed our approach long ago. Dealing with the issue of addiction and drugs solely through the criminal justice system has not worked. I do not think anyone in this House would argue with that. I suppose it could depend on a person's views of the outcomes we hope to achieve in our response to drug use and addiction, but our criminal justice approach has been indicative of a State and, if we are honest, a society that for a long time would prefer not to acknowledge the dignity and the humanity of those who have unfortunately found themselves dependent on drugs. It has allowed us to brush the issue under the rug and forget about them.

However, drug use is so prevalent now that it has become difficult for people to ignore. It is in every town and village across the country, as we have heard. It is in every community, every workplace, every family and every club. To criminalise drug use is to completely misunderstand the nature of addiction. Of course, we can slap someone who is suffering from addiction with a charge or a custodial sentence and pretend that will solve a problem; it simply will not. Drug use is just not a choice for people who are suffering from addiction and punishing them for their addiction is absolutely not going to deter them; on the contrary all it does is push them further and further to the margins. That marginalisation, particularly among neglected communities and which is often multigenerational, is very often what fuels drug use in the first place. We need a genuine health-led approach, one that prioritises harm reduction and recovery, and supports people out of addiction.

The World Health Organization now favours decriminalisation of people who use drugs. Ultimately this is a sensible approach. It is the effective approach. It is the approach that will save lives - lives that have been undervalued for too long. It is about time we changed it.

Deputy Duncan Smith: We are asking the Government to listen to this Chamber, the people's Chamber. It should listen to its own senior backbenchers if it will not listen to the Opposition, follow the data and change its drug policy. We know it is listening to tech bros running op eds about trying to rebrand itself as a government that can deliver on infrastructure. It needs to deliver on people suffering with drug addiction. The data is there. If it is going to be the government of delivery, then it needs to prove it and deliver what we are asking for - fixed and

mobile consumption centres. It should not take nine years to deliver one, like it did when we first proposed one in 2015 which was only opened last year. If it is the new face of delivery, it needs to deliver for people suffering from drug addiction.

Criminalisation of people who use drugs has not worked full stop. It has been an absolute abject failure. That is not even the discussion any more. We know the issue is more acute in working class areas, but is not restricted to them. It cuts through age, demographics, class and constituency; it is everywhere. The Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, has been at pains to tell us all that our prisons cannot handle the levels of people they face, yet by not decriminalising possession of drugs for personal use, we are still seeing 10,000 people arrested each year.

12 o'clock

Sixty-seven percent of all those arrests are for personal use, which is an absolute failure. It is not as if we do not know there is another way to do this. We have spoken about the Portuguese model. It is in place and the data are available. The WHO, as has been said, favours decriminalisation.

The Labour Party, through Aodhán Ó Ríordáin and Deputy Marie Sherlock, our health spokesperson, have led and continue to lead on this. As Mr. Ó Ríordáin said in an interview last week, the truth of the matter is that our State policy over the years has had no respect for those who use drugs, no empathy for them in respect of how they became addicted and no concern for what happens to them once addicted. For every other policy, whether in government or opposition, we try to base our thinking on data. That is what the Labour Party is doing here, yet the Government is basing its drugs policy on feelings and moralism. This is absolutely wrong and needs to end. The template exists and it can be delivered.

If we as legislators cannot find a way to tackle the stigma head on, we will continue to see a high level of drug-induced deaths. In 2021, our rate of drug-induced deaths among those between 16 and 64 was four times the EU average. In 2024, the European Drug Report ranked Ireland first among reported EU countries. There were 354 drug-poisoning deaths in Ireland last year, which is twice the number of people killed in road traffic accidents, which we all know is a national tragedy.

How many Dáil statements did we have for the victims of road deaths last year? We had three, and rightly so. How many did we have for those poor people who lost their lives to drug-induced poisoning? We had none. That shows where this Government's priorities are in terms of tackling deaths and addiction by drug use. It has to change. We have offered the Government a motion multiple times. It should please follow through and deliver for people suffering from addiction.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

An Ceann Comhairle: Just before we take Leaders' Questions, I take the opportunity to welcome Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett back to the House.

Members applauded.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, everybody is absolutely thrilled to hear that your treatment went well. You are looking so well. Maybe you are somewhat quieter; we will have to judge that as we go.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: We never thought we would miss you so much.

An Ceann Comhairle: The very best of wishes.

Now we shall proceed to Leaders' Questions. I call Deputy Cullinane.

Deputy David Cullinane: I welcome an Teachta Boyd Barrett back to the House. His return is great news.

Workers and families in this State are under savage pressure. They are being hit from every direction: soaring rents, sky-high energy bills, rip-off groceries, childcare that costs more than a mortgage, and insurance premiums that are through the roof. Yesterday's Future Forty report from the Department of Finance clearly sets out how housing costs have skyrocketed in line with a cost of living that has spun out of control. Everywhere people turn, there is another bill, another squeeze, another hit. Now, as we head into Christmas, what does the Government do? It hikes up the local property tax. In the middle of a cost-of-living crisis, when people are counting every euro and every cent, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael decide to take more. This is a tax on the family home. It is not a tax on wealth or greed; it is a tax on ordinary people, including workers, pensioners and families, who are doing their best to get by. This one is on the Government, including the Minister for Finance, because it changed the law. The Minister widened the bands by just 20%, even though he knows house prices have shot up by 30% to 40% across most of the State. That is what is driving families into higher bands and costing them hundreds of euro.

The reality on the ground makes an absolute mockery of the claim of the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, that only 5% of households would be affected by the band changes. Families in Waterford, Cork, Dublin, Louth and elsewhere all over the State are getting revaluation notices that claim otherwise. They feel angry, let down and tired of being bled dry. It is clear that the Minister's figure is not just wrong; it is wildly wrong. The number of households hit will be far higher than the Minister for Finance says, and his attempt to say otherwise is to take people for fools. They are not having it, because right now those same families are sitting at kitchen tables asking which bill to skip this month, be it the electricity bill, the rent or the groceries bill. The Minister came along and hiked up the local property tax. No sooner was the ink dry on a budget that left workers high and dry than the Government was back again heaping more pressure on struggling families. It handed out massive tax cuts and breaks to developers, banks and landlords and it gave nothing to ordinary workers to help them to make ends meet. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, as always, found room for the vested interests but not for the people who keep this country running. The Government had choices, of course, but it made all the wrong ones. It scrapped the energy credits that helped families to heat their homes; it raised student fees, making it harder for young people to stay in education; it hiked petrol and diesel, driving up the cost of getting to work or bringing kids to school; and it increased tolls, punishing

commuters. Now, on top of all that, it hikes up the local property tax. That is not leadership; that is putting the wealthy and the golden circles first. The Minister for public expenditure can spin it whatever way he likes, and so can the Minister for Finance, but when these bills land through the door, people will see clearly that, again, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil are taking more from those who have least. The Government is taxing the family home when families are deciding which bill to skip. It is wrong, it is unjust, and it has to stop.

People have had enough of a Government that says one thing and does the opposite, and talks about helping families but quietly signs off on measures that hike up charges. It had a choice between standing with workers and households and squeezing them further. It chose to squeeze them further. The Minister and I know it does not have to be this way. He does not have to increase the local property tax. No parent, pensioner or worker should have to pay more on their family home. I am asking the Minister to do the right thing: stop these hikes and stop hammering working families.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Jack Chambers): I want to start by welcoming Deputy Boyd Barrett back to the House. It is wonderful to see you back healthy and well. You spoke with enormous candour and bravery publicly, which has helped many people who are experiencing cancer in their own lives or their families' lives. I acknowledge that. It is great to have you back. You are certainly back in action, and I look forward to our engagement later on today.

On the local property tax, it is important to speak first about the Future Forty report, which sets out the wider economic and fiscal scenarios and the broader risks and megatrends that could crystallise over the coming decades. We know demographics are changing. Deputy Cullinane's party leader, Deputy Mary Lou McDonald, previously said that demographics will look after themselves, which shows the short-termist approach of their party when it comes to economic management and its inability to see the strategic long-term risks in our economy.

As we see from alternative budget scenarios, the Opposition wants to abolish the property tax, narrow our overall position on taxation and increase expenditure. This presents serious risks for our economy. The local property tax is a key source of funding for many local authorities across our country. It pays for services and amenities in each local area. It is a progressive tax linked directly to the value of properties. Higher-value properties are subject to a higher tax. By law, the local property tax is revalued every five years. There is ongoing work in the context of the local property tax changes from 2026 to 2030.

It is important that we have a broad-based taxation system as we plan for dealing with the long-term effects on the economy. All Deputy Cullinane has given is a platitude of negativity and attacks against the Government, but very little in terms of solutions as to how his party plans to pay for what must be paid for in the medium to long term. Sinn Féin must be honest about how it would manage the economy and pay for all the commitments and promises it is making across nearly every area of government. Its statements are not credible and that is why the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, made changes in the context of the local property tax, including the widening of the bands. In the absence of any change to valuation bands or rates, there would have been a much bigger increase in the overall local property tax. That is why a

significant number of homeowners will remain in their present bands for 2026 to 2030. The new annual charge for many households could be between €5 and €25 higher. We know there is discretion at local authority level to reduce or amend the local property tax depending on the decision of each local authority. That is why there has been significant work by the Department of Finance in terms of how it manages this self-assessed tax. The bands have been broadened and the Government did take measures in the budget to protect working families. The social protection budget, which the Sinn Féin leader dismissed yesterday, is €2 billion. The Deputy says it is insignificant. It is a significant, progressive and targeted intervention for those most in need in our society.

It is not credible to attack every area of taxation and then to attack every area of expenditure for it not being enough. Sinn Féin's position on the economy would seriously undermine the foundations of our State and undermine the future. We all need to be honest-----

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Do you not remember the troika? For God's sake, you crashed the economy.

Deputy Pat Buckley: You crashed the economy.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----about managing demographics and the risks and concerns around global trade.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: What a short memory.

Deputy Jack Chambers: That is why this Government has done that in budget 2026.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Cullinane will respond.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We have not taken the popular measures which Sinn Féin presents every week on additional temporary measures that are not sustainable in overall economics.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: What did Ivan Yates say?

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Cullinane.

Deputy David Cullinane: Neither I nor my party will take lectures from Fianna Fáil on economics. It crashed the economy and made people's lives a misery. They lost their homes and jobs. The Minister is in no position to come in here and lecture anyone on economics. When he talks about platitudes, I am talking about people who are making tough choices, such as what bills they pay. It is a reality facing those families. The Minister can come in and talk about Sinn Féin, Sinn Féin and Sinn Féin, but he should talk to the people listening who are affected by this. It is one hike after the other and it is the same with the property tax.

The Minister talked about the housing report as if it was some great report for the Government. That report said there will be 15 more years of housing crisis under the Government's watch. Another generation of young people will be locked into a housing crisis

and locked out of any chance of having their own home. That is the shameful record of this Government. We cannot take 15 more years. I have asked the Minister a simple question. It is not supermarkets, groceries or insurance companies that have hiked up the property tax; the Government increased it and it can stop the increase. I am asking the Minister to stop it.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I am being very honest with people when it comes to the need to have a broad-based system of taxation to manage the economy. The Deputy is being dishonest when it comes to his approach to managing the economy. Sinn Féin's alternative budget would have increased net expenditure by up to 14%. That is a reckless approach. It would undermine the foundations of our economy and it would cause serious risk into the long term.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Is the Minister speaking from experience?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I will not take lectures from Deputy Cullinane or anyone from Sinn Féin when it comes to economic management. Their party leader has said in recent years that demographics will look after themselves. Has she read any report? Have any of their finance spokespeople read any report on the wider long-term trends for our economy?

Deputy David Cullinane: It is all Sinn Féin's fault. We have been in Government, not you. Own your own responsibilities.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Sinn Féin's approach to everything is providing for a massive increase in expenditure, abolishing and narrowing different areas of taxation, and imposing greater taxation on jobs and enterprise in our economy. It would undermine all opportunities for growth.

Deputy Pat Buckley: Is it 1% of it?

Deputy David Cullinane: The Minister is avoiding answering the questions for ordinary working families because he has no answers.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: We have never been in government.

Deputy Jack Chambers: That is why our approach in budget 2026 is progressive, fair, sustainable and targeted for those most in need.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Ivana Bacik.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: First, I want to say fáilte ar ais and welcome back to Deputy Boyd Barrett. I never thought I would say this, but I have missed his voice in my left ear across the aisle. It is great to see him back.

I acknowledge the wonderful electoral victories against Trump in the US overnight. The stunning win by Zohran Mamdani in New York, in particular, proves that voters want a message of hope. That takes me neatly on to my question. Yesterday, the Government published Future

Forty, a long-term economic assessment of Ireland's outlook conducted by the Department of Finance. It projects that the housing disaster will continue for at least another 15 to 20 years, which is a truly grim analysis for every generation in this State. The report also issues a stark warning about the high cost to us all due to the Government's failure to invest in climate action measures. The Tánaiste might like to take particular note of the report's finding that "continued inward migration will be vital to maintain growth in the labour force." So much for his outrageous dog whistle comment last week that there are too many people coming here. As I pointed out to the Minister yesterday, this report confirms that we need people to come here to share their skills with us to run our schools, cafés, crèches, care homes and hospitals and to build the homes we need.

The report also tells us that the window of opportunity is closing when it comes to investing in infrastructure. My message to the Minister today is this: it would be utterly bizarre and, indeed, irresponsible for the Government to take as inevitable the projection that the housing crisis will continue for another decade or more. Regrettably, the Government has taken this bizarre approach for some time because in the face of successive damning reports about the lack of public investment by the Government, it has acted as if it has no power to change outcomes. The Minister and his Cabinet colleagues are not bystanders. They need to let go of neoliberal ideology, step up and show some ambition and urgency. As the Government's own Housing Commission recommended, a radical reset of housing policy is needed and the Government needs to accept that we can fix things with political action. This is message is coming not just from those of us on the left, like Mamdani, but also from people like Stripe's John Collison who asked at the weekend, "Why can't Ireland just do things? It's not for want of money." I do not agree with all of his points, but he is right to say that Ministers have more powers to change things than they actually use. So, why does the Minister not step up?

In the Government's recent budget, it could have taken on the constructive proposals that we in the Labour Party put forward to ensure investment in affordable homes and decent public services. Instead, it chose to reward burger barons and big builders. It chose to make an evidence-free VAT cut, costing €681 million per year, and not to invest in tackling the housing crisis or the crisis in healthcare and childcare. Yesterday's report should increase the Government's ambition, not temper its expectations. Will the Government now correct its course and deliver a truly ambitious plan to build homes and adopt that radical reset on housing?

Deputy Jack Chambers: The report from the Department of Finance is not a projection. It looks at over 2,000 scenarios on a no-change policy basis. The Minister, Deputy Donohoe, was very clear yesterday that we are changing policy on an ongoing basis when it comes to infrastructure and housing, and we have more to do. We have a new housing plan being published in the coming weeks. We will have significant infrastructure reforms being published in the coming weeks, all to enable greater delivery of more homes and more infrastructure right across our economy. That is why it is important that we have that broad examination of the various economic and fiscal scenarios. It helps to set out the broader choices that we have as a Government and, indeed, as an Oireachtas around the risks which will crystallise. We know the trends on deglobalisation and how they will impact our wider long-term economic growth. We know the impacts when it comes to digitalisation and also the

upside of that, if we can embrace that in the public service and also across all elements of the economy.

When it comes to housing delivery, if you look at the national development plan, you will see that next year we will have over €11 billion between current and capital spending for the Department of housing, which is a significant increase in overall spending to deliver more social and affordable homes. That mix of funding will be set out in the new national housing plan to really drive the delivery of more homes for families and people across our country.

It is not just about what the State is spending and allocating to housing. That is why when we bring forward measures, like the Minister, Deputy Browne, did yesterday on enabling private sector input in wastewater treatment plants, for example, what we heard from the Labour Party was total negativity.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: That is not true.

Deputy Jack Chambers: That is a measure which enables infrastructure and growth to be developed to build more homes across our economy. I ask Deputy Bacik to look at her own party. One of her own councillors is involved in judicial review proceedings against the new apartment guidelines, which will deliver more apartments and more units in our economy.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Smaller apartments.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We need to complement the State investment in housing with a market that is viable and can work. The Labour Party has attacked builders and developers in relation to the VAT cut. That is all about having viability in the market. If we are serious about delivering housing and more apartments, we must have a viable market to deliver more homes. Many families and workers across our economy want to see the delivery of more supply and we have to be honest around using taxation, regulation and other policy levers - not only more spending - as a means to deliver more homes.

We have fronted up to the question of spending when it comes to the national development plan on infrastructure and housing, but we also need to reset a wider policy when it comes to regulation in our economy by examining rules, regulations and structures in terms of infrastructure and housing so we can deliver more homes quicker. That is the focus of the Government when it comes to the challenges set out in the Future Forty report.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I do not know where to start in coming back to the Minister on his response. We all know Government housing policy has abjectly failed. The Government failed to deliver homes or meet its own targets. We saw vastly elevated and false targets last year, and thousands of people in homelessness. It is absolutely shocking to see so many children in particular without a home in an Ireland that is wealthy, where the money is there to make the changes that are needed. Instead of taking responsibility for Government policy, the Minister and his colleagues consistently choose to attack Opposition parties.

The Labour Party put forward carefully costed and considered proposals. Unlike any other Opposition party, we chose not to narrow the tax base. We were realistic and constructive in

our proposals. We are not the party of negativity, as the Minister suggests. Rather, we seek to ensure decent homes for people. I make no apology for seeking decent homes and decent housing standards as our councillors are consistently doing across the country. The Government needs to take responsibility for the failure and the failure in particular to adopt the radical reset that housing policy requires.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We are absolutely fronting up to our responsibilities. I welcome any constructive suggestions on policy but a lot of the policy that is coming from the Opposition is just for more spending. The State has fronted up to that question when it comes to the national development plan - over €100 billion of spending in the next five years. The strategic focus is on infrastructure, housing, water infrastructure and energy infrastructure, all to enable more homes to be built across our economy. What the Deputy refuses to do is to be honest about proposals to also enable the market to function. We have viability gaps in terms of delivery of apartments. That is why guidelines should change. We have viability gaps in other areas of housing supply. That is why the reforms the Minister, Deputy Browne, has introduced to enable the market to function to complement the State's role in housing delivery is central to deliver the overall level of housing supply required in our economy.

The Deputy can attack the Government and talk about failure repeatedly but ultimately her approach would probably impose greater regulation, more stringency and more rules on the market.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Look at our manifesto.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We would have less housing supply. That has been Labour's approach. Its councillor is involved in a judicial review-----

Deputy Ivana Bacik: To uphold standards.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----on apartment guidelines. The Labour Party needs to be responsible as a party in stopping such a proposal.

Deputy Holly Cairns: First, on behalf of all of the Social Democrats, I extend a very warm welcome back to Deputy Boyd Barrett. It is great to see him back.

We are hurtling towards a catastrophe. A new UN report published as COP30 is about to begin makes that clear. Plans to limit global warming to 1.5°C have failed. That threshold will be breached in the next decade. We are now on course to see temperatures rise by 2.3°C to 2.5°C. This is an existential threat to our very existence on this planet. Too many world leaders either do not recognise this threat or refuse to take it seriously. We know that 1.5°C of warming will have unthinkable consequences. It will lead to increased drought, famine, flooding and countless deaths. It will see large-scale food insecurity, increased migration and economic shocks. The world will become an even more unstable and dangerous place.

Even the EU, which claims to want to counter this threat, is failing miserably. This morning, member states agreed to cut emissions by 90% by 2040. However, this comes with a broad acceptance that 2030 targets will be missed by a country mile. That is the stark difference

between climate rhetoric and climate action and it is something the Government is guilty of too. The Government said it would reduce emissions by 51% by 2030. Then, incredibly, it put forward measures that could at best add up to a reduction of only 23%. Shamefully, zero offshore wind is being generated, with none likely in 2030 either. Our waterways are choked with pollution, primarily from agriculture run-off and wastewater. None of us has to look very far to see the impact of the climate crisis.

In my own local area, Bantry was once again hit by floods yesterday, devastating homes and businesses that have barely recovered from floods last October. The long-promised culvert works to protect the town will not even begin until next year. This Government tells us that it is taking the climate crisis seriously.

I wish I could sound more hopeful about this, but what we and future generations are facing is truly frightening. We need to recognise it and address it because soon we will reach a tipping point, which will mean abrupt and catastrophic consequences that cannot be reversed. We still have time to act but only if plans are turbocharged, fast-tracked and, crucially, implemented. The current approach is not working. What new measures and emergency options is the Government going to take to meet our climate targets before it is too late?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I share the Deputy's concern, as I know everyone in this House does, about the ongoing climate crisis. The work ongoing at COP at an EU level is all to ensure the European Union continues to show leadership when it comes to domestic policies but also to be responsible internationally when lots of world leaders and countries are backsliding on climate action. The work the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has done in the context of budget 2026 and the funding he has secured for his Department is all about trying to accelerate Ireland's energy transition and to underpin our journey to a net-zero future. It includes record funding of over €500 million for home energy upgrades and solar PV. This will help make homes warmer, healthier, more comfortable and less expensive to heat.

It is the most pressing change in our society. We have seen in the Future Forty report the huge risks that will crystallise if we do not take the action now on climate change. That is why it is central in the work we have done as part of the national development plan review. We have prioritised critical sectors in our economy.

When it comes to energy, for example, that is why €3.5 billion of an equity injection is being given to ESB and EirGrid, all to accelerate the need to build a grid that can match the renewables that we want to see onshore and offshore. It is also the work we are doing when it comes to reform of infrastructure in our economy. The report will be published in the coming weeks to try to enable much greater acceleration of renewables across the board.

We are absolutely committed to addressing the climate crisis. We also need to be resolute in the work the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, is doing in protecting our nature and biodiversity. We need to prepare in terms of climate resilience as well. It is not only action in terms of the emissions profiles but also ensuring our critical infrastructure is protected and is more resilient for extreme and adverse weather events which are happening.

The 2024 data from the EPA showed that Ireland's emissions continue to fall for the third year in a row and are at their lowest level in three decades compared with 1990 levels. Ireland's emissions decreased in 2024 and have decreased by 10% from 2021 to 2024. That is against a

growing economy. If you take our comparators with many of the European economies that have populations which are relatively flat, or economic growth which is relatively flat, we have had extraordinary economic and population growth and we are still managing to reduce our emissions profile overall.

What the Government is focused on is delivering a just transition for communities, enabling opportunities through the action we are taking in terms of climate change and focusing on the huge opportunity that renewable energy represents. I mention the work that is being done to build a grid that can be connected to that renewable energy as it is being advanced through the respective processes.

Deputy Holly Cairns: It feels like I may as well be talking to the wall. We are nowhere near reaching our targets. It does not feel like the Government really understands the consequences of that. The Minister is talking about the huge amount of work on offshore wind but the reality is we generated more energy from wind 20 years ago. The climate crisis could not be more serious, and it is very obvious that it is not being taken seriously by this Government. There are no new ideas or no meaningful attempt to address it. There is absolutely no ambition. Climate action could be an enormous opportunity for Ireland. We could be leading the way. We could be developing offshore wind potential and become a net exporter of energy. We could be held up as the example of sustainable agriculture and food security. Instead, it is business as usual. There has been no action on offshore wind. The Government is trying to hang on to the nitrates derogation for dear life and, predictably, we are about to miss our emission targets again. Target after target is being missed. You would have to wonder what is the actual point of Government targets, whether for housing, spinal surgery, emissions, you name it. They only exist in the Government's PR strategies. The Government's clear pattern is to promise everything, do nothing and then blame everybody else. Will the Minister please tell me what the Government is going to do to turn this around? Take responsibility and tell us what the Government is going to do to meet its emission targets.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Last January, Ireland hit a really important milestone of hitting 5 GW of installed onshore wind capacity. That is significant progress towards our 2030 target. We were ranked second in the world in 2023 for onshore wind generation.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: We have no auctions. None.

Deputy Jack Chambers: A significant amount of auctions have happened for offshore wind generation, as the Deputy is aware. They are working their way through their respective development processes. What we are trying to do is to accelerate that so we can deliver greater offshore renewable energy.

Part of the problem with bringing people with us on climate change is reflected in the Deputy's remarks on farmers and agricultural. The Deputy has attacked the nitrates derogation. There was a meeting of 2,000 farmers in Fermoy, Cork earlier this week. They desperately want and need to hold onto that derogation. They are making massive efforts at farm level to make that transition and to build sustainable food systems. I am sure many of the farmers in west Cork would not welcome the Deputy's remarks, which will put them out of a livelihood.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: The Government is leading them to a cliff edge.

Deputy Jack Chambers: If we weaponise climate action, as the Deputy has done-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Minister, time is up.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----we will not be able to take the climate action that centrist politics needs.

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Boyd Barrett.

Deputy Jack Chambers: You need to work with farmers, with the agricultural community-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Minister, time is up.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----in supporting their transition rather than weaponising the derogation.

An Ceann Comhairle: Minister, respect the Chair. Time is up.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: So disingenuous.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is good to be back. It is particularly good to be back in the aftermath of the successful campaign of Catherine Connolly. I congratulate her in her position as our new President. It is also good to be back on the day that a socialist gets elected in New York. Signs of hope and portents of the future.

An Ceann Comhairle: I hope the Deputy is not taking credit for that.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Certainly not. We might learn a few lessons from it though. I also thank colleagues across the House for their kind words today and messages during, before and after my treatment. I also thank the thousands of members of the public who sent very kind messages. They were very heartening and very helpful.

My biggest debt of gratitude is to the fantastic people who work in our health services, particularly the cancer services, in my case in St. Luke's Hospital, and the eye and ear hospital. There are similar people providing cancer services right across the country. They asked me to raise particular issues about the need to properly resource and support cancer services in this country. It is important to say that everybody has a stake in that happening. I did not know this, but 50% of people will have an encounter with cancer during their lives. Some 44,000 people this year will get a cancer diagnosis. The Irish Cancer Society made a whole series of

requests pre-budget. It is still not clear whether any of those have been met to fully fund and resource the national cancer strategy.

There is a particular issue for me and for the people who provided me with care in St. Luke's in the area of radiation oncology machines. They are called linear accelerators. They, as well as the staff, infrastructure and so on, have given me my life back. Some 50% of those people who get a cancer diagnosis each year, which is a very high figure, will need these machines. Fairly incredibly, 35% of those machines, which are supposed to be replaced every ten years, are now 15 to 17 years old. Some 40% will need to be replaced in the next five years. This means there is a lot of discomfort and stress for patients and staff who need this lifesaving treatment. What the people who work in radiation oncology are asking for, and they have asked repeatedly for this, is a national radiotherapy replacement programme where there is centralised oversight and procurement and ring-fenced multiannual funding, going forward, so they do not have to come each year with a begging bowl for money to provide this absolutely vital machinery to save lives.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy and again welcome him back. I welcome the fact he has raised issues relating to cancer services and the national cancer strategy. It is important just to take a step back and look at the progress we have made over many years since the national cancer strategy was introduced. Over 65% of patients live for five years after a cancer diagnosis, compared with 43% in the 1990s. A lot of the difficult reforms that were introduced by Ministers in previous years around the centralisation of particular services and hubs have yielded much greater outcomes for citizens across the country. Like the Deputy, I commend all the workers across our hospital system who provide that daily care, compassion and support for people as they go through their treatment journey.

We have tried in recent years to build and resource a public health system that responds to the needs from a workforce perspective. That is why in the past five years we have nearly 30,000 additional healthcare workers in terms of whole-time equivalents working in our public health system to support and rapidly respond to diagnoses or particular incidents as they arise from cancer and a lot of other health perspectives. Next year, we will have an allocation of over €27 billion in terms of the overall allocation to the Department of Health.

The Deputy asked specifically about radiation oncology, which I will respond to. In my negotiations and engagement with the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, we will have over €9 billion of capital in our health system over the next five years. That is a record level. The Minister is now developing a sectoral investment plan, working with the HSE on the capital needs in our system. Some of that will relate to radiation oncology or treatment interventions around replacing existing equipment. Others will obviously relate to new beds and building bed capacity across our system. As a Government, we have prioritised funding our health system, funding more workers and beds in our health system and also funding the technological improvements that I think will yield greater improvements in life expectancy. That is why we are taking digital health seriously and prioritising that from a capital perspective over the next five years. I will ask the Minister to respond in time to the Deputy's specific question and take a note of the work that is happening and the capital plans for the next five years. However, successive Governments have resourced and significantly reformed our health system and its cancer treatment. We are seeing the positive outputs from that due to the great work of the people the Deputy mentioned.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The professionals in this area stated in the context of the budget that radiotherapy services are operating significantly below capacity due to under-resourcing. They went on to state that our healthcare staff do everything they can to minimise the impacts on care for patients but it is simply not possible to provide optimal care in these conditions.

Sixteen of 24 working days last month were affected by unscheduled downtime. Machines are breaking down because they are too old, putting stress on patients and staff. Some €23 million per year is being spent on outsourcing to the private sector because of machines breaking down and not being replaced, and because of the lack of a national replacement programme. As I said, doctors who should be providing services and care to patients are instead, in their own words, coming to the Minister, the Government and Departments begging for money, resources and so on to replace the machines they need to provide the care to save lives. The Minister needs to respond to the specific request to have a national programme for the replacement of these machines and to have the staff and infrastructure necessary to deliver it.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I share with the Deputy the focus on ensuring that our health infrastructure, including radiation oncology machines or building better bed capacity across our health system, is achieved in the next five years. That is the work we are doing with the sectoral investment plan with the HSE to ensure we replace the equipment that is required and build additional capacity. We are now funding a public health system which should become less reliant on the private health system over the next series of years in terms of outsourcing and some of what the Deputy referenced. I want to commend the enormous work and leadership of many people in our health system who have transformed outcomes. It is important, when we talk about the national cancer strategy, to note it is a strategy that has worked. It is delivering improved outcomes. Looking at the data over two to three decades, we have had a transformational improvement in that area over the last number of years. I will ask the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, to respond to the Deputy's specific question about radiation oncology. I believe there is significant scope over the next five years, through the investment we have put aside in the national development plan, to have a significant replacement programme for a lot of the health equipment which is required.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome back my constituency colleague, Deputy Boyd Barrett, and wish him well in the rest of his recovery. I would like to raise the status of the long-promised primary healthcare centre for Loughlinstown and the surrounding communities. The HSE confirmed earlier this year that the operational lease process for the new Loughlinstown primary care centre collapsed when the preferred operator withdrew for viability reasons. The HSE advised it is now carrying out a service-led review before deciding on the next steps. I fully accept the HSE must ensure value for money and that projects are deliverable. However, it is vital this review does not quietly become a vehicle to move the primary care centre out of Loughlinstown and into Cherrywood or elsewhere.

Loughlinstown, Ballybrack and the wider area have some of the highest levels of disadvantage in my constituency. It is also an area with a significantly older population, with the Dún Laoghaire, Dalkey and Loughlinstown community healthcare network recording 20% of residents to be aged over 65 compared with 15% nationally. They are precisely the communities that most depend on accessible, local primary care. Cherrywood, by contrast, is a new strategic development zone built from a new urban centre with plans for more than 10,000 homes and a projected population of roughly 26,000 people, orientated towards younger working households, well served by the Luas and the new town centre facilities. Cherrywood, rightly, will need services of its own but they should be additional to, not a replacement for, the long-promised upgrade of the primary healthcare centre in Loughlinstown. There is already a HSE health centre and primary care team in Loughlinstown delivering valuable services on the ground today.

The purpose of this project is to modernise and expand those services on or adjacent to the existing site and not to relocate them elsewhere from people with the greatest need. I ask the Minister, on behalf of the Taoiseach, for whom he is taking questions today, to reaffirm the Government's commitment to delivering a new primary care centre in Loughlinstown, serving Loughlinstown, Ballybrack, Shankill, Shanganagh and the surrounding estates, and to confirm that the current HSE service-led plan will explicitly take into account the deprivation and age profile in deciding its location so we do not see a shift of resources from an older, lower income community to a more affluent, younger one.

Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Jack Chambers): I thank Deputy Devlin for raising this very important issue. It is one he has been consistently raising and campaigning for on behalf of all of his constituents.

Of course, the HSE and Department of Health should, in any instance, focus on deprivation and demographics when it comes to the positioning of capital investment in terms of its overall allocation. As I mentioned previously, over the next five years, there will be an overall capital budget of over €9 billion. I think we will see a significant acceleration of investment in primary and community care right across our country. All of that is to manage the broader risks we have on demographics, ensure we can treat more people in the community, anchor more primary healthcare workers and embed more healthcare professionals in the community. That is the work that is ongoing in terms of the regional health areas.

A central objective in the programme for Government is to deliver increased levels of integrated healthcare and that is towards general practice, primary care and having a home first approach, as I have referenced. Integral to this is the development of primary care centres across the country, in local communities such as Loughlinstown and in the Deputy's own community. They form a critical part of our healthcare infrastructure, providing a single point of access to primary and community care services for individuals. Progress has been made during the past number years. One hundred and eighty primary care centres have opened across the country and a further seven are under construction.

Related to the Deputy's specific question, the HSE has confirmed the proposed delivery mechanism for a primary care centre in the instance he referenced was through the HSE primary care operational lease model. A tender process was undertaken and a preferred

operator was selected. The HSE further advised that, unfortunately, the selected preferred operator then encountered difficulties in relation to the economic viability of the proposed project, which resulted in the collapse of that process. The HSE has confirmed that a service-led review is under way and that is to validate some of the questions the Deputy referenced. He spoke to the importance of age demographics being critical to managing the broader trends we see in communities across our country. There is also deprivation and we know education and healthcare are critical to enabling opportunities for people and also to mitigating a lot of the risks of intergenerational poverty. That is why deprivation should be a critical focus in the wider deployment of this capital funding.

The HSE has confirmed a review is under way and HSE capital estates is looking at the best location for the primary care centre and then the most appropriate method of delivery for expedience, value for money and delivering for the local community.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank the Minister for that reply and acknowledge what the HSE states about the regional health areas and the single point of access. However, this primary care centre is nearly a decade in the making. I understand it has planning permission, or did at one stage, and it beggars belief how long this has taken to redesign and redevelop the existing site where primary care is being administered at the moment. There is genuine concern locally that as Cherrywood continues to grow and attract investment, there will be pressure to rationalise, as was mentioned in the reply from the HSE, by shifting the new primary care centre there instead. It might look more efficient on a map or on a desktop but it ignores the original objective of that project that was conceived to serve an older and less well-off community. The demographics illustrate that, even in the HSE's original documentation.

I ask for a commitment from the HSE to meet local TDs prior to any finalisation of any review but it is also important to highlight-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The HSE should continuously engage with local TDs representatives around healthcare needs and the feedback they are receiving from constituents and also on the critical point the Deputy made on demographics and deprivation playing a really important role. The Deputy mentioned the huge amount of construction in other parts of his constituency where we will see an inevitable rise in demand over time. That should be a factor in the HSE's overall consideration of how primary care centres are deployed. The HSE is conducting a review. It is unfortunate the process collapsed. I will ask the HSE to reflect on the feedback the Deputy has given and, in its engagement with local TDs, to reflect on the wider work we will do over the next five years as part of the capital investment programme.

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

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Fastway workers, subcontractors and franchisees were left high and dry last week. Some of them are outside the gate today and some of them are in the

Gallery with Deputies Ruth Coppinger and Paul Murphy. They were told they would not be paid during the 30-day receivership period. It is eight weeks before Christmas. They cannot apply for another job. They cannot get jobseeker's allowance. They are afraid to take supplementary welfare allowance without having written confirmation that it will not affect their redundancy. There are serious questions as to how we can allow companies to operate like this in the first place. Will the Minister tell me today what precisely Ministers are doing to protect these workers, the small businesses and the road haulage companies that have suffered acute losses? What is the Government going to do to get the 50,000 parcels delivered to customers who are waiting for those parcels?

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Government Ministers have to be active in this space.

Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Jack Chambers): I thank the Deputy and acknowledge all of the workers who are here. I regret what has happened in the past number of days. I know how concerning and difficult it is for everyone involved. To answer the Deputy's question, receivership is a long-standing legal mechanism around the independence of functions when a company enters into that process. I was asked about this yesterday by Deputy Murphy. The Department of Social Protection is engaging directly with the receivers in the context of the information that has emerged and a collective redundancy notification has been received by the Department of enterprise as well. There are limitations given the independence of the receivership process. Of the two respective Departments, one has been notified and the other is engaging directly. That work is ongoing in the context of what is emerging.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: But what are they going to do?

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I too acknowledge the workers in the Gallery.

This morning EU climate ministers agreed to reduce carbon emissions by between 85% and 90% by 2040, following marathon negotiations in advance of the COP30 summit. Ministers adopted a legally binding target for cutting emissions by 85% by 2040. On paper and in principle, it is positive to see this agreement reached, but the deal also mandates that another 5% reduction be achieved by outsourcing pollution cuts abroad through the purchase of international carbon credits. That get-out clause suggests that EU states will continue to believe that we can buy our way out of climate change and outsource our obligations to countries that have less. This is not so positive, especially as we are still miles off our target of a 51% reduction by 2030. In that context, will the Minister to commit Ireland to being a climate leader within the EU? As the Minister for infrastructure, what are his plans to ensure that key public services will make life better for people-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister to respond.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: -----and that we can have investment in infrastructure-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We are not going over time.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: -----to address climate?

Deputy Jack Chambers: To answer the Deputy's question, I welcome the outcomes from the European Commission proposals. Europe continues to be a leader on climate action in a world that is, unfortunately, backsliding in many instances. The new targets will be challenging for many member states, including Ireland, but we are taking action in the context of the national development plan that we reviewed. Consider the focus on energy and transport in particular, with more than €20 billion in transport investment over the next five years. That is a real opportunity for transformational investment and delivery of transport infrastructure and public transport across our economy. Ensuring that we accelerate the planning and design process for many of the projects that cannot be started-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----is critical to ensuring we meet our climate goals from a transport perspective.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Yesterday's report from the Department of Finance said that the housing disaster will continue for another 15 years. That seems to be an optimistic forecast based on housing delivery doubling to 60,000 by 2030. We are facing 30 years of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil housing failure unless their housing plans radically change or they are removed from office. The lives of generations of people in this country have been destroyed and will be destroyed. They have been betrayed and abandoned because this Government, despite all of its resources, has failed to meet the basic needs and deliver homes to people. Given this damning assessment, maybe it is not surprising the Government has gone looking for scapegoats. In recent weeks, Ministers have pointed the finger at migrants, State agencies, NGOs and EU law. The Government has gone full Farage and this report explains why. Meanwhile, we have the Minister for housing scrambling around-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister to respond. The Deputy's time is up.

Deputy Rory Hearne: -----trying to put together a housing plan. Does the Minister agree that we face another 15 years of a housing disaster?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister to respond.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Who is actually to blame for this housing catastrophe?

An Ceann Comhairle: We will not be going over time, Deputies. The Minister to respond. Speak within the 60 seconds, please.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The report sets out over 2,000 scenarios and it is not a projection. The Deputy needs to be factual about what it is and what it is not. It has been made on a no-

policy change basis and this is reflected in that. We will take further decisions in terms of delivery of infrastructure and housing right across our economy. That will be the new housing plan and the infrastructure reforms it will underpin. There are issues that we need to be honest about. For example, parts of EU law do not allow us to deliver levels of housing and infrastructure which are required.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Have you just figured this out now?

Deputy Jack Chambers: No. It is why we need-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We have been saying that for some time.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, please.

Deputy Jack Chambers: It is why we need to remove some of the regulations that exist in parts of delivery of infrastructure and also in housing. The Deputy's solution on housing is just more State investment-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----and he ignores the market continuously. We need to have a viable housing market that allows small builders and developers to deliver housing right across our economy.

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up.

Deputy Jack Chambers: That is what we are trying to do, with measures the Deputy opposes continuously.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I too welcome my socialist colleague Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett back into action. I welcome also the election of a socialist in New York, the belly of the beast of capitalism, Zohran Mamdani.

I welcome the Fastway Couriers workers to the Public Gallery today. Perhaps it will be third time lucky because two TDs have already asked the Minister about this. I ask him to look them in the eye and tell them what they are to do for the next 30 days. They have been blindsided by their company. They were told they were making vast profits and then they were dumped. They are told they are not allowed to sign on for any social security measures for 30 days or they risk losing their redundancy and the wages they are owed. They are caught in a complete double bind. We need a statutory instrument to get around this. The law needs to be changed but they do not have time to wait for that. Elysian Capital, the big venture capitalist company that seems to own it, pulled the plug on this company coming up to the busiest month of the year for couriers, quite amazingly, given it could have recouped some of the debts it was owed. I do not know if the Minister is going to investigate that.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Will the Ministers for Social Protection and employment please meet these workers to sort this out?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I was setting out the honest position relating to receivership, which has a legal standing, and the Deputy needs to be honest about it as well.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I am being honest.

Deputy Jack Chambers: There is a long-standing legal mechanism when it comes to receivership and when a person is appointed. As I said to our two colleagues, the Departments of both enterprise and Social Protection are engaged in this. One is part of the notification and the other is engaging in the context of the real issues and challenges that I know the workers are facing. I will reflect on what the Deputy and others have said and bring it to the Minister for Social Protection. That is why the Department is engaging in this. We will allow that to continue over the coming days. The Minister will be able to set out further details.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Why are none of them here? It is very poor.

Deputy Michael Collins: Since last July, the Adrigole-Beara community has had up to 14 water outages, never mind what was happening before this, leaving residents young and old in farms, schools and crèches without water for a day or two in some cases. This has led to the closure of the local school and crèche. Families with small babies have moved out of the community when the water supply has broken, leaving people very stressed. One section of pipe needs immediate replacement from the source along the Healy Pass. The local community has set up the Adrigole Water Action Group, which has pleaded with me to get the powers that be to change the pipe, even with a temporary pipe. If repair crews have been kept out for 14 days since July this year, what cost is that to the State instead of replacing the section of piping immediately? This is also happening in Beach, Bantry, where the water supply has broken down 65 times over two years. The people of Adrigole are rightly frustrated. They know that if this was happening in Dublin, it would be replaced within hours. Why are they being treated like second-class citizens? Can the Minister tell me when this broken asbestos pipe will be replaced in Adrigole?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I regret that households and businesses have been seriously and repeatedly impacted by this. I will certainly relay that to Irish Water. I received just a brief update on this before I entered the Chamber. I know there is work ongoing to ensure it is part of the mains replacement project. I will ask for a more detailed response to issue to the Deputy. I appreciate that this issue should not be arising repeatedly, particularly with the capital uplift we are giving to water infrastructure across our economy. We need to ensure there is a quicker delivery and a better response to communities that are affected by such issues.

Deputy Albert Dolan: Schools in Galway East and right across the country are waiting on critical upgrades and critical building upgrades. I am talking about new classrooms, special education spaces, safer buildings and modern facilities. I am thinking about Carrabane National School, Gort National School, St. Brigid's College in Loughrea, Gort Community School, and Coláiste an Eachréidh in Athenry. Over recent months, we have seen very few school building announcements. We need clear timelines. We need to know when decisions are going to be made. Boards of management and principals have done everything they can do. They are now waiting on the Department. Will the Minister explain the cause of the slowdown? When can schools expect updates? When will approvals be given so we can see projects get shovels in the ground and see children experiencing a higher level of education in this country?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I acknowledge that Deputy Dolan would like to see projects delivered quicker over the next number of years for the schools that he has raised in Galway East. What we have tried to do in the national development plan is to significantly prioritise investment in education and in particular special education for communities where we know there is serious pressure on school places from a special education perspective.

1 o'clock

That is why the capital allocations have gone from, on average, €1 billion a year in the Department of education to €1.5 billion over the next five years. The capital allocation over the past five years was €5 billion; over the next five, it will be €7.5 billion. That will allow for a lot more school buildings, special education places and, indeed, the critical social infrastructure in terms of schools delivered in communities across our country. I can ask the Minister for education to respond back to the Deputy's particular needs. There are pressures the Minister needs to manage in-year around the pipeline of projects that are there-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Minister. I call Deputy Michael Murphy.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----and I know she is working to manage that within the context of her overall allocation.

Deputy Michael Murphy: In the week of COP30, I call out the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, for its utter failure to deliver the warmer homes scheme in a timely manner. This week I got confirmation from the SEAI that the average waiting time for initial assessment is 14 months, and a minimum of 26 months from application to completion. What really concerns me is the lack of urgency from the SEAI and the lack of an action plan to reduce waiting times for what are really vulnerable customers. They need these urgent heating upgrades. It is time we held the SEAI to account. I appeal to the Minister to reach out to the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and his Department to engage with the SEAI. If it cannot deliver the scheme in a timely manner, let us get somebody else to deliver it.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I share Deputy Murphy's objective of ensuring we accelerate the delivery of the warmer homes scheme, which has made a real difference for many families affected by energy poverty across our country. In recent years, the SEAI has received a significant increase in demand for the warmer homes scheme. The increased supports for the

scheme have resulted in a significant increase in applications, with 45,000 received over the period from January 2022 to the end of September 2025 and a total of 24,000 homes upgraded under the scheme. The waiting times are too high and that certainly is something I will ask the Minister for the environment to reflect on. However, to be fair to the SEAI, it has significantly reduced its waiting times from what they were. I understand the average waiting time was significantly higher in previous years. There is work ongoing to reduce it.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: As the Minister is probably aware, an outbreak of bird flu has been confirmed in a commercial turkey flock in County Carlow. This flock of about 500 birds will have to be euthanised. We need to see adequate compensation packages for farmers affected and biosecurity measures must be stepped up. As a preventative, I am calling for a housing order to be implemented as we know wild birds play a huge role in spreading avian influenza. We saw this recently in Fota Wildlife Park. I call on the Government to introduce an adequate compensation package for businesses like Fota that have had to keep their gates closed and for poultry farmers for loss of earnings. Will the Government put a housing order in place now?

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Martin Heydon): I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. First, I extend my sympathy to the flock owner affected in Carlow. We have a 3 km protection zone and a 10 km zone in place, as is procedure. At noon today, I announced the introduction of a housing order in consultation with my colleague in Northern Ireland, the Minister, Mr. Muir. That will take effect in Ireland from next Monday because we need to allow time for our flock owners and commercial operators to put housing in place. We will work across areas. We are aware of the challenges for Fota Island. We want Fota Wildlife Park to be able to continue to care for the animals in that space. I remind the public that we are in a time now of higher risk of avian influenza. The migratory birds have landed here and are carrying it. We need the public to be very aware not to handle sick or dead birds but instead to report them to local and regional veterinary offices. We stand ready to support our poultry sector. The introduction of this poultry order coupled with the biosecurity measures are key measures to protect our poultry stock and captive birds.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: Over the recent bank holiday weekend, DART services were suspended due to maintenance work. While I accept this maintenance work has to be done, does it really have to be done over a bank holiday weekend, particularly when the Dublin city marathon, with more than 20,000 participants, was taking place? Many of my constituents found themselves unable to use public transport because the DART was not running and buses were full as a result of increased demand. More broadly, there is an issue with the punctuality of buses and no-show buses. For example, the No. 15 bus, which runs through my constituency, is regularly a no-show or late. A number of constituents have contacted me to advise that they were at their stop waiting for the bus and it arrived significantly late or did not show up. The programme for Government commits to improving public transport services and encouraging people to get out of cars and onto public transport. These events do not encourage that. Will the Department of Transport engage with public transport operators to ensure our public transport is reliable and functional all year round?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I acknowledge the significant difficulty for many of the Deputy's constituents when there is such disruption over a weekend, exacerbated by other events. There should be better co-ordination. There is capital investment in particular events. In terms of public transport no-shows and issues with levels of services, the National Transport Authority, NTA, has brought in a regime of fines for bus operators that do not operate on time or where there are no-shows. It is quite punitive for a lot of the bus operators, and rightly so, if they do not deliver a service on time or if there are no-shows. I will ask our colleague, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, to engage with the NTA to ensure there is better co-ordination around major events, which is a fair point, and also to ensure we have an ongoing focus on efficiency. There should be punitive fines placed on transport operators that do not deliver a service for constituents.

Deputy Brian Brennan: I want to discuss the pending closure of the Merck site in Arklow, County Wicklow. This has come as a devastating blow to the 100 employees, their families and the people of south Wicklow. I am looking for assurances that the Government and IDA Ireland will leave no stone unturned in their search for a new operator for the site. When we consider that we have a highly skilled workforce and one of the largest and newest wastewater treatment plants in Europe, the location must be really attractive to any potential buyer. The workers must be fully supported by all Government agencies in the weeks and months ahead. Arklow has been devastated by closures over the decades, including IFI, Arklow Pottery and Inamed. Now more than ever, the staff in Merck, and the town of Arklow, need our help.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I acknowledge the Deputy's concern in terms of the announcement by Merck. On, Wednesday, 22 October, IDA Ireland was notified of Merck's decision to wind down operations by the end of 2028. Staff were made aware on the same day. It is important to say this decision does not affect the life science employees. Our foremost concern is for any of the potentially impacted employees during this time. To be absolutely clear, the Government is on hand to any of the employees. We will be providing a range of supports for those affected, including assisting with appropriate training and development opportunities or, indeed, any other income supports. IDA Ireland continues to keep close contact with Merck management to offer support during the process. Our enterprise agencies have shown in other instances where there is an announcement such as this that they help to provide alternative employment and opportunities in terms of their wider client base and other indigenous companies through Enterprise Ireland. That is something they are working on in the context of the announcement the Deputy referenced.

Deputy Ann Graves: This is day 46 for the hunger strikers for justice outside Leinster House. Mary Donovan, Miriam Moriarty Owens, Mary Dunleavy Green and Maurice Patton O'Connell represent the 4,000 survivors of residential institutional abuse. Their situation is critical. These survivors have been driven to this extreme action after decades of fighting for justice. They were deeply traumatised by the institutional abuse they suffered and now they are being retraumatised by the lack of action by the Government. Their demands are simple and include a State contributory pension and a medical card to help address the lifelong consequences of the abuse they suffered in industrial and reformatory schools. The time for agreed, written commitments is now. Can the Minister confirm that the Taoiseach and the

Minister will meet and engage with them today and deliver long overdue justice for these survivors?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I know the Taoiseach had a meeting with some of the survivors in the past number of days. A process was put in place around the appointment of a mediator, which was wanted by all sides. The update I received on this yesterday was that a specific issue had arisen for the mediator who was due to be appointed but a recommended, very experienced alternate had agreed to be in place. It is my understanding that a meeting was due to take place at some point towards the end of yesterday or today so that a mediation process can advance. In the aftermath of the meeting with the Taoiseach, the Government certainly wants to see that mediation to occur and engagement with the survivors relating to some of the issues they are raising.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I welcome Fr. Johnny Sweeney from Doon, County Limerick, to the Visitor's Gallery. He celebrated our mass for deceased Members and staff this morning. I also thank the Ceann Comhairle for her co-operation.

The Minister replied to another TD about the nitrates directive a few minutes ago. I am talking about the 1,000 farmers he said attended a meeting in Corrin Mart on Monday night. They are very concerned. I am glad the Minister for agriculture, Deputy Heydon, is here.

Farmers feel they need to be heard and their concerns to be appreciated. Nearly all of them have invested hugely in making their farms adaptable up to the current limits but they are frustrated now because neither the Government or Europe seems to be giving a clear message as to what scientific levels are needed. It is vital that the nitrates derogation is maintained at the current level. Despite the attacks from the left, the media and the EPA, who will provide our food? Farmers are doing the best. I know the Minister is supportive of them but the Government needs a clear message and a strong message for the Commissioner when she comes here - the Minister said he is meeting her - to ensure we have clarity going forward and that the derogation is maintained.

Deputy Martin Heydon: I thank the Deputy for raising what is a really important issue. The nitrates derogation is critically important, not just for our 7,000 derogation farmers, many of whom are in County Tipperary, but for our overall rural economy and for all elements of agriculture. It comes down to land availability and many other measures. This has been a top priority for me since I became Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine. I attended the meeting of a couple of thousand of farmers in Fermoy on Monday night. I will meet with Commissioner Roswall, who has accepted my invitation to visit Ireland later this week. I have met with her in Brussels previously. I have met with her officials in Brussels and in Ireland when they visited previously. We brought them out to farms and I will bring Commissioner Roswall to a derogation farm as well when she visits to show her first-hand the great work our farmers are doing in terms of the higher standards they are operating to for water quality.

As we reach the endgame of our negotiations, all of this is to try to have an extension of our derogation and get a new derogation beyond the end of this year because our current one falls at that point. We have the habitats directive to address, as well as water quality. That is a very

onerous undertaking and we are putting detailed proposals to the Commission right now to get the best possible outcome agreed for our farmers.

Deputy Mark Wall: I wanted to raise with the Minister today the car park the M7 and N7 have become over the recent period. Yes, we all believe in public transport but unfortunately, we all know that will take time. This morning, as I made my way to work, it took me three hours to get here from the town of Athy. I have been inundated with emails today from people from Rathangan, where it is taking two and a half hours, and from people from Newbridge, where it is taking two hours.

I have raised this in these Houses before and I ask the Minister, with the Minister for Transport, to contact TII and to put on an emergency service for rush hour traffic that is there constantly. That is what we need every morning because there are so many accidents happening on that road. It has become a danger for people. It is affecting people's quality of life and it also affecting their productivity as they get into work. I appreciate his response.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy. I discussed it there with the Minister, Deputy Heydon, as well. I acknowledge the significant pressure it puts on families, particularly in the commuter belt in south Kildare and elsewhere, who are reliant on coming to Dublin early in the morning. I will ask TII and the Minister for Transport to better resource the response, if that is an issue, so that when a particular accident arises, it can be responded to quicker. Obviously, there are particular accidents that arise where the scene has to be preserved. That has an inevitable impact on displacement of traffic.

As a Government, we are committed to being more pragmatic on our roads building programme. It is something that is important for the commuter belt and regions across our country. That is why the work the Minister for Transport is doing around the sectoral investment plan will significantly improve public transport but also ensure we continue the acceleration and build out of our national roads programme, which is critical for economic growth and development. It is also critical for the daily lives of many people who live in the commuter belt in Kildare. I will ask them to respond to the issues the Deputy raised.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: Budget 2026 allocated €117 billion nationwide. Approximately €19 billion or €20 billion of that was in capital investment. I raise with the Minister the issue of Carrignavar wastewater treatment plant. It is something that has been highlighted and identified as in need of urgent investment from Irish Water and Cork County Council. Nonetheless, it has been waiting years to be reached in their own list of priorities. I understand Irish Water received a significant uplift in the past couple of weeks and it is due to review its capital plan in light of that. Carrignavar is a village that has been restricted for development for nearly 20 years because of the lack of wastewater capacity. When will that capital plan review be concluded? Who will actually track and trace the deliverability of those projects? That is because seven projects were allocated money back in 2025. Not one of those wastewater treatment plants has actually broken ground yet.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy. He is correct that some of the delivery of projects has been too slow. That is why projects like Carrignavar and others need to be accelerated over the coming years. We have prioritised putting €12 billion into water and

wastewater infrastructure over the next five years. The Minister, Deputy Browne, is finalising the capital investment plan and the sectoral plan for water and wastewater infrastructure so that many of the projects on lists can be delivered. They are the foundation for building more homes in the villages and towns right across our country.

That plan is due to be published in the coming weeks. Work is ongoing between the Department of housing, the Minister and Irish Water to put that together over a five-year period and put the capital investment beside a lot of the projects that are referenced. The Deputy is correct that they are critical to ensuring we build more homes across communities and I will ask the Minister, Deputy Browne, to respond on the specific plant.

Deputy Colm Burke: In Scotland, the RSV vaccination programme has resulted in a 62% reduction of people in the age group 75 to 79 being admitted to ICU. RSV is a respiratory virus that, despite being very common, can cause serious complications. We have a growing elderly population. The vaccination programme can help keep people out of hospital. Will the Government give serious consideration to introducing a similar programme to the one in Scotland, particularly for the group aged over 70? It is extremely important now. We will have 1 million people aged over 65 within the next four years. Now we need to start taking action to keep the numbers being admitted to hospital down.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. As he knows, the National Immunisation Office in the Department of Health takes a very much evidence-based approach to vaccination programmes. There has been some work on RSV relating to certain groups and it is free for babies, according to the Minister of State, Deputy Butler. Any expansion of that should be examined by the National Immunisation Office, where appropriate. I know it is continuously ambitious in terms of broader vaccination. It is hugely important for managing overall public health and acute presentations that occur in our accident and emergency departments and in terms of using overall bed capacity in our hospital system. I will ask the Minister for Health, the National Immunisation Office and public health officials to respond to the Deputy's specific question relating to the learnings from Scotland.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are three Deputies left. We are out of time. This is what happens when we go over time. I do not do it for fun. I will take the Deputies but I would like everyone to bear it in mind for the future. I call Deputy Aidan Farrelly and ask him to be as brief as he can.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I will cut straight to the question. We have seen reports this morning of 50 IPAS contractor locations with significant fire safety concerns. What does the Government intend to do to ensure the health and safety of every bed, whether that is State-run or State-funded? These contracts were signed with contractors by this Government. What steps will the Minister take to ensure the safety of every child and vulnerable adult in an IPAS setting or any State-run setting is secure?

Deputy Jack Chambers: The safety and well-being of all residents in IPAS centres is of the highest priority for the Government and for the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan. All issues relating to fire safety are taken extremely seriously. When any inspection identifies issues,

including those relating to fire safety, a formal process is immediately triggered to bring about a resolution. A written report is provided to the contractor within 14 days detailing all deficiencies. They are contractually bound to respond within a further 14 days on remedying particular problems. Where issues relating to a contractor's track record are of concern, a follow-up inspection is scheduled around the remedial works. I can ask the Minister for justice to send a more detailed submission to the Deputy.

What was set out in *The Irish Times*, I think, is a point-in-time assessment. It is important that any deficiencies found are responded immediately to by respective contractors to protect the safety and well-being of residents.

Deputy David Cullinane: I want to raise an urgent issue that has arisen in relation to the Irish Coast Guard air search and rescue service. I met with crew representatives from across the State yesterday, including pilots and other crews, who raised serious safety issues and fatigue issues. This is down to 24-hour shifts where a greater portion of their shift is now being classed as "on standby" time. They are not on standby, they are on site, they are in work and in a state of immediate readiness. They also argue that the Irish Aviation Authority is in contravention of the EU working time directive. Will the Minister examine this? The State needs to come clean if it is the case that we are in breach of that directive. We owe it to those crew members to ensure that safety is paramount. There have been far too many accidents in this area.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy. What is really important in aviation in particular is that safety comes first. I have not seen the particular report referenced but I will ask the Minister for Transport to respond to the Deputy's particular questions and the concerns raised by workers. Safety would come first in any framing, or agreement, of a contract or indeed the operational work around that contract. The Minister for Transport will be able to respond to the Deputy's concerns comprehensively. We are in a new contract with Bristow relating to the coast guard which will serve us over the next number of years. I can ask the Minister for Transport to respond to the Deputy's question.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Our immigration law explicitly allows for deportation in cases of criminal convictions, particularly in relation to serious or violent convictions. This includes provisions such as those outlined in the Immigration Act 1999, as amended. Section 3 states that the Minister for justice may sign a deportation order against a person who has served or is serving a term of imprisonment imposed by an Irish court. Additional considerations when deciding on a deportation order include factors such as a person's criminal convictions, character, conduct and whether their presence poses a threat to public safety or the common good. In light of this, would the Minister agree with me that non-Irish nationals who come here and commit barbaric acts of savagery against young women such as what happened in Tullamore in 2022 should be on the next plane out of here?

An Ceann Comhairle: I call the Minister to respond.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Is it not high time that we stopped catering to their so-called rights---

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An Ceann Comhairle: I am giving leeway, Deputy.

Deputy Carol Nolan: -----and instead began to radically and forcefully implement the laws that we have on our Statute Book?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please. I call the Minister to respond.

Deputy Jack Chambers: What happened to Ashling Murphy in Offaly was shocking. I know how difficult this continues to be for her family and indeed for the wider community. I want to speak more generally to say that the removal of criminals and those who are a danger to public safety is always a priority for the Minister for justice. In the free movement regulations of 2015, there is a mechanism through which that can occur. There is a particular threshold and bar which is set for the utilisation of that directive. That is co-ordinated by An Garda Síochána working with the Irish Prison Service relating to any individual.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.25 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.25 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.25 p.m. and resumed at 2.25 p.m.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

National Development Plan

1. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the reforms he plans to introduce to improve the delivery of infrastructure and capital development outlined in the revised national development plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [60445/25]

Deputy Ged Nash: We have been reading a lot of significant information in the media in recent days and weeks about plans the Minister appears to have to improve the delivery of infrastructure and capital development in the context of the revised national development plan, NDP. Will he elaborate precisely on what those plans are and how he plans to implement them?

Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Jack Chambers): My Department is currently finalising the completion of a report and action plan on accelerating infrastructure delivery in our economy. It will be brought to Government in the coming weeks. It will set out a series of high-impact reforms targeted at the most significant barriers to the timely delivery of critical infrastructure. These reforms will have a clear focus on reducing timelines and significantly improving outcomes. They will be targeted at the most impactful barriers to infrastructure delivery as outlined in the report published in July. This report identified 12 barriers to the effective delivery of infrastructure in our country.

The most significant barriers identified are broadly categorised across three headings, which were set out in the report. The first is the regulatory environment, including the growth and

complexity of legislation; policy statements and strategies; how consents, licences and permissions for development are obtained; the timelines for these processes, engagement between the regulatory bodies and project developers; and consistency across regulatory bodies.

The second heading is the planning and legal systems, including the increasing role that the courts play in infrastructure projects; the cascading consequences from these decisions through development cycles; and the impact that the uncertainty in planning and legal decisions are having on projects.

The third heading is internal systems, such as how the Government allocates funding and develops a credible project pipeline; the rules applied to the development of projects; and how contractors are procured to undertake the works necessary for a project.

The task force is providing strategic guidance and practical insights into the development of actions to address these barriers. This work is also informed by extensive engagement in the economy with delivery bodies, regulators, and industry representatives, as well as international best practice.

Some reforms had already been introduced when we published the NDP. We have given funding certainty of €102 billion from 2026 to 2030, which is €34 billion over the previous allocation. It provides greater certainty for key strategic projects such as MetroLink, the greater Dublin drainage scheme and the eastern and midlands water supply project, as well as the prioritisation of funding for critical infrastructure, such as electricity, water, and transport to help the supply of new homes and economic competitiveness.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Minister.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Departments are in the process of developing sectoral investment plans to allocate their capital resources and these will be published in the coming weeks.

Deputy Ged Nash: This is all well and good and we have been reading a lot about this since the revised national development plan was published. We will see updates on specific projects shortly. Will there be timelines for those projects? Looking beyond the abstract, what will it mean for people? For example, will the package of proposals that the Minister wants implemented shorten the timeframe for the delivery of the MetroLink or the northern line DART project to Drogheda? How many new homes will it deliver? At the moment this is all in the abstract about task forces and so on reporting but there is very little detail.

The Minister briefed the media earlier this week that the threshold in the Department's infrastructure guidelines will increase from €200 million to €500 million. I am not absolutely convinced that will improve project delivery. In fact, I would advise caution in that regard. The Minister should be streamlining the process for using the infrastructure guidelines, not necessarily increasing the threshold.

Deputy Jack Chambers: There are extensive actions across every barrier and the plan is to have the majority of the practical actions being delivered in 2026. Every action we take is about shortening and truncating timelines for the development lifecycle of critical

infrastructure, which is simply taking too long. That means we need to increase our risk appetite. We have too much process and too many decision-makers and there is risk aversion across our systems. Secondly, within government, where we can control processes or procedures, that means we cut unnecessary levels of process which do not add value but simply add time. We have had a forensic assessment of this in recent months. The response to it around the infrastructure report which we publish involves practical actions which will demonstrate shortening of timelines for critical infrastructure and other infrastructure across our economy.

On the point about housing, water and wastewater treatment plants are central to the delivery of new homes and many of Irish Water's capital projects are taking far too long. We have secondments from Irish Water and the task force in my Department. They make a positive contribution to the whole area of reform.

Deputy Ged Nash: Would the Government take any responsibility for what the Minister described as the unnecessary processes that have developed over time? We hear a lot of analysis of this and finally the Government appears to be cottoning on to the fact we have a real problem with delivery. We have been saying it in opposition for years - I try to be constructive and put forward alternative proposals for delivery of infrastructure - but it is only when someone like John Collison writes an article for a national newspaper that senior Government representatives seem to take notice. I understand from the media that Fianna Fáil backbenchers have been saying this for a long time as well. There is a form of fetishisation of bureaucracy in this country. We seem to love it and get caught up in it, but it may have gone too far. In some respects, however, that is a scapegoating exercise. Our problem these days is not money. It was always money but now it is delivery and this Government will be judged on delivery. The IMF said clearly that our infrastructure lags 32% behind comparable countries. It is a rich country that feels very poor.

Deputy Jack Chambers: That is why we have corrected that around having over 5% GNI* allocated for critical infrastructure, which is one of the highest levels of infrastructure investment across EU counterparts. It did not take any article in any newspaper for me to prioritise infrastructure delivery. Since the brief was allocated to my Department, we have stood up a task force, developed an evidence base and published the report in July on the evidence base, which is now informing the various reforms which we will introduce and set out in the coming weeks. That is about cutting unnecessary processes within government and the State. We have a complicated structure of regulation in our economy which needs simplification, and not only at EU level. We need to prioritise domestic simplification and reform to do things quicker, to develop and facilitate economic growth and, ultimately, to deliver infrastructure quicker and build more homes. That is the central metric which will underpin all the work on infrastructure. We will set out the detail around that when it is published in the coming weeks.

Public Expenditure Policy

2. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation if he will publish updated spending reviews for each

Government Department; the reason for not publishing in advance of budget 2026; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [60444/25]

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I ask the Minister about the spending reviews carried out this year that were not published, as had been the practice in previous years. Why were no spending reviews published in the run-up to the budget? How many spending reviews were carried out this year that were not published? Why has the practice of publishing these reviews been abandoned? Does the Minister agree the public has a right to know what is in these reviews? Will he publish all spending reviews that have been carried out? When will he publish them?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy O'Callaghan. Securing value for money is an ongoing priority for the Government. It is at the heart of all decision-making at every stage of policy or programme lifecycles. It is about securing the efficient and effective use of public resources and improving living standards and infrastructure for the people of our country. Policy analysis is a core component of public expenditure management and value for money frameworks.

A wide range of policy and expenditure analysis is undertaken and published by Departments annually. These can take the form of staff papers, focused policy assessments, spending reviews and analytical notes, among others. My Department plays a central role in this process by regularly analysing expenditure trends and policies. Alongside this, individual Departments have responsibility for evaluating the efficiency and impact of their own programmes and policies. Since 2024, approximately 59 papers have been published by Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service, IGEES, staff across government. During 2025, it produced policy analysis and expenditure evaluations on a broad range of topics, including disability services, social housing, migration and labour market trends, statutory sick leave, well-being, education, transport and youth participation. This analytical research has continued to play a key role in supporting evidence-based policymaking.

In addition, my Department continues to ensure evidence and analysis is at the centre of policymaking within the budgetary process. This is communicated through a range of publications including the annual expenditure report and the public service performance report, as well as our expenditure and policy evaluation papers across a range of topics.

In preparation for budget 2026, my Department undertook several pieces of analysis to support resource allocation. The public service performance report was published in June and it detailed how Departments performed against targets set in the Revised Estimates process. We published the national development plan review in July. We spoke about that previously. Importantly, we published the medium-term expenditure framework in September. This is a multiyear public expenditure planning exercise which supports assessment of the resource implications of future policy decisions over the period from 2025 to 2030.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Go raibh maith agat, a Aire, but let us focus on spending reviews and 2025, and not all the other things that have happened. The Government has a track record of wasting public money. We need look no further than the bike shed for an example of that. In previous years, spending reviews were published in the run-up to the budget. That did not happen this year. Why not? Why is the Minister suppressing these reports?

At the budgetary oversight committee, we were told by the Parliamentary Budget Office that about 50 spending reviews were carried out this year and that these were not published. Some 250 IGEES personnel worked on these spending reviews in every Department. It is a significant amount of work but we have not seen what is in these reviews. The public has a right to know what is in them. When will the Minister publish them? Is there something in these spending reviews the Minister does not want us to see? If not, will he commit now to publishing all spending reviews that have been carried out in 2025?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I reject that analysis. Much work across government and in the public service is delivering a significant number of projects on time and on budget. Flippant remarks about particular projects undermine the core work of many people who work across our system. It is important to balance the Deputy's remarks in that context. Since 2024, approximately 59 publications have been authored. In 2025, we have had the Intergenerational Dependence on Social Housing working paper from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage; the Review of Social Housing Delivery and Spend from my Department in January; the Supply and Demand of General Practice in Ireland report, which was published by the Department of Health; the Analytical Paper on the School Meals Programme, which was published in July; the Spending Review: Disability Residential Services report; and the Focused Policy Assessment: HSE Adult Disability Day Services report. I have a long list here which I can send to the Deputy of many papers published by IGEES, which is co-ordinated by my Department, as part of its work across government around spending reviews, value for money and providing policy analysis. There have been extensive publications. I could list many publications from this year, such as the well-being framework. They complement the medium-term expenditure framework, which was an extensive piece of work by the central expenditure division.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: How many spending reviews were carried out in 2025 that have not been published? That is the nub of my question. That is what I want to know. We have been told at the budgetary oversight committee that in the region of 50 spending reviews across Departments - a very significant body of work - have not been published. Can the Minister tell us how many spending reviews have been carried out this year, how many remain unpublished and when will he publish these spending reviews? They can provide an invaluable insight and analysis. There can be huge learnings from them. It is important information is shared with the public and that it is not suppressed. How many spending reviews have been carried out this year that the Minister has not published and when will he publish them?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I started listing a number of them that have been published. As I said, there have been 59 papers published since 2024. I am happy to send to the Deputy a list of the ones we have published.

Indeed, what has informed most of the work in the Department was the medium term expenditure framework, which did an expenditure analysis of the overall expenditure trends across Government. I am not sure if the Deputy has read it. It looked at the-----

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I am asking the Minister about the spending reviews he has not published.

Deputy Jack Chambers: It has been the most extensive detailed piece of work across many of the economists in the Department, looking at the expenditure trends for the past five years and at how we make the policy choices and trade-offs over the next five years, acknowledging some of what was referenced in the Department of Finance report yesterday in terms of changing demographics, the impact of climate change and-----

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Will the Minister publish the spending reviews that he has not published?

Deputy Jack Chambers: There are ongoing publications. Indeed, I regularly publish their respective reports. I am not sure who is giving the Deputy that analysis on reports not being published because-----

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The Parliamentary Budget Office.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----many of the IGEES reports are published.

I am not sure if the Deputy read the medium term expenditure framework. It is a comprehensive, cross-cutting cross-government report as a five-year backward-looking analysis on expenditure trends to inform expenditure for the next five years. It informs a lot of the work that we undertook as part of budget 2026 and will inform the medium-term structural and fiscal plan with the Minister, Deputy Donohoe.

EU Programmes

3. **Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation when he expects the mission critical communications system to be fully operational; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [60174/25]

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: My question today is about how we can strengthen our national resilience against future storms in the wake of Storm Éowyn and how new technologies can be used to better protect our communities. I want to ask the Minister of State when she expects the mission critical communications system to be fully operation and will she make a statement on the matter.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Emer Higgins): I thank the Deputy for this question. I am pleased to advise that officials are actively discussing the launch of the Irish component of the EU critical communications system with the European Commission with a view to Ireland becoming an early adopter of this.

I hope the Deputy will be pleased to know that six weeks ago Government launched a new mission critical communications system that was built by Vodafone in partnership with the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer. It has been set up to be able to help emergency services, such as An Garda Síochána, the Fire Service, the National Ambulance

Service, the Coast Guard, Civil Defence, to be able to communicate and co-ordinate effectively through more resilient challenges.

The Deputy mentioned Storm Éowyn. I suppose that identified communities, in particular, rural communities, and especially the island communities, which were vulnerable in a situation where our already resilient systems unfortunately were unable to perform because of power failure.

The mission critical communications system, which was under the EU resilience fund, was built as a system of systems to be able to make sure that our lines are fully resilient. We tested it in September. That happened in Westport. Both I and the Minister, Deputy Chambers, were delighted to be able to join emergency services' colleagues not only from Ireland but from across the EU, who together ran a live testing. It was a maritime scenario where they looked at a Coast Guard vessel that was five miles offshore and they were able to make sure they were able to receive real-time video streaming from an aircraft. This was done using satellite technology. It was done using satellite-enabled links that are designed to provide communication connectivity even if terrestrial networks fail.

It was successfully trialled. It is part of the broader European critical communications system. I can give the Deputy more information in my next contribution.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I thank the Minister of State. It is good to hear that it has been trialled and it is getting up and running. This system will build greater resilience in our emergency communications. As the Minister of State said, it is kind of a system of systems so it gives us a last resort in terms of response.

I referred to Storm Éowyn. We all know that storms are getting worse. All the weather records show that. Storm Éowyn is out on its own in terms of the impact on the west of Ireland and I suppose we are all so cognisant of the importance of communications during serious storms like that. Elderly and vulnerable members of the community were left without power but even longer without communications. We will be looking at that issue in the climate committee soon.

In terms of rolling out to community first responders, are they on the list? As the Minister of State will probably be aware, the National Ambulance Service co-ordinates a network of community first responders who are volunteers, who can do CPR, who can do defib and provide other services. It strikes me that they could be a good group to benefit from this in an emergency or a storm situation.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Deputy for that feedback. I will double-check but it is my understanding that they would well be able to use it. I met with members of the Civil Defence based in Mayo who were already part of that active trial and it is great to see that the community initiatives are also built into it.

For the Deputy's information, the European Commission is proposing to bring in legislation next year that will formulate that entire system. It is likely that will happen during the Irish EU Presidency. That will give us a great opportunity to influence this. Ireland will then co-ordinate with the European Commission to agree a date to have its sub-system in place. Components of the Irish system have already been deployed in recent years as part of the

recovery and resilience facility project 2.5 and the remaining components will be installed to meet whatever timeline is ultimately agreed with the European Commission. As I said, that is likely to happen on our watch, during the EU Presidency.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: It is positive that we can have an influence on that while we hold the Presidency of the Council. It is good to hear about Westport. Storm Éowyn was a west of Ireland problem in the main and testing the system off the west coast in Westport was a positive development. It would be great to keep the plan moving. We will no doubt hear more about it in due course in the context of the EU Presidency underpinning further work. I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Emer Higgins: Absolutely. It was fantastic to meet public health nurses from the HSE who advised that they had clients in rural island communities who were badly impacted by people's inability to communicate directly with emergency services or the ability of emergency services to co-ordinate. That is what this initiative will help to resolve.

Any systems deployed for the emergency services have strict requirements for both bandwidth and latency. That is to ensure the highest level of service is always achieved. From the time a radio call button is pressed by a garda anywhere in the country to when it is complete, it is less than 300 milliseconds. That is kind of critical component of infrastructure we are talking about.

To test the full capabilities of the 5G standards, the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer built a private 5G network core that implements the most recent standards for which the public protection and disaster relief, PPDR, services are deployed and tested. Those standards became known as mission critical communications. They will provide an equivalent feature set to that seen on the Trans-European Trunked Radio, TETRA, networks, for example, push-and-talk functionality in emergency situations.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Office of Public Works

4. **Deputy Barry Ward** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the position regarding a departmental review into the way in which the OPW manages projects to ensure value for money for the taxpayer; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [59380/25]

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Question No. 4 is being taken by Deputy Neville.

Deputy Joe Neville: My question is to ask the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the position regarding a departmental review into the way in which the OPW manages projects to ensure value for money for the taxpayer and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran): Securing value for money is a central priority for both this Government as well as the Office of Public Works, OPW. It is at the heart of all decision-making at every stage of a policy, project or programme's lifecycle, as it should be.

Securing value for money is both a priority as well as our duty. It is at the forefront of decision-making on all projects in the OPW, at all stages. The OPW is obliged to adhere to the robust guidance in place to treat public funds with due care and always ensure we pursue optimal value for money. I assure the Deputy that we take our responsibility and obligations very seriously.

The OPW takes a structured and thorough approach to delivering value for money across both its capital and current expenditure programmes, with the capital expenditure programme grounded in the principles and requirements of the infrastructure guidelines and adherence with the capital works management framework.

The capital works management framework aims to deliver cost certainty, better value for money and more efficient project delivery. This is achieved through standardised contracts, guidance notes and a structured approach to project management. The OPW follows this policy instrument to deliver compliant tender processes and construction projects, ensuring that projects achieve value for money, are delivered in an efficient manner, and meet the needs of Government and our clients across the system.

In addition, new guidance on capital works projects with an estimated value of less than €500,000 was fully implemented earlier this year. This guidance covers the approval and oversight for smaller capital works projects and will further strengthen project oversight, regardless of project size. All the recommendations of the internal audit report in March have now been implemented and are assisting in embedding additional value for money consideration and evidence across OPW projects.

Deputy Joe Neville: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. I raise this in the context of the OPW being an organisation that has its hands on many properties around the country and manages a huge portfolio of different properties. One that is closest to my heart is Castletown House, which has been a key amenity in the Leixlip-Celbridge area for a number of years, and has been a key focal point for the island. It had well over 1 million visitors in 2022. We do not have access in the same way and decisions were made at the time where it might have asked whether value for money was given in 2022. It was decided by the Minister at the time that we should not go ahead with the purchase of the land but, ultimately, we have to see where that lands in future. Costs have been incurred in that way since.

Taking that, and the bike shed located at the back of Leinster House, we think about the OPW and the cost overruns we have had in individual areas. I am a member of the public accounts committee, which the OPW will attend in a few weeks. I want to see what the answer is ahead of that because I am sure issues that came up in the past will come up again, no more than they do for any organisation.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: As the Deputy is aware, the OPW is a significant and large organisation with a wide-ranging remit. It is currently processing 100 flood scheme projects and maintains 11,500 km of channel and 800 km of earth embankments. It maintains over 2,000 properties, including offices, Garda stations, parks, gardens, heritage buildings, accommodation for over 50,000 civil servants, which is up by 15,000 over the last ten years, and over 500 office buildings nationwide. It deals with 38,000 client requests through the OPW help desk and with 15 million visitors a year, which is great for our touristed areas.

I assure the Deputy I will not be found wanting as the head of my Department. Since I came to the Department, I inherited the problem everyone mentions in relation to the bike shelter, but I assure the Deputy that rules and regulations have been brought in. With the Department and I working together, along with the chairman of the OPW, I am quite satisfied that what happened in the past will not happen in the future.

The Deputy raised a question on Castletown.

Deputy Joe Neville: I thank the Minister of State for his response and the way he spoke regarding his work in the Department since he came in. I know the questions and issues I raised were well before the time of his role with the OPW. It was in that context I raised this. One of the key issues that Fine Gael brought forward and raised ahead of the previous election was the view that we needed to look at the OPW to ensure that expenditure was spent, to my key point, in a way that ensured there was value for money for the taxpayer. All across what we do as a State, and why we stand up here, is ensuring the public gets value for money. We know the difficulties we have. The Minister for infrastructure and public infrastructure is here. The biggest single difficulty facing this country is delivery of infrastructure, notwithstanding how we go towards building housing. We need to get value for money across all areas. I am delighted to be able to raise that today in the context of the OPW.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: As the Deputy mentioned, I work closely with the Minister, Deputy Chambers. As I said, we brought in all these new rules and regulations. I am quite satisfied that as we go forward with the projects the OPW carries out, we will do them within budget and on time. We have a huge portfolio and an awful lot of areas. In some cases, we have to work with contracts. When I say that we "work with contracts", I mean that we could go into a site where we were to do work on a roof but discover halfway through there is more work to be done with that roof. Do we then stop the contract or the people doing the work? No, we have to continue on. I will continue to do that in the best interests of the public in terms of value for money.

I am working right across the board with all Departments, mostly with my own, to deliver value for money. That is the echo coming across from everybody in government. We have learned from the past but we have to move on. We cannot stop the progress of delivering for the people of Ireland. We talk here all day about infrastructure projects not getting going, but we cannot keep going back to the past. We have to learn from the past, which we have done, but we have to move forward and move forward together as a Government.

National Development Plan

5. **Deputy Emer Currie** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the progress to date under national strategic outcome 10 of the National Development Plan 2021-2030; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [60155/25]

33. **Deputy Emer Currie** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the progress to date under national strategic outcome 4 of the National Development Plan 2021-2030; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [60154/25]

Deputy Emer Currie: What is the progress to date under national strategic outcomes 10 and 4 of the NDP? I think I get some additional time for my supplementaries.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I propose to take Questions Nos. 5 and 33 together.

As Minister, I am responsible for setting overall capital allocations across Departments and for monitoring the relative expenditure and delivery at departmental level. In the national development plan review 2021, the Government originally committed €165 billion in capital investment for the period from 2021 to 2030, and subsequently agreed to additional funding of €2.25 billion in March 2024 for the period from 2024 to 2026. The revised national development plan, published in July, sets out €275.4 billion in public capital investment to 2035, which is the largest and most significant capital injection in our economy in the history of the State. Following the agreement in July of this year of the national development plan review, gross capital ceilings for all sectors have been set out to 2030.

While the Government has prioritised investment towards the critical growth-enabling sectors of housing, energy, water and transport, all Departments are now tasked with developing sectoral plans for the upcoming five years out to 2030. These plans will detail priority projects to be progressed, and Departments must ensure these are affordable within the overall capital expenditure ceilings, as agreed by the Government. These plans will be published in the coming weeks.

The Deputy referenced strategic outcomes 10 and 4. Strategic outcome 10 refers to access to quality childcare, education and health services. The Government has allocated €795 million to the Department of Children, Disability and Equality and €9.25 billion to the Department of Health for the 2026 to 2030 period. A range of projects have already been delivered under this since 2021, including, for example, a €6.9 billion investment in capital infrastructure for primary and post-primary schools resulting in 1,200 projects completed, many of which are in the Deputy's constituency; the establishment of 18 Sláintecare healthy communities in disadvantaged areas under the healthy Ireland framework; the Sláintecare healthy homes scheme, from which 4,500 people benefit; and the ongoing work in communities from a public health perspective.

National strategic outcome 4 relates to sustainable mobility and a commitment to a more environmentally sustainable public transport system. Given the nature of this strategic priority, many projects take a number of years to fully deliver. Transport has been highlighted and focused on as a critical growth-enabling area in the national development plan review. A total of €22.3 billion was allocated to the Department of Transport for the 2026 to 2030 period. A

further €2 billion was allocated to support low-carbon transportation projects, including projects such as MetroLink, under the national development plan review. Considerable progress has been made on a range of projects across the country under this objective since the 2021 review, including, for example, planning permissions for nine bus corridors under BusConnects Dublin; final network details for BusConnects Cork; planning permission for BusConnects Galway; planning implementation for BusConnects Limerick; and work is now ongoing on BusConnects Waterford. Over €320 million has been invested in walking and cycling projects through the active travel infrastructure programme.

Full lists of projects and programmes for each of the ten strategic outcomes are regularly published by my Department. The capital investment tracker provides a composite update on all major investments where there is an estimated project cost of over €20 million. There is a detailed map of each of the projects relating to each of the specific and strategic outcomes.

It is important to balance the conversation. We need to accelerate delivery, and we are fronting up on doing an extensive amount more on capital investment in our economy, but a huge amount has been delivered. We are seeing that in our school system in terms of social infrastructure. We are also seeing it with a lot of the public transport projects and continued investment in the road network, as well as the delivering of outcomes for bed capacity in our health system. We need to balance the conversation. A lot of infrastructure is being delivered but we want to do more and do it quicker.

Deputy Emer Currie: I thank the Minister for his update. I agree with him that a lot of delivery has taken place.

3 o'clock

I want to speak specifically about childcare, early learning and school-age care. I believe €795 million has been ring-fenced until 2030 for capital funding for the Department of Children, Disability and Equality. Over the last two years, €45 million was allocated to expand childcare capacity, which is positive. I think we all recognise that is not enough. In this year's budget, €36 million was set aside for 2026 to develop a new programme of acquisition and fit-out of State-led early years and school-age care settings to provide 700 additional places. We have the building blocks extension scheme, which will open in 2026 for extensions and modifications to deliver approximately 1,500 places. That is 2,200 places and it is still not where we need to be.

We have over 13,000 children under three on waiting lists, with infant places especially scarce due to a 35% drop in baby rooms over the term of the last Government. According to Dublin Chamber, 90% of firms claim a lack of affordable childcare is damaging recruitment and retention. Parents, primarily women, are struggling to return to work, as we know from talking to our constituents in Dublin West. This is an economic issue and an equality issue. It is biting and it is hurting families now. Childcare fees are still a second mortgage for families, particularly those whose fees have increased substantially because their crèches pulled out of core funding. We need a big vision of childcare but we also need big delivery. The Department of children is working on an action plan. Capital funding and infrastructure are absolutely key to that. Will the money be there to fund the delivery at the scale we need?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy. We both share the same constituency with a lot of young families. I share her objective of ensuring we develop more places and more opportunities to have childcare facilities and affordable childcare across our community and indeed in communities across the country. The Minister, Deputy Foley, is working with her allocation of €795 million over the next five years. Obviously, that includes children, equality and disability. She is working on a on a multiyear sectoral plan to set out specific steps and overall allocations in respect of some of the childcare schemes the Deputy referenced. As part of the budget, we agreed to continue. Obviously, the increased demand for childcare across our economy has had to be funded in the context of budget 2026. An additional 35,000 places under the national childcare scheme are being supported in that context.

We want to complement many of the smaller childcare providers that have developed their own capacity in communities across the country. Obviously, the State will be doing more and the sectoral investment plan for childcare will put the detail on that and provide the specific allocations. We have a wider vision on childcare in the programme for Government whereby we want to make progress across successive budgets when it comes to the affordability initiatives but also the capital allocations, which will be set out in the coming weeks.

Deputy Emer Currie: I accept that the Minister and the Department are working on the action plan for childcare. I am trying to ensure that the big thinking that is required to deliver childcare at the scale that we need is reflected in the NDP and will be ready to be activated to deliver the spaces that we desperately need. We need systemic change and a new model of childcare. I am looking for reassurance that there will be funding behind it to deliver those plans based on the ambitions that we have and that parents and families need at this point.

In relation to transport, we know DART+ West has cleared the legal challenges. I heard the Minister's update that the Department of Transport is working on funding envelopes for his Department. He said that those envelopes will become clear in the coming weeks. Does that mean that we will hear in the coming weeks that we will get the green light for funding for DART+ West and it can then commence work?

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Deputy and I are in agreement in lots of areas. DART+ West is a project that is not caught in the paralysis, the delays and bureaucracy. It is one that we can try to commence quickly. Where we have opportunities on public transport, we should be using the increased capital allocation from a transport perspective to get projects moving. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is working on the sectoral investment plan for the Department of Transport, working with TII and the National Transport Authority. DART+ West is a really good example of a project we need to advance over the coming years. A critical part of the transport sector investment plan will be setting out the timeline for that and putting the detail around that so we give clear certainty to the market about our intent. Trying to attract more international contractors will be critical so we have a broader transformation of public transport investment over the coming years. That will be a priority as part of the capital plan and it is also a priority in the existing national development plan.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy is looking for a date.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I know. Quickly.

Capital Expenditure Programme

6. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the way in which he plans to address delays in delivering capital projects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [59855/25]

Deputy Cathal Crowe: Will the Minister outline some of his plans to address the significant delays in delivering capital projects in the country?

Deputy Jack Chambers: In line with the commitments made in the programme for Government, a new infrastructure division has been established within my Department. Led by a deputy secretary general, this division is focused on how the delivery of critical infrastructure across the State can be accelerated. It comprises a blend of experienced civil servants and sectoral experts with direct experience in infrastructure delivery, many of whom have been redeployed into my Department from key State agencies.

The work of the infrastructure division is supported by the accelerating infrastructure task force, which I chair. This includes six independent experts with extensive infrastructure delivery experience, alongside six *ex officio* members drawn from commercial State bodies at the forefront of infrastructure development, as well as representatives from the local government sector.

The new division has recently undertaken a major exercise to systematically identify the most important barriers impeding the timely delivery of capital projects. As part of this work plan, officials met with over 50 key stakeholders involved in the development of infrastructure in our country and received nearly 170 formal responses to a public consultation exercise that was conducted in parallel. This was complemented by engagement events, including a session at the National Economic Dialogue and a regional event in Athlone in June.

Based on this consultation and research, we published the report on the emerging themes on the barriers to infrastructure in July. The report identified 12 key barriers to the timely delivery of infrastructure, spanning the regulatory environment, planning and legal frameworks, and internal government systems. It highlights the urgent need for infrastructure delivery systems that are fit for purpose, efficient and economically viable.

The infrastructure division, in close collaboration with the task force, is now preparing the final report and an action plan to address these barriers. I will present this report to Government in the coming weeks. It will outline a series of targeted, high-impact reforms designed to address all the identified barriers and to deliver critical infrastructure more quickly across the economy with a clear focus on reducing timelines and improving outcomes.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: They say every day is a learning day. Recently, I was back in University Hospital Limerick with other politicians looking at a new ward system, a new 96-bed block, a five-storey building. Angela Coll of the Ennis hospital committee was recently in the Minister's office, where the three of us had a good discussion. When I spoke to clinicians that day, they were delighted with this five-storey building and the 96-bed block. However, they made the point that another one is needed and probably even three. I made the point that

we should build up and instead of going to five stories, go to ten or 12 storeys. I wrongly believed that there was some planning barrier to this. They told me it was because of the €200 million spending cap. That is just ludicrous because it becomes more costly to go back and build a new one and another one. I take some hope and solace from the fact that the Minister has not finalised his plans yet. When it comes to healthcare, particularly in the mid-west region where there is a healthcare apartheid, I appeal to the Minister to raise the cap so that when we are building a new block, we go higher, we go bigger and we build as many wards with as many beds as we need, not just as many as we can afford to do at that particular time.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I know the critical need to deliver more beds in the mid-west region. Following the HIQA report, it is important that we do that in the context of the new allocation to the Department of Health and as part of the national development plan. I agree with much of what the Deputy has said. The guidelines, as they are, are probably too conservative and there is a need for reform. That is why we want to go higher, bigger and quicker when it comes to infrastructure and planning for it, be it in the context of bed capacity, social infrastructure or critical economic infrastructure. Rebalancing regulation and removing some of the barriers, steps and internal systems will all be part of the report. These are practical steps that narrow timelines but also rebalance risk. Increasing the risk appetite is critical if we want to deliver more social and economic infrastructure. It is a matter of backing public servants to make the decisions and get on with doing what we know is required, be it in terms of healthcare infrastructure or water, energy, transport and housing infrastructure across our economy.

There are too many constraints that promote a culture of risk aversion. Risk aversion permeates the system, and that is why we have long lists and not delivery now. Part of what we are doing in our infrastructure reforms is cutting a lot of that out, addressing and reforming internal systems and really focusing on delivery. We will be able to set out the detail and the timelines that will shorten as a result of the changes we are going to make.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: The whole system is very impractical. When you want to build a new 96-bed block, it is not just foundations you are building; you are digging down, tanking out a whole basement floor and then going up five or six storeys. The upper floor must be load-bearing, so it can take more units and wards if required. All the services, including sewerage, water and electricity services, are then introduced but then you have to stop because the ceiling is reached. That is totally impractical. It does not meet patient needs and is not achieving the value we should obtain from public expenditure. One has to go all the way through the planning process again and build another block. From public healthcare and public spending points of view, we need to deal with this.

I spoke to an official in the Department recently and he told me that back in the recessionary years, gateways were introduced. It was a way of slowing down projects without killing them off. Let us take out the gateways for all the public projects. There should be only three or four stages from conception and planning to funding and, eventually, building. We do not need additional gateways involving analysing and re-analysing. What these inevitably do is raise the cost, and that is the last thing we want.

I thank the Minister for his engagement. I have faith in him. He is going to make proposals in the coming weeks but they need to be practical ones that address this matter.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I agree the proposals need to be practical, quick and make an impact on the wider delivery of economic and social infrastructure. The guidelines the Deputy referred to, which have multiple gateways, need to be reformed and changed. There is too much circular analysis, which in many instances does not add value and adds time. That is why there is going to be change. Some of the reforms we will be introducing will be practical steps that will reduce the time and help deliver infrastructure better.

The Deputy is correct that when developing a site, there should be better intensification and use of it, particularly if it is a hospital site that has only a limited amount of land available and potential future needs. We will be able to detail actions that will make a genuine difference and practical steps we can control within internal systems in government and the State, and then ensure we promote reform. Reform is as important as the allocations around expenditure policy. The obsession in this House is often who gets what and how much. Reform is the most important aspect of resolving issues with infrastructure delivery and rebalancing excessive regulation that is not adding value and is holding back growth. That is what I intend to do.

Public Procurement Contracts

7. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the way in which the incorrectly spelled new sign outside his Department came to be put in place; the total cost of the sign; the estimated cost for the removal and a replacement sign; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [60171/25]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I wish to ask the Minister about the way in which the incorrectly spelled new sign outside his Department came to be put in place, what the total cost of the sign was and the estimated cost for its removal and replacement. I hope the cost is at the lower end. Nobody has made more mistakes than me, and I know a printer who often said, “I print what I am given”, but we would need to see checks and balances. We do not want to see issues like this arise in the future.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Following the change of name of my Department upon the formation of the Government, a procurement process was undertaken to replace the Department’s signage at the Government Buildings complex. After the new signage had been installed, it was noted that one word had been misspelt. The external supplier of the signage confirmed that it made this error when producing it and has replaced the signage at no additional cost.

The Department of Finance undertook the procurement on behalf of my Department in the context of shared facilities services between the two Departments. While we have not yet received an invoice, the quoted price for the original design, manufacture and installation of the external signage at the entrances was €8,460, excluding VAT. I highlight again that there was no additional cost associated with rectifying the supplier’s error.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It cost €8,460 but there was no added cost because the mistake was at the supplier’s end. I suppose that answers the question.

Obviously, there are wider questions on Government spending. These questions, concerning bike sheds, IT systems and the Revenue bill in the Minister's Department, have almost been done to death here. We must spend public money wisely and have more checks and balances than existed in the past.

I am very glad nobody in the Department was responsible for the signage error. I would not like to have been responsible myself. Obviously, we are talking about something that is costly. I can work on the basis that the Minister sent the printer the correct name and it printed it incorrectly. It was rather costly for it. Could the Minister speak about the due diligence needed to ensure less public waste than we have seen previously?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I have set out the position. Very few Ministers are directly sending items for procurement or are directly involved in the procurement process. When this emerged, the facts were established. The signage is being replaced at no additional cost. Ensuring value for money and financial management are critical in all elements of public expenditure management.

At a wider level, we are reviewing public financial procedures to strengthen accountability and fiscal discipline across government when it comes to the medium-term fiscal and structural plans. Public servants take this very seriously. To give balance to much of what is said here, there are many good projects delivered by people who believe in our public service and do deliver, in many cases on budget and on time, across many sectors in our economy. It is important to balance that with the concerns the Deputy has raised over the need to deliver quicker. A bigger part of the infrastructure conversation is the need to address risk aversion in decision-making, whereby we have lists but not delivery. Better risk appetite regarding capital infrastructure will be a part of the reforms we will have to introduce.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I hope it was not ominous that it was "Infrastructure" that was spelt incorrectly. I think it was missing an "r".

I welcome what the Minister has said. There are many public servants doing really good work. Generally, what we are asking in here is that public procurement and planning work better and in a more streamlined way so we can see the delivery of more projects. I accept that checks and balances can sometimes slow things. We have heard what was said by Mr. Collison and others and we need a balance between having checks and balances and being able to deliver quickly.

Sometimes when going through public procurement, suppliers take into account who is paying, and that needs to be pushed back on. Again, however, it is a matter of streamlining and ensuring everything happens fast, because we know the issues that exist, particularly regarding electricity, water and other major infrastructural projects that need to be completed.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The relevant Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, is doing extensive work on procurement reform. She has led extensive engagement across the country with SMEs and businesses on how we can have better engagement in the tendering process to have more competition and participation by SMEs. There are reforms happening at EU level as part of that too. All elements of streamlining are our focus so as to deliver infrastructure better across our economy and also provide value for citizens regarding what is delivered. The Minister of

State, Deputy Higgins, is advancing procurement reforms, which we hope to publish by the end of the year.

Question No. 8 taken with Written Answers.

Flood Risk Management

9. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation his plans to improve the management of the River Shannon; his plans to tackle the issue of flooding in the Shannon Callows; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [59983/25]

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: The Shannon flood risk State agency co-ordination group was established by the Government in 2016 to enhance the ongoing co-operation of all State agencies involved with the River Shannon and to introduce co-ordinated solutions that may have a benefit in managing flood risk in the Shannon catchment. The group is focused on prioritising actions and activities that can help manage flood risk along the River Shannon.

A programme of strategic maintenance for 24 sites along the River Shannon has been approved by the group and Waterways Ireland is carrying out this work on its behalf. I announced that funding of €2 million is available for such maintenance. I have asked my officials to engage with other key stakeholders along the Shannon to identify further sites that they believe may require maintenance.

The group approved the appointment of an ecological consultant to carry out high-level environmental studies in relation to a proposed project of the removal of pinch points along the Shannon Callows. The findings of this study highlight that significant environmental assessment is required to fully assess the impact of any such project. The group has established a dedicated working group to consider next steps, including the consideration of further options to address flood risk on the Shannon Callows.

In 2016, the group agreed to introduce the protocol to reduce the levels on Lough Allen. The ESB has obtained a section 21 licence under the wildlife Acts from the National Parks and Wildlife Service to continue with the temporary operation of the protocol to reduce the lake levels on Lough Allen for this coming winter period.

The group also produces an annual work programme to identify extensive work and the co-ordination under way to manage the Shannon. The plan encompasses phase works, maintenance, management, policy and planning.

The group's website, rivershannongroup.ie, was recently launched. The website contains information on the significant programme of flood relief schemes that the OPW is progressing in partnership with local authorities. This programme protects communities in the Shannon catchment and provides real-time information on the management of water levels by ESB and Waterways Ireland. Minutes of the meetings of the group and plans can also be found on the website.

I remain fully committed to working with the group and key stakeholders to improve the management of flood risk on the River Shannon.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: As the Minister of State knows, the ongoing flooding on the Shannon Callows is causing huge issues for farmers and landowners. It is a problem that is getting worse and worse each year as time goes by. It is having a severe impact on the livelihoods of the people affected. There are hundreds of families affected by this and it has caused devastation. For example, in 2023, farmers lost everything as land was flooded through the summer. In recent weeks, there has been severe flooding again, impacting on land and livestock. People in the local area feel that this problem is now almost out of control. They are frustrated as they do not believe strong enough efforts have been taken to tackle this situation. In particular, there has been a lack of investment between Meelick and Athlone to take out the pinch points and a lack of ongoing river maintenance to get the situation under control. A reduction in the water levels of the lakes along the Shannon, such as Lough Allen, Lough Derg and Lough Ree, should be looked at, especially at times when we can expect a lot of rain. Will the Minister of State outline any specific plans in this regard?

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I did outline plans, Deputy. As I said, a total of 24 strategic maintenance works will be carried out over the next number of months. Since I resumed my role in the Office of Public Works, I have put forward a number of changes, particularly with regard to the minor works scheme, where local authorities play a key role. I changed the criteria from €750,000 to €2 million. That gives a greater role for the local authority to come to my Department to seek funding to do works, particularly for the areas mentioned in the Deputy's question.

I know the issues regarding the River Shannon at first hand. I know the trauma they cause people. I must also point out, as the Deputy mentioned, that the area of Athlone and Meelick is almost flat. It is only a foot of a fall. We are after having so much rain over the last number of days and levels are rising. I understand the concern from the farmers up and down the callow system, but I assure the Deputy that I am doing everything within my power, working with the agencies that are involved, to alleviate the problem for people.

It is not easy. Climate change is having a real effect. People talk about what has happened over 40 years, but 40 years on, we see the difference from climate change and the effect it has had. I am working, and continue to work, with all agencies but particularly with the farming community along the Shannon. If you look at what we have done from Athlone right down to Limerick and all the flood schemes that are in place, that is enormous, as are the other works being carried out.

I also should say to the Deputy that I announced a vegetation blockage and cleaning scheme. Funding can be sought from my Department for such works. That is open.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I appreciate the Minister of State's response and commitment to this. Obviously, the issue is that this problem is continuing to get worse and my constituents who are speaking to me do not feel that enough is being done to maintain the river to address those pinch points to get water levels under control. I know that the Minister of State is meeting with the Save our Shannon Organisation, which represents local people affected by this, in the coming days or weeks. These people know the river better than anyone, having lived and worked alongside it for years. They have an important stake and voice in this and, crucially, they want to be at the table where decisions are being made. They need to be included in the Shannon flood risk agency co-ordination group, which is chaired by the Minister of State. They

should not be excluded from this group when they are the ones most affected by this flooding. Will this be facilitated? Can the Save our Shannon Organisation be included in that group?

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I have responsibility for the Shannon from one end to the other. I meet many different groups and I understand fully where everyone is coming from. As I said to the Deputy at the outset, we all have to work together. The flooding of the Shannon onto a flat surface is a major problem arising from climate change. I met the group the Deputy mentioned after taking up my role. I will meet it again next week and I will set out what we are going to do over the next number of months.

When I was in government previously, I undertook huge changes to the Shannon in terms of strategic maintenance. We put machines on the river when a machine had not been on the river for a great number of years, or ever. As the former Deputy Denis Naughten said, there had not been one since Queen Victoria left. We achieved it and we did it. I can honestly say that in my five years of absence, very little machine work happened on the Shannon, but I am now back at the helm and I will work to make sure we deliver. I will try to work with the local community, particularly the farmers.

I have a role to play from one end of the Shannon to the other. The changes I have made are significant in bringing forward and helping local businesses, the local farming community and householders. We all need to work together. Everyone is jumping up and down on social media blaming the OPW and the Government. The Minister on my right has given me the money to do the work, but there are environmental things I must adhere to. The Deputy knows that if I went in and did the opposite, like what happened in Lough Funshinagh, we would back to the drawing board and nothing would get done. It is about us all working together with the Save our Shannon Organisation and every other organisation to deliver for the communities.

Public Spending Code

10. **Deputy Barry Ward** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the position regarding guidelines and instructions provided to all Departments to ensure strict and transparent control of capital spending budgets; if these guidelines will be made publicly available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [59379/25]

Deputy Peter Roche: The Government has made repeated commitments to improve transparency and tighten controls around how Departments manage their spending or budgeting. This is essential to maintaining public trust in our ability to deliver value for money when using taxpayers' funds. We understand that the updated regulations are to be introduced to guide how funding needs to be allocated or spent. Will the Minister clarify when these updated guidelines will be issued and whether they will be publicly available?

Deputy Jack Chambers: The review of the national development plan published in July represents the largest capital investment and injection in our economy in the history of the State. As part of the NDP review, the Government agreed substantive annual sectoral allocations for 2026 to 2030 and overall Government capital ceilings to 2035. The review sets out total public capital investment of €275.4 billion to 2035. This comprises €202.4 billion in

Exchequer voted capital from 2026 to 2035. Of this, €102.4 billion is being allocated for the next five years, which is an additional €24 billion on what was previously allocated. A further €10 billion in equity and fund releases is being provided for strategic megaprojects in water, energy and transport. This brings the total additional capital investment to €34 billion for the period to 2030.

My Department is responsible, as the Deputy mentioned, for the infrastructure guidelines, which replaced the public spending code for capital appraisal since the end of 2023. These set the value for money requirements and guidance for evaluating, planning and managing Exchequer-funded capital projects. Management and delivery of investment projects and public services within allocation and within the national frameworks is a key responsibility of every Department, Accounting Officer and Minister. Capital spend is monitored, valued and reviewed each month. Actual spend is compared to the budgeted voted allocation and any variances require an explanation to be submitted to the relevant Vote section in my Department.

Capital sanction is provided to Departments in line with the public financial procedures. Any proposed expenditure that does not fall within the scope of the capital sanction must be submitted to my Department for review and sanction must be sought before any expenditure can occur. Failure to seek and obtain the sanction of my Department may result in a line Department becoming liable to a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General and subject to examination by the Committee of Public Accounts.

It is also important to highlight, as also set out in the public financial procedures, the role of the Accounting Officer for each Department, which is central in terms of accountability, delivery, propriety and ensuring value for money. Each Accounting Officer is personally responsible for the safeguarding of public funds and property under his or her control, for the regularity of all the transactions in each appropriation account and for the efficiency and economy of administration in his or her Department.

I know I am running out of time, but I will set out further details.

Deputy Peter Roche: I thank the Minister for the comprehensive response. It is fair to say that now more than ever, the public expects transparency and accountability in how public funds are spent. People want to know not just where their money is going, but how decisions are made and whether they deliver value for money. We are very fortunate to be in a position where we can invest in infrastructure, services and innovation, but with that comes a responsibility to ensure that every euro is spent wisely. Clear and consistent budgeting practices across Departments are essential to maintaining public trust and delivering outcomes that benefit communities across the country. I hope that these forthcoming guidelines will strengthen that trust and provide clarity for both Departments and the general public.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We will reform some of the infrastructure guidelines. Some of that is intended to try to remove some of the excessive time that projects take as they move through the infrastructure life cycle. Also central to wider expenditure control will be a reform of public financial procedures and ensuring for certain Departments that we need to have better fiscal discipline in terms of overall expenditure management. Accountability is central there when it comes to Departments or agencies under their remit. We have commenced a review of the public financial procedures. We will be able to set out further direction on the infrastructure

guidelines when we publish the task force report. All of that is intended to deliver more, but also to ensure that we have accountability and oversight around overall spending of public funds.

Deputy Peter Roche: The Minister's response has been reassuring. Like many others, I feel responsible in many ways if there is any guessing or dispute around how moneys are spent. I really welcome that. I am reassured by the Minister's responses.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: As there are no further Deputies offering, that concludes questions.

Is féidir teacht ar Cheisteanna Scríofa ar www.oireachtas.ie.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 3.34 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 3.49 p.m..

Sitting suspended at 3.34 p.m. and resumed at 3.49 p.m.

International Protection Processing and Enforcement: Statements

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): Both I and the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, very much welcome the opportunity to discuss in Dáil Éireann the processing and enforcement of international protection. It is important to emphasise what, in fact, is meant by "international protection". It is sometimes confused with other areas of immigration. "International protection" is the term that we use to describe those people who come to countries such as Ireland, or indeed any other country, because they say that they are fleeing persecution or war. It derives from the 1951 Geneva Convention, which was put in place in the aftermath of the Second World War when we saw very many examples of people being persecuted in countries or having to flee war because of events outside their control. When we talk about international protection, we are talking about the term that is used for the purpose of describing individuals fleeing war and persecution.

The term "international protection" became common in usage within the European Union. For the purpose of trying to identify what are the laws in Ireland governing international protection, I refer people to the International Protection Act 2015. As Members will be aware, that legislation, in effect, transposes into Irish law the directives and regulations in respect of international protection that were agreed to and introduced by the European Union. It is important at the outset that we understand by "international protection".

The reason I wanted to make that opening comment is international protection is only an element, a proportion, of immigration into Ireland. We need to put the numbers of people coming in and claiming asylum into the context of the general figures for immigration in Ireland. In doing that, and in forming that context, I always go back to the population of the island that existed 185 years ago in 1840. The population of Ireland before the Famine was 8 million. The devastation of the Famine is evident from the fact that today on the island of Ireland we have not yet got back to those figures.

What we have noticed in recent years, and this is particularly aligned with our economic success and the attractiveness of Ireland as a country, is that immigration has increased significantly. If I had to choose between the population of Ireland going up or down, I would favour the former. We saw what happened for many years when the population was declining and it can destroy a country.

On immigration generally, I would like to put on the record some of the statistics in respect of the numbers of people who came into Ireland so we can assess the numbers of people coming in and claiming international protection. The Central Statistics Office, CSO, produces finely tuned statistics on the matter. For the year ending April 2024, the CSO recently recorded that 149,200 people immigrated into Ireland. Of those, 30,000 were returning Irish citizens, 27,000 were other EU citizens, 5,400 were UK citizens and approximately 86,800 were citizens of other countries, including Ukraine. I will return to that issue presently. Those were the numbers who came into Ireland. Of course, people leave each year. Approximately 70,000 people left Ireland in the year ending April 2024. Those consisted of 34,700 Irish citizens, 10,600 other EU citizens, 3,000 UK citizens and 21,500 other citizens, including Ukrainians.

It is important to set out those figures for the numbers coming to and leaving Ireland before we come to assess and appraise the figures in respect of international protection. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of people coming into Ireland were approximately 3,000 to 4,000 each year. The numbers obviously dropped significantly in 2020 and 2021 because of the travel ban and the impact of Covid restrictions. I think 1,500 and 2,500, respectively, came into Ireland in 2020 and 2021. There was then a significant increase in the numbers coming in in 2022 and 2023. In fact, in each of those years 13,500 people arrived to Ireland claiming international protection. In 2024, 18,500 people arrived to Ireland claiming international protection. During 2022, 2023 and 2024, in the region of 44,000 or 45,000 people came into Ireland and claimed international protection.

At the same time, we were also providing temporary protection to people who were fleeing the war in Ukraine. I will not go into the details of the distinction between temporary protection and international protection but obviously it is known that when it comes to temporary protection, people similarly are entitled to come here for that purpose. A significant number of people came into Ireland claiming either international protection or permanent protection on the basis of what was happening in Ukraine and, indeed, what was happening internationally.

I just wanted to set those statistics in context because it is important that we do not allow the discussion about international protection to be viewed solely as the cause of immigration in Ireland or as what it is being generated by; it is not. There is a whole variety of other reasons people are coming into Ireland. Most of them are coming in to work. The Minister of State has responsibility for the visa systems. Last year, we issued approximately 150,000 visas for people to come to Ireland, many of them to work. Many of them come for holidays and the short term. It is important that we understand and get a sense of the proportion of people coming here to seek international protection in the context of general immigration.

What does, however, distinguish international protection applications from other individuals who are coming to Ireland on a work or holiday visa is that in the context of international protection, we have obligations to fulfil. The two most prominent obligations are to provide a place of accommodation for people who come here claiming international protection and to process their applications. The reason we have to do that is that it is not the case that simply

because somebody claims to be entitled to international protection, they are so entitled. Every country in the European Union and the world has a system in place for the purpose of appraising and assessing those applications to determine whether they are valid or should be rejected. In each European Union country, there is an obligation to provide an appeal mechanism. People who are rejected at first instance must be given the capacity for appeal. Unquestionably, what puts tension and pressure on the Irish system of governance is the fact that we must provide accommodation. When, prior to Covid, we were processing 2,000, 3,000 or 4,000 applications per year, we are able to do so. In fact, the criticism at the time was that direct provision centres were not suitable enough and needed to be improved, and unquestionably they did. That was the political argument at that stage. In 2022, 2023 and 2024, because of the numbers arriving in, there was a crisis in the system. That is unquestionably the case and neither I or the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, would have any hesitancy in saying that the surge in numbers created a crisis. It was extremely difficult to provide accommodation for every person. In fact, in truth, we were not able to provide accommodation for everyone. That is the important architecture in understanding the system of international protection.

I also want to say something at this stage, in parenthesis if I can, about events that have taken place over the past two weeks. We have seen some reprehensible acts over the past two weeks. I mention them not just for the purpose of condemnation but also for the purpose of communicating a message. We saw approximately two weeks ago an allegation of serious sexual assault against a child being made against a person who had applied for international protection and had been refused but was still being accommodated within an International Protection Accommodation Services, IPAS, centre. We then saw serious acts of violence and rioting committed against members of An Garda Síochána and attempts were made to attack and cause damage to the centre in Citywest. Last weekend, we saw the reprehensible act of an individual trying to set a building on fire in the knowledge that there were people in that building. Let us be honest about it: that was an attempted murder if ever I saw one, in terms of the consequences of a fire going up on that stairwell.

4 o'clock

I refer to those three reprehensible acts because it is extremely important that in this House we do not allow that extreme behaviour or the criminal acts of others to dictate our policy when it comes to international protection. I know all of us in this House will be outraged by the acts I have recounted. I urge people to ensure we do not allow extremists and people involved in criminal activity to dictate and mould how we will respond in terms of policy to the issues raised in respect of international protection. It is important not only that we condemn those acts but also that we do not permit the individuals who were behind perpetrating them to have any belief that their actions will mould or change our behaviour.

In terms of the processing of international protection applications, it is obviously the case that if 18,500 people come to Ireland claiming international protection, as was the case last year, it will be a very significant job to process those applications. That processing is done by my Department through the International Protection Office, IPO. Each individual who comes to Ireland and claims asylum, or international protection as it is more formally called, will have an interview in the IPO. Their account will be appraised by an officer and a determination will be made in respect of it. My predecessor started the process of improving the numbers within the IPO and I commend her on doing so. There were 143 IPO staff in 2019 and I am pleased

to say that today there are 620, which is an increase of 334%. It is extremely important for people who come and make an application for international protection to have their applications dealt with promptly. It is fairer for them to have their applications dealt with promptly and it is fairer for the Irish system as well. We have seen an increase in the number of staff at the IPO, but we also seen an increase in the use of ICT and technology. It is now a paperless office. The Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, and I have visited the IPO and we have seen that it is run extremely efficiently. We can see the benefit of further investment in the IPO in the numbers of decisions it is making each year. Last year it delivered 14,000 first decisions, compared with 8,500 in 2023. Already this year we have seen 16,600 decisions. I am confident that by the end of this year we will see the IPO produce 20,000 decisions. This is achieving the policy objective that the Minister of State and I have set. We want to see applications determined more quickly and efficiently.

Later this year or early next year I will bring a new international protection Bill before the House. It will seek to put in place a requirement, imposed on me, on my office and on the appeals process, that we determine applications within a period of 12 weeks. That is something people may think cannot be achieved but I am pleased to tell this House that since July of this year we have been running a pilot project within the IPO and the International Protection Appeals Tribunal, IPAT, which has been assessing applications from three countries - Georgia, Brazil and India - to see whether we can fulfil our time obligations that will kick in during June of next year. I am pleased to say that pilot has been successful. We have seen over 300 decisions from applicants from those countries which have gone through first stage, the appeals stage, and in many instances deportation orders signed, within a period of 12 weeks. Let us be clear that the policy objective of the Government is to ensure that by the middle of June 2026, applications for international protection made after that date will be processed extremely quickly; within 12 weeks, including the appeals process. I think that is a fair system. I know others in the House may think it is unfair to process applications with such speed but I disagree. My view, and the policy I am seeking to set out, is that it is fairer on everyone concerned if we can get a determination in respect of applications promptly and within the 12-week period.

A person who brings an application before the IPO has an entitlement to appeal a decision to IPAT. At the end of 2024 there were 9,700 appeals pending; as of now there are nearly 17,000 appeals pending. We are getting through the appeals faster this year than last year. The number of appeals pending is increasing because of the number of people who arrived during the previous three years. I also recently announced that Ireland has signed an operational plan with the European Agency for Asylum, EUAA. I know this will provide us with great support. Under the agreement, up to 30 new personnel from that association will assist us in our supports. That is about the processing of international protection applications.

I cannot ignore the fact that approximately 81% of applications are rejected at first instance. Approximately 70% to 76% of those refusals are appealed but even on appeal, only 25% to 30% of appeals are granted. I cannot shy away from the fact that the majority of people who apply for international protection are refused. I know some people in this House do not want to say that and they do not have to say that. I am not requiring them to do so. As Minister for justice, along with the Minister of State with responsibility for migration, Deputy Brophy, I cannot shy away from that. We would be remiss in our duties if we were to do so. When that happens, the question that must arise is what happens to people who have gone through the system and have been told they are not entitled to international protection. What should happen

to them? The remedy is that we serve them with deportation orders. If it were the case that everyone who applies can stay, regardless of whether they are successful or unsuccessful, we would not be able to cope with the numbers who would come to Ireland. I want to be frank about what would happen if we were to adopt such a policy.

I think everyone in this House realises that there has to be a consequence when somebody is refused international protection. There is a consequence under the policy we are operating. Already this year, I have issued nearly 4,000 deportation orders and approximately 1,700 people have been removed from Ireland through voluntary returns, enforced deportations, deportations on charter flights or deportations on commercial flights. It is not something from which the Minister of State or I derive pleasure, but we would be neglecting our very serious responsibilities if we did not seek to do it. Voluntary return is the mechanism we prefer to ensure people will accept an assisted offer to go back. The message has to be delivered fairly unambiguously that if people apply for international protection, are refused and are served with a deportation order, they must leave the country. Already this year, up to 31 October, I have signed 3,877 deportation orders and 1,770 people have had their departures confirmed through these pathways.

Deputies will ask how it can happen that somebody with a deportation order can still be in the country. I think Deputy McDonald raised this issue in respect of the suspect who was arrested following the alleged sexual assault in Citywest. When a deportation order is issued, it gives a person a certain period of time to leave the country. There are mechanisms whereby he or she can seek to appeal that order, and there are mechanisms that can have an impact in delaying giving effect to the deportation order. On many occasions it is to the advantage of the Department and me to have people who have deportation orders present in an international protection accommodation centre. We know they are there. Recent charter flights I have directed have been assisted by the fact we knew where the people with the deportation orders were. They were in an international protection accommodation services, IPAS, centre and we could remove them because of that. I do not profess to say that this is an easy issue; it is not. It is complex. The Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, and I are seeking to say that there is a rules-based system and if people comply with the rules, they will be satisfactorily responded to by Ireland.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Colm Brophy): Along with the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, I will start by addressing the terrible arson attack that took place in Drogheda over the weekend. Our thoughts are with the families impacted by this. It was an attack on an IPAS centre but it was actually an attack on their home. It is truly awful to see something like that happen to someone's home. My thoughts are also with the victim of the alleged sexual assault in Saggart recently. I also want to commend An Garda Síochána members who so bravely defended the peace in Citywest when faced with such abhorrent behaviour. We put our trust in the justice process to deliver due process over the coming months.

As we start this debate, we have seen the discourse on migration that has become increasingly fraught across the world. Here in Ireland we are not immune to the impact of this polarised debate. The incidents in Drogheda and Citywest show the extent to which this is impacting communities. We have seen anti-immigrant protests on our streets. We have seen attacks on international protection accommodation. We have seen attacks on international protection

accommodation where people knew that women and children were staying. We have seen the dire consequences of the anti-migrant rhetoric in and the shocking racist attacks on our minority communities. The Government is determined to combat such racist crime and protect vulnerable communities.

The vast majority of Irish people are, I believe, positive towards migration because we know the value of migration to Ireland. Migration benefits our economy, our public services, our infrastructure and has made Ireland a pluralist and more open society. The Government is operating under a clear and co-ordinated strategy to manage immigration in what I want to see, as does the Minister, as a firm, fair and effective way, in a rules-based system. The programme for Government provides a commitment to developing a new migration and integration strategy for Ireland detailing how we intend to meet the demands and the opportunities facing our society and economy over the next decade. This strategy is being led by my Department with support from across Government and we plan to publish it in 2026. It is important to point out that this is the first time such a strategy has been undertaken and we are determined that our approach to migration is rules based, planned and coherent.

The Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan, has gone through in some detail the significant reforms ongoing in the international protection process. This is being done through ongoing legislative reforms, investment in our processing capacity, and particularly with our enhanced co-operation with our EU partners. We are addressing our international obligations and the legitimate concerns of communities across the country.

The programme for Government also contains strong commitments on consultation with communities about local services and integration, and to improved communications on migration and integration. Yes we do accept that we need to improve this. There have been failings in the past and we need to see more improvement in this area. The community engagement team in my Department has a role to share information, to engage, to listen and to help communities prepare for new arrivals. They are doing an excellent job. It is important in these engagements to balance our discussions between recognising the need for urgent shelter for people who are in very vulnerable situations and who are legally entitled to it, and to also recognise the needs and sincerely-held concerns of communities.

By necessity, the work of the community engagement team has to date focused on the opening of new accommodation centres. Some of these engagements have been a simple sharing of relevant information through the relevant channels while in some centres it has involved far more detailed meetings with local community groups, local officials, local public representatives, national representatives and other key stakeholders. This work has involved the provision of briefing notes, the organisation of information sessions and responding to queries from both community organisations and public representatives. It has also involved strategic engagement with key Departments and agencies, local government and civil society organisations. It is vitally important that this work continues and that the community engagement team continues to strengthen engagement at local community level.

Our overall strategic approach is intended to reduce the scale of the demand for accommodation. We want to see the proportion of accommodation provided on State-owned sites increase, with the objective of developing an accommodation system with a reduced reliance on commercial provision. I believe, as does the Minister, that it is particularly important that we move to that process of, by and large, having State-owned facilities so we

can provide the best value for money and services: services to the people in those centres and services to the communities that surround them and the best value for money for Irish taxpayers.

I also want to introduce a contribution model for people in international protection accommodation. In this regard, a proposal was considered by the Cabinet subcommittee on migration this week, which came from the Minister and me. The programme for Government included a commitment to introduce such a system. It is expected that the proposals will now be developed and timelines for implementation will be finalised and brought to Government in the coming weeks. While I appreciate that this has been a proposal that was there previously, the Minister and I have worked tirelessly on this over the past weeks to ensure we can bring this proposal to Government in the next few weeks. Not all applicants in centres are working but many are. I believe it makes sense that people who are working and paying income tax would make a contribution towards the cost of their accommodation. It is only fair. The system I want is a system based on fairness. If a person is working in a factory, in a shop or in a tech company, and they are working alongside somebody who is paying for their rent at the end of the month, then there is no reason that person, if he or she has an income, should not be making a contribution to their own accommodation.

I want to move on now to the area of removals. Part of an effective immigration system needs to be an effective returns system. We are working at national level and with EU partners on this. The proposal for a new returns regulation, as presented at European Union level, would establish a common European system for returns with the aim of a swifter, simpler and more effective returns procedure across the EU, while fully respecting fundamental rights. This proposed new legal framework is a complementary measure to the EU Migration and Asylum Pact. It is the Government's preference that Ireland is part of the new returns measure. Officials in my Department are continuing to engage with European colleagues to determine the most appropriate means for Ireland's participation. Any decision to participate would be made following the approval of the Oireachtas. My Department firmly believes that it is in the mutual interest of all member states and Schengen-associated countries to ensure as broad a level of participation as possible to reduce fragmentation to ensure coherence and support operational effectiveness across the Union.

As Ireland continues to show its active engagement and involvement in the European Union, I believe that a lack of participation in this proposal could potentially undermine the efforts to bring about effective harmonisation and coherence in the returns domain. Participation in the returns measure would ensure that Ireland can benefit from enhanced co-operation and information sharing with other member states. I must emphasise that my Department is not waiting for the European Union to return people who should not be in the State. As the Minister has indicated, returns this year are the highest they have been for 20 years. We have had six charter removal flights so far this year, coupled with a large increase in those being removed on commercial flights. Just this week, 52 people were removed on a charter back to Georgia. There has also been a large increase in EU citizens removed under the free movement regulations. These orders can be made on the grounds that an individual's personal conduct represents a genuine, present and sufficiently serious threat affecting one of the fundamental interests of society. The number of removal orders under the freedom of movement directive has increased from 24 in 2024 to 99 so far this year. On Monday, 13 October removal orders were enforced against 23 Romanian citizens who were removed from Ireland by charter flight.

A very high bar must be met for a person to be removed under this directive but it is a priority for the Minister and me to ensure that those who meet the threshold are removed from the State accordingly.

Our immigration system is not just about faster processing and a more effective system. We are concerned that when people are granted permission to remain in Ireland, we are ensuring that these people are integrated into Irish society. If one is going to have an effective removal system, one also needs to have an effective system for integration when someone is allowed to remain. My Department administers a series of funds to support anti-racism and integration initiatives around the country. I will be announcing the outcome of a funding call for the integration funding next week. My officials are currently finalising the outcomes of that process.

The Ireland against racism fund, which is a key part of the national action plan against racism, enables non-government and community organisations to provide projects and local initiatives that combat racism. The EU's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, AMIF, aims to support international protection applicants, programme refugees, beneficiaries of temporary protection and other third country nationals in Ireland. Ireland's total budget allocation for the AMIF 2021-2027 national programme is €63.5 million.

The integration and employment of migrants grant scheme is part of the European Social Fund Plus. The total funding under the scheme is €5.5 million, made available over a seven-year period. In 2022, seven projects were approved for total funding of €2.7 million for a three-year period. I announced a second call for funding under this programme in July this year.

Ireland has shown its commitment to a common EU-wide solution to migration by opting in to most elements of the EU migration and asylum pact. The pact is a landmark in our collective effort to manage migration with fairness, compassion, effectiveness and order. It recognises the need for solidarity and shared responsibility across all member states. It emphasises border protection while upholding international law. Crucially, it allows us to distinguish between those in genuine need of protection and those who do not qualify, thereby enabling swifter and more just outcomes. It is really important to recognise that it does not just benefit the country in question; it benefits people going through the process when decisions can be made for them in a fast and effective way. Our commitment to the pact, alongside other member states, shows we stand together in recognising that no country should be left to face these pressures alone. Whether by welcoming refugees, supporting returns or contributing to border management, every state has a role to play and Ireland is no different. The pact also promotes deeper co-operation with countries of origin and transit. We must work upstream by addressing the drivers of migration, tackling trafficking networks and supporting development. We need global solutions for what are global issues.

Much of the public focus on the pact has been on those aspects related to reception conditions and assessment procedures for people arriving seeking international protection. However, an important aspect of a well-managed and effective migration and asylum policy is having the successful integration and inclusion policy about which I have been talking. That is why we are committed to continuing to provide practical ways to support local communities involved in integration efforts right across Ireland.

Along with the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, I consider it very important, particularly in light of what the country has faced in the past week, that we, as an Oireachtas, can have a balanced conversation that respects all the key requirements of the debate. There must be an understanding that there are very vulnerable people who apply for international protection - they are here in our country and we need to understand, look after and respect the process they are going through - and there are also communities that have very genuine concerns. People in those communities must be engaged with and have an opportunity to have their voice heard. They need to see real leadership in this area from us, as public representatives, as Members of this House and as the Government. People who are able and willing to stand up and comment must be allowed to speak and to have their voice heard but we must not pander to the extremes. We must never allow the extremes to win. We must respect what everyone is saying, listen to it fully and work together. For the sake of our country and its long-term future, which will be as a fully integrated modern Ireland with lots of different types of people in it, we must be able to have these discussions and deliver real results out of them.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I welcome this debate on international protection but I am very conscious that it could be taking place in very different circumstances. The backdrop to these statements could, but for the grace of God, have been multiple fatalities as a result of the arson attack in Drogheda. I want to be unequivocal in stating that there can be absolutely no tolerance for racism or racist attacks. Nobody should be in fear for their safety or their children's safety. The message must go out loud and clear that racist attacks on any community or on those living in IPAS accommodation will not be tolerated. The attack in Drogheda was clearly a traumatic ordeal for those impacted, especially the small children involved. I commend the members of the emergency services who saved lives. I hope those who carried out this and similar attacks are brought before the courts and held to account for their crimes.

I also want to be clear in stating there is no contradiction in condemning such racist attacks and also raising concerns about Government mismanagement of immigration generally or the international protection system specifically. The former is abhorrent and unacceptable; the latter is entirely legitimate. In fact, criticisms of Government handling of these matters are not just acceptable but well founded because the international protection system, in particular, is dysfunctional. That is not the fault of those applying for asylum; it is the fault of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, which have made a mess of a system that continues to operate in crisis mode. Decisions on international protection applications are taking too long, as are appeals, and deportations are not enforced. All the while, there is massive profiteering from the provision of often inappropriate IPAS accommodation.

On migration, the Government makes decisions without any consideration of the consequences and with no plan to deal with those consequences. For example, the Government signed up earlier this year to an extension of the temporary protection directive in respect of Ukrainians. There was no consideration of numbers, costs, capacity or other implications in terms of Ukrainians coming to Ireland. The Minister did not even bring the matter to the Dáil for debate, let alone approval, and now he scampers along, making decisions on the hoof and playing catch-up with the Government's lack of forethought. Equally, the decision by the Government to sign up to the EU migration and asylum pact in its entirety is a mistake. It undermines Irish sovereignty and binds us to EU rules that will not take into account our unique circumstances, including that we are part of a common travel area with a state outside the EU.

In a week when the Government is citing EU law as an obstacle to implementing contributions to accommodation costs for international protection applicants in asylum and trying to blame EU law for housing delays, it is bizarre that it has yet to realise that tying us into an EU framework that will not only tie the Minister's hands but also the hands of future Ministers is the wrong approach.

There has been a lot of focus on the international protection system, and rightly so. It is a broken system. I have been clear and unapologetic in stating that it has failed local communities and raised divisions and tensions. It has not worked for those communities that have lost local amenities such as hotels and have been given no additional supports by way of investment in health services, educational services or gardaí. The approach of locating IPAS centres in areas based on the single criterion of there being a building owned by someone prepared to provide it for that purpose is the wrong one. It has stripped many communities - working-class communities, in particular - of any sense of agency or being part of the decisions that shape their own areas. It is long past time to end the planning exemption for IPAS and Ukrainian accommodation and ensure a proper system of community engagement in order that communities are part of the decisions that affect them.

We also need to be clear that this dysfunctional system is not working for those fleeing war or persecution. Housing people in communities that are already under pressure does not serve them well. Placing people in accommodation that is often substandard, without fire certificates and without access to the services they need does not serve them well. Forcing people to wait years for applications to be processed does not serve them well. Alongside the pressures this clearly puts on the system, it feeds into the overall sense that the system is broken.

It is still taking far too long for decisions to be made. For those who appeal, the mean processing time is over 2.5 years. That is failure and inefficiency writ large. Even for the so-called accelerated procedure, the overall processing time, including appeals, is 15 months. That is not good enough. While there has been an increase in staff in the international protection system, there is still a vacancy rate of more than 10%. All this means that those awaiting decisions are left in limbo for far longer than they should be. It also means some who will ultimately be adjudicated not to have an entitlement to be in Ireland are holding up accommodation while others who are fleeing war and persecution are rendered homeless.

The international protection system is also not working for the taxpayer, which is picking up the tab for an ever-increasing bill for accommodation while those providing the accommodation make fortunes. IPAS alone is projected to cost €1.2 billion this year, with virtually no transparency and zero accountability. How and why has it been allowed to get to this point? Is it just part of the wider failures we have come to expect from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael governments? Is it just Government incompetence? The system is working for some people. It is working for those who have become millionaires on the back of the provision of IPAS accommodation. This is a scandal of which we have only barely scratched the surface. For months, I have been calling for a full review of all IPAS contracts granted. The Minister has refused. The system is also working for those companies that gain access to often low-paid, non-unionised and vulnerable workers. These are companies that would not be eligible to get work permits. The system fails the applicants, the communities and the taxpayer but it is benefiting a brand new golden circle. How very Fianna Fáil.

Sinn Féin is clear. We have to have a managed immigration policy, one that recognises the value of those who come here but also recognises the challenges in capacity, housing and public services and the ability to integrate. On international protection, it is clear we need a rules-based system, where applications are processed in a timely manner, where those found to have a genuine need for international protection are supported to integrate and where those who are not entitled to be here leave or are deported. It is in everyone's interest that the State manages immigration properly. That means managing international protection, work permits and economic migration and those entering the State as tourists and as students and it means ensuring the very small minority who abuse an Irish welcome by becoming involved in criminality are quickly deported. All of that is a basic necessity of proper governance. Instead, we have had a litany of Government failures.

Those failures were crystalised for many by the horrendous recent events at Citywest. It would be a huge mistake for this House to ignore the widespread public anger about what happened to the young girl in this instance. Those who engaged in the violent disorder afterwards, trapped people in their homes and attacked gardaí must be condemned, but that should not allow us to disregard the genuine fury over what happened. What happened was a result of catastrophic failures by the State, in terms of both keeping a vulnerable child safe and ensuring somebody not entitled to be here had left the State.

The questions hanging over Tusla remain unanswered. How does a ten-year-old girl go missing without the public being informed? How the hell does Tusla get away with issuing a statement that essentially blamed the child for Tusla's failure and talked about absconding as if describing a violent criminal? How is this the latest of a series of Tusla failures and yet the Government will not acknowledge that there is a systemic problem in that body? An equally valid question is how someone enters the international protection system, remains in it for six years, receives a deportation order and yet remains in this State to be charged with such a heinous crime. Above all, the question people want answered is whether the Government can give an assurance this will not happen again.

The problem with deportation orders is that the Government is not enforcing them. More than anything, that has led to the undermining of people's confidence in the IPAS system. Yes, more deportation orders have been signed but today, the Minister does not know whether the vast majority of those subject to deportations have left or remain in the State. In 2024, for example, there were 2,403 deportation orders but only 156 confirmed deportations. That is a ratio of 6.5%. While there have been a number of high-profile deportation flights, there is no evidence of whether the wider enforcement in the system has improved.

Across the international protection system, we know changes need to be made in ensuring decisions are made quickly and enforced, including deportation orders, and in bringing the obscene profiteering to an end. Sinn Féin has set them out time and time again. Instead of Simon Harris, Micheál Martin or even the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, speaking as if they were passing commentators, we need the Government to make the changes we have outlined once and for all.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It should not come as a surprise, given the recent and marked growth in Ireland's population and diversity, that there is a widespread public conversation on migration. It is no surprise either that people recognise the value that nurses from the

Philippines, doctors from Syria and engineers from India bring to our society, our economy and our service provision, which would really struggle without them. Ireland remains a welcoming country. It is no surprise either that the Irish public requires and demands that the Government and its agencies manage, regulate and oversee all aspects of the migration of people in an orderly and efficient way. Today's statements are about the international protection system processing and enforcement. The system created and presided over by the Government, as my colleague has said, is broken, not fit for purpose and now does not command the confidence of the public. That is a big problem.

The processing of applications takes far too long. Deportation orders go unenforced. There are no exit checks. Too often, the State does not know if those issued with deportation orders have actually left. Sickeningly, there is massive profiteering from the provision of IPAS accommodation. The Government has made multimillionaires of a small group of people, virtually overnight. Millions have been made from the misery of others. Meanwhile, communities are sidelined, ignored and left behind without the basic resources needed in housing, healthcare and local services. It goes without saying that upholding safety is paramount in any system that functions and commands people's trust. The arson attack on Drogheda at the weekend - the attempt to burn people alive that endangered the lives of small children and led to babies being taken to hospital - was callous, disgusting and indefensible. Those responsible are the most vile of cowards and must face the full weight of the law. Yesterday, my colleague an Teachta Joanna Byrne shared on the floor of this House just how unsafe that particular IPAS accommodation had been prior to any arson attack. Those poor people were doubly failed.

The sexual assault of a ten-year-old child in Citywest last month was sickening. The news that the man charged with the assault was subject to a deportation order months ago and yet still remained in the country really shocked and angered people. The violence that followed all of that is in no way acceptable and is in no way excused in any set of circumstances, but people no longer trust that the system ensures safety for the public or for those in IPAS accommodation. That is a failure of Government. An international protection system can only work if it is grounded in fair, reasonable and enforceable rules, mindful of the need to safeguard social cohesion, respect communities, protect people's rights and command public confidence. That means those whose applications are successful and have leave to remain here must lead full lives, enjoy opportunity, contribute to our society and be fully integrated, but it also means that where an application fails and where a deportation order is issued, it must be enforced efficiently and speedily. It is only through the full enforcement of all the rules that we can have a system that works and enjoys people's trust.

The vast majority of our people not alone reject racism but see it as abhorrent, ugly and un-Irish. They have no truck with those who seek to spread hate in our communities and we all have a solemn duty to keep every person safe on our streets and in our communities and to create an atmosphere where people of goodwill can have an open, honest conversation about how we build a system that works, a system that meets our international protection obligations in a fair way and deals with the concerns and needs of the people of Ireland.

People want to see an end to the Government's chaotic approach and a migration system and international protection system with a book of rules that is clear, strong, reasonable and fully

enforced. That is a fair and reasonable expectation and it is the responsibility of the Government to deliver.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: It has been clear for quite some time that this Government has been mismanaging the entire IPAS process and accommodation. Concerns raised by the Opposition and civil society groups have been dismissed by this Government. It has buried its head in the sand, stating how much it is spending to fix the problem, which only continually gets worse. It is solely responsible for the mess and it will not be remedied under this Government, which makes statements in the press but then takes a hands-off or do-nothing approach. Recent comments by the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste show they are taking no responsibility for their own failures in relation to migration. Because of the failures of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in government, our migration and international protection system is a mess and is operating in crisis mode. Every stroke of the pen takes too long, from decisions to appeals to deportations. Worse, there is massive profiteering in the provision of inappropriate IPAS accommodation.

The review by the Comptroller and Auditor General of the management of international protection accommodation is a damning indictment of the Government's failures to address profiteering and cost overruns. The Government should not be able to dismiss the C and AG's review but I have no doubt it will do its best to ignore it. The review is damning about a lack of due diligence and payment controls in the awarding of IPAS contracts, which the State is due to spend €1.2 billion on this year alone. The Irish taxpayer deserves better. Following the despicable arson attack on the IPAS accommodation in my hometown of Drogheda, the Government ordered a security review of all IPAS accommodation. General security in emergency details is already part of the IPPS inspection checklist to ensure the occupants are safe. From what I have witnessed, this is not the case. I refer the Minister to the fact I outlined to the House yesterday, where one of those families in Drogheda had no way out of the burning building except via stairs that were ravaged with flames. When we checked the inspections, we saw that few inspections have been published for 2025. In fact, only two have been published for County Louth for this year as the year draws to a close. Will the Minister tell me why this is the case? Is there a lack of inspectors or are issues that require remediation arising that we are not hearing about? Similarly, there is no inspection report for the D Hotel in Drogheda. The last review, in 2024, counted only 89 occupants despite the hotel having capacity for over 500. This was the only hotel in the largest town in this country and it was ripped out of the tourism and hospitality sector. I call on the Minister to publish the 2025 reports for all IPAS accommodation in County Louth immediately. If he cannot do that, he must make a statement to this House to explain why.

Following recent events, the people of this State, County Louth and indeed Drogheda need to be certain that those operating IPAS accommodation centres have been awarded contracts appropriately and based on merit, providing value for money and in areas that can accommodate them. The people of this State and more importantly those in IPAS accommodation deserve a system that is fair, efficient and enforced. It is time to stop prioritising profiteering.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I condemn in the strongest possible terms the disgraceful attack on an IPAS centre in Drogheda last week. There should not be any tolerance whatsoever here, and I know there is not, for such aggression and attacks of that nature. At this stage, most of

us have seen the images - we have all been appalled by them - of an accelerant being poured before the fire was lit, a fire that trapped children including a small baby on the upper floor of that building. If not for the quick action of our local fire services, we could be talking about a very different situation here today. I hope every community leader will send out the message that attacks on any community cannot and will not be accepted.

That said, it has to be acknowledged that the Government has made a mess of the international protection system. Instead of action, we have performative politics. We get announcements designed for headlines - there was another one today - but little or no action. We get commentary from the Tánaiste and the Taoiseach, who, it seems, have finally woken up to the reality that things are not rosy in our immigration system but they remain in denial as regards their own responsibilities. You would swear they were commentators walking down the street just giving their opinion. Having spent years at the heart of government, they have overseen the sorry state of the system. We see a small number of well-publicised deportation flights designed to capture press and give the impression of action. That is the reality. That is what it is about and I do not think it is appropriate.

When you look behind the curtain and see what is really happening, if we are going to talk about deportation, there were 2,403 deportation orders signed last year but just 156 deportations confirmed. That is a problem. This year to mid-September, the number of deportations confirmed was less than 10% of the number of orders signed. For an immigration system to work, to have a properly managed system, for it to be truly fair to all involved, to economic migrants, asylum seekers and our citizens alike, the rules must be fair, and most importantly, they need to be enforced. The failure of Government that I have just described is not acceptable. Decisions are taking far too long. There is not proper oversight when applications are refused. That is not acceptable to people fleeing war and persecution. Nor is it acceptable to those who are here and are rejected when they have families and have built up networks, friends and so on. There has to be a proper system that is enforced and greatly speeded up.

There are now 32,000 people in direct provision across the State and, as many Members have mentioned, there is no real strategy to deal with the high level of arrivals. Instead, we get unchecked profiteering, private operators springing up offering any building they can get their hands on, and humans fleeing God knows what being shipped around in buses and handed over to operators with no checks. The Government has rejected time and time again Sinn Féin's call for a full review of this. The Comptroller and Auditor General has told the Minister that there needs to be a root-and-branch review and still we get no action from the Government. It is protecting a profit system that hurts those in the system and ignores communities.

Sinn Féin's position is clear that, first and foremost, deprived areas should not be used as locations for IPAS accommodation centres. I have made the point before. Donegal is one of the most deprived counties on the island of Ireland. That is what the statistics tell us, yet per head of population Donegal has the highest number of IPAS centres and individuals availing of that service and the largest number of Ukrainians as well. That is just a badly managed system. We have made it clear that the Government's approach is not working, yet it refuses to listen. The Government needs to stop trying to blame others and start doing its own job.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: When the Government took the decision to purchase the convention centre and hotel in Citywest, it said there was going to be a new template for State-owned

provision of accommodation for people coming to Ireland to seek international protection. It gives me no pleasure to say it, but the events of the past two weeks show that template is in tatters. The community of Saggart and the surrounding areas of Citywest and Rathcoole are strong, vibrant, diverse communities. People are generous and welcoming and have been going above and beyond to do the right thing during recent times. It is also important to acknowledge that inside Citywest itself there are men seeking international protection and Ukrainian families with children receiving temporary protection. In an adjoining building, homeless families are accommodated by the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive. When any of us elected representatives for the constituency talk to people in those communities, they tell us that even before the horrendous events of recent weeks, they felt ignored and let down.

The reason for that is that the promised engagement has not materialised. There have been meetings; there is no dispute about that. We have met the Minister and his engagement team has met local elected representatives and the community. However, the communities on the ground are saying they are not deep and meaningful engagements. Decisions are not being made, investment is not taking place, and reasonable requests by the local community for increased investment, Garda resources, community safety, education, health facilities and supports for people in the community as well as for those in accommodation provided through the Department are simply not forthcoming. In fact, at most of the meetings, key decision-makers who can make decisions on these matters are not even in the room. As a consequence of that, before the savage assault on the young child a number of weeks ago and the nights of serious and unacceptable disorder on the streets of Saggart, the community was telling us they had a problem. Now, they are telling us they are fearful and angry and feel let down. I urge the Minister to hear what we on both the Opposition and Government benches are telling him, to hear what the community is telling him, and change that approach.

The Saggart Village Residents' Association, with which we have been engaging on an ongoing basis, sent a detailed briefing note to all the local TDs recently. It urged us to listen and engage with the concerns of the local community, to do nothing to escalate tension for political gain, to get accurate information into the public domain quickly and to support groups and residents' groups in key ways to resolve the situation. Again, it has made appeals around Garda resources and opening times for Garda stations, key amenities in terms of health facilities, school places and school transport, addressing the very real concerns around issues of community safety and supporting both the host community and those who are living there in IPAS accommodation to get through these issues.

An Ceann Comhairle: Go raibh maith agat, Deputy.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I urge the Minister. If this template is going to work it has to change; otherwise, it will augur very poorly for the future.

Deputy Alan Kelly: When we talk about international protection, we need to wrap it up in the subject matter of migration. That is getting lost, not just in these Houses but in the country, and it is deeply concerning. Everybody in here has family members who have gone all over the world, mine included. I have double the number of first cousins outside this country than in this country. My only sibling lives in America. I have cousins in Asia, Australia and New Zealand - all over the world. Half of my mother's family emigrated in the 1950s. We know

how this works. In many ways, we know better than any race how this works. As the Minister outlined in his opening statement, we spent generations as migrants. Over the past number of years, we have obviously had to deal with this subject matter. We are not dealing with it very well in some cases, particularly in the past few years.

When we talk about defining the issues here, we have to discuss migration as a whole. This is a really pertinent and defining moment for our country. We are not really into extremes yet in this country, and that is a good thing, but we are in danger of changing as a country. The extreme views I am seeing across many different media formats out in the open in relation to a very small minority of people are very un-Irish. They are wrong. This is going to kill off forever Ireland of the welcomes. That is what we are known for.

International protection is only a small percentage of migration into this country - it is approximately 10% to 12%. We all know there have been decreases in relation to volume and, I understand, in the number of people being passed after appeal. The Minister said the majority of applicants are refused and he is right. The figure is approximately 58.4%. Some 40% are accepted. If I was Minister, the one thing I would do immediately is do a public awareness and support campaign for migrants into this country. Without them, this country would simply stop. I spent two years in the hospitals visiting my parents. Without migrants the health system in this country would stop. Across a whole range of other sectors, it would stop.

Will the Minister do a positivity campaign about migration to this country and the fact it is good that we are bringing these people into this country, that we need all these workers and that our health and care services would collapse without them? Let us call a spade a spade because many people will not say this. There are jobs in this country Irish people will not do anymore and we need people to supply services in our country. It is a good problem. That is outside the diversity, good social values and everything else that comes in from the mix of people arriving into our country and contributing.

I have two kids in secondary school. Some of their best friends come from migrant communities. I see what is going around. I come from outside the town of Nenagh, which is one of the wealthiest towns in Ireland. It is doing very well. That is why we have so many migrants; we need the workers. The contribution they make is incredible and yet we focus in on a small percentage of them in relation to international protection, a considerable number of whom come to this country for proper reasons, considering they are allowed to stay.

We talk about the small number of people who end up getting deported. Dare I say it but I have no issue with that. If you deserve to be deported, you should be deported. I believe in a rules-based system. I am not going to argue about that. I would argue about that if processing takes too long, particularly where children are involved, we are going to have to look at some exemptions. Does the Minister know why? In 2019 before the last general election, I was one of the few public representatives - in fact, I was the only TD - who stood up in relation to dealing with the issues in Borrisokane. People were fighting, arguing and worried about the number of people coming into Borrisokane.

There is a far-right element across this country and the Minister's Department is very concerned about it. The Minister's Department did a deal with the people of Borrisokane. The people of Borrisokane, who I am so proud to represent, honoured that deal. All of those people settled in Borrisokane, so much so as the Minister probably knows, that more than a year and

a half ago, we had public meetings because they were being moved, including some 40 young children running up the street with their hurlies. We do not really play Gaelic football in Tipperary, although they play a little bit in Borrisokane. Those children were running up the street in their Borrisokane colours and now they were being moved. The same people who were going to block the entrance to the asylum centre four years previously were now going to block it to keep them in. That is the impact the people who arrived in Borrisokane had on the wider community. There was a large March through the town where I had to support them again because I will be consistent on this issue.

When we talk about migration, we need to be positive about it. Everybody needs to be positive about it. I am very concerned about the three largest parties in this country and what they have been saying offline, online, in here, out of here and in every other way. I am talking about Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Sinn Féin. Some of the commentary has been unacceptable. They have been trying to ride both horses. On the one hand, they want to be pro-migration while on the other hand, they make remarks which are totally unacceptable.

We nearly had a catastrophic event recently in Drogheda. Can the Ceann Comhairle imagine what would have happened if that had turned into a tragedy? What would have happened in this House then? Where would we have been going? What would the people have demanded then? What would the narrative have been? Dare I bloody say it but where would all the keyboard warriors be then - these anonymous, faceless thugs and cowards? We missed out narrowly but thankfully on that tragedy. We all know about the events in Citywest two weeks ago.

The reality is that one in five of all our workers - and the percentage is narrowing - is not originally from Ireland. We need these workers and we need to promote the benefits of such workers. I believe much of the political commentary recently has been diversionary in nature and it is absolutely horrendous. There are issues in relation to processing. There have been improvements, and I say that from an Opposition point of view to be balanced. However, there are also real, significant issues in relation to it still. The Minister has acknowledged the geographical distribution of IPAS centres needs to change. I dealt with an issue in my hometown of Roscrea where the last hotel was taken out for an IPAS centre. That is absolutely bloody stupid. Whoever made the decision in Dublin, oh my God. Talk about turning community against it, and those people in Roscrea had, in fairness, taken in many people before that. Those are the types of decisions that are ridiculous.

We all know about the use of private facilities and how people are becoming so wealthy out of it. As the Labour Party has said through our strategy - and we are the only party that has published a strategy in relation to migration - we need to have publicly-funded infrastructure. We need to develop it quickly. There are real issues and they have to be dealt with.

We also need to ensure we look at how information is being distributed. We had a fairly significant issue in Roscrea again recently. There was a carjacking. It was automatically assumed that the perpetrator - and I understand somebody is in court, so I will not say anymore - was possibly from the locality. This is going on all the time everywhere around the country. Public representatives in some cases are as bad as everyone else.

5 o'clock

As a society, we need to change the narrative and change the dial on this. Will the Minister put in a positive campaign on migration? If he is to take on one suggestion from this House tonight, he might take that on.

I would like to look at how we will integrate into a European plan. If somebody is denied asylum in one country, how do we deal with it here? We have never discussed that fully in this House.

I would like to look at the issue of assessments. Obviously there is the issue in relation to bringing them down but, as regards appeals, how can that be streamlined even further? I believe in quick assessments, once they are done properly. I note the Minister and Government are changing in relation to those in IPAS making a contribution towards their accommodation. In principle, I do not have an issue with this; the problem is the quality of the accommodation in some instances. Would you be asking people to pay for it? I doubt it. Second, this will cost more than it will take in. Is it not symbolic rather than real? Third, we all know you cannot really chase the people involved for the funding, so why do it?

We need a pathway and plan for those who are successful in naturalisation and migration. We should put a plan in place around English and Irish language learning, civics and everything else for those successful in their processing. That whole space has been let go but it is really necessary.

I will conclude by reading something sent to me by a lady in my hometown of Nenagh in relation to a club of which she is a member. I will not name her but it is a club that helps children with autism. She said she has stood with the club, supported it and recognises it. She wrote:

I ask you to recognise that within our membership we have autistic children from refugee families and autistic children of immigrants, and that they face complex and multiple struggles in their daily lives.

These children and their families are well aware of the growing racist discourse in public forums. They feel targetted, visible and afraid. They see comments on local Facebook groups, hear people saying the most awful things on programmes [on a radio show I will not mention] that are unavoidable in settings like GP surgery waiting rooms or small businesses. These extremist voices are boosted for being 'click-worthy' or creating debate. Unfortunately, the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice have both contributed inflammatory public comments after the attack in Drogheda this week.

I am very privileged to be a white Irish woman in my own country, but as the child of returned emigrants, a returned emigrant myself, and as the wife of an immigrant, I feel the fears of growing xenophobia acutely. As the mother of autistic children, I am deeply concerned how racism affects the families in our club.

My request to you is please to not mistake anti-immigrant noise for the sentiments of the vast majority of Tipperary people, who are generous, kind and tolerant. Most of us recognise that our rural schools and communities have been revived and enriched by newcomers over the past [20] years or so. Please continue to work for the good of our communities as a whole without scapegoating minority groups who are powerless to bring about change. Harm against one of us harms us all.

I was very taken aback by that. The small number of people who are so deeply affected need to be in the forefront of our minds from now on. Second, we need a positive campaign on the benefits of migration.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Without the people who come into this country and make their contribution-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I call the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins.

Deputy Alan Kelly: -----this country simply could not function.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you. I call the Minister of State.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I was ten seconds over time.

An Ceann Comhairle: Everybody is the same.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I will watch that from now on.

An Ceann Comhairle: You had 15 minutes, Deputy.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I will watch it from now on, Ceann Comhairle, thanks very much, and I will point it out every time you go over ten seconds.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Emer Higgins): Migration, when managed well and planned well, works well. We see that in the people who staff our hospitals and care homes, those working on our building sites and buses, in our restaurants and hotels and across the local services we all depend on, and in entrepreneurs running businesses and employing people in our communities. I am truly grateful for the contributions many of those people make to our society, communities and economy every day. I am also very conscious that some people who arrive here do not come by choice; they come because they are fleeing conflict, persecution or deep instability. They come here seeking shelter and safety.

There is another truth people feel in their day-to-day lives. They feel that right now the pace and scale of migration is too fast in many communities. That is because services and decision-making have not kept up. As a result, confidence in the system's ability to keep up has been shaken. People want a process that is firm, fair and credible, and a system that acts quickly. If someone has a legal right to be here, the Department should make that decision quickly and support them to settle in well and contribute positively to society. Equally, if someone does not have the legal right to remain here, the State must act promptly and deport them. This is how rules-based systems work in any functioning democracy.

I acknowledge the work under way by Government and the clear commitment, especially that shown in recent days and weeks, to strengthen our system, make it more efficient and ensure decisions are timely and fair. However, if we truly want to rebuild public trust and confidence in the system, we cannot just talk about national policies. We need to focus local because that is where policy becomes reality. Policy becomes real in communities, on people's doorsteps, in schools, in GP waiting rooms, on the street and in local facilities. That is where trust is built or lost. That is why we need to rethink what community engagement looks like in practice. It cannot just be treated as a procedural step. It is what makes or breaks a community's trust in our system. Alongside clear decisions, we need real community investment and practical support on the ground.

Take my own community, for example. In my own constituency of Dublin Mid-West, particularly in Saggart, but also in Lucan, Clondalkin, Brittas and Palmerstown, people have been decent and compassionate. These communities have been patient and they have been fair. They have done their part. They have more than stepped up. In return, they are asking for something very reasonable, which is for the State to step up too. They want clear communication, proper planning and services that keep pace with population growth - joined-up policy. They know better than any of us what the pressure points are and what supports are needed. We cannot just ask for their feedback and ideas; we need to act on it and respond to it.

Before and since the horrific alleged assault on a young girl in Citywest and the outbreak of deplorable violence, I have been out speaking with local people, business owners and services providers in Saggart. I hear their frustration, worry and upset but I also hear their compassion. The people I speak to do not want division or labels. They just want fairness and information and that is the very least they deserve.

For months I have been raising with the Minister the need for permanent gardaí for Citywest and Saggart. I have raised the need for stronger local supports and I have been working closely with the Minister's engagement team. I have had meeting after meeting and call after call. I have met with residents groups on the ground and brought their feedback to more meetings and calls. Now we need to respond and take action. We need a permanent increase in Garda visibility in Saggart and Citywest, as Councillor Shirley O'Hara and I have continued to advocate for. We need investment in amenities like St. Mary's. We need to make sure resources move in line with population growth. We do not have enough public health nurses or SNAs in the area. We do not have any youth service. Those are the kind of real services we could deliver in order to keep up with population growth. That is what the residents, businesses, education providers and sports clubs I engage with want. It is a very reasonable ask of the Saggart Village Residents Association. No one is asking for things they do not deserve or for special treatment; they are asking for what is fair and just.

Local people were appalled and frightened by the violence and disruption brought to the community in recent weeks. They are still being impacted because the onsite gym and restaurant in Citywest remain closed on foot of Garda advice. Over 3,000 paid-up members are missing gym sessions. These are small things but they matter to people's quality of life and morale. People just want to be heard on this. We need trust in the system maintained.

Deputy John McGuinness: I will take up from where the Minister of State left off. Community is important. The engagement of community with any project ensures its success

or failure. From the beginning of this process dealing with those that were coming to our country for protection or arriving here without their documentation or arriving here illegally, the Department did not respond in the way that it should. We have to acknowledge that. We have to say to communities that we were wrong in what we were attempting to do. They refused to respond to public representatives who were trying to assist the community to understand what was happening and to understand the policy and that is why I welcome the Minister's opening remarks in how he set out and explained the difference between temporary protection, international protection and those who are coming here to work and stay and contribute to our economy. That needs to be said more often and we need to take the appropriate actions to support that.

As well as supporting our own local communities, the new arrivals to those communities need to be supported and we need to have a plan and a strategy for the future that will deliver results in quick time. When people come here on a visa and are working and they ask for their wife or family to come to join them where they are economically sound and can support them, I do not know why they have to wait for a year or two years for that to be processed. I do not understand it. I do not understand why applications to the Department of justice take so long in the context of reaching a decision where a person is either legal or is not legal and must leave the country. Until we get to that point where we have clear systems and we have a clear understanding with the electorate, the people whom we represent and the communities that we are trying to support, we will have ongoing serious problems.

When Irish people and people who are living here and not Irish see, believe or are led to believe that others get far better treatment than them, that causes huge division in the country. The work of social media has contributed in no small way to all of that misinformation and all of that wrong and it needs to be corrected by the Department. The Minister has the resources. He knows what needs to be done. I have listened careful to what the Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, had to say and I encourage him to bring about the action that is necessary.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I condemn unreservedly the attack on the IPAS centre in Drogheda and all attacks on IPAS centres up and down the country. In each of those cases, a human being has made a decision to inflict a violent act on another human being and that cannot be justified under any circumstances.

I am proud to be a TD for Dublin Mid-West, one of the most ethnically diverse constituencies in the country. I am proud of the fact that we have many people in my constituency who have come to our country from abroad and add hugely to our community. I have stood with them at their festivals and at their community gatherings and I view them as integral to the life of our constituency.

It is important today that we do not conflate the asylum seeker system with the overall question of migration. Today's debate is on the international protection system and the policy implications thereof. Core to this debate, as stated in the programme for Government, is the move towards State-owned and State-managed accommodation for those seeking international protection. The point I have made previously in meetings with Ministers and other colleagues around this House is that we are at a stage where we can design a blueprint for community engagement around the construction of what will become permanent facilities up and down the

country. One such facility that has been purchased by the State is Citywest, in my constituency, which would have been a strong local amenity for the communities that lived in the Saggart, Rathcoole and Newcastle areas.

The Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, alluded to, and other Deputies mentioned, the blueprint for how we have advanced the purchase of that particular facility and for the recognition of the additional burden that it will put on the communities around it. When I use the word "burden", I am not casting aspersions on anyone; I am talking about sheer facts. In the 2022 census, there were almost 19,000 people in the Rathcoole, Saggart and Newcastle areas, an increase of 32% since 2016. We are three years ahead of the projections set in 2022. We are at the 2028 level of population in Newcastle, Rathcoole and Saggart and that does not take account of the additional residents that we put in the Citywest centre as well. That is part of the underpinning assumption that we need to have when we are talking about community engagement and the pressure that is put on services and nobody needs me to tell that the areas of Rathcoole, Saggart and Newcastle, like many areas in Dublin Mid-West, have been behind in the provision of services. For example, a Garda sub-district in Dublin Mid-West, Ronanstown, has a similar population to Rathcoole, Saggart and Newcastle and these areas would justify a full Garda sub-district. This is something I have been arguing for since being elected and have been doubling down on since the purchase of Citywest as well not because there is necessarily a correlation between crime and the number of asylum seekers, but because of the sheer number of people that are in that area and putting more residents in place there as well.

We have heard mention of public health nurses. We have heard calls for investment in amenities and green space that were at breaking point in areas such as Citywest previously. That is why community engagement needs to be more than a tick-box exercise with regards to saying we have met people, we have heard their feedback but there has not been any action on it. We need to show action in these places. We need to show recognition of the fact that we are making a good life and an integrated community for all people there and fundamental to that is the integrity of the asylum system, giving people an insight into what goes on in IPAS centres or the training facilities put in place for people who have been successful in their applications. Are we providing them with the skills that they need to live successfully in our country? Are we providing them with the language skills? These are questions that we need to ask and we need to look at how are providing the training and how are we putting these facilities in place to support these people in their journeys here, and ultimately how are we underpinning the community integration funds that we need to integrate these communities.

We have a lot of lessons to learn from the past few months. I look forward to working with the Minister to ensure that those lessons are learned from and we work for our communities.

Deputy Michael Murphy: Over recent months, the situation in Dundrum, south Tipperary, has become a test case for how we as a State balance urgent humanitarian obligations with proper process, transparency and respect for local communities. From the outset, I raised serious concerns about the lack of due diligence and transparency surrounding this decision, which regrettably have proven well founded.

A substantial public contract was entered into with a company only incorporated in January of this year. That fact alone should have triggered greater scrutiny. Instead, the process

proceeded with minimal oversight, limited consultation and little clarity about accountability or planning compliance.

It is important to remember what Dundrum is. It is a small village of approximately 200 people, a place with deep roots and a strong sense of community. The golf course is at its heart. It was not merely an amenity. It was an historical landmark woven into the social and recreational life of generations. Its closure has had a devastating impact on local workers, clubs and residents. It represents the loss of a gathering place, a sense of identity and a shared heritage.

Now we face further uncertainty, with a section 5 declaration central to the legality of this development due before the High Court on Monday. There are serious issues at stake not only in this case, but wider afield. I will not comment on matters *sub judice* but it is clear that the process to date has fallen short in terms of the standards the public rightly expects in planning, governance and community engagement.

It is time to do the right thing. The Government should call a halt to this contract, take stock and ensure that future contracts are rooted in transparency, legal clarity and genuine local dialogue. Dundrum deserves nothing less than fairness, honesty and respect for its people, its heritage and its place in the life of the State.

Deputy Mark Ward: When the Government decided to purchase Citywest as a public IPAS centre, I found out in the national newspapers. No information was supplied to Opposition TDs.

On 17 June, I asked the Taoiseach if the Government was purchasing Citywest. I did not get an answer. At the same time, the Minister for justice was on the plinth outside announcing the purchase of Citywest.

Residents of Saggart and Opposition TDs are finding out information from the media and not from the Government. This is simply unacceptable and it has led to mistrust of the Government among the people of Saggart. This mistrust is still prevalent today.

We have been calling for meaningful engagement from the Government for the local community about the Citywest centre. Government will cite the meetings that it has had with the community engagement team as meaningful but meaningful meetings need to have positive outcomes. I mean no disrespect to the people who are from the Department who are on this community engagement team. They are simply the wrong people. We need people at these meetings who are from different Departments who can also make decisions. Information I received today indicated there have been 15 meetings so far but nothing has really happened. Rathcoole Garda station is still only manned part-time. There is no long-term commitment to increase the visibility of policing in Saggart. There is no increase in school places or places on school buses and there are no increases in medical services, such as public health nurses.

When the Government decided it was going to house people seeking international protection in Citywest, it did not do an audit of the services that were in Citywest to see what impact this was going to have on the community. In fact, as we speak, there are fewer services in Citywest than there were when the Government purchased the facility. The gym is closed, leaving 3,000 members stranded without that facility, and the restaurant is closed. The Minister said he was going to do everything in his power to keep those open. I again urge him to do that.

The violent sexual assault of a ten-year-old girl at Citywest has left the community devastated and afraid. Questions need to be answered. How did a child under the care of Tusla end up in Citywest in the first place? Why was the person who was arrested for this crime still in the country, despite having a deportation order for months? These are genuine questions that I have been asked, which the Government must answer and that people need to be held accountable for. People applying for international protection are subject to the rules of this country. Nobody will argue with that. These rules are not enforced and people are not processed quickly. If people have not got the right to be in this country, they should be processed quickly and returned to their country of origin as safely as possible. This is what Sinn Féin would do and this is what Government has been failing to do.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The approach of this Government and the previous one to migration, and international protection in particular, has been a failure. It has failed to ensure a fair system that works. It has failed communities, which have felt ignored and not properly engaged with. While there are some good people in the system, there are nowhere near enough and the system as a whole is set up badly in terms of engagement. It has failed applicants who often end up in totally inadequate accommodation. It has profoundly failed in terms of value for money having, for far too long, relied almost exclusively on private provision leading to incredible waste and companies making huge sums. It has failed to deliver quick decisions that are in everyone's interest and has failed to ensure their enforcement. The confidence of the public and the people of Ireland has been totally lost in this respect.

The Government's policy needs to balance common sense with common decency in ensuring rules are applied. When people are not entitled to be in Ireland, the rules need to be enforced so they are returned to where they came from. Always, we must remember the human dignity of each individual, successful or not, and that each applicant is treated with respect and given adequate conditions. We have detailed much of how the system can be improved in our policy proposal, *A Fair System That Works*, some small elements of which have been taken on board by Government. I urge it to return to that.

I have heard a number of people in this Chamber and outside it say there is a need for a debate on this whole area. I totally agree. I have been saying that for quite some time. It is important we have a debate. It is important we have an honest and robust debate. I trust the Irish people to have that debate. I trust their ability to weigh up common sense and common decency and to analyse it with sobriety and sense. What is never acceptable, in any circumstance, are racism, xenophobia and treating people as lesser because of their skin colour or ethnicity. What is never acceptable is intimidation or violence. I take the opportunity to totally condemn the incident in Drogheda that put young people, children and a family at risk. That is never acceptable. We can and should have a debate but there is no place and no room in our society or democracy for that kind of violence, intimidation or racism.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I completely welcome the debate. I am conscious it could be happening in a very different context, given how fortunate we were that the horrors we saw too viscerally in Drogheda last week did not materialise in an outcome that would have been most devastating with a loss of life. It was a scenario, however, where a person with hatred in their soul placed petrol on stairs. You cannot imagine any other outcome was intended but death and loss of life that would have included children and a baby of just 20 days.

I am also conscious of the experience of a child who was viciously assaulted in Citywest a couple of weeks ago. All of us shook with absolute horror and revulsion at the failures of the State that led to that incident. I cannot imagine the mental gymnastics it would take for people to see in that incident a motivation to assault gardaí and burn fires in the hope of getting into a building, where more children were being terrified to the point where many could not get to school. That is the context in which we are having this debate. The tensions, level of rage and misdirection of anger towards migrants are all palpable. When we have a debate, and use our position and voice, it is incumbent on us to do so in a tone that is measured, with facts that are accurate, and to understand that the message we may intend to set out can often be redirected, manipulated and misconstrued by actors who are very purposely trying to set terror in the hearts of people who came here in search of sanctuary.

I will talk about the comments made by the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan. There were a couple of inaccuracies in his statement. The Minister told the House that the appeals process is getting faster but his own Department gave me a response to a parliamentary question that shows that is not the case. In fact, it is the opposite. The median waiting time has increased from ten months to nearly 13 months this year, up to the end of September. The Minister is saying one thing but the opposite is true. He also made a charge that has been repeated by any number of Government backbenchers and that Ministers have taken to the media over the last six months: "My overall strategy for the international protection process, aimed at making more and faster decisions, is working. From the beginning of my tenure as Minister [for justice], applications for asylum have decreased by [approximately] 40%." Is the Minister seriously trying to tell me that because he tweets about deportation flights, somebody in some far-off location, who is considering coming here to seek asylum, will say that the Minister has now tweeted so they will not come here? He should pull the other one because it is just a joke that continues to be allowed to percolate.

I will talk a little bit about the Tánaiste's comments. As I engage with this debate, because we want it to be reasonable and have asked for it to be facts-based, we should use the Tánaiste's own lines and words and deconstruct them as we go. He said that people on the left are trying to shut down the debate. That is far from the case. We just understand the stakes and that it needs to be facts-based when we debate. The Tánaiste said that those of us who advocate for compassion, fairness and a facts-based discussion, are trying to shut down debate. What he actually means is we are refusing to nod along to misinformation. There has been no shortage of debate, be it in the media, the House or the committee chamber. We looked at the international protection Bill 2025 for over seven hours without much in the way of Government contribution, and nothing in the way of actual scrutiny, because the heads of Bill are still not even in place for most of the outstanding issues. When the Tánaiste says the debate is being shut down, he is not defending free speech. He is defending poor speech, speech that confuses facts, blames the wrong people and hides his own failures. That is the issue here because far-right actors and, believe me, there are far-right actors, do not win when they get the type of people who would like to see impositions of power. They do not win electoral seats. They win when nice middle-class people, with nice respectable-looking suits, start wearing their clothes and echoing their calls. That is when they win and that is what we are seeing too often.

The Tánaiste said, "migration numbers are too high". This line is everywhere. It is in interviews, briefings and even Cabinet notes but it does not stand up to a single piece of data. The Central Statistics Office tells us that immigration to Ireland actually fell by 16% in the

year to April 2025. A total of 125,000 people came to Ireland and 65,000 people left. That is a net migration of 59,700, which should be a perfectly manageable number for a country of 5.46 million people. What is more, half of those arrivals were aged between 25 and 44, who are working-age adults filling vital gaps in the labour market. When the Tánaiste said that numbers are too high, he is not describing reality. He is trying to turn a story of economic growth and workforce needs into one of threat and crisis potentially because his back is against the wall.

The Minister, Tánaiste and several others have said that 80% of asylum applications are rejected. The Minister stopped in his tracks to say that should be something we consider. Okay, let us consider it. People have a right to seek asylum. It is natural many of them will not be successful. That is okay. People have that right. We do not get to control that. The presidential election was fought over who was more pro- or less pro-European Union. If that is what is being complained about, we have signed up to international agreements and if you want to deconstruct them, maybe you should revisit your belief system. Through parliamentary questions the Minister has also confirmed that of that number of 80% at least one in three is successful on appeal. The Minister is referring to 80% but one in three people of that percentage are successful on appeal. What does that tell us? There is a red flag. It is the first-instance system that is wrong hundreds of times a year. That is not efficiency; that is failure.

The Tánaiste went on to say that people who fail to comply with deportation orders should be "detained". Here again the Tánaiste sells drama instead of facts. Detention already exists under section 5 of the Immigration Act 1999. It allows for detention for up to 56 days extendable only by court order. We have detentions in prisons at the moment but our prison system is operating at 124% capacity. Is Fine Gael, the party of law and order, telling us that those people with outstanding deportations hanging over them should go into the prison system to increase that percentage? Will we see what we saw for example in Limerick last year when people who had committed actual crimes were released from prison so that we could detain people who had committed no crime? That is the extent of what the Tánaiste said. These are the debates we need to go into.

Both the Minister and the Minister of State said today that these those who work and are living in centres should pay for their accommodation. That was outlined as if both of them sat down and came to this determination just by themselves in a room presumably without any evidence basis or business case. Even the Government's own memo on this policy tells us it will cost €1.6 million to set it up and deliver a low-rate return. It even admits major difficulties in enforcement and recovery. There is no evidence of contribution models with high compliance rates in any EU member state. It just weakens one of the pull factors attracting international protection applicants to Ireland. This is the performative cruelty idea that people present as reasonable. Of course, perhaps the people in a position to pay could do so. However, when the Minister and the Minister of State were in that room deciding this policy without any evidence, did they consider that these working people might also have childcare and afterschool needs? They might want to put themselves in a position where they could save for the deposit for rent to try get some accommodation in a failed housing market that they did not create but are now being blamed for.

The Tánaiste went on to say that migration outside asylum is also too high. Here is where the hypocrisy really shows. In 2024, the Government issued 38,189 employment permits, the

highest number ever with over 32,000 new permits and 5,700 renewals. I am sorry that the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, just left the Chamber because she put out a strong press release talking about the fact that we need migration in this country because we are operating at such low levels of unemployment. However, the Tánaiste did not say that. He just simply said that migration at all levels is too high, whistling a little bit for somebody to hear, but when you break it down-----

Deputy Colm Brophy: The Deputy should listen to what the Tánaiste said afterwards, which is never quoted.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I consistently hear the Minister of State talking absolute drivel and I do not interrupt him.

So, who are we actually taking out of sectors? Is it students? Regardless of who is taken out, that will prove another area where this Government has failed. Removing students would actually destroy the education sector. Does it want to take people out of the healthcare system? Where is it? Migration pressures are undermining public confidence is another argument that is made, but public confidence has been undermined by a Government which does not have the capacity to manage anywhere across the State.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this topic today because this is an area I have deep expertise in. For ten years before becoming a TD, I worked in human rights and equality and for the second half of that decade, international protection was my primary focus. I find it incredible to listen to the statements from Government representatives here today calling for action on certain elements of our international protection system when they are part of a series of governments which, term after term over the last three decades, have overseen an absolutely shambolic approach to international protection. We had direct provision for two decades where people had barely enough means to live on. The Government had to be dragged kicking and screaming to provide for basic rights like the right to work and the right to access a driving licence which would allow people within the system to integrate into Irish society.

The main thing I have tracked as hugely problematic in the last ten years is the move that has taken place since I entered into this space and got involved in discussions. People used to wonder whether the Government was really that cynical, and whether the State was really trying to make it difficult and unattractive for people. Now we are at the point where the Government is openly saying that it wants to address the pull factor and does not want to attract applications from people for international protection. That is a direct denial of the right to claim asylum and it is a direct denial of the reality that 130 million people on this globe are displaced and need help. If, across the European Continent, we are in a race to the bottom to deny that right to claim asylum for people across the rest of the globe, we are on the wrong side of history.

I urge Ministers to read three books: Suad Aldarra's *I Don't Want to Talk About Home*; Sally Hayden's *My Fourth Time, We Drowned*; and for those into fiction Paul Lynch's *Prophet Song*. These will help them to zoom out and look at this issue in the way they need to.

Deputy Rory Hearne: In recent weeks we have seen in Citywest and Drogheda absolute violence with the potential for children and adults to be murdered with that arson attack. That is the reality. The Government can talk about condemning and say it absolutely thinks this is disgraceful, but I encourage people to read what the Hope and Courage Collective has put out. It makes it clear that it is the words of political leaders that have fanned these flames. What they have done is they have dog whistled. The Minister of State can talk about it, but there is no denying that what the Tánaiste did was dog-whistling to the far right because it is cheap political right-wing populism; that is what it is. People are hurting. People are being devastated every day by the housing crisis. In my constituency, from Ballymun to Beaumont, I meet people who are really struggling. Ministers are dog-whistling in saying that all the immigrants and asylum seekers are to blame because we have messed up so badly. It is the Government's failures. It is disgraceful that Ministers have turned and dog-whistled, and are blaming immigrants, because the real cause of the housing crisis is their failures. Why are they not calling out the Irish landlords who are evicting people into homelessness? Why are they not talking about the 100,000 vacant and derelict homes? Ireland is not full; it is full of crap from this Government which has failed over and over. I absolutely condemn the way it has taken this turn.

Deputy Jen Cummins: The atmosphere in this country has changed and it is entering into uncertain times. People are at their wits' end with regard to housing, public services, the lack of facilities in their communities and just feeling left behind by this Government. What should be centre stage for this Government is ensuring that this country has functional public services, has a thriving economy and is safe for people who live here and come here for safety. However, what we see is dysfunction and emptiness. People do not feel they can influence or change things that are so desperately wrong in this country. Waiting in the wings are characters who are looking to blame others who have nothing to do with the failures in this country, the failures from the Government. These characters are flooding social media with fear and hatred, and are inciting violence. Desperate people see that and believe that at least somebody is listening to them and maybe somebody might act in their best interests. That is how the far-right playbook is operating and developing.

Now there is fear, dread, violence and intimidation based on people's skin colour or where they are perceived to be from. IPAS centres, which are people's homes, are being attacked and burned down. Recently we have seen attempted murder and serious injury in Dublin 8, in Basin Lane in my constituency, and in Drogheda. Tricolours are being hung all around my constituency, not because it is St. Patrick's Day but to say foreigners are not welcome here. I beg to differ and so do many people in my constituency, including Dublin 8 for All, Inchicore for All and lots of police people who are doing great work to counteract the hate, fear and dread that has been driven into people who are at their wits' end. The lack of urgency the Government has shown in addressing the rise of hatred and violence is unacceptable and dangerous; and there is a risk to life. The Government needs to listen to us, look at what is going on and act.

Deputy Joe Neville: I must say I am very disappointed listening to what previous speakers have said and how they are characterising this. I think they are using it as an attempt to bring down an issue and to talk about it in a way that is not helpful and essentially disengages a vast number of the people who have a right to ask questions. Two weeks ago at the Committee of Public Accounts, we talked about the significant amount of money that is spent on IPAS. There

should be no issue with anybody asking questions about how State or taxpayers' money is spent, how centres or other places are run and who receives the money. We can all decry specific events like those that occurred in Drogheda and we can all say how horrified we are by what people take it upon themselves to do. Obviously, the worst thing is to attack the most vulnerable, and that is absolutely what happened there. However, to conflate the two issues in a way that only raises the temperature further is dishonest and very unfair on people who are trying to do their best by the State.

With regard to IPAS locations, we know how difficult it is for people who come to our country. They leave countries not because they are in a positive situation but because they want a better life. Ultimately, it is difficult for the State and us, as individuals, to talk about this because we have a history of emigration. This country has suffered from considerable emigration over the years. Significant numbers have left our shores for hundreds of years, and no one is more aware of it than ourselves. In the last century and this one, much of our economy was built on money received from those who went to America and their children who came after them, who still support the people here. We know how difficult it is and we sympathise instinctively with those who have to come here, but at the same time we have to address concerns where they arise. Vast numbers of people in this State have concerns about how their money is spent and who it is given to. We know that €1.2 billion was spent on IPAS centres last year. We also know that only a small number of third-party providers received most of that money. Some received up to €30 or €40 million. We need to ask questions about that.

What I am referring to covers all of the sector. Obviously, the IPAS system, in different locations and in different ways, has not worked. We need to continue to ask questions in this regard because, ultimately, as we were told by the Secretary General of the Department of justice, 80% of people who come to this country fail to secure residency. Deputy Nash questioned that number but that is the one that was stated to us. Other numbers have been issued since, but at the same time, the percentage given at the meeting of the Committee of Public Accounts last week was indeed 80%. Ultimately, if 80% of those who go through the process are not entitled to be here, we must question the system that allows it. We have a neighbour with which we share a border and many seem to be coming over it. In the past, people arriving at our airports were ripping up their passports. We have to stop that and question it, because if we do not we will not be serving the best interests not only of those who elect us but also others in the State who deserve our full support in many different ways. If people are arriving through the UK and have not sought asylum there, we must ask why. I do not want to use any term that might be misconstrued, but is this State seen as a place where they feel they might have a better chance of gaining asylum? If so, we must ask why it might be the case.

Ultimately, the Minister finds himself in a difficult situation. He was appointed to the role last year. The Department was restructured for a specific reason. Obviously, it was not working well enough previously. The Minister is trying to resolve some of these difficult issues. We need a system that works better and more quickly and that ultimately gets decisions made. If people are not entitled to be here, so be it. People will have to know that when they come here, they will have a limited opportunity, or otherwise, to stay here.

A vast number of people who have come to this country have contributed greatly and that is not to be questioned at all. We would all say that but we deserve transparency and

accountability from the Departments that deal with this. I have seen significant issues in my area. The State has used places – such as Ryevale House near me – where there was no proper planning permission or water resources, and no proper education provided for the people. I would question the Department and seek to continue to ensure that we do so.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: It is imperative that all of us condemn all violence and intimidation of international protection applicants at IPAS centres, which many applicants call home. Across Europe, every country is facing the same challenge, namely how to manage immigration fairly and firmly. Ireland is no different from its European counterparts. They have tightened their systems, sped up decisions and focused support on those who genuinely need protection. Ireland is now mirroring many of those same measures. We have started to cut processing times from years to months and increased voluntary returns to help people to go home safely and with dignity. We are moving towards State-owned accommodation, which offers better oversight and value for money than the private providers.

What is quite frustrating for many communities is that, even where applications for IPAS centres by private providers are refused, some of the providers, such as Shalom in Kilcock, continue to carry out works without the necessary planning permission, causing division in communities such as that in Kilcock and, as referred to by Deputy Neville, that near Ryevale House in Leixlip.

One area where we could go further is at the very start of the process at our borders. Across the EU, new border procedures are being introduced so applications can be screened quickly for identity, security and eligibility before people enter the asylum system. France and Germany have already begun this and it is proving effective. Ireland should follow that model. A properly designed border screening process would mean that clear initial decisions could be made within days, not months. Those with strong claims could move swiftly into protection and integration, while those without grounds would receive a fair early decision and be supported to return home. This would reduce the backlog, cut costs and give the public confidence that the system is being managed properly.

An immigration system without clear rules is not fair to those seeking refuge, to those already living here and to the communities coping with stretched housing and services. We have heard arguments in this regard time and again throughout the country. Since the start of the year, over 80% of first-instance asylum applications have been refused. That shows that the system is being overwhelmed by unsuitable cases. People are waiting too long and communities are being left without clarity.

Across Europe, governments are responding to the same pressures. Ireland is doing so too, but we can go further, learning from our partners while staying true to our values. Denmark and the UK now offer support for voluntary return because it is more humane and costs less. Belgium and Germany link accommodation contributions to income, ensuring fairness for taxpayers. Ireland is now taking similar steps, and I believe this is the right approach.

Ireland cannot do everything for everyone but we can do what is right and we can do it well. We can uphold our international obligations, protect our communities and maintain public trust. The Irish people want order, compassion and competence. They want a system that works, and that is what we must deliver.

The system must work not only for those already living here but also for those seeking protection. We have an international duty to care for those who come here in good faith. We must ensure that they are protected, that educational and social supports are in place and that we build an integrated community, not a segregated one.

We have seen good, important examples of where international protection applicants and refugees have been integrated into communities through GAA and soccer clubs and schools. That is key to ensuring that there is no secrecy and that people – both those coming to this country and those here already – feel they are involved in society. It is important that the process be open, fair and clear.

Deputy Martin Daly: Ireland has always been shaped by movement. For much of our history, we were a people who were forced to leave to seek opportunity abroad. However, in recent decades, as our economy has flourished and our society modernised, it has become a place where others come seeking safety, work, opportunity and hope.

I want to speak on this issue from personal experience. I am the son of an immigrant. My mother came here from India. She worked hard, contributed to her community, raised a large family and loved this country with deep and abiding affection. She would be horrified by the rise of racism, both casual and overt. I know the positive contribution that legal, well-managed immigration brings. I have lived it and we need it in this country but we do ourselves a grave disservice if we fail to maintain a fair, efficient and respected immigration system, one that is compassionate, yes, but also transparent, timely and enforced. If we want the Irish public to have confidence in immigration, then the immigration system must be one that deserves that confidence. We need a mature national conversation based on facts, not one where genuine concerns are dismissed as racism. We have to be honest when the State does not manage its borders effectively and when processes are slower and sow doubt. It does not produce compassion; it produces false narratives and resentment and it is the extremists, the racists and the chauvinists who step into that vacuum. If we do not govern this space responsibly, they will occupy it destructively.

We also need to be frank. Many people currently seeking international protection are doing so for economic reasons. While I fully understand their desire, we cannot conflate legal and illegal immigration. It does legal migrants, genuine asylum seekers and refugees no service. If a claim is fairly assessed and rejected, then deportation must follow. This is not institutional harshness; it is the rule of law and it protects the integrity of the system.

I acknowledge and commend my colleagues, the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, and the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, who have brought renewed urgency to processing and enforcement. In his speech, the Minister acknowledged his predecessor who also had initiated some change, but there has been a palpable change since he has stepped into his Ministry and it has been noticed by the public. That progress must accelerate and be sustained because if we fail to act, we do not just undermine the immigration system, but we undermine social cohesion and create a political vacuum that will be destroyed. We have seen the extreme forces who feel emboldened to try to burn, injure, maim and murder vulnerable women, children and men. The law must identify these people and deal with the perpetrators with severity.

Ireland must remain compassionate but it must be rigorous and prompt in the application of immigration laws, in keeping with our international obligations and in the common interest.

To do otherwise would be politically irresponsible. As international experience demonstrates, it would fuel the rise of extremism that would undermine the confidence of people who have come here with the vital skills and energy that drive our economy and enrich our society.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Our international protection system is not fit for purpose. It does not have the confidence of the people. This is a situation created and compounded by the failures of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in government. The system, as it stands, is dysfunctional and it lacks public confidence. Why? In the first instance, the basic principles of a rules-based system are not being followed. Decisions and appeals are taking far too long and there is a systemic failure to enforce the rules, particularly at the final stage. This undermines the process and eats away at public trust.

Compounding this is the scandal of profiteering. A staggering €1.2 billion is being spent on IPAS accommodation annually with a small number of private operators making tens of millions of euro from the State's dysfunction, all shrouded in a lack of transparency. We know from the Comptroller and Auditor General that the level of oversight and accountability on that spend is wholly inadequate. This must be addressed.

Sinn Féin wants an international protection system that is efficient, rules-based and fair, one that ends profiteering, processes applications swiftly and enforces decisions. We want a system that commands public confidence and trust.

While we are rightly critical of the Government's failings, we must condemn those who seek to exploit those failings to stoke fear and hate. There is no justification for racist and vile rhetoric or hateful acts. No one deserves to live in fear for their safety or their children's safety. This hate is causing immense hurt and fear within immigrant communities and it is being used to divide people across our State. It must be confronted and it must stop. We must stand firmly for a society that is inclusive and welcoming, where racism and hate is challenged and integration is properly supported. We can have a functioning international protection system and a compassionate society. They are not mutually exclusive. It is time for this Government to deliver both.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: In the summer of 1988, having graduated from third level, like thousands of others, I boarded a plane at Shannon Airport with a tourist visa and headed to New York city. I worked there for 18 months and later returned to Ireland. Unfortunately, due to Government policies at the time, unemployment was rampant. As I was unable to access employment in Ireland, I secured a job in London, where I spent nine years. I was fortunate enough to be able to come home. I am sure there are many more Irish people across the world who would like to return but they see the housing crisis and the ever-rising cost of living as barriers. We must do more to encourage and help them to come home.

We in Ireland are a very welcoming and open society that treats those fleeing war and persecution compassionately. This is a strength and a measure of our collective humanity. It is strength we cannot afford to lose. The Irish across the centuries have been forced to emigrate. My mother's whole family emigrated. I know the pain of having to say goodbye to loved ones at airport terminals. Like any sovereign state, however, we must manage migration to ensure the process is orderly, rules-based, enforceable and fair. This is something that Government parties have failed to deliver, leaving an immigration process that is an absolute mess.

Processing applications and appeals takes too long, deportation orders are not enforced and massive profiteering exists in the provision of inappropriately placed and maintained IPAS centres.

In March 2022, the Taoiseach said that as many as 200,000 refugees could arrive from Ukraine. There was no plan whatsoever to deal with that projected figure, and we struggled to deal with the half of that number who eventually came to Ireland. Approximately €1.2 billion is being spent on IPAS accommodation, with hundreds of millions of more euro for Ukrainian refugees. A small number of people are getting rich from the Government's dysfunctional approach to accommodation. In one year, two directors of Igo Cafe Limited, an accommodation provider, paid themselves €4.6 million. This is a company that has been one of the largest beneficiaries of State contracts.

Between the number of deportation orders signed and the actual numbers of deportation, there is a huge gap. In 2024, there were 2,400 orders with only 156 confirmed deportations. The level of enforcement is not good enough.

The failure of the Government to manage the migration process has led to an erosion of public confidence. This stems from a failure to manage the system but equally a failure to communicate with local communities. This has often been exploited by far-right agitators, often from outside of the State, to spread their fear and message of hate. Their distorted and xenophobic message must always be challenged. Local communities, where they have legitimate concerns, need to be listened to. Our IPAS system must be fair for both our citizens and those seeking international protection. The Ukrainian accommodation recognition payment contributes to the belief that things are not equal.

We need an international protection system that is fit for purpose. It is essential we continue to be a welcoming country. Those who have made Ireland their home contribute enormously to our economy and communities. Those who are granted protection must be welcomed, supported and integrated into our communities.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The Tánaiste said yesterday that we need a rationale, calm and informed debate on migration. I agree with that sentiment. Unfortunately, the past week offers little evidence that he means what he says. We need a reset on our public discourse on migration and that starts with all of us in this House and with our leaders in government. For a rationale debate, we need to make appeals to truth, not fears. For a calm debate, we need to stop exaggerating, misrepresenting and facilitating the endless conveyor belt of online lies which too often end up in diluted form on the floor of this House. For an informed debate, we must speak only to facts. The Tánaiste bulldozed through each of these three last week. He did so purposefully. He chose his words carefully. He knew the effect they would have on the ears that heard their fears reflected back to them and he knew the debate it would trigger. It contrasted so much with the thoughtful, rationale contribution from the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, in his article in yesterday's edition of *The Irish Times*.

I will focus on the Tánaiste's comments as the context could not be clearer. I will speak in factual terms now. This past weekend, we saw an attempt to kill innocent people and children. That is a fact. As the investigation into this is ongoing, we cannot speculate on what kind of hate is driving the minds of people who do these sort of things or where it comes from but we can make a fair guess.

6 o'clock

It is against that backdrop of where are as a country right now that the Government must make a choice. It can speak to the facts about migration and international protection in our country, or it can continue to come out with poorly judged generalisations that are only speaking to fears. When you look at the approach taken recently, we are not seeing that leadership. We are actually seeing a bit of a blame game going on within the coalition.

Throughout the last Government, we regularly saw Fianna Fáil backbenchers coming out briefing against Helen McEntee, when she was justice Minister, about international protection. Last Wednesday, in a turnaround, we saw Simon Harris declaring that it is taking too long to deport people from the country. Following this, last Thursday, in an interview with Claire Byrne, the Taoiseach declared that it was a mistake to have taken migration responsibility out of the Department of justice. Except that never happened. The Department of justice has always had responsibility for all aspects of our border and who enters our country. Responsibility for issuing visas remained with the Department of justice. Responsibility for the Garda National Immigration Bureau, the International Protection Office and the Refugee Appeals Tribunal all remained with the Department of justice. Responsibility for policy on employment permits remained with the then Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. The only thing that was taken out of the Department of justice was responsibility for accommodating people fleeing here, either through international protection or subsequently through temporary protection for those fleeing the war in Ukraine. This effort by the Taoiseach to rewrite history is not the leadership that we need.

At a time when there are bad-faith actors on the far right trying to divide our society in the most dangerous way, too often the country is left with a vacuum in leadership. Whether it is the attempted arson in Drogheda, the attacks on people of Indian or Southeast Asian descent across the summer or the continuous vicious racist abuse that many Irish people face online, the Government needs to stop its internal bickering, stop trying to shift blame and actually show leadership. The Government must lead on protecting people who are vulnerable, on standing up to hatred, whether it is on our streets or in the online space, and by combating misinformation with facts.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Why are we having this debate? That is the first question I want to ask. A child was horrifically sexually assaulted. We are not discussing gender-based violence. I have just come from a committee that the rape crisis centre set up. Four TDs showed up. Nobody from Fianna Fáil or Fine Gael was there. They do not care about that issue. A racist riot followed the assault. Massive harm was done to gardaí. We have seen the attempted murder of families in Drogheda. Then we hear the Minister of State on the radio scapegoating the people who live in IPAS centres, saying that they should pay for their accommodation in which they are not even safe and which is being surrounded by people who sometimes want to harm or kill them. We hear his Minister friend's performative cruelty with the deportation flights that are costing the taxpayer a fortune. There is more performance in so many of the other things that he has done.

I want to talk about Simon Harris. Let us be clear, he had a disastrous presidential election. The housing crisis is increasing at pace. Fianna Fáil's own backbenchers are rare and savage over it. The Taoiseach has disappeared to a conference he does not even need to be at. Simon

Harris does a pivot again to the right and starts to scapegoat minorities in this country, something he has done before. I am not a bit surprised. It is the *modus operandi* of establishment parties worldwide. In order to compete with the far right, they move further right. I was never very convinced by Simon Harris's liberal foray on repeal any way. I think he is in more comfortable territory right now.

We need to say a couple of things. The vast majority in international protection do not want to be in this country. Let us start with that. They do not want to leave their own countries, but there has been a massive increase in genocide, in wars, in militarism and in poverty. Many of the people are Ukrainian, and the Government was all for funding the war in Ukraine as well. We have a capitalist system, to which the Government is wedded, that is bringing nothing but devastation and poverty. What does the Government do? It resorts to increasing racism itself. Misogyny, homophobia and all of that is being resorted to by Trump and it looks like the Government is following suit. I saw photographs yesterday of Georgian people, apparently, being put onto flights. It is the kind of thing I have seen Trump do in the US with the ICE raids. It is absolutely despicable.

Simon Harris said that people are shutting down debate and are being divisive. He is being divisive. This has actual repercussions for lots of people in this country, including constituents of mine. It is a very diverse constituency. I did not hear the Government running for a debate on racism when the Indian community was under assault all over the summer. There was no debate in this House.

In the minute I have left, it has to be mentioned that it is not just Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Other parties in this House are leaning into racism as well. Aontú was exposed for its youth membership having a brutally antisemitic group chat where the n-word was used throughout. This is somebody who was working in a Deputy's office in these Houses and we are meant to pretend that they did not know he was a racist. He was an absolute fascist. Independent Ireland has been putting up stuff. It is disappointing that Sinn Féin is also there. If you do not point to the resources that exist in this society in a massively rich country with a huge budget surplus and huge number of vacant properties and all you do is attack the IPAS system, you are not actually tackling the far right. I am competing in the exact same territory. Take a lesson from the presidential election and Catherine Connolly. You do not have to lean into this stuff. Take a lesson from Zohran Mamdani as well. A lot of people do not want division and hatred stirred up.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It was very strange yesterday on Leaders' Questions. I counted no fewer than seven times when Jack Chambers, stepping in for the Taoiseach, called for a debate on our migration policy. This is kind of the last refuge of the scoundrel. Rather than actually coming out and arguing for a position, they just say we need to have a debate about it, suggesting that somehow they are not able to have a debate. They are able to have a debate; they are the Ministers responsible for Government policy. It has become clear that what the Government wants is not a debate. What it wants is a free run to engage in dog-whistling and in scapegoating of asylum seekers and for that not to be challenged. Simon Harris was deliberately conflating migration numbers in general with a small number of asylum seekers who had not been deported. When Fintan O'Toole very accurately and precisely skewered that and exposed the misinformation that Simon Harris was engaged in, and when that was then echoed and emphasised by some Opposition parties, the response by Simon Harris to this

debate happening was to accuse us of shutting down debate. The debate is not just that you get to say whatever you want or that you get to throw out your dog-whistles and not be challenged on it. You will be challenged on it.

The truth is that the Government does not want to significantly change aspects of our migration policy. If it did, it would bring forward those proposals. It wants to stick with the current migration policy, but add in some more elements of performative cruelty to dog-whistle, to scapegoat asylum seekers and to distract from its failures in government. The idea, as it was suggested by a Fianna Fáil TD, that by doing so they will cut across the rise of the far right and that this is what the evidence across Europe shows is ridiculous. All the evidence shows that as the establishment moves to the right, it reinforces the rhetoric and analyses of the far right. It simply gives them more and more space because the establishment cedes ground to them. Fintan O'Toole was absolutely correct in analysing why this is happening:

There is a question that hovers over Irish politics: what will the parties of power do when they start to panic about losing it? Last week, after their joint debacle in the presidential election, we got the grim answer: turn on immigrants.

It is not the first time we got the grim answer. We got the grim answer in the run-up to the local elections, where Sinn Féin deserves a fell-for-it award where it tried to compete in being more anti-immigrant than the Government, which resulted in a disastrous election for Sinn Féin because it all became about immigration. The Government earlier stated that it was overrun at that stage and that the result was that people were on the canal. That is not what happened. That is not true. There were empty beds in the system. The Government chose to put people on the canal because it wanted to make people homeless in order to centre the issue of immigration and say that was the problem. It is all an incredible distraction technique to make people think that the problems in our society, the housing crisis, the health crisis and the cost-of-living crisis and the causes of those problems are not those at the top, those who profit from those crises, not the Government that represents those forces that profit, but the most vulnerable people. The latest act of performative cruelty or suggestion, which is being trailed again and again, is the idea that the Government is going to charge people who are working for staying in IPAS accommodation. It is presented as just common sense. Why would people not be paying? Well, one reason might be that it is going to cost more to implement than the Government will raise. There is also a very good reason that we do not charge people who stay in, for example, emergency accommodation. We want them to actually get out of emergency accommodation. The Government is going to keep people in poverty in these systems just so it can have some performative cruelty. This is the thin end of the wedge. If the Government gets away with doing this for asylum seekers in their emergency accommodation, is it going to do the same for homeless people? Is the Government going to use that horrendous attack? If it sets up the system, spends millions of euros on it and establishes the principle that if people work while in State-provided accommodation they should pay, then all homeless people will be next. That is why we must stand against this divisive policy.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I welcome the opportunity to make a contribution on the topic of international protection processing and enforcement. It is an area in which, in spite of enormous challenges, the Government has made sustained progress in the right direction. It is critical to point out at the outset that migrants make an immense contribution to Irish society.

People are welcome to come here, work, study and join family so long as they do so legally, as the vast majority do.

Migrants' presence here in Ireland contributes to a rich and culturally diverse society that we should all value. Amidst an unprecedented number of arrivals in recent years, the Government has ramped up staffing levels in the International Protection Office, IPO, showing a real commitment to speeding up the international protection process and improving effectiveness and efficiency. Through September of this year, the total number of applicants had reduced by 38.5%. In addition, enforcement had significantly stepped up, with an increase of 105% on the same period in 2024. However, while this progress is being made, it is important that we recognise, and indeed challenge, the increasingly hostile online commentary that has grown up regarding immigration in Ireland. The claim that migrants coming to Ireland are unvetted is entirely false. All international protection applicants have their fingerprints and photographs taken and these are checked against EU databases. Of course, we must also recognise there are many communities throughout the country who have legitimate concerns about migration, which we must address by having sensible, honest and rational discussions with local communities.

While debating the issue recently on KCLR, I outlined my view that the best way of challenging those sections of society that engage in hateful and divisive rhetoric on the issue is by continuing to deliver a firm but fair migration system that recognises people's right to stay here but also deals robustly with cases of people who do not have that right. That is why the Government is bringing forward the international protection Bill. This new legislation will bring important changes, which will streamline the decisions process, as well as the returns process, and will provide new institutional arrangements for international protection decisions and appeals.

The Bill also signals the Government's intention to shift away from the emergency use of hotels, with a preference now expressed for facilities on State-owned land. This will be a welcome relief to hoteliers and local communities, and will also be cheaper in the long run.

I commend the former Minister for justice, Deputy McEntee, and the current Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, on their work to streamline Ireland's international protection processing service. I also acknowledge the ambition and efforts of the Minister of State at the Department, Deputy Brophy. The best way of lowering the temperature when it comes to debating immigration is to focus on the delivery of a robust, fair and firm system, and the international protection Bill is a key component of that delivery.

While a lot has been done, we all know that there is much more to do. I welcome the Government's determination in getting this work done.

Deputy Edward Timmins: It is important that in all discussions here we choose our language carefully. We must not say anything that might inflame situations or give encouragement to any extreme positions. We must stick at all times to facts and remember that we are talking about fellow human beings. The most important thing is that we have open and frank discussions. By having open discussions, we lessen the possibility of false information and extreme positions taking hold.

Two years ago, I stated publicly that we should have an open discussion on immigration. To date, we have failed to do so. We have nothing to hide.

I commend the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, on the steps he has taken, which have already resulted in considerable improvements.

I wish to make a few points. We need to deal with applications quickly. By denying quick decisions, we are leaving people in limbo. This is not good for them. It also contributes to overcrowding and many other challenges. This feeds into the extra cost to the State. This expenditure has been far in excess of what it needs to be. I urge the Minister to work to renegotiate all contracts with a view to lowering the cost. Allied to this, there needs to be a regular count to establish the numbers in each centre so as not to be paying for people who are not living there. This is a basic control.

One of the cornerstones of any system is that all citizens of the State are treated equally. In the case of IPAS residents who are working and earning a wage, there must be a contribution to all accommodation costs. Rent should be calculated along the lines of the letting priority scheme of local authorities. Food and utility costs must also be charged. This is the same as what any citizen in this State pays.

My next point relates to the distribution of IPAS locations. It is important that centres are not all located in one area, or that small towns and villages do not have very high numbers. In my own county of Wicklow, the majority of IPAS centres and numbers of people seeking international protection are located in one municipal district, namely, west Wicklow. This district is also the most poorly served by public transport and services. Above all, these measures should be introduced quickly. One of the main issues I have seen since I entered the Dáil is how slowly things move. The world out there moves quickly. Government action and the action of relevant public servants must move much more quickly and reflect the realities on the ground. We see this in infrastructure delivery. These delays are causing hardship for those involved and costing the taxpayer hundreds of million of euros.

I will repeat what I said at the beginning. I hope this forms part of a move to an open and frank discussion.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: The Government has dealt with unprecedented numbers of international protection applicants in recent years, following a decade of geopolitical instability. Ireland strives to maintain a robust, rules-based system for all and to ensure that our citizens are protected through the appropriate enforcement of our borders. It is this Government's utmost priority to ensure that all those who arrive at our doorstep are treated with dignity and respect. We acknowledge the difficult journey that many asylum applicants make to arrive at our borders, fleeing war and enduring treacherous voyages. Therefore, each applicant should be treated fairly and in an appropriate length of time. However, we can also acknowledge the pressure that the high numbers of applications have put on the IPO, particularly since 2022. The waiting times are not acceptable for vulnerable international protection applicants or for Irish citizens who believe in a just legal system. The median processing time for cases in early 2023 was almost two years.

What is most important is that we deliver a fair and efficient immigration system. Notwithstanding that, we must acknowledge the geopolitical challenges and our unique

position in the EU to help. We must ensure that those who are entitled to protection are processed more quickly and with efficiency, transparency and respect. As a country, we cannot tolerate abuses of the system, such as misleading authorities or destroying documents. We cannot have any tolerance for asylum shopping. We welcome the drive from the Government and the wider EU to implement an efficient and faster processing time of 12 weeks under the EU migration and asylum pact, which will be introduced in June 2026. The current process is lengthy, including 14 months for first-instance decisions and 13 months for appeal.

As I said, increased efficiency will ensure that Irish citizens can maintain trust in the State to implement a just immigration process and guarantee a robust, rules-based enforcement of legal systems. What Irish citizens want to see is efficiency, transparency, ready access to information and value for taxpayer money. This Government wants to combat the sense of powerlessness for applications stuck in the system and for our Irish citizens who are confronted with disinformation.

In 2025, we had the highest number of deportation orders in Ireland in over 20 years. I welcome the work of the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, on deportation orders, including an operation to Georgia this week, thereby ensuring that abuses of the system will not be tolerated. We need a fair and efficient system for everyone.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I express my condemnation of the appalling attack that took place at the IPAS centre in Drogheda last week. Such acts of violence are unacceptable and have no place in any society. My thoughts are with all of those affected.

This is such an important and sensitive issue. I fully recognise the need for a robust international protection system for people fleeing war-torn regions. The global instability we have witnessed in recent years has underscored just how essential this is. At the same time, we must ensure our immigration system is fair, effective and sustainable. That means addressing potential abuse of the system and ensuring housing, public services and infrastructure can meet demand.

Since taking office earlier this year, the Minister has done a commendable job in building and delivering a robust and rules-based immigration processing and enforcement system. The Minister and his Department are moving towards a system that is more enforcement ready, faster in its decision-making and putting a stronger emphasis on verifying and processing.

One specific point I would like to make is about deportation. My understanding is the total number of people removed by charter flights this year has come to 205 people. I recognise that the Department continues to prioritise voluntary returns. In light of recent incidents, however, there comes a time when, for a particular type of person, a deportation order must be enforced more strictly. Is the Department satisfied the voluntary returns programme is making real progress and being properly resourced, both financially and in terms of staffing capacity? The voluntary returns programme depends on people coming forward and not everyone will comply with this process. What actions is the Department taking to follow up with those who do not engage with the voluntary return programme? How do we track and enforce deportations for those who are not complying?

I welcome the debate we are having. The current system is not working as it should. Decisions are taking too long and it is proving very costly. It is clear that significant reform is

needed. I hope we can move forward in delivering that reform with compassion and fairness. It is worth noting that since the Minister has taken office, there has been a 40% reduction in the numbers of people arriving here and that is a testament to that robust system the Minister is trying to enforce.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I join others in expressing outright condemnation of the horrible scene we saw in Drogheda the other night. I did not realise until yesterday morning that there was actually footage of it online. How disgusting to see someone bring a flammable liquid into the hallway of that premises, pour it up along the stairway and set it on fire, putting the lives of children upstairs at risk. It is disgusting and I hope when that person is identified and brought before the court system, he will not be tried for manslaughter or an arson attack or anything like that. He should be tried for attempted murder as that is what it was on the night.

I have been 21 years in politics and on Monday evening I had a first. I was hosting a local advice clinic in my community along with Councillor Rachel Hartigan, who is in the Public Gallery this evening. It was the first time ever that we had nine people from a certain ethnic community come to a clinic and say they fear for themselves and the community they live in. I had never heard that before. I have had people come to clinics to talk about the taxation of cars, medical cards and housing but I had never heard a group of people say they live in fear in the community that is their home. That is very worrying.

It is really important that our international protection system is both fair and robust. If you have come from a situation in a country where there is war, persecution or famine and your life is at risk, you should come to Ireland with dignity, respect and knowing this country will care for you, listen to your case and how worthwhile it is, and protect you during that period. If you have come here for economic reasons, told lies, with false documentation or have destroyed your documentation after you have come through the port or airport, you have totally flouted all of the rules of international protection and you should be deported.

I commend the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan. What I have seen in him is more guts, courage and conviction than in many of his predecessors because what we are seeing is deportation happening in real time. There is not just talk about it; it is happening. I also welcomed his suggestion during the week that if someone is staying in an accommodation centre and earning a salary, which people are allowed to do after a six- or eight-week period, they should rightly be paying for that because every other person in this country, be they accommodated in emergency accommodation, social housing or any form of accommodation, pays a contribution that is appropriate and equal to what they are able to pay.

There is a certain cohort that is coming to our country seeking work. They should be coming here through the work visa system. We do need people with critical skills and that was laid bare yesterday in a Government report. We will need people from other countries to come here to fill our workforce and provide critical skills, but if people are coming here and saying there is a war in their country when they are in fact here for economic reasons, that is flouting the system.

It is really important that towns like Lisdoonvarna which have played a disproportionate role are reflected on during the next phase of planning. Lisdoonvarna in County Clare, more than any town in Ireland, has played a role. Its population has increased fourfold during the past two and a half years and yet the Government and agencies of the Government did not backfill

that with fourfold support. It is also important to note that schools very quickly played a major supporting role and welcomed young children into their classrooms, but now as those children have moved on to other accommodation centres, those schools are being told by the Minister for education that their enrolment on 30 September dropped by two or three pupils so a teacher will be taken from them. We should show the same good spirit to those schools that they showed to the little children who arrived at their front door because it has to work both ways.

We need to have scrutiny on how centres are managed. It is built into their contracts that there should be good food and transport but also 24-7 security. That is not being fulfilled in a lot of centres. If the Government is paying good taxpayers' money, it should certainly have some oversight of how it is being spent.

I have faith in the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, and I look forward to his Bill being progressed in due course.

Deputy Pa Daly: Unfortunately, we have turned a corner in this State. During the past week, we have had convictions for racially motivated murders and the lives of babies put in danger in Drogheda, where there was no way out of a burning building except down a stairs. Some of the online commentary in response to the attack in Drogheda were: "the person who did it must be staying there", "it was an inside job", "they did it themselves", "immigrants looking for better accommodation", "scum will get a nicer hotel now" and "there are other issues that are more shocking". Are they more shocking than attacking children in a burning building or attempted murder? It is unbelievable to have heard this in the same week Sr. Stanislaus Kennedy passed away.

If people keep spreading hate and misinformation, these attacks are inevitable. There is nothing new to this type of misinformation. I recently read a debate in Britain from 40 or 50 years ago where Roy Jenkins said, "a few people whether, out of political opportunism or personal inadequacy, have deliberately whipped up prejudice, playing on fear and ignorance, and blaming immigrants for problems which are none of their making - but which stemmed from previous parsimony in housing, schools and welfare services." Similarly, a Welsh politician once said that if you do not have a programme, a bogeyman will do. Who better to pick on than people who are voiceless and, crucially, poor, such as asylum seekers? In my constituency, we admired people such as Mike Quill from Kerry, a union leader in New York who always preached an anti-racist message. He said that if blacks and Jews were good enough to fight and die beside, they were good enough to live beside and work beside also. There was also Sr. Stanislaus, of course, and Hugh O'Flaherty, who said, "God has no country".

The lessons were set out to the Government years ago that there should have been more State-run accommodation. Unfortunately, nothing was done about that in the previous Dáil and a lot of the problems fall squarely at the feet of the Government.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: What we saw in the attack on the IPAS accommodation in Georges Street in Drogheda was nothing short of attempted murder. We saw somebody put flammable liquid on the stairs and five people had to be rescued - one adult and four children, one of them a very young infant. Somebody was willing to go in around 8.15 p.m. on Hallowe'en, break through the door and burn what could have been 28 people to death. That

is the reality of what was done. It could have been the deaths of 28 human beings. The only escape for them was down the stairs.

There are questions about the appropriateness of the building. My constituency colleague has brought up the issue of some of the people who have been involved in IPAS offering IPAS accommodation. Really and truly, I do not think any of this is good enough. We need anyone with any bit of information to provide it to the Garda. That is the only thing that is right. We need to make sure that the full power of the law is felt in this regard. Beyond that, we must ask what sort of world we are in. I also saw comments that this must be an inside job. Facts do not even matter any more in the commentary. There is just utter online hatred and online racism and beyond that there is an element of madness out there. At the end of the day what we saw was an attempt to take human life. We need to ensure that those people are prosecuted and give whatever resources the Garda require need to be provided. My thoughts go out to the families who have been through that.

This does not take away from the fact that this State, like every other state, needs to have a system. We should have a greater level of State-provided accommodation for those seeking international protection. We also need to make sure that the process is sped up. Decisions and appeals are taking too long. If someone has a right to stay here because they are fleeing war and persecution, that is fine. If they are not, they must leave. We need to ensure that our deportation system is conducted correctly. Outside of that we need to make sure we stand up against racism-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: -----and stand up against the absolutely brutal violence such as we saw in Drogheda.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: We need workers in this country from different countries. We need to simplify the process, under the enterprise system, for those coming through. A lot of businesses are looking for and need workers, including hospitals and hospitality. We need doctors, nurses, and nursing home workers. There is not one person in the country who disputes that.

No one could condone what we witnessed the other night in Drogheda, or any gardaí getting hurt. It was despicable. I want to be very clear on that. There is a fact, however, that I also want to talk about. It is not acceptable if somebody comes into the country and basically gets rid of their paperwork, to put it very simply. It is not a thing where we would be able to stop people coming into the country via Northern Ireland and southern Ireland, but the bottom line is that we should have a process whereby within the first six weeks, a decision should be made on whether the person can stay. We should have a section in the courts so if the person wanted to go to the courts, he or she can deal with the courts and go through the different process. The whole process should be finished inside six months. When that is done and once that decision is made, if a person is staying they are staying if a decision is made that way. However, if a person is to be deported it should not be a case of "Rock on and whenever you get chance, head off". We need to tighten that system up whether we like it or not. In fairness to the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, he stood up and now it is way better than what was going on before. It is

despicable that somebody who has been in the country for six years has not been processed. This is not acceptable either to the person who comes in or to the State's system. It is not working, to put it simply.

I ask the Government to be fair to everyone but the one thing it has to do is when it makes a decision, it makes a decision. A lot of people are chancing their arm coming into this country; let no one say there is not. People are sick of what is going on.

I also ask the Minister of State about the courts system and whether a new system has to be set up. I know this takes resources and it takes more money-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy is taking Deputy Collins' time now.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: -----but I would ask the Minister of State to make sure this is fast forwarded very quickly.

Deputy Michael Collins: I state unequivocally that we do not ever condone violence. The events in Drogheda over the weekend were deeply disturbing and there is absolutely no place in this country for such behaviour, no matter who owns the building. Let us be honest, however, that condemning violence is only part of the conversation. We must also confront the systematic failure in our immigration system. These failures are causing real harm to decent and law abiding people. Let us consider the South African man I am helping. He travelled from Mizen Head to Dublin today without an appointment and desperate to secure a visa for his wife. He has been waiting since March. He is a respected member of my community and his story is not unique. It is emblematic of a system that is failing. In Bandon there is a man who is married to an Irish citizen. He is still waiting for a visa despite having a ten-week-old baby. In Clonakilty another man is trying to reunite with his Brazilian partner who was forced to leave the country due to the delays in securing a de facto visa. These are people who contribute to our communities and who are trying to do things the right way, yet they are met with bureaucratic indifference and endless obstacles. Meanwhile we have IPAS centres housing individuals with deportation orders. Serious questions remain unanswered about how non-residents, including vulnerable children in Tusla care, ended up being assaulted by a resident of the Citywest campus. The Minister's reply to my parliamentary questions confirmed that around 500 people who are subject to deportation orders are currently residing in IPAS centre accommodation. This is not just a policy failure; this is a safeguarding crisis. Let me say something that some seem to be afraid to say: I do not believe it is wrong to take care of our own people first. What is so controversial about that? We have over 16,000 people homeless in this country. Where is the help for them? When we are passengers on an airplane, we are told that in the case of an emergency we must put on our own oxygen masks first before helping others. That is not selfish; that is common sense.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I would like to be associated with the words of condemnation of what happened in Drogheda, as my party colleagues have pointed out.

I speak for the 82% of Irish people who feel unheard, unseen and forgotten in this country. The Government has lost control of migration, lost control of enforcement and lost the confidence of the nation. What we have now is a system without fairness and without end in

sight. Appeals have surged by 46% in six months from 9,700 to 14,134. Deportation orders had been issued but from June only 160 have been acted on by removal charter. That is not order; that is abdication.

Nearly €1 billion each year is being spent on accommodation for international protection applicants. Some of them, as was pointed out to the House, have an unusual relationship with CAB. Others have very unusual relationships with Fianna Fáil. This is while Irish citizens who built and paid into this country cannot find a home, cannot find a GP, cannot find a dentist and cannot get extra services into their classrooms. Many of them have told me that they have lost their sense of security within their own community. There is nobody talking about that. We must put Irish people first. We must protect our own citizens and house our own homeless before we try to impress the boys in Brussels. Charity should always begin at home when it comes to our citizens. Our duty is to our own people, not for the good of the boys in Europe and to impress those and to be the best in class.

We walk through villages in Ireland today and they do not reflect Irish society anymore. Many people are saying to me that they do not feel safe because they were in a small village, their hotel has been taken away from them, everything has been taken away from them and there is a huge influx of a new society which is being put upon them and no consultation given to them at that time.

We look across to Europe and see that countries are taking back control. Countries like Denmark are enforcing great and proper immigration and well structured immigration laws. Poland is defending its borders. Hungary will not be lectured by bureaucrats in Brussels. Ireland meanwhile rewards the policy failures of this Government with hotel rooms and handouts.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy must conclude.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I am sorry, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Those policies are not making any economic sense and would not promote anybody. It is economically unsustainable.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I condemn the horrible attacks that happened on the IPAS centre in Drogheda. I welcome the fact that the Government has done such a U-turn on immigration and its rhetoric. It is quite incredible to be sitting here listening to an immigration debate with comments by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael TDs that they would have been called racist just a year ago. Where was the critical thinking then? Where was the independent thought a year or two years ago? It is amazing to hear Government Members raising concerns and talking about a firm and fair immigration system. This is something we spoke about for a very long time and for which we were condemned by the Government. I am glad that the Tánaiste has made a U-turn and finally allowed some common sense and critical thinking into this debate. It is ironic that the Government is condemning the Social Democrats and the Labour Party for trying to censor debate, which I believe is wrong, which the Government engaged in just a few months ago. It is important that I welcome the Minister of State to the side of common sense, to critical thinking and, indeed, to law and order.

We know the IPAS system has been abused for far too long. That abuse includes applicants coming from the North, which is a safe country, into Ireland. There has been abuse by way of

the destruction of travel documents, which the Government has done nothing about because it is incapable even of having a rational discussion on the topic. This is something that could easily have been solved but a discussion on it in the House was refused. The situation of economic migrants using and abusing the IPAS system should have been addressed several years ago. Another abuse is the fact the Government has taken over the last remaining hotel in so many towns and villages. We have deportation orders that are never enforced. In fact, last year, more than 2,500 deportation orders were issued and just over 100, or less than 5%, were enforced. That is the reality but one would not think so from listening to Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael TDs this evening. That is not to mention the utter abuse of taxpayers' money associated with the IPAS system. The Comptroller and Auditor General's report outlined a litany of such abuse, including more than €7.5 million wrongly being charged on VAT.

That is the situation over which the Government has presided. I welcome that we are finally moving to a stage where we can actually discuss this topic but it is important for the Government to realise it has created and presided over this chaos. It is crucial that it now implements rational steps that seek to improve the situation and address the chaos over which it has presided.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I cannot say much in two minutes other than to point out that we need a much wider debate on this issue. Without proper, respectful discourse, a vacuum is created and that vacuum is taken over by radical groups that foment hatred and spew disinformation. That leads to there being open season to verbally abuse and possibly physically abuse anyone on a bus with darker skin. We have seen that happening all around the country and I have seen it in my constituency. It is absolutely reprehensible. At the same time, there are groups using identity politics to stir up, antagonise and cast aspersions on people who raise genuine concerns.

The fact is that 74% of asylum applicants in the country at the moment are found, after appeal, not to have the right to remain. They are economic migrants. I have said to the Taoiseach previously that many of them are genuine, decent people who only want a better life, but the asylum process is not the way to apply to remain. We need workers, as Deputy Fitzmaurice said, and we always will need workers. There is an issue with an industrial policy that brings the likes of software localisation to Dublin, where there is huge pressure on house prices, when there are rural areas that could do with more children in local schools and where shopfronts and rooms above shops are lying idle. That is an issue for a wider debate.

We need a citizens' convention on the issue of asylum policy and immigration to facilitate a fact-based, respectful discussion that takes into account our international obligations to support those fleeing persecution and also looks at the common good in Ireland and our capacity to provide support for people. That would be a fair discussion. We can discuss immigration and asylum but not other people because of their background or the colour of their skin. Let us please have that wider debate.

Deputy John Lahart: While I agree with much of what the previous speaker said, this Chamber is the citizens' assembly for discussion of this issue. We need to be courageous. Unfortunately, a previous speaker has left the Chamber. There are a couple of points I would have liked to respond to but perhaps that is for another day. The Minister of State will understand if I focus my comments locally or parochially on Citywest. Some of the points I

will make could already be subject to action by the Minister, the Minister of State and the Department. They are issues that have been raised with me and I am sure they have landed on the Minister of State's desk.

I understand a meeting is planned in the coming weeks to discuss the situation at Citywest. The issue I raise relates to the management of the facility. Some of the concerns may be groundless but I will outline them in any case. There is concern that the current staff lack appropriate training in essential areas, including conflict resolution, Children First and child protection protocols, trauma-informed practices, human trafficking awareness and general social care and protection standards. Question marks have been raised around accountability structures reaching down to security staff. The Citywest complex, as the Minister of State knows well, hosts at least three distinct centres. There is what we would have known as the golf hotel, with 300 or 400 rooms. I understand it is still housing refugees but it is separate from the Citywest facility. The Citywest hotel houses more than 1,000 Ukrainians and then the leisure centre, or the gym as it would be known locally, has 30,000 sq. ft of accommodation. The convention centre is over 250,000 sq. ft in size and the hotel has 750 beds. It is a big operation.

One of the things we need to do now we own a significant portion of this facility is sit down and review how it is governed and managed from security right down to welfare. Concerns have arisen regarding security and access control. One of the suggestions made to me is that we need tighter control of access points and consideration of enhanced security measures such as the use of drug detection dogs. There are claims of open drug dealing on the site. Use of facial recognition technology has also been suggested. That is standard practice in some other IPAS centres and involves a swipe in-swipe out system. It does not contravene anybody's rights; it just protects the place properly. It has been proposed that there be a review of and greater emphasis on monitoring and accountability. I am not talking here about the Ukrainians living in the State. I refer to those seeking international protection and who must remain on site until they attain that. The site is not a prison but it is a holding centre for people in that sense. There have been calls for a focus on social cohesion within the site and off-site and on residents' well-being. There is a mix. I volunteered there for a little while. What I did was a microcosm of what other volunteers in south County Dublin did. However, I was there just as things started to get a little more complex and it was not just Ukrainians being housed there. I wrote a little paper on what I saw, which I will forward to the Minister of State. My time is up. Those are just some of the concerns that have been raised locally. I know the Minister of State is aware of them.

Deputy James Geoghegan: Deputy O'Flynn has left the Chamber but unless I misheard him, he said that when we walk through our villages, they do not reflect Irish society. I am not sure what he meant by that but I cannot imagine how it could be interpreted as anything other than inflammatory. It really puts into stark contrast the labels that have been thrown at my party leader for the measured remarks he has made in respect of how we deal with the international protection system and with migration. Like others in this House, I utterly condemn the cowardly and reprehensible behaviour we have seen in Citywest and Drogheda. I am glad to hear every Member call those responsible out for what they are, which is racist, unlawful and an affront to us all.

I will speak about something central to the immigration debate and the way we do politics as our country's demography and workforce change. In discussing migration, we must acknowledge it is a complex social phenomenon. There are different forms of migration. It brings obvious benefits to our economy, healthcare system and cultural life but it also presents new demands. Given the issue's complexity, the public expects that we, as its representatives in this House, will discuss challenges for the systems we use to manage migration. I fear we are falling disappointingly short of the public's expectations. To state these two things that are obviously true should not be controversial. The Tánaiste's recent remarks simply reflected the issue's complexity and the need to respond to a new environment.

Of course our policies should change if our system is not fit to deal with the challenges we face on migration for both workers and those seeking international protection. We do, of course, need workers and we have a duty to support people in need but we also need a rules-based system. These are arguments that cannot be brushed aside. Arguments should always be considered on their merits and on the strength of evidence in support of them. Ideological dogma should never take precedence over constructive debate. It is disgraceful that some parties in this Chamber have chosen to engage in dangerous and divisive culture war politics. The bad faith arguments, closer to innuendo, put forward by some of the Opposition have been nothing short of remarkable. As a former Lord Mayor of Dublin, I am incredibly proud that one in five people living in Dublin city is not originally from Ireland. That adds to the vibrancy of our city and makes it international. Deputy O'Flynn's remarks about walking through villages and not seeing Irish society absolutely disgust me. However, you can believe both things are true and still believe in a rules-based system for migration while still championing the extraordinary people who are working in our health service but equally acknowledge there are challenges in our international protection system. This is an important debate worth having.

Deputy Barry Ward: I welcome these statements. It is very important to have debate on these issues. However, it is also important when having this debate to have it in a reasonable, informed and safe space because it seems that anybody who engages in debate on this issue now is criticised by one side or the other as being extreme in one direction or the other. That is a really regrettable state of affairs. Some Members who have contributed to this debate so far have been quite unreasonable but rather than train my guns on them, I will specifically raise an issue that came up in *The Irish Times* this week. Columnist Fintan O'Toole criticised the Tánaiste for remarks he made outside Cabinet.

Criticism of the remarks is fine but I found something in the paper of record that was unworthy of *The Irish Times* and unworthy of Fintan O'Toole. There was a twisting of what was said, followed by a suggestion that it was misinformation. He did that by suggesting the use of the word "migration" means "immigration". If he had actually listened to the entirety of what Deputy Harris said, the Tánaiste was at pains to point out that we need immigration. Throughout this debate, I have heard people talk about immigration, despite the fact this is entitled Statements on International Protection Processing and Enforcement. It is not about immigration but migration and people who come here seeking our protection.

I am dealing with a situation where I have a huge IPAS centre on the border of my constituency that very much affects the people in my area. I am not saying that should not happen. I welcome it. I am trying to communicate it with the people in the area but by doing so, I am getting criticism from other people online. There is not a reasoned space where we

can actually debate the real issues here and suggest what can be done. There are definitely legitimate criticisms that can be made of the Department and the manner in which it manages IPAS. For example, there is consistently an information vacuum. There seems to be a decision made within the Department that it will not trust members of communities in local areas. They do not actually trust them to give the information well in advance so they actually know what is happening in their area. People are entitled to know what is happening in their area. They are not entitled to veto it. Nobody gets to decide who lives next door to them but in the absence of information from the Department, other people fill that vacuum with misinformation.

Speaking about misinformation, Fintan O'Toole namechecked me in his article too because I defended what the Tánaiste said. He suggested the Tánaiste conflated migration and immigration, notwithstanding his clarification later on in his comments. When he said there was too much migration into the country, there is justification for that comment. The reality is that 80% of people who come here and apply for international protection are found not to be entitled to it and are therefore the subject of a return to the country they came from. Migration is down 47% in 2025 compared to 2024. Still more than 16,000 people have come here this year. That is still a major problem because it creates huge pressure on the system. Let us not accuse people of misinformation when they have in fact stated facts. Let us allow people have space to debate it in a reasoned way that allows them to actually look at the real issues.

Deputy Paula Butterly: First and foremost, I want to address the issues we witnessed in Drogheda last week. It appears two thugs kicked in the front door, set light to the stairs and this resulted in 28 people being homeless. It resulted in eight people having to go to Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital to seek treatment. Thankfully, none of those injuries were serious. However, let us put ourselves in the shoes of those people for those hours and the subsequent hours afterwards. These were people who were going about their ordinary Halloween business. There were decorations across the household. As a result of thuggery, they were put out of their home.

These people were IPAS applicants. They are waiting and biding their time to see if they have a right to remain in the State. Irrespective of whether they have a right to stay, they are going through a process that is based on rules. These rules have to be adhered to and respected. These people are ordinary human beings. For the time they remain in the State, it is absolutely necessary that we never lose sight of these people. That is what they are: people. They are human beings and they should be afforded every right and every respect as any other citizen or non-citizen would get while they reside in this State.

However, this is not just an isolated incident, unfortunately. This incident in Drogheda went to the extremes and could have cost life and limb of children, babies and women. However, because of certain discussions and commentary, some people are taking the law into their own hands. Recently in my constituency in County Louth, we had a situation where somebody went about their business photographing people who were actually seasonal workers. They were going about their business and had their visas. A house was targeted in which they did not even live. It was a family home where there were children who were absolutely terrified. We must have a discussion about immigration. We must have a discussion about IPAS but we must have a sensible, calm discussion. We have to accept there is a process in place and there are rules and laws by which we have to abide.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I join with colleagues in condemning the despicable attacks in Drogheda. I hope those responsible are brought to justice and face very serious consequences for their actions. This island has a storied history of migration. We have seen many generations forced to emigrate due to famine and economic necessity. Today, famine and war still remain in the world along with conflict and people who are in need of international protection. Ireland must continue to play our part in providing international protection. However, this role must be managed, fair and robust.

The current international protection system has been completely mismanaged. Decisions are taking far too long. Appeals are taking too long and the rules are not being enforced. This has been ongoing for years under the watch of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Let us take the number of deportations over the past four years. During this period, over 6,600 deportation orders were issued, yet only 667 deportations were confirmed. That is about a 10% completion rate. How can the Government stand over that? For a system to work and to have public confidence, the rules must be followed and enforced.

To make matters worse, the Government has now made the decision to hand over our migration powers to the EU by signing up to the migration pact. That hands away our sovereignty. It will impede our ability to make decisions for ourselves about migration and international protection.

On the delivery of IPAS accommodation, we have seen large scale abuse of taxpayer's money. This abuse has ranged from private IPAS operators charging the State VAT when IPAS accommodation is VAT exempt right through to other operators being paid by the State for beds that do not even exist. There are clear examples of private companies and individuals profiteering from the IPAS system and it is no wonder there is such distrust of the system.

In my own constituency, I have seen abysmal communication between the Department and local communities when there are proposals to establish new IPAS centres. Legitimate concerns of local residents have not been addressed and there has been no real plan for resourcing local communities that host international protection applicants. This is a system that fails both communities and asylum seekers alike. Significant work needs to be done to improve our system. Sinn Féin believes in a system that is robust, efficient, ends private profiteering and crucially, ensures decisions are enforced.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: The Government's policy to date in the area of IPAS processing and enforcement has been reckless, farcical and absurd. The State simply could not be bothered applying its own rules. The structures of Tusla have been a sham, which was something I highlighted at an Oireachtas committee meeting just weeks ago. Sadly, just a few days after that, we saw the end result of this reckless policy when a ten-year-old girl was raped or sexually assaulted by someone not even entitled to be here and for whom there was a deportation order issued that the Government simply had not bothered to enforce.

I received a reply from the Minister's office, which stated: "As there are no routine exit checks at Irish borders, it is not possible to accurately provide the number of people who are currently in Ireland subject to deportation orders.". There you have it.

7 o'clock

The Committee of Public Accounts has heard that the State spent an estimated €2.1 billion on IPAS last year. That means €2.1 billion of the public's hard-earned money went to cowboy speculators.

How did we get to this sorry state of affairs? Until recently, any attempt by ordinary decent people, who are the vast majority, to have a rational or reasonable discussion on this subject was shut down by the State and its institutions in all its different guises. It was obvious this was a dangerous, reckless and unhealthy head-in-the-sand approach by the Government that left a vacuum into which stepped a tiny number with divisive and malign intent. The Government handed it to them on a plate. Why would it not, when it is ourselves that are getting attacked on the issue moreso than the Government that is responsible? So, it was a win-win situation for the Government. The Government that engineered the problem is now frantically searching for scapegoats and PR stunts to put the genie back in the bottle. Over many years as a councillor I exposed this farce. Sinn Féin has been clear from the beginning that where a person is not entitled to be in Ireland they should be returned safely to their country of origin and the deportation order should be both enforced and tracked. We need to have the powers to return immediately those who are not entitled to be here.

An Irish Government is best placed to make decisions in the interests of the Irish people, not unelected bureaucrats in Brussels or faceless EU institutions that make the decisions for us, undermining our democracy and our sovereignty. Protocol 21 of the Lisbon Treaty has given the Government the opt-out clause for certain measures. However, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and others opted into the EU migration pact which comes into force next June.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: The Government caused the problem. The people need to direct their anger at that Government.

Deputy Gillian Toole: As every Member today has done, I condemn the barbaric events at Citywest and, more recently, in Drogheda, County Louth. I want to express my gratitude to the members of An Garda Síochána and the emergency services for their swift actions. However, it should not have come to this. As I said on 18 September, there is a real risk to social cohesion if we do not put our house in order in a fair and humane manner as quickly as possible. I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, and the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, for the detailed updates they provided to us this afternoon and the briefing document, which I skimmed through. I am grateful for that. There is probably a public relations piece in terms of the information given to us and getting that out into the wider community so that people are aware that huge efforts are being made by the international protection team and the ministerial team. However, as our population is increasing rapidly, I sought information previously on capacity audits in the areas of housing, healthcare, education and transport in order to determine in advance the services that are required for those who legitimately apply for and qualify for international protection supports but also for the communities that will host international protection applicants.

The other area I queried previously is that of critical skills audits. That links in with the issuing of work permits. I am somewhat concerned that there may be a crossover between

using an international protection application route disingenuously where a work permit application may be appropriate, albeit more timely and at a cost. It is possible that avenue is being used disingenuously. I wonder whether a critical skills audit is being carried out to determine sector by sector the number of migrant workers we require. I note that Brazil, Georgia and India were mentioned earlier as countries of origin. I am not sure whether that was for work permit applications or international protection. There are two countries in particular which have areas where their geography, geology and demographics are changing very rapidly because of large corporations moving in looking to increase output and productivity. Farmland is being taken over, populations are being moved to urban areas which are overpopulated and then people are forced to leave their country of origin. That links in to the climate piece as well. There is a much bigger picture here.

Another concern is whether there are robust checking mechanisms in place with the Department of Social Protection. Perhaps reforms are needed there as well. Many small businesses in County Meath cite an unavailability of workers who will work more than 18.5 hours a week, so there are some issues there.

I will point out some glaring surprises. It is unusual for ordinary people in my own area to raise flags with me on the issue of migration but two cases come to mind. The question has been voiced to me about how accommodation offers and expressions of interest can be fast-tracked for international protection applicants but previously they have not been sought nor offered for people who are on local authority housing lists. Another issue I would like to point out is, as of this evening, I can book a two-night break in the Hilton in Kyiv-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy and call Deputy Mattie McGrath.

Deputy Gillian Toole: -----for 16 and 17 November and travel advice is only recommending-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am pleased to be back after a short absence due to illness. I am delighted to be back. I tried many times to have debates here in the previous Dáil and I was denied. I too want to condemn the attack in Drogheda. Actions like that are totally reprehensible and cannot be condoned. Let me be absolutely clear: Ireland's international protection system is broken. The Tánaiste himself admitted that it is not working. The Taoiseach echoed that sentiment. They have been on some road to Damascus there. My goodness; I never saw anything like it. It is astonishing for those of us who have been calling out the broken system for almost three years now, including Deputy Carol Nolan, me and others, to hear these sentiments by the Government now. We have been abused, heckled and shouted down by all sides of this House, called racist and far right and accused of creating division or undermining social cohesion. Yet, here we are now. The Government has caught up with our understanding and concerns. Maybe the spoiled votes in the election had something to do with that. It is a bit late. As I said, it is a road to Damascus situation. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating. We will see by its actions.

More than 80% of asylum claims are found to be false. That is not a system under pressure; it is a system being exploited shamefully. What is worse is that many individuals remain in Ireland even after receiving deportation orders. There is no accountability. This is totally

unacceptable. I accept that deportation orders have increased. However, when a person has been ordered to leave, they must leave.

Let us take the case of Tipperary. From top to bottom the céad míle fáilte in Tipperary is well known, from the top of Tipperary right down to Rathcabbin. What happened in Roscrea was appalling. It is appalling what is still going on in Dundrum House Hotel . Hearn's Hotel in Clonmel and many other buildings were taken over. These were hotels that the economy depended on for tourism. Many local people were working in them. If you say anything you are told to be quiet. What is going on in Dundrum is absolutely shambolic. The Taoiseach was in Clonmel before the election to open the office of then Councillor Michael Murphy. He met Ms Crowe and Ms O'Dwyer who explained to him what is happening. He seemed to listen. Then they were decried and the riot squad was sent in. So much force was deployed on communities that were totally non-violent. Anybody who came there trying to create trouble was hunted. It was the same in Roscrea. The way An Garda Síochána was used was shocking. Now we are left in a heap in Roscrea. A section 5 is due for adjudication in the High Court which has gone on and on and deferred. Meanwhile, another section 5 has been submitted. Now the council has referred it to An Coimisiún Pleanála. We know what it is doing. It will facilitate the making of Dundrum House Hotel, leisure resort and golf course into an IPAS centre. That is being facilitated by the Minister and the Government. The nod and wink system is alive and well in big business. A lot of money is being paid to rogue developers who would not be interested in housing people. They are only interested in their póca, their pockets. We should cut the funding they are getting by two-thirds. Ordinary people will want to help asylum seekers, not greedy people who are not nice. The people who own that place in Drogheda are not nice either. A lot of investigation is needed into this. Books will be written about this and there will be huge investigations in years to come and we will have to hang our heads in shame. It is a broken system. The Government is only playing catch-up. I do not think it really wants to fix it.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Colm Brophy): It was a very interesting debate and I acknowledge the range of views expressed across the House. When I was making notes for my closing remarks, I wrote that I would like to thank all of the Deputies who contributed to this important discussion. I said at the start that I hoped we would have a discussion that was balanced, fair and done in the right way. Most of the contributions were. We need to call a spade a spade. Some of the contributions veered towards an area which I find very worrying. They were contributions that were not fair, not necessarily in criticising the Government, but in terms of using tropes and language that should have no place in this type of debate.

We have to acknowledge that debates on migration can be difficult. They will always provoke strong emotions. There are differing perspectives here. For the most part, we have seen how we can engage and talk about this issue. Respectful debate is the cornerstone of democracy, but I have to call out things when I think they are crazy or are tropes that are just thrown out. We had a Sinn Féin Deputy talk about deportations and border checks in his contribution. It would nearly make me laugh if it were not so serious - to have people in Sinn Féin wanting checks for people going across the Border. They should get real because the biggest border on our island is between North and South. Are they suggesting that we close

the Border? There is talking out of both sides of your mouth, but that brings a new level of farce.

I have to say I was disappointed with the contribution from the former Minister, Deputy O'Gorman. At a certain point, he went out of his way to list all of the things he was not responsible for. Unfortunately, one of the main things he was responsible for during that period in government was the IPAS accommodation system. We are sorting out the problems that came about during that period of time. Some of that was not his fault. Some of it was because of the huge influx that took place. I am willing to acknowledge that he was dealing with a very difficult situation, but we have to have reasonableness and respectfulness about it.

We had contributions from Deputies, and in particular from the Social Democrats, none of whom are still here, in which they ranged their fire down on the Tánaiste from the high moral ground. If you want to be morally superior to others, you have an extra duty of care to make sure your contributions are careful and inclusive of everything. One line has constantly been taken out of remarks made by the Tánaiste. I am going to take a moment to read the bit that these Deputies seem so incapable of following it with. The Tánaiste stated:

Let's be honest with people. We are developing a new migration policy here. We are developing a migration system and somewhat doing it in real time. I am very clear that immigration is a good thing. I am very clear that our country benefits from immigration. I am also very clear that immigration or migration into our country [is] lawful. I am very clear...

At that point the Tánaiste gets interrupted. He came back to say that he thought this was the challenge with migration. When politicians get asked a question they do not have an opportunity to answer. He added that what he was trying to say was that migration was a good thing. He said that we needed to get a system where people have a right to stay here and are told that quickly and can get on with their lives and contribute positively to our country and to integrate. He went on to say that he was speaking honestly to the people of Ireland and we were not where we need to be. He said that we had a system that needs change. When people do not have a right to be here and have exhausted their right to be here, they should be deported quickly. If they cannot be deported for some logistical reason, they should at that moment be detained. He also said that we had to be honest with people because what people are seeing right across the country is that the numbers are simply too high and he wanted to acknowledge that.

That is the totality of what the Tánaiste said and it is the totality of what the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, and I keep on trying to say. We need to be honest and inclusive in total about what we are saying about migration. Most people in this country who were not born in Ireland and who we see everyday are here because we have asked them here. They are here because they are providing essential services, keeping the health service going, building the houses that we need and working in hi-tech businesses. We have gone out and looked for them to contribute and build our society. They are paying the taxes that contribute to providing the social services that we need to provide, including pensions. We have an issue with international protection and it is what this debate was about. We need to be honest and truthful about that as well. Our international protection numbers were too high. They went from the low to the high thousands. That was unsustainable. I agree with the Deputies who talked about the billion euro bill for running international protection services. That is not sustainable, but if you want

to make that point make the other point too, namely, that the migration pact, the International Protection Bill 2025 which we are bringing through the Houses, will take the processing time down to 12 weeks, including the appeal. That is what will really take the cost out of providing international protection services. It gives a firm, fast and fairer system, which is better for the people who are going through it and also for this State.

While criticising the Government, one Deputy said that we should introduce a system that would take six months. We are introducing a system that will take 12 weeks. That is coming in next June. It is important that people make sure they are aware of the facts. As a Government, we want to see things change. The Minister and I are bringing this change through this Chamber and the Seanad, so we will have a new, better system. We want to see a system that is fair to everybody. We also want to recognise that Ireland has changed and that it is not going back to some version of non-reality that certain Deputies seem to think will happen.

Many of the people here are not international protection applicants but the people who are building the modern Ireland. They are the people who playing in our GAA clubs, on the soccer pitches and with our kids in the school playground. Their parents are working flat out to build and supply the services we all need. That is the new Ireland. We need to be proud of that. When I left school in 1984, if you were lucky, you got into college for a few years. Even if you did, you still most likely left. We were the migrants. We went outward. The important thing is a good lot of us came back, and we should be proud of that fact. We now have people coming here because we have a country - and I acknowledge there are still problems - that in so many ways is successful, prosperous and has grown. We need those people. We should always remember that.

As the political leaders in our country, we need to be willing to stand up and say that. At the same time, I will always respect people's right to say there are problems with the system or that the Government has got it wrong on a certain point. That is absolutely the case because you can never get anything 100% right. If the centre is willing to work together to do the reforms that are necessary to have a better system, what we will have is not just a firm, fair and effective system for dealing with international protection, but, through the people who have come in here and are living and contributing in our country, we will have a better Ireland. With that, I thank all of the Deputies for their contributions.

Employment (Contractual Retirement Ages) Bill 2025: Report and Final Stages

Bill reported without amendment and received for final consideration.

Question proposed: "That the Bill do now pass."

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I welcome the successful passing of the Bill through the Dáil. This Bill will introduce a new employment right and will facilitate workers who want to continue in employment until they first access the State pension. It also makes the necessary provision for the limited cases where a lower retirement age may be required. The Bill gives effect to a Government commitment under the Pensions Commission's recommendations and implementation plan. This is a balanced and proportionate measure. It respects the rights of

employees while recognising the operational needs of employers. It is a positive step in improving adequacy of income for older workers and it reaffirms our long-standing policy to encourage and support longer and fuller working lives.

I thank Deputies for all their contributions and engagements, especially on Second Stage. I also thank the officials within the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment for their hard work on progressing the Bill. I look forward to the Bill progressing through the Seanad.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies should be aware that any contribution must be confined to what is within the actual Bill, but they are free to speak.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: For years, Sinn Féin has stood with the men and women who have built our economy from the ground up. We have championed the right to retire at 65, a milestone earned through decades of hard work and dedication. Yet we also recognise a simple truth: life does not always fit a single blueprint. Some people want to keep contributing, learning and shaping our world, even after 65, and they should have that option without being pushed out of their jobs or onto a less secure footing. The decision to retire is deeply personal. It is not one size fits all. Each person's health, job, finances and hopes for the years ahead come into play. Health can be a friend or a foe in this journey. It can open doors to more flexible work or make a longer career challenging. I heard a story from a worker who wanted to stay beyond retirement age but found signing a new contract meant different terms and conditions which left him worse off after a lifetime of service. We must ensure no one is forced to accept worse conditions simply because of their age. The right to continue working must be safeguarded, not traded away in the fine print of a new agreement.

The heart of our position is simple: every person should be able to decide how to shape their own life after years of hard work. Sinn Féin supports, firmly and clearly, the right to retire at 65 with a full pension and the equally important right to keep working, if that is what a person desires. Too long and too often, workers have had mandatory retirement ages written into their contracts. If you want to stay on and contribute your knowledge and skills, you should not be forced out because of age or face a change in terms and conditions that undermines your well-earned security.

I welcome this Bill because it aligns with our long-standing goal of removing mandatory retirement clauses and restoring real choice to workers. The freedom to decide to retire or continue working must belong to the individual, not to a corporate policy or outdated rules that deny people agency over their own lives. After a lifetime of work, people deserve the chance to retire with their pension at 65 or to carry on contributing. Right now, too many are pushed out of jobs and into unemployment long before reaching pension eligibility. With that income gap comes stress, uncertainty and a squeeze on families already facing the pressures of the rising cost of living. When workers are pushed out, it is not just a pay cheque that vanishes. The social connections, daily routine and sense of purpose that come from being part of a team can also disappear. We must protect those bonds and support mental health by ensuring fair terms and keeping doors open to continued employment, if that is what a person wants.

We stand with workers and we want to work on their terms with employers who want to retain the experience and energy of their seasoned staff, and with a government that will not duck this issue. It is time to commit to a policy that respects choice, protects earned benefits

and recognises the value of a life spent contributing to the working environment. We will not abandon the principle that workers should have control over their own careers. We will continue to advocate for a system where a worker at 65 can choose to retire with their pension or continue working with terms that respect their experience and contributions.

We ask the Minister of State to ensure any Bill before us preserves the rights of workers to work on their own terms and guarantee that those who wish to keep contributing do so on fair and secure conditions, while those who retire can do so with dignity and full pension rights. We welcome the Bill but urge the Minister of State to listen to his constituents and the public, who want the choice of retiring at 65 with dignity and security or staying in the workforce, if that is their decision.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy and the Opposition for supporting the general scheme of the Bill. No amendments have been tabled on Report Stage. We welcome the Deputy's engagement and contribution.

In general terms, the intent is that employees continuing in employment past the age of 65 should, where possible, be treated in the same way as colleagues below that age. We understand the challenges around the income gap experienced by a person required to retire at an age lower than that at which the State pension can be accessed. That is a key objective of the Bill. Indeed, we are very supportive in that regard.

I thank everyone for their contributions in the House. Without further ado, we look forward to moving it to the Seanad.

Question put and agreed to.

Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Bill 2025: Committee and Remaining Stages

Section 1 agreed to.

SECTION 2

An Ceann Comhairle: Amendments Nos. 1 and 2 are related and may be discussed together.

Deputy Pa Daly: I move amendment No. 1:

In page 3, between lines 19 and 20, to insert the following:

“(2) To insert new subsections after subsection (4):

“(4A) The Board shall borrow to invest in projects on the basis of a prioritisation framework which encompasses—

- (a) congestion softeners in areas of high congestion,
- (b) security encompassing hospitals, Garda stations, water safety and wastewater treatment,
- (c) basic needs encompassing residential construction,

(d) exceptional cases of public interest,

and will exclude grid infrastructure upgrades or connections for data centres.

(4B) The Board shall, within 6 months of the commencement of this Act and annually thereafter, lay before the Houses of the Oireachtas a report detailing:

(a) the amount borrowed under section 4(4) of the Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Act 1954;

(b) the purposes for which such borrowing was applied including a breakdown of project type;

(c) the projected borrowing required for the next year including a breakdown of project type;

(d) the impact on consumer electricity prices;

(e) the report shall be subject to review by the Oireachtas Committee on Climate, Energy and the Environment and the Oireachtas Committee of Public Accounts.

(4C) The Board shall ensure that any borrowing under this Act does not result in an increase in domestic electricity tariffs beyond inflationary adjustments, and shall publish an annual statement confirming compliance to be laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas.”.”.

Due to decades of underinvestment, our energy system is not fit for purpose. With rip-off costs and a regressive approach to financing, our electricity grid is another in a long line of Government failures. It has been plagued by critical infrastructure deficits. Millions of euro have been wasted in renewable energy every year, driving up the cost of energy. One of the current members of Government described the Government's approach in recent years as navel-gazing and sitting on their hands. It has also stopped people moving into their homes. The need for urgent action and investment in the grid is clear.

This amendment relates to a series of Acts going back to 1954. It concerns the framework that will guide the borrowing capacity of the ESB into the future. It is, of course, the State-owned agency but it should be mandated with a focus on the common good. It will seek to safeguard against future investment in and development on the grid that may repeat the mistakes of the past, which we do not want to do. The grid needs upgrading at present and while Sinn Féin is totally in favour of increased investment in the grid, it must be done in a way that covers and supports ordinary workers and families and works for the common good of people in the State. A grid that is fit for purpose is a linchpin of many of our priorities. Of course, we want to solve the housing crisis, end the energy rip-off, bring down prices for good and create an energy market that is based on a fair funding model in which energy is treated as a public good, as I have said.

Amendment No. 1 proposes three subsections. Subsection (4A) mandates that the increased borrowing capacity of the ESB from €12 billion to €17 billion is targeted towards the public good rather than being gobbled up by data centres. The increased borrowing capacity will allow the ESB to access the capital required to fulfil the investment required in the network as outlined in the draft decision in price review 6, PR6, a final determination on which is due towards the end of this year. Grid capacity in recent years has been gobbled up by data centres

and other key strategic priorities such as housing are suffering as a result. As ESB Networks itself warned against this in a recent appearance at the committee, Sinn Féin wants to ensure that the enhanced investment is targeted towards the social good rather than corporate interests. The prioritisation framework is modelled on the Dutch authority for consumers and markets, ACM, model, which refers to congestion softeners, security encompassing Garda stations, hospitals and wastewater treatment, basic needs, including residential construction, and exceptional cases of public interest. It excludes connections for data centres. They are not a priority in contrast to the priority for the need for housing.

Our amendment inserts the new subsections to include the congestion softeners in paragraphs (a), (b), (c) and (d), and proposes that within six months of the commencement of this Act a report would be laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas detailing the amount borrowed under section 4(4) of the Act of 2001, the purposes for it, the projected borrowing required for next year including a breakdown of project type and the impact on consumer electricity prices. That is vitally important in a time where we have seen the supports ripped away. Even though prices on the wholesale energy markets have been reduced by 70% over the last three years, electricity bills have increased by around the same amount. We must also ensure that borrowing under this Act does not result, as I said, in domestic electricity tariffs beyond inflationary adjustments. There should be published an annual statement confirming compliance, and that would be laid before the Houses.

Subsection (4B) enhances the transparency, accountability and oversight which, of course, is necessary. This lack of oversight was recently highlighted in the Bill's digest.

Subsection (4C), as I have said, ensures that it does not result in an increase in domestic electricity tariffs.

Deputy Réada Cronin: First, we support the need for this Bill but objected to the fact that there was no pre-legislative scrutiny. I hope the Minister will look at our amendments in good faith.

The ESB must focus on the public good. The Minister will have heard me on several occasions, here and in the planning committee and the infrastructure committee, talking about the need to strengthen the infrastructure to strengthen the grid but that it cannot be just for data centres. We have to make sure that the grid is fixed. It has been weakened by decades of lack of investment and we have to make sure that we are prioritising the grid to make sure that we can deliver the homes we so need. I was talking in the infrastructure committee today where we had the construction workers in. I was saying that when you go away on your holidays, no matter how lovely the hotel was, when you come home and you get into your own bed with your own pillow, there is nothing like it, and we have now passed the point of 5,000 children homeless. The Government is shameless. We have to make sure that by investing in the grid, we are making sure that it is for houses and not data centres. We have to treat energy as a public good and not just about increasing the data centres.

In subsection (4B), we want to strengthen the transparency and oversight. We were not happy about not having pre-legislative scrutiny. We have to make sure that the ESB publishes its annual reports and spending outcomes and price impacts.

Subsection (4C) prohibits the higher household electricity tariffs. I was talking to somebody a few weeks ago and they were saying that we used to have the cheapest energy in Europe and now have the dearest. It makes no sense.

We absolutely support the need for investment in the ESB but we have to make sure that it is done for the public good and not to supply more data centres with energy. I hope the Minister will look at that and that he agrees there has to be oversight on the expenditure of public money in the ESB.

Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I thank my colleagues for amendments Nos. 1 and 2, which I am taking together.

At the outset, I appreciate the support for this important legislation. We are about to embark on the largest and most significant investment in the grid infrastructure, pretty much in the history of the State and certainly since rural electrification. This Bill is an important part of that because it allows an increase in borrowing and it allows for the first time an equity injection in ESB, which will reduce the overall borrowing cost for it.

Unquestionably, we have a country that continues to grow. We have a population, thankfully, that continues to grow. We have full employment in this country. We have an economy that is the envy of most of Europe. I accept we still have challenges. There is no doubt about that.

This legislation will help to underpin price review 6, which is our investment in the electricity grid and in the network over the course of the remainder of this decade. I thank the Deputies for the suggested additions but I am not in a position to accept either of those amendments. In relation to pre-legislative scrutiny, I wrote to the committee seeking a waiver. That was granted by the committee. I thank the committee for doing that. I think it was recognised that this is urgent and important legislation.

The Deputies explained their new proposed subsection (4). That would bring about a prioritisation framework that would require investment in the grid along certain prioritisations. I genuinely recognise the positive intent of what is proposed to ensure the network development priorities will prioritise the connection and supply of hospitals, Garda stations and houses. PR6, when the Deputies see it published, will identify exactly what this grid investment is underpinning. That is underpinning the houses that we need. It is underpinning the social infrastructure, the schools, the industrial infrastructure that we need and the future growth. To present the argument that the amendments here are about us trying to stop Government investing in a grid purely to allow further growth in data centres is not correct. On PR6, the Deputies have seen the draft decision and the final decision should be out shortly. The Deputies will see how that is clearly itemised.

We are considering how this matter can be reviewed but as it currently stands under EU law, connection and supply must be carried out in a non-discriminatory manner. That is prescribed in EU law. However, we are currently considering how this can be reviewed and I will be happy to share that information once that review has been concluded.

Within price review 6, we will have 29 very significant projects for onshore network development planned by ESB Networks, ESNB, and EirGrid within the period of the investment programme. The vast majority of these will serve the multiple needs I mentioned - security of supply, grid resilience and grid expansion - enabling us to bring additional

renewable energy generation and distribution into our grid. Ireland is a European leader in the integration of renewables into our grid. While there are still challenges, it is important we recognise that things have been done well, although we need to do better. We need to meet the critical demand for increased power supply that is there for both residential and business customers.

The new subsection (b) will place specific reporting requirements on the ESB regarding its borrowing. Its borrowing is already outlined and published in its annual report and accounts, which are audited. In light of the significant investment by the State, and as part of the ongoing engagement with the ESB, we will develop a share subscription agreement that will require ESB Networks to provide significant detail on how it is financing, and the financing of its programme of investment, including its debt raising. As part of this agreement, ESB Networks will be required to deliver a quarterly report to me in relation to its ongoing expenditure, its project management and project delivery of the core infrastructural projects of PR 6. First, it is the investment in the quantum of money we need to invest and then it is about making sure it is delivered upon because this is absolutely critical. That will be reported to me directly as Minister. It will of course be open to ESB Networks, EirGrid and others to come in front of the Oireachtas committee, and rightly so.

In addition to the oversight by my Department, the CRU, under the PR 6 guidelines, will also require a significant increase in reporting by ESB Networks on its expenditure and programme delivery. The combined efforts of the CRU and my officials will result in very significant and appropriate oversight of this Government investment on behalf of our people. It will ensure value for money and, most importantly, expedient delivery of the critical grid infrastructure we need to support families, our citizens and businesses in the State.

On the impact of the ESB's borrowing on consumer energy prices, the amount charged to customers by electricity suppliers, including network charges, are a matter for the supplying company. We have oral questions tomorrow morning on this, but I will say that we have already published the national energy affordability task force interim report. We have taken some measures already in the budget. There are further longer term measures we will be working on towards publication of the final report in 2026. We will look at things such as network charges and length of borrowing repayments to reduce that charge on customers. To be helpful, and this is just a guide, the average annual increase for a typical domestic customer's network tariff will be around €6 over the five years to 2030. This does not mean the overall energy bills will rise by the equivalent amount because some of the investments will drive lower overall system costs.

One significant investment that will drive down overall electricity costs is the North-South interconnector, which needs to be delivered. It will be a major project to deliver grid resilience and expansion and will drive down costs for households. I hope and expect we will get support to commence and complete that consented project, which is critical to the all-Ireland electricity network and to our citizens on this island North and South.

The proposed new section 4(c) would prevent any borrowing activity by the ESB that could lead to domestic increases in electricity tariff rates beyond inflation and require the ESB to publish an annual statement confirming compliance. Under its legal mandate, it is the CRU, as the independent regulator, which is responsible for the network tariffs and grid investment plans. Network charges are a primary manner in which grid infrastructure is funded. What we

have done, not just through the equity investment in the ESB but the further equity investment we will make in EirGrid, is reduce the amount of borrowing required to allow both organisations to leverage off the capital investment. The CRU sets out the network tariff to align with the grid investment plans. As such, it would not be appropriate to legislate to restrict activities related to the network.

Amendment No. 2 relates to section 3. The Deputies outlined its content. I thank them for the suggested addition, but I propose to reject this amendment also. The proposed new section 7(d) would require an independent audit of the employee share ownership plan, ESOP, as the approved scheme and for the findings to be published within three months.

The proposed new subsection (8) specifies that nothing in the Bill should be construed to allow the sale or transfer of capital stock to anyone other than the relevant Ministers and the employees of the ESB, or the trustees on their behalf. It is already the case that stock in the ESB can only be owned by the Ministers, employees and their trustees through the ESOP. Employees can only sell their stock shares to other employees, the ESOP trustee or to the ESB in a closed market. Any shares purchased by the ESB are cancelled.

The proposed new subsection (9) would involve the creation of a prioritisation framework that would require the investment provided by Government through capital stock subscriptions to be used only for projects that contribute to specific use or specified uses, while excluding upgrades or connections for data centres.

The proposed new section 10 would place specific reporting requirements on the ESB relating to the use of funds invested by the Government by way of the capital stock subscriptions.

The proposed new section 11 would, like the proposed subsection 4(c) and amendment No. 1, prevent any borrowing activity that would lead to any increases in electricity tariffs. I have already responded to the points as to why we cannot accept them.

I thank the Deputies for their support for this legislation. It is critical and important. Everyone in this House recognises the urgent need for increased investment in our grid to ensure that we can continue to expand renewables and drive costs down for domestic and business customers. We are on the cusp of a significant level of investment and output through renewable energy when, last year, over 41% of our electricity was generated through renewable sources. We intend, through these and other measures, including successful auctions we have had in relation to onshore renewables as recently as a number of weeks ago, to further expand the renewables base we have and work towards reaching our target of 80% renewables by 2030. I thank the Deputies for their amendments but I am not in a position to accept them.

Deputy Pa Daly: I will come back in regarding a number of matters. One relates to what the Minister said about PR 6. While I appreciate that what was published during the summer is a draft decision, that is all we have to go on at the moment. We do not fully know what will be there but under the CRU's draft decision, households and SMEs will see their electricity network charges increase, while large energy users, such as data centres, will see reductions of up to 18%. It also stated that the grid upgrades are being driven in part by growing electricity demands from the same data centres, whose usage has increased by 400% since 2015. In effect, the entities that are driving the increased need for grid investment will be asked to contribute less while the public pays more.

Amendment No. 2, which the Minister dealt with, involves direct State investment, or money that is taken from the State coffers, in order to finance improvements that are needed. While there is overlap between the two amendments, this is more important because it relates to the investment from the Central Fund. As noted by the Oireachtas Library and Research Service, the Bill as drafted provides for the relevant authorisation of funds totalling €1.5 billion. There is no other mechanism to ensure Oireachtas oversight or control of the use of money from the Central Fund for the purchase of capital stock.

Our amendment deals with a prioritisation framework, which has been done in other countries, notably, the Netherlands. It will include security, which includes hospitals, Garda stations, water safety and wastewater treatment because it is important the structures are put in place. There has been a lot of talk recently about wastewater treatment systems around the State, or the lack of them. It is also about housing, where people who have made agreements to go into their homes have not been able to do so because the connections have not been there. It also prioritises the basic needs of residential construction and exceptional cases of public interest, as I mentioned, which also relate to the previous amendment. The amendment also states:

(10) The Board shall, within 6 months of the commencement of this Act and annually thereafter, lay before the Houses of the Oireachtas a report detailing:

- (a) the purposes for which the payment was applied [so necessary oversight] including a breakdown of project type;
- (b) the purposes for which the pay will be applied in the next year including a breakdown of project type;
- (c) the impact [if any] on consumer electricity prices;

the report shall be subject to review by the Oireachtas Committee on Climate, Energy and the Environment and the Oireachtas Committee of Public Accounts.

(11) The Board will ensure that any borrowing under this Act does not result in an increase in domestic electricity tariffs beyond inflationary adjustments, and shall publish an annual statement confirming compliance to be laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas.”.”.

While we agree with the need for more borrowing and we agree that there should be more investment in the grid, this should be done with some safeguards in place because we do not believe that they have been in place. The priorities are not there and there should be a prioritisation framework. Amendment No. 2 addresses this issue in the Bill. I accept that the committee agreed to waive pre-legislative scrutiny even though there was opposition to that. It is now ten months since Storm Éowyn took place and it was a bit rich of the Government to come in to say that it needed to do it all in a hurry when the Bill was not published until the middle of the summer. We are now being pushed into a corner with the suggestion that there is a panic that we have to do it all in a hurry. We should be getting it right before we agree to all of the legislation without what we feel are necessary amendments.

Due to the constraints on the grid, there has been a history of failing to plan properly and treating affordability as an afterthought. Since June, there have been a series of energy bill hikes from various companies. One even increased its bills on two occasions. The corporate balance sheet certainly seems to have been the priority. Checks and balances need to be put in

place particularly through the provisions of amendment No. 2 where we feel that public investment should be delivering for the public good. I know that the €1.5 billion was announced in the revised NDP in July. When it was announced, the Government said that it would be targeted at expanding onshore and offshore capacity and the distribution network infrastructure. Our amendments, particularly amendment No. 2, seek to ensure that this is the case and that past mistakes are not repeated.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I am disappointed that the Minister is not accepting our amendments in whole or in part. About 21% of our electricity goes towards data centres. I think I read recently that was set to increase to 30% by 2030. In France and Germany, it is around 3% or 4%. We have to make sure that the increased investment in the grid goes towards the public good.

More importantly, amendment No. 2 deals with €1.5 billion in public funds drawn from the Central Fund rather than borrowed. The fact that this money is not voted by the Oireachtas means that there will be limited scrutiny of it. I believe the Sinn Féin amendment helps to close that gap to ensure that there will be transparency and accountability in how that money is spent, and to ensure that the investment goes towards renewable capacity, network upgrades and the public good. I believe no funds should be used for new data centres. We just do not have the energy there and the data centres are insatiable. The more we produce, the more they look for. Meanwhile, we need to start building houses.

Energy affordability has to be protected to make sure that households are not forced to pay for this through higher bills. I would like the Minister to reconsider amendment No. 2 in particular.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I do not intend to accept either amendment. I have outlined why that is the case. I appreciate the Deputies' remarks but have nothing further to add.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Section 2 agreed to.

SECTION 3

Deputy Pa Daly: I move amendment No. 2:

In page 4, lines 32 to 36, to delete all words from and including “and” in line 32 down to and including line 36 and substitute the following:

“ “(c) up to such amount as will enable such employees or trustees to maintain the same percentage of capital stock they held of the total capital stock issued by the Board that they held immediately before the relevant stock was issued, and

(d) the approved scheme shall be subject to independent audit and the findings shall be published within 3 months of completion.

(8) Nothing in this Act shall be construed as permitting the sale or transfer of capital stock to any person other than:

(a) the Ministers specified in subsection (5);

(b) employees of the Board or trustees on their behalf under an approved scheme;

any future proposal to alter this arrangement shall require prior approval by resolution of both Houses of the Oireachtas.

(9) The Board may only use this payment to invest in projects that have been identified as part of a prioritisation framework which encompasses—

(a) congestion softeners in areas of high congestion,

(b) security encompassing hospitals, Garda stations, water safety and wastewater treatment,

(c) basic needs encompassing residential construction,

(d) exceptional cases of public interest,

and will exclude grid infrastructure upgrades or connections for data centres.

(10) The Board shall, within 6 months of the commencement of this Act and annually thereafter, lay before the Houses of the Oireachtas a report detailing:

(a) the purposes for which the payment was applied including a breakdown of project type;

(b) the purposes for which the pay will be applied in the next year including a breakdown of project type;

(c) the impact on consumer electricity prices;

the report shall be subject to review by the Oireachtas Committee on Climate, Energy and the Environment and the Oireachtas Committee of Public Accounts.

(11) The Board will ensure that any borrowing under this Act does not result in an increase in domestic electricity tariffs beyond inflationary adjustments, and shall publish an annual statement confirming compliance to be laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas.”.”.

8 o'clock

Amendment put:

The Committee divided: Tá, 61; Níl, 72; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Aird, William.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Boland, Grace.	
Brady, John.	Brennan, Brian.	
Buckley, Pat.	Brennan, Shay.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brophy, Colm.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Browne, James.	
Coppinger, Ruth.	Burke, Colm.	
Cronin, Réada.	Butler, Mary.	
Crowe, Seán.	Butterly, Paula.	

Cullinane, David.	Cahill, Michael.	
Cummins, Jen.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Daly, Pa.	Calleary, Dara.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Canney, Seán.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Chambers, Jack.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Collins, Niall.	
Gannon, Gary.	Connolly, John.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Cooney, Joe.	
Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Gould, Thomas.	Currie, Emer.	
Graves, Ann.	Daly, Martin.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Dillon, Alan.	
Kelly, Alan.	Dolan, Albert.	
Kenny, Eoghan.	Donohoe, Paschal.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Lawless, Paul.	Fleming, Sean.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Foley, Norma.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Geoghegan, James.	
McGrath, Mattie.	Grealish, Noel.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Harkin, Marian.	
Mitchell, Denise.	Heneghan, Barry.	
Murphy, Paul.	Heydon, Martin.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Higgins, Emer.	
Nash, Ged.	Keogh, Keira.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Lahart, John.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Maxwell, David.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	McAuliffe, Paul.	
O'Donoghue, Richard.	McConalogue, Charlie.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	McCormack, Tony.	
O'Flynn, Ken.	McEntee, Helen.	
O'Gorman, Roderic.	McGrath, Séamus.	
O'Hara, Louis.	McGreehan, Erin.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	Moynihan, Michael.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	Moynihan, Shane.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Murphy, Michael.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	Naughton, Hildegard.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Neville, Joe.	
Rice, Pádraig.	O'Brien, Darragh.	
Sheehan, Conor.	O'Connell, Maeve.	
Sherlock, Marie.	O'Connor, James.	
Smith, Duncan.	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
Tóibín, Peadar.	O'Meara, Ryan.	

Wall, Mark.	O'Shea, John Paul.	
Ward, Mark.	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
Whitmore, Jennifer.	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Fearghail, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Richmond, Neale.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Smyth, Niamh.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Troy, Robert.	
	Ward, Barry.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Amendment declared lost.

Section 3 agreed to.

Section 4 agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: Amendment No. 3 is out of order.

Amendment No. 3 not moved.

Section 5 agreed to.

TITLE

Question proposed: "That the Title be the Title to the Bill."

Question put:

The Committee divided: Tá, 93; Níl, 41; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Aird, William.	Brady, John.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Buckley, Pat.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Boland, Grace.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Brennan, Brian.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Brennan, Shay.	Cronin, Réada.	
Brophy, Colm.	Crowe, Seán.	
Browne, James.	Cullinane, David.	
Burke, Colm.	Daly, Pa.	
Butler, Mary.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Butterly, Paula.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Cahill, Michael.	Ellis, Dessie.	

Callaghan, Catherine.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Calleary, Dara.	Gould, Thomas.	
Canney, Seán.	Graves, Ann.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Chambers, Jack.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Lawless, Paul.	
Collins, Niall.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Connolly, John.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Cooney, Joe.	McGrath, Mattie.	
Crowe, Cathal.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Cummins, Jen.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Currie, Emer.	Murphy, Paul.	
Daly, Martin.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Dillon, Alan.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Dolan, Albert.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
Donohoe, Paschal.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Feighan, Frankie.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Fleming, Sean.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Foley, Norma.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Gannon, Gary.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Geoghegan, James.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Grealish, Noel.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Harkin, Marian.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Ward, Mark.	
Hearne, Rory.		
Heneghan, Barry.		
Heydon, Martin.		
Higgins, Emer.		
Kelly, Alan.		
Kenny, Eoghan.		
Keogh, Keira.		
Lahart, John.		
Maxwell, David.		
McAuliffe, Paul.		
McConalogue, Charlie.		
McCormack, Tony.		
McEntee, Helen.		
McGrath, Séamus.		
McGreehan, Erin.		
Moran, Kevin Boxer.		
Moynihan, Aindrias.		
Moynihan, Michael.		
Moynihan, Shane.		
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.		

Murphy, Michael.		
Nash, Ged.		
Naughton, Hildegard.		
Neville, Joe.		
O'Brien, Darragh.		
O'Callaghan, Cian.		
O'Connell, Maeve.		
O'Connor, James.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Donoghue, Robert.		
O'Gorman, Roderic.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Rice, Pádraig.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Sheehan, Conor.		
Sherlock, Marie.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smith, Duncan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Wall, Mark.		
Ward, Barry.		
Whitmore, Jennifer.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell.

Question declared carried.

Bill reported without amendment, received for final consideration and passed.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Bill will now be sent to the Seanad. Before we move on, there are four lovely medical students in the Gallery, one of whom is the daughter of Deputy Martin Daly. They are all very welcome.

Estimates for Public Services 2025

Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I move the following Further Revised Estimate:

Vote 33 — Culture, Communications and Sport (Further Revised Estimate)

That a sum not exceeding €1,164,069,000 be granted to defray the charge which will come in course of payment during the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2025, for the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport including certain services administered by that Office, and for payment of certain subsidies and grants and that a sum not exceeding €24,788,000 be granted by way of the application for capital supply services of unspent appropriations, the surrender of which may be deferred under Section 91 of the Finance Act 2004.

Votes put and agreed to.

Education (Affordable School Uniforms Bill) 2025: Second Stage (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Darren O'Rourke on Wednesday, 4 November 2025: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "That" and substitute the following:

Dáil Éireann:

notes that the Government:

- recognises that the cost of preparing children for school each September can be a cause of financial difficulty and worry for many Irish families;
- is committed to ensuring that schools will adopt measures to reduce the cost of school uniforms and other costs in line with Programme for Government Commitments; and
- has commenced work to review Circular 32/2017 which sets out the measures to be adopted by schools to reduce the costs of school uniforms and other costs as noted in Education Plan 2025, and this includes:
 - the establishment of a working group, which includes representatives from the National Parents Council and from the education partners;
 - planned engagement with parents as well as with children and young people to obtain their views; and
 - work to promote uniform swap shops in all primary schools, thereby making uniforms more affordable and supporting sustainability, as committed to in the Programme for Government;

recognises that while decisions on school uniforms are a matter for individual schools and Boards of Management, Circular 32/2017 already sets out the principles of cost-

effective practice to be adopted by schools to reduce the cost of returning to school, including:

- schools are advised that they should select school uniform items which are generic and can be purchased from a range of retailers;
- only 'iron on' or 'sew on' crests should be used;
- schools should provide parents with a list of all required items and indicate the likely costs of these required items at best value stores;
- where an exclusive supply arrangement applies, it should be tendered for regularly; and
- schools should also consult with parents as to their views on how to reduce costs;

further recognises that the Government has introduced a number of measures to alleviate the costs associated for schools including:

- €170 million allocated to provide free schoolbooks for some 940,000 children and young people enrolled in schools in the Free Education Scheme, from the start of the 25/26 school year;
- €39 million secured in Budget 2026 towards increased capitation funding for primary, post-primary and special schools to provide additional financial support towards their running costs;
- over €69 million of additional funding allocated to school transport services as part of Budget 2026, and this is to provide for the additional demand for pupils with special educational needs on school transport services and increased bus contractor running costs; and
- additional funding of €58 million allocated under cost-of-living measures to the School Transport Scheme, to allow for continued reduced transport fees in 2025;

further notes that the Government is progressing the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill, which will strengthen engagement between schools, parents and students, including on issues such as school costs and uniform policies; and

accordingly declines to give the Education (Affordable School Uniforms) Bill 2025 a second reading.

- (Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth, Deputy Michael Moynihan)

Deputy An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a deferred division relating to the ministerial amendment to the Second Reading motion on the Education (Affordable School Uniforms Bill) 2025. On the question, "That the amendment to the motion be made", a division was claimed, and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 72; Níl, 62; Staon, 0.
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Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Browne, James.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Colm.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Butler, Mary.	Cronin, Réada.	
Butterly, Paula.	Crowe, Seán.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cullinane, David.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Cummins, Jen.	
Calleary, Dara.	Daly, Pa.	
Canney, Seán.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Chambers, Jack.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Collins, Niall.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Connolly, John.	Gannon, Gary.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Currie, Emer.	Gould, Thomas.	
Daly, Martin.	Graves, Ann.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Dillon, Alan.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dolan, Albert.	Hearne, Rory.	
Donohoe, Paschal.	Kelly, Alan.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Foley, Norma.	Lawless, Paul.	
Geoghegan, James.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Grealish, Noel.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Harkin, Marian.	McGrath, Mattie.	
Heneghan, Barry.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Heydon, Martin.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Higgins, Emer.	Murphy, Paul.	
Keogh, Keira.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Lahart, John.	Nash, Ged.	
Maxwell, David.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McEntee, Helen.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McGrath, Séamus.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
McGreehan, Erin.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	O'Reilly, Louise.	

Moynihan, Michael.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Murphy, Michael.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Neville, Joe.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Rice, Pádraig.	
O'Connor, James.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Shea, John Paul.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	Ward, Mark.	
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 72; Níl, 62; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Browne, James.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Colm.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Butler, Mary.	Cronin, Réada.	
Butterly, Paula.	Crowe, Seán.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cullinane, David.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Cummins, Jen.	
Calleary, Dara.	Daly, Pa.	
Canney, Seán.	Doherty, Pearse.	

Carrigy, Micheál.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Chambers, Jack.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Collins, Niall.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Connolly, John.	Gannon, Gary.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Currie, Emer.	Gould, Thomas.	
Daly, Martin.	Graves, Ann.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Dillon, Alan.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dolan, Albert.	Hearne, Rory.	
Donohoe, Paschal.	Kelly, Alan.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Foley, Norma.	Lawless, Paul.	
Geoghegan, James.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Grealish, Noel.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Harkin, Marian.	McGrath, Mattie.	
Heneghan, Barry.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Heydon, Martin.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Higgins, Emer.	Murphy, Paul.	
Keogh, Keira.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Lahart, John.	Nash, Ged.	
Maxwell, David.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McEntee, Helen.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McGrath, Séamus.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
McGreehan, Erin.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Moynihan, Michael.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Murphy, Michael.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Neville, Joe.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Rice, Pádraig.	
O'Connor, James.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Shea, John Paul.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	Ward, Mark.	
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	

Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell.

Question declared carried.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 8.47 p.m. go dtí 8.47 a.m., Déardaoin, an 6 Samhain 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 8.47 p.m. until 8.47 a.m. on Thursday, 6 November 2025.