



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters	777
Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate	778
Housing Provision	778
Housing Schemes	780
Disability Services	783
Swimming Pools	785
Health Services Waiting Lists	788
Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Prohibition of Importation of Goods) Bill: Motion [Private Members]	791
Visit of Chinese Delegation	821
Appointment of Ministers and Ministers of State	822
Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions	822
Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltai Eile - Other Members' Questions	835
Ceisteanna ar Pholasáí nó ar Reachtaíocht - Questions on Policy or Legislation	838
Central Bank (Amendment) Bill 2025: Referral to Select Committee [Private Members]	848
Ceisteanna - Questions	848
Cabinet Committees	848
Cross-Border Co-operation	857
Teachtaireacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad	864
Estimates for Public Services 2025: Message from Select Committee	864
Post-European Council Meeting: Statements	864
Estimates for Public Services 2025: Message from Select Committee	890
Paediatric Spinal Surgery Waiting Lists: Statements	891
Estimates for Public Services 2025: Message from Select Committee	922
Health Information Bill 2024: Instruction to Committee	923
Health Information Bill 2024: Report and Final Stages	923
Courts and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025: Committee and Remaining Stages	932

Estimates for Public Services 2025	934
Supplementary Estimates for Public Services 2025: Leave to Introduce	935
Arts (Recognition of Comedy) (Amendment) Bill 2024: Second Stage (Resumed) [Private Members]	935
Cost of Motoring: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]	940
An Bille um an Aonú Leasú is Daichead ar an mBunreacht (An Aois Vótála a Laghdú go Sé Bliana Déag), 2025: An Dara Céim (Atógáil) [Comhaltáí Priobháideacha].....	943
Forty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Reduction of Voting Age to Sixteen Years) Bill 2025: Second Stage (Resumed) [Private Members].....	943

DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 19 Samhain 2025

Wednesday, 19 November 2025

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 39 and the name of the Member in each case:

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss funding and support for the Killarney innovation centre.

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

Deputy Johnny Guirke - To discuss the contracts homebuyers signed in Ringfort, Rathmolyon, County Meath.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly - To discuss the sustainability, resourcing and funding of the early years education sector.

Deputy Donna McGettigan - To discuss the waiting list for home help in County Clare.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil - To discuss the reliability of bus services in Kildare North.

Deputy Pat Buckley - To discuss the proposed construction of a waste incinerator in Ringaskiddy, Cork Harbour, County Cork.

Deputy Séamus McGrath - To discuss the new school building project proposed for Ringaskiddy and Shanbally national schools, County Cork.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the difficulties facing Wicklow and Wexford commuters.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty - To discuss the need for a full public inquiry into the tendering and construction of Lucan leisure centre.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss access to a remediation and compensation scheme for homes built with defective block in Skerries.

Deputy Erin McGreehan - To discuss the establishment of a community neuro-rehabilitation team in the Dublin and North East regional health area.

Deputy Louis O'Hara - To discuss the continued closure of Dunguaire Castle, Kinvara, County Galway.

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss unsafe lead levels in Phibsboro's drinking water.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara - To discuss ambulance wait times in north Tipperary.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny - To discuss building renovations and school accommodation in St. Patrick's College, Gardiner's Hill, Cork city.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss the financial crisis at Darver National School, County Louth.

Deputy Thomas Gould - To discuss issues with reliability and punctuality of Cork city's bus service.

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

Deputy Mattie McGrath - To discuss the need to revoke the Dundrum House hotel IPAS contract following a High Court decision.

Deputy Jen Cummins - To discuss the remediation scheme for apartment owners.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss the urgent need for investment in Carrignavar wastewater treatment plant.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke - To discuss plans for investment in water and wastewater infrastructure in Dunboyne, County Meath.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí - To discuss the escalating arson attacks on playgrounds and public facilities in north Dublin.

The matters raised by Deputies Guirke, Cummins, McGreehan, Gogarty and McGettigan have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Housing Provision

Deputy Johnny Guirke: I am a little disappointed that the senior Minister for housing is not here to answer on this very important issue. The Ringfort development in Rathmolyon, County Meath, has been plagued by mismanagement, delay tactics and questionable dealings that have left five families locked out of their homes for more than five years. It has been more than five years since couples put a booking deposit down on a home in the development. They signed contracts on homes that were being built and, instead of being in their new homes, they spent the past five years trapped in limbo, paying rent, storing furniture and living with a constant sense of uncertainty and frustration. They paid their initial €5,000 deposit in October 2020, followed by a balance of €24,500 in early 2021. One couple signed their contract in July 2021

and were told to expect completion within 18 months, by the end of 2022. That never happened. What began as small delays soon spiralled into a nightmare for these buyers. In early 2023, they were told by the developer that each buyer would need to pay an additional €60,000 to make the project viable. It was extortion. In May 2024, it was agreed to pay an additional €26,000 each to help move things along. A letter confirming this agreement was sent to solicitors. It was not subject to contract; it was open correspondence. The homebuyers accepted and signed, believing the end was near. By late 2024, every house on the site was structurally complete. The utilities were connected. All that remained were the final road surfacing and landscaping works. Now in 2025, a liquidator has been appointed, plunging everything back into chaos. The homebuyers face the prospect of losing the homes they paid deposits and signed contracts for. The financial stress and emotional toll has been immense on the five homebuyers who did not pull out of their contracts. They have spent thousands of euro in rent since 2020, not to mention storage cost and lost savings. One family from the group was evicted from their rental home earlier this year and is now living in a single bedroom with their young child. Another couple lives less than 200 yards from the Ringfort site and every time they pass it, they say they feel a mix of heartbreak and anger. Their contracts, you would guess, are legally binding. They have paid deposits and the homes are built, but these families cannot move in.

Even if these families had their deposits returned, they simply can no longer purchase houses at today's prices, which essentially leaves them homeless. One couple stated how ordinary people can do everything right and still lose. They have gone through every proper channel, kept every line of communication open and offered compromise after compromise, and still no progress has been made. The families who signed contracts for these homes are asking for accountability. I first brought this up nearly two and a half years ago. I ask the Minister of State to intervene and contact the Revenue Commissioners and his Department to step in and ensure the homebuyers' contracts are honoured after five years. Will he meet the five families affected as soon as possible? These families are close to losing everything they have worked so hard for. They need help and support from us all, and they need it now.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): I thank the Deputy for raising what is a very distressing situation for the homebuyers who entered into contracts and indeed paid significant deposits for the purchase of 16 homes at Ringfort development in Rathmolyon, County Meath. I have read news reports as recently as this morning about this case. My deepest sympathies go out to those families. I understand the frustration they are facing. For many of us, buying a new home is a dream. It is an aspiration for all families. The Government is committed to ensuring such aspirations can be realised. That is why we published the Government housing action plan last week, which commits to delivery of 300,000 homes to the end of 2030, including 90,000 starter home supports.

As I am sure the Deputy will understand, this matter is subject to an ongoing legal process and I understand the developer company is appointing a liquidator. Accordingly, I am constrained in what I can say on the matter. While I certainly share the understandable concerns of the Deputy and the families concerned, there are clear laws of contract and legal frameworks governing the purchase of houses that should be enforced.

I am aware State support has been drawn upon by both the homebuyers and developer concerned. I understand help to buy was used by some of the homebuyers to support the purchase, while the developer drew down loan funding from Home Building Finance Ireland to help finance the development, debt I am given to understand has been repaid. Notwithstanding the State support provided, the matter remains a private contractual and legal one between the homebuyers and the developer in question. Accordingly, it would be inappropriate for me as Minister of State or for the Government to intervene, especially when the appropriate legal processes are under way.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: As State support has been drawn down on these houses, I believe the Minister of State can intervene and that we need to intervene. I visited the site in Ringfort last Friday and blocks were being delivered to complete works on the boundary wall. This site is nearly complete, which begs the question why the developer would continue to work on the site if it is going to liquidate it. Yesterday we attended a meeting with the liquidator, the developer and the homebuyers. The homebuyers left the meeting with many question unanswered. The homes they paid deposits on are built, the lights are on but five years after giving deposits, some with the help to buy scheme as the Minister of State said, the doors are still locked for the five families who just want to move into their forever homes. Residents believe this case exposes how existing company and receivership law allows directors to manipulate processes at the expense of ordinary homebuyers. I have seen developments delayed in different towns. Developers are hoping that homebuyers pull out of legally binding contracts so they can get the current market value for houses they are building, which is at an all-time high and increasing. If the price decreased in value, the developer would expect contracts to be honoured. It should be the same the other way around. I ask the Minister of State again to intervene here so these homebuyers can move into their homes. The way they are being treated is appalling. The flaws in Ireland's housing regulation and receivership system are being taken advantage of. I plead with the Minister of State to make the right decision and intervene to protect these five homebuyers and families who remain and want their contracts, legally binding agreements, honoured in the middle of a housing crisis.

Deputy John Cummins: As I said in my opening reply, I have great sympathy for those who are trying to purchase homes here and across the country. That is why the Government is putting supports in place like the one the Deputy mentioned, to support homebuyers in purchasing their first home. I would love to be able to solve this matter for the individuals and families in question. As he will appreciate, contractual and legal frameworks govern the purchase of properties and have to be followed. This is a matter in respect of which a legal process is ongoing. As a result, unfortunately, as Minister of State I am not in a position to be able to intervene. I want these families to be able to be in their homes as much as the Deputy does. From a departmental perspective, we are keeping a close eye on proceedings and what is happening here in this particular instance. Unfortunately, given the state of the circumstances that face us at the moment, it is not appropriate to be able to intervene.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: Will the Minister of State meet the families?

Housing Schemes

Deputy Jen Cummins: I raise deeply worrying and entirely unacceptable issues for apartment owners and renters who are experiencing them in my constituency of Dublin South-Central. Let me paint a picture for the Minister of State. When I visited some of these apartment blocks, I saw fire safety hazards and potential for flooding. In another apartment block, I saw water coming into people's homes. This was not from a river. They do not know where this water is coming from. It has dripped into their home so much that it is now forming mould behind cupboards that have to be taken off. It is lifting skirting boards. I have been in their homes, and they invited me in to show me what exactly was going on. They have a wonderful area outside, which could be a communal area, but because it so badly damaged by water and the lack of ability to have any remediation, they are not able to use it. After I visited, a few weeks later, part of that apartment building fell apart. The family who live underneath have twins. They are brand new babies. If it had been warm enough to be out, they could have been sitting out underneath that balcony and they would have been seriously injured or worse.

The difficulty is that they are stuck in a situation where they are not able to get this remediation because they do not seem to be able to do it. They have a sinking fund, which is sinking rapidly into things that should be fixed ordinarily. There are developers that still own parts of those apartments. They are not paying money to the owner management company. There are people who own their apartments and they have spent a lot of money on these apartments. I do not know if the Minister of State knows my constituency, but Dublin 8 is an area where properties are very expensive. These properties were bought at the height of the boom and they were incredibly expensive. They are gorgeous, but people are frightened to live there. They are at their wits' end. One of things that I remember from that meeting was that one couple said they hated to hear the sound of dripping because they knew that was when something was going to go bad. In their minds, they hear drip, drip, drip all the time. They have buckets, pans and pots trying to gather the water, but they are emptying them all the time. It is causing them absolute stress. When I met them, what should have been a wonderful place to live in was an extremely stressful place to live in.

Will the Government deliver a comprehensive and fully funded statutory remediation scheme for apartment owners and renters? According to parliamentary records, legislation to establish an apartments and duplex defects remediation scheme is being drafted. The Government has approved in principle such a scheme with the aim of covering 100% of the eligible remediation costs for purpose-built apartments and duplexes constructed between 1991 and 2013, but the scheme seems to be unimplemented. These people living in these apartments are not able to access this. I am not going to name them because that would not be fair, but I am happy to talk to the Minister of State afterwards and give him the names. It is causing them a huge amount of stress. Will the Government provide a clear and publicly published timeline for when this legislation will be passed, when the scheme will be opened and when affected residents can apply? Will the Minister of State guarantee that as part of that scheme no apartment owner or renter will be forced to shoulder the costs of the defects that they now have by ensuring that remediation costs already incurred or levied will be eligible for refund or support under the legacy defects provisions of the scheme?

Deputy John Cummins: I thank the Deputy very much for raising this important matter. It gives me the opportunity to update the House on behalf of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. The Government fully understands and acknowledges the

difficulties that homeowners and residents of many apartments and duplexes are facing and the stress that is caused when defects arise in their properties. The Government is committed to helping those whose lives have been impacted by this issue. As the Deputy is aware and mentioned, the Department is, as a matter of priority, preparing legislation to put in place a statutory remediation scheme for owners of certain apartments affected by fire safety, water ingress and structural defects. This legislation will establish supports for the remediation of these defects in purpose-built apartment buildings, including duplexes, constructed between 1991 and 2013. Given the complexity of the issues, including the significant amount of Exchequer funding that this Government has committed to assisting affected homeowners, sufficient time is required to ensure that the scheme is fit for purpose, provides value for money for taxpayers and contains appropriate oversight and governance measures.

Indeed, good progress has been made with Department officials attending a meeting of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage yesterday evening to begin the process of pre-legislative scrutiny. Pending the introduction of the statutory scheme, the interim remediation scheme has been established to provide for funding of emergency fire safety defect works to provide an acceptable level of fire safety in buildings until full remedial works can be completed. This scheme, which is being administered by the Housing Agency on a nationwide basis, is open to applications from apartment owner management companies, OMCs, via the Housing Agency's website. Given their status under the Multi-Unit Developments Act 2011 and the key role they play in management of the apartment sector, OMCs have been identified from an early stage as being an essential ingredient to ensuring the efficient and effective delivery of this remediation scheme. The Housing Agency will oversee the process, ensuring OMCs receive the funding necessary to carry out these remedial works. It will work with the companies through the application process. In addition, an effective advice and information service within the agency has been established to provide support for OMCs. In principle, full funding will be provided for all eligible works necessary to achieve an acceptable level of fire safety in each building. To ensure value for money and good governance regarding Exchequer funding, appropriate terms and conditions will apply to such funding, outlined in the grant agreement.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I am happy measures are being put in place and the scheme is coming onstream. However, for these people who are living there, the time is now. How much time does the Government need? When can they access this? The difficulty is the communal areas. If people are not paying in and if everyone is not in the OMC, what seems to be happening is that they are not able to access the remedial fund. When that happens, those areas are not being looked after because there is no one able to do it. What happens then for apartment blocks where the OMC is not as strong as it could be? How will it be supported?

I am concerned about the Minister of State's comment that the Government needs to make sure it is value for taxpayers. These people are taxpayers. I will not outline the total, but one woman has paid in a lot of money to make sure that her home is safe for her children, herself and her husband. The reality is that when these apartments were built, building standards were not upheld. This is a problem of a regulation that was never enforced. We have a number of apartment blocks not only in my constituency but around the country, which now have to be sorted out because there was no enforcement. I do not know how this happened. We are supposed to have regulations for everything, and it seems to not have worked. We have fire

regulations, but this water ingress is also happening. The people who live there are taxpayers. They are renters or they own their apartments, and they deserve better. I acknowledge the need for value for money, but there is no value for money for the people who live there. They are seriously stressed. I thank the Minister of State for his response. I will keep pressing on this issue because time is of the essence. People spend a lot of time in their homes. This is totally fixable. If homes are dangerous and if they are stressed in their homes, time is of the essence.

Deputy John Cummins: Owners and renters deserve better. There is no question that these properties should not have been built to the standard that they were. They should have been built to a higher standard; that is a given. That is why the Government has committed to putting a significant remediation scheme in place to support the owners and renters in those properties to improve them and bring them up to an acceptable standard. The Minister, Deputy Browne, has continually met with stakeholders in this area. He is committed to progressing the overall legislation that will provide for this. As I mentioned, officials were before the Oireachtas joint committee recently. We have to get this right, however, and owner management companies are a critical component of this. If we are to invest significant sums of taxpayers' money in remediating these properties, we have to ensure there is effective governance in place in all those complexes. The last thing we want to see is money being poured into something and for it either not to be improved to the level it needs to be or to be misused in some other way. This money, which is taxpayers' money, will be ring-fenced to improve apartments and duplexes that were impacted between 1991 and 2013. The report in 2022 estimated that up to 100,000 units could be impacted, not just in Dublin but right across the country. We therefore have to get this right, and I am sure all Members will contribute to that.

Disability Services

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I am standing up here for the people of Louth because my constituents, neighbours and families are being denied essential neuro-rehabilitation services that most other regions have or plan to have. Let us be very blunt about it: Louth has no community neuro-rehabilitation team, CNRT, - not one. That is not because the need is not there; it is because one has not been provided.

The HSE has confirmed to me directly that HSE Dublin and North East which includes Louth, is one of the only regions in the entire country with no operational CNRT and no funded team. That has been written in responses to my parliamentary questions, in black and white, and it has real and devastating consequences for the people of my county.

Let us humanise this because it is not just about a line in the national service plan. Louth has stroke survivors trying to relearn how to walk and speak with no specialist community rehab team to support them. People with acquired brain injuries are being discharged from hospitals straight into a vacuum. Families are caring for loved ones with progressive neurological conditions without any structural follow-up. Patients are travelling across counties or simply giving up because the service or the medical team recommended to them does not exist. We are not talking about a luxury service; we are talking about physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, psychology and medical rehab oversight. Those are the fundamentals of recovery and these are supports that determine whether persons regain independence or lose it permanently. Right now in Louth, that recovery depends entirely on a

person's postcode, a system that is failing us. In reality, for every month Louth patients wait, they lose more function. For every year the team is delayed, more function becomes permanently lost. That cost is inaction, and that is what patients are dealing with.

Meanwhile, other areas, such as Galway, Mayo, Roscommon, Dublin south, Wicklow and Kildare, have received funding for 12 whole-time equivalents and teams are progressing with recruitment. We have been left behind in the north east. The HSE has confirmed year after year that it has submitted estimate bids to fund the CNRTs for the regions with nothing, including mine, and those bids have not been delivered. When I ask through parliamentary questions whether existing neurological services in Louth will be expanded or integrated, the answer is that we have to wait for the national service plan for 2026. When I ask about monitoring this, the reply is "details to follow"; when I ask about staff and recruitment plans, it is "not yet available". There is no timeline, no commitment or no clarity. It is completely unfair to the patients in County Louth and the people of County Louth that they are continuously waiting for this. We cannot leave families continuously waiting while the rest of the country moves on. There is no equity in that system. We cannot pretend that a region of nearly half a million people does not need what the HSE itself describes as essential population-based rehabilitation services.

I ask the Minister for an update on that and I hope there will be urgency on it.

Deputy John Cummins: I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter. It gives me an opportunity to respond on behalf of the Minister for Health.

The neuro-rehabilitation strategy implementation framework was launched in February 2019. The overarching aim of the strategy is the development of neuro-rehabilitation services to improve outcomes for people by providing safe, high-quality, person-centred neuro-rehabilitation at the lowest appropriate level of complexity. Services must be integrated across the care pathway and provided as close to home as possible.

Specialist neuro-rehabilitation services being established under the neuro-rehabilitation strategy will provide earlier access to specialist rehabilitation that improves people's outcomes, reducing their neuro-rehabilitation needs, enhancing function and reducing the supports required as they transition back into their communities.

As part of the strategy, the HSE is in the process of expanding the number of community neuro-rehabilitation teams across the country. The current position is that in 2025 four new teams have been recruited and will be operational this year. Some areas have partial teams in place but some areas, including Dublin and the north-east regional health area, have no teams in place currently.

Moving forward with the neuro-rehabilitation strategy, the aim is to enhance the existing CNRTs and fund those areas that do not have a community team to create a large population-based team within each regional health area.

A substantial amount of additional funding was provided for the continued implementation of the neuro-rehabilitation strategy in budget 2026. The details will be set out in the national service plan in 2026, which is due to be published shortly.

I take on board the points the Deputy has raised on behalf of her communities in the north east in relation to the absence of a team in her area. I will take back what she said to the Minister for Health.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: It is a pity the Minister is not here this morning because the Minister of State is reading out a response I have received several times to parliamentary questions. I know all this stuff. I also know that Louth does not have a community rehab team. I deal quite regularly with people who have acquired brain injuries, MS, FND or Parkinson's disease and they are not being cared for. The rationale is that they should go to Dublin, but the exhaustion of having to travel to Dublin from north Louth, south Louth or indeed mid-Louth is not acceptable. The stress of that is not good for health outcomes. The Minister of State said that we need to have the best outcomes or care pathways "as close to home as possible". The HSE is not even doing what it is recommending or what it is putting in replies for the Minister of State to say. This is for the Department of Health and the HSE. Again, it is the same answer about the HSE national service plan 2026. The reality is that County Louth has no neuro-rehabilitation teams. I need one, my constituents need one and the patients deserve proper care close to home, exactly what the HSE and the Department of Health clearly state.

Deputy John Cummins: The Deputy has articulated very well the importance of this service to her community in Louth and the entire north-east area of the country. There is a commitment in the programme for Government to ensure the continued roll-out of the neuro-rehabilitation strategy, and community teams form a critical element of that. Budget 2026 has invested significant additional moneys in this area. That will have to be reflected in the HSE national service plan. There is a commitment to focus on the areas that do not have a team and to expand the areas that have only partial teams in place.

Again, I will take the points the Deputy raised back to the Minister for Health.

Swimming Pools

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: We need a full public inquiry into Lucan swimming pool, at least to the point of the termination of the contract of the most recent contractor, McLoughlin.

The history of this pool is an absolute mess. In the 1980s, Lucan Community Council collected moneys for a leisure centre. People paid towards this and were promised a pool in phase 2. Unfortunately, the project went into debt with a bank loan to AIB and had to be bailed out by the council and Lucan leisure centre became owned by South Dublin County Council. People were still asking whether they could have a pool. In 2002, the council said it was sorry but the swimming pool programme was closed and we could not apply. I was a TD at the time. I put in a number of parliamentary questions and was told that we could have still applied. The council made a hames of it for the first time at that time.

Along with my colleague and friend, the late Councillor Fintan McCarthy, I was involved in the swimlucan.com campaign in 2005. We collected over 1,000 postcard petitions and an equal number of emails were sent into South Dublin County Council. Fintan was able to get a commitment from the council that it would add the Lucan swimming pool to its own programme. The response was that while the council was committed to building a pool out of

its own funds, it would be remiss not to seek funding elsewhere as well. That was the story. Unfortunately, in 2006, my late friend and colleague died tragically in an accident in China. His vacant seat was taken over by my late father, Billy Gogarty, who subsequently became mayor. He was told during his term as mayor that he would be turning the sod for Lucan swimming pool. This was in 2007. Unfortunately, he died tragically of a brain tumour in 2008. His replacement, Councillor Dorothy Corrigan, in due course asked about the pool. The council stated that there were no plans for a pool at the time. Having given a commitment, they reneged on it after two people involved in the project died under tragic circumstances.

It is no surprise that, in 2014, when I came onto South Dublin County Council again, my first speech in the chamber was about the Lucan swimming pool. This time there were a number of a community individuals, including Helen Farrell and Sandra Whelan, who were interested in doing a campaign on the pool. Along with other councillors, including Liona O'Toole, Guss O'Connell and Francis Timmons, I decided to support their massive campaign to bring it back into the eyesight of the then county manager. After a number of trials and tribulations, we got it into the county development plan and the rolling three-year programme and the council committed €6.2 million towards a pool. This is where it becomes a matter of State interest because €3.8 million of that initial investment came from national sources.

The pool design was passed in 2018 and we were told that construction would commence the following year and it would be completed in 2020-21. Covid hit, obviously, there were supply chain issues and prices went up. At some stage in the period between 2020 and 2022, the council took its eye off the ball. When I was a councillor, I submitted many questions asking when the pool was going to be completed. We were told that it would happen in December 2022, in April 2023, and so on. A new architect was appointed to oversee the project a year and a half ago. That individual deserves a medal because they have been chasing a lost cause. They were trying to keep their finger on the pulse of what was happening with the contractor. The contractor was not allowing any proper oversight until recently. The contract was then terminated. The council said it cannot do a review until the project is finished but I believe a review up to the point of the contractor's termination is absolutely necessary.

Deputy John Cummins: I thank Deputy Gogarty for raising this matter, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan. Government investment in sport is essential to increase participation levels in all sports across all sectors of society. The allocation for the sports programme in budget 2026 is over €290 million, an increase of just under €60 million or 26% compared to the 2025 allocation. When the national sports policy was published in 2018, it set a commitment to double investment in sport to more than €220 million by 2027. Obviously, we are significantly ahead of that already.

With regard to the development of physical sports infrastructure, the role of the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport is to provide capital funding for such facilities, including swimming pools. The construction and day-to-day operation of swimming pools is a matter for the respective local authority in the first instance. The Department operates two capital funding programmes for sport, namely the community sports facilities fund, CSFF, and the large-scale sport infrastructure fund, LSSIF. Over €250 million was allocated to 3,048 community sports clubs and facilities in 2024 from the 2023 round of the CSFF, representing the largest ever investment in sports facilities in communities across Ireland. The LSSIF was established under the 2018 national sports policy to provide Exchequer support for larger sports

facility projects, typically those requiring investments greater than the maximum available under the CSFF. A total of €297 million has been invested through the LSSIF across 68 projects. The 2018 round awarded €124 million to 33 projects, including top-ups in 2023. In November 2024, €173 million was allocated to 35 projects following record demand. An allocation of €28.9 million was made to nine swimming pool projects. In addition, the CSFF has provided allocations in excess of €5 million over the last ten years to swimming projects.

Previously, the local authority swimming pool programme, LASPP, provided grant aid towards the capital costs of new swimming pools or the refurbishment of existing pools. Fifty-two pools have been completed and just one swimming pool project, Lucan, remains in the programme. Lucan swimming pool is currently under construction. I note that South Dublin County Council handed over the dry-side facilities, including the gym, to the appointed operator on 22 July 2025. These facilities were subsequently opened to the public on 28 July 2025. In relation to the funding provided to Lucan swimming pool, the Department, as the Deputy rightly states, provided a grant aid allocation of €3.8 million from the LASPP to South Dublin County Council, which is responsible for delivery of the policy. Formal approval for the grant was provided in 2019. To date, the Department has paid out €3.2 million to South Dublin County Council for the ongoing construction works on Lucan swimming pool. South Dublin County Council has confirmed that the construction programme for Lucan leisure campus was impacted, as the Deputy said, by supply chain issues, Covid and the war in Ukraine. Since then, various other factors have contributed to project delays.

I am informed that South Dublin County Council is actively working to advance the project and ensure delivery of the facility for the people of the area. A tender process for appointing a replacement contractor is complete and a preferred bidder has been identified and notified. This step is critical to progressing the project and completing the remaining works. The newly appointed contractor will assume responsibility for co-ordinating all remaining works which will include finalising the swimming pool element of the development. Following the conclusion of the contractual arrangements, an updated project completion date will be communicated publicly. This will provide clarity and certainty to the community regarding the timeframe for opening the leisure centre and swimming pool complex.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Now that the Minister of State has given the response, I can go into a little more of the nitty-gritty. The Minister of State mentioned the Covid issues and the restrictions on working practices, etc. The council was aware of this from an early stage but it took the word of the contractor. I have had stories told to me about electricians walking off site because they were not getting paid commensurate to the increases in costs. As they are obviously the ones who have to certify the work, this would have caused delays. What we were told by the council which could not be put into the public domain was that while that contract was live, it had to adopt a softly-softly approach because if the council had to re-tender the contract, it would massively increase costs and delay construction of the pool. Three years later, we have seen a massive increase in costs. The original pool was approximately €10 million. It was €13 million at the commencement and now it has gone up to €20 million. We have had an increase in costs that goes way above Covid and supply chain increases. We have had a time delay that goes way above what it would have taken to get rid of the contractor and act on clauses at a much earlier stage. There has been a massive clamour for proper transparency - as there has been none - from members of the public in Lucan who have been

looking for this pool for years. The council has consistently refused to give any sort of information now that the contract is complete from the McLoughlins side on why it held on as long as it did. What were the factors? There could be valid factors. I would like to see them in the public domain. We cannot wait until after the pool is completed. We need this information now because it is a huge waste of public money that we need to investigate. I ask that the State would use its own resources to try and get such an inquiry going.

Deputy John Cummins: I thank Deputy Gogarty. It is obviously an exceptionally important project for his area that he has campaigned for over a significant period of time. I acknowledge the people that were previously involved, including his own dad, as he mentioned.

Sport is really important, as are pools. I come from a sporting background myself in that I am a qualified physical education teacher. I understand the importance of having good quality sports infrastructure in all of our communities right across the country.

As I said in my opening statement - it speaks to some of the frustration the Deputy has outlined - of the 52 pool projects under the local authority swimming pool projects, only one of them remains uncompleted, and that is Lucan swimming pool. The positives I take from the response that I have put on the record of the House is that a new contractor has now been appointed in order to complete the works. That is very important.

In terms of swimming more generally, the 2024 to 2027 strategy sets out an important vision in order to try to increase participation and take-up of people in learning what is a very valuable life skill, as close to their communities as possible. The Government will continue to put additional funding behind the swim strategy. Some €1.5 million has been allocated for the period 2025 to 2026. The governing body, Swim Ireland, is currently undertaking an analysis of the overall ownership structure of swimming pools across the country that will feed in to future projects. I assure the Deputy that this is something the Department will keep a close eye on, as we want to see this project completed and the pool opened as quickly as possible.

Health Services Waiting Lists

Deputy Donna McGettigan: Recently, Home and Community Care Ireland, HCCI, published its new report and witness for home and community care throughout the State. Home and Community Care Ireland is an umbrella group for home and community care providers across Ireland. Its report is based on the latest available statistics. The report makes for grim reading, with almost 5,000 people currently waiting for home care, but what is of particular concern for me is that my constituency of Clare has a waiting list of 304, which when calculated per 1,000 people of population equates to 2.386 per 1,000 or 157% of the national county average. The lowest waiting list per 1,000 of population is Dublin, with 0.076. County Clare's waiting list is more than 3,000% higher than that.

HCCI has compiled reports on waiting lists for a few years but they were based on the total number of people on the waiting list in each county. Under that measure, Cork had the highest waiting list. This is the first report that calculates the HSE waiting list as a percentage of the population of each county. Since it is the first report of its kind, we cannot even say for sure how long this problem has persisted in County Clare. More importantly, we do not know why the waiting list is so much worse in County Clare, so that is the first question that needs to be

answered. What is causing the excessive waiting lists in County Clare? If the Government does not know, what does it intend to do to research the problem and find out its causes?

These 304 are not just numbers. Behind each of them is a person who has been approved by the HSE for home care hours and yet cannot avail of this vital service to keep them in their own home for longer. Without this help, people's health can deteriorate, making them more likely to need hospital care or nursing home care. They may also face difficulties in being discharged because they cannot be sent back to their own home if the home care is not available to them. A spokesperson for HCCI said that they have heard of examples of where people have died while on the waiting list, only for their families to be later offered home care for them. This must be utterly heartbreaking for family members. They must feel like their loved one was completely let down and neglected by the State in their time of need.

The HSE issued a statement to the media in response to the HCCI report. We should not be reliant on the HSE to issue statements in the wake of a report like this about the lack of services that people have to endure to try to find out what is going on. The HSE statement may have been its best guess as to why the people of County Clare have been so neglected but a number of its assertions simply do not add up. It states that the mid-west has an ageing population and that is a contributing factor. However, other counties with higher age profiles have lower waiting lists. The Central Statistics Office gives a ratio for the number of people over 65 years of age to those under 65 in each county. County Leitrim, for example, has an age ratio of 28.4, according to the latest census data compared to a ratio of 25.1 for Clare, yet its waiting list is 1.254 and ours is 2.386. Let me be absolutely clear: the waiting list in Leitrim is far from acceptable. No one should have to wait for the care services they need.

The HSE's statement also implied that County Clare is a rural county but so is County Kerry. It has a waiting list of 0.676 per 100,000 compared to our 2.386, so ours is more than three times the waiting list of Kerry, even though both counties are rural.

The HSE is responsible for managing the waiting lists and for managing decisions to allocate home care to people in the first place, yet it seems it is not able to adequately account for the large difference between the waiting lists in each county. Even if we in County Clare does have a higher ageing population than anywhere else, and even if we have a more dispersed rural population than anywhere else, as the HSE seems to assert, it is still the job of the Government to ensure that Irish citizens have proper, full and prompt access to appropriate home care when they require it. Every Government has had access to census data for years, which was supposed to be used to plan for future needs, so why do we find ourselves in this unacceptable situation?

Deputy John Cummins: I thank Deputy McGettigan very much for raising this important matter, to which I am responding on behalf of the Minister for Health. Improving access to home support is a priority for the Government. The overall budget for home support in 2025 is circa €838 million. This is the largest allocation ever for home support. It is an increase of nearly €122 million on the previous year and an increase of over 70% when compared to the 2020 budget of €487 million. We are on track to exceed the target of 24 million home support hours, excluding complex home support, for this year. At the end of September, we delivered 1.3 million more hours than by the end of September 2024. We have already exceeded the year-end target to support over 60,000 people at any one time.

Under budget 2026, the HSE will be funded to increase the target to €26.7 million next year. In the Clare and Limerick integrated healthcare area, at the end of September 2024 the HSE reported that 1.034 million hours of home support had been delivered. This is 2.1% ahead of the target for the year to date, and nearly 48,000 more hours than the number of hours delivered in the same period last year, which is an increase of nearly 5%. However, although supply of home support hours has increased, the waiting list does remain persistent in some parts of the country, including County Clare. The HSE reports that, as of September 2025, the waiting list in County Clare stood at 340 people. Some 93 people are waiting for their home support package to commence, while the other 247 people were waiting for receipt of additional home support hours.

Where there are waiting lists for home support, priority is given to those in the community with acute needs and those assessed and waiting in acute hospitals who are able to return home with support. Higher waiting lists are known to be directly related to the availability of carers in the region. The Government has recognised the importance of addressing recruitment and retention for the sector and is continuing to work to deliver on the recommendations of the strategic workforce advisory group on home carers and nursing home health care assistants.

The HSE has also reported that it is carrying out regional rolling recruitment campaigns in line with the pay and numbers strategy across the health regions. A number of initiatives are under way to focus on the recruitment and retention of HCAs to provide home support in areas where additional home support staff are required. Additionally, at a national level the HSE has developed a HCA career hub spotlight piece which highlights the role of HCAs who provide home support, the training required and the benefits associated with working for the HSE. It also offers contact details for local home support services as well as information on how to join the career hub to receive job updates.

The Minister of State with responsibility for older people and housing, Deputy O'Donnell, is fully committed to addressing waiting lists for home support, with a focus on those regions that are disproportionately affected. The Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, has specified that home support waiting lists must be addressed through the HSE's upcoming national service plan.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: It is a pity the Minister for Health is not here because, unfortunately, the Minister of State has been left to read out a response which indicates that he has not even heard what I have been saying. The answer he has read suggests that the Department has exceeded targets but we are not seeing that in County Clare. The answer does not tell us what we want to hear. While I thank HCCI for this report, which clearly identifies the problem of waiting lists for home care in various counties, we should not have to rely on a report to tell us what we should be informed of by the HSE. It is the responsibility of the Government and the HSE to bring forward solutions for this, but I am not hearing solutions. The Minister of State is saying that there are increases, but they are not being seen in County Clare. These solutions have to be rooted in a clear understanding of the sources of the problems. It is deeply concerning that the HSE cannot clearly identify the causes of the current excessive waiting times in County Clare. The suggestion that County Clare has longer waiting times because it is a rural county does not hold up when other rural counties do not have the same level of waiting lists we have. The idea that it is caused by an ageing population overlooks the fact that other counties with ageing populations have shorter waiting lists than ours. This

seems to be another case of postcode lottery in terms of services. We in County Clare have inadequate services and the agencies responsible do not seem to know why.

The people of County Clare have a right to feel abandoned by the Government. The HCCI stated in its report that it relies on parliamentary questions to get access to statistics and data relating to waiting lists. We need to see transparent reporting from the HSE. Will the Government instruct the HSE to compile and report on waiting lists regularly in the same way it reports on other matters? If so, when will it do so? If not, why not? This report should serve as a wake-up call. People are being left to wait and suffer in silence and that is not acceptable. Ours is a modern society in the 21st century. This dereliction of duty by the Government cannot continue. The Government and the HSE need to formulate a plan to introduce protocols for the capturing, analysing and publicising of data related to what is clearly an inadequate home care service.

Deputy John Cummins: As I said in my opening statement, budget 2026 will increase the number of hours provided for home support to 26.7 million, which is significantly more than what was provided in 2025. Nonetheless, I acknowledge the points the Deputy has raised. The Minister of State with responsibility for older persons and housing, Deputy O'Donnell, is committed to ensuring that where there are gaps in provision, including in County Clare as the Deputy has pointed out, they will be addressed through the national service plan which the HSE will bring forward. There is no question that areas of rural Ireland should not be disadvantaged in terms of home support - or any other service for that matter - that is provided by the State. Where there are disproportionate waiting lists in certain parts of the country, we are committed to addressing that through the HSE service plan, which the HSE is responsible for bringing forward. It is the Government's responsibility to ensure the funding is put in place and it is the HSE's responsibility to ensure that adequate provision is provided across the country to ensure people can remain in their homes, as is their requirement, and to ensure we free up capacity within acute settings as well. I will take the points the Deputy has made back to the Minister for Health.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aidan Farrelly): I thank the Minister of State and Deputy McGettigan.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 9.55 a.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 10.01 a.m.

Sitting suspended at 9.55 a.m. and resumed at 10.01 a.m.

Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Prohibition of Importation of Goods) Bill: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— the Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill 2018 (OTB), first introduced by Senator Frances Black and other members of Seanad Éireann, proposed to

give effect to the State's obligations arising under the Fourth Geneva Convention, and to ban trade in goods or services with an occupied territory;

— the OTB passed First Stage in the Seanad on 24th January, 2018, almost eight years ago, it passed Second Stage in the Dáil on 24th January, 2019 and has been at Dáil Committee Stage, without progress, for the intervening almost seven years;

— on 19th July, 2024, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) delivered an Advisory Opinion which confirmed that, under international law, "Member States are under an obligation... to abstain from entering into economic or trade dealings with Israel concerning the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) or parts thereof which may entrench its unlawful presence in the territory... and to take steps to prevent trade or investment relations that assist in the maintenance of the illegal situation created by Israel in the OPT";

— the Tánaiste, Simon Harris TD, has stated that the Irish Government considers that the ICJ's Advisory Opinion "represents an authoritative statement of applicable international law which is binding on all states and international organisations, including the European Union (EU) and its Member States";

— on 25th June, 2025, the Government published the General Scheme of the proposed Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Prohibition of Importation of Goods) Bill 2025, which was then sent to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade for the purposes of pre-legislative scrutiny;

— the provisions of the General Scheme seek to prohibit the importation of goods originating in Israeli settlements but do not include a ban on export of goods, or on the import or export of services;

— the 19th July, 2024 Advisory Opinion of the ICJ did not make any distinction between trade in goods and services for the purposes of international law;

— a range of eminent legal experts who spoke before the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade during pre-legislative scrutiny meetings, stated that the obligations outlined in the ICJ Advisory Opinion applied to both goods and to services, and the Legal Advisor at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade told the Committee that, regarding the binding obligations clarified by the ICJ, "trade is trade in goods and services";

— on 18th September, 2024, Ireland co-sponsored a Resolution adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, which, in line with the ICJ Advisory Opinion, called upon all States to comply with their obligations under international law, as reflected in the Advisory Opinion, and to prevent trade or investment relations with the illegal Israeli settlements, making no distinction between trade in goods and trade in services;

— in advice provided to the Government in 2024, and available online, the Attorney General, in concluding that the OTB is justifiable on grounds of "public policy" under EU law, stated that the State may argue that "the proposed offences", plural, included in the OTB "are necessary to uphold respect for rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms and human dignity" and

"represent the fulfilment by the State of the obligations referred to in the ICJ Opinion", and that those offences, plural, include a prohibition on trade in both goods and services;

— equivalent measures restricting trade in goods, services and investment with Russian-occupied territories were adopted by Ireland and other EU member states in 2014, remained in force, and the Irish Business and Employers Confederation noted at the Oireachtas Joint Committee that those laws were adhered to and practically implemented without significant issues being raised by its members;

— research by academics, development organisations, journalists and UN bodies have identified significant trade in services between EU-based companies and the illegal Israeli settlements, including specific and publicly identifiable companies based in Ireland, and that this trade assists in maintaining the illegal situation created by Israel in the OPT, just as trade in goods does;

— on 31st July, the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade published its pre-legislative scrutiny report on the General Scheme of the Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Prohibition of Importation of Goods) Bill;

— the Oireachtas Joint Committee's pre-legislative scrutiny report "strongly recommends progressing the Bill and that the prohibition of imports from the Palestinian Occupied Territories should be extended to include trade in services, in line with the Advisory Opinion of the ICJ and the Resolution which Ireland co-sponsored at the UN General Assembly";

— the Oireachtas Joint Committee also recommended that the title of the Bill be the "Illegal Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Prohibition of Importation of Goods and Services) Bill";

— despite the publication of the Oireachtas Joint Committee pre-legislative scrutiny report over three months ago, and its inclusion in the list of Legislation for Priority Publication for the Autumn Session 2025, the Bill has not yet been brought before Dáil Éireann;

— since pre-legislation scrutiny concluded in July, several other EU member states have either fully passed or announced plans to prohibit trade with illegal Israeli settlements, and that several of these go further than the draft Government proposal, including a ban on the export of goods (Slovenia) and a ban on the advertisement of services (Spain); and

— the situation in the OPT remains devastating, including record numbers of home demolitions, settler attacks, and orders for new illegal settlement construction in 2025, and that this current political context requires States to actively defend international law and human rights, and deliver on their prior commitments, rather than delaying or rolling them back; and

calls on the Government to:

— accept the recommendation of the pre-legislative scrutiny report from the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade that the Israeli Settlements in the proposed Occupied Palestinian Territory (Prohibition of Importation of Goods) Bill, should be extended to include trade in services; and

— as a matter of the utmost urgency, bring the Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Prohibition of Importation of Goods) Bill, amended to include services, before the Dáil, and do everything necessary to ensure the Bill can be enacted before the end of this year.

I am sharing with Deputies Murphy and Coppinger. This Government speaks out of both sides of its mouth when it comes to the issue of Palestine. In one breath it states it stands with the people of Palestine against the crimes that Israel inflicts on them and promises sanctions while in the other breath it reassures its friends in the White House that it is going to do nothing at all, and the consequence of that is that despite promises for nearly ten years on the occupied territories Bill, it still has not passed it. It is bad enough that since 2018 the Government has refused to pass this Bill to impose sanctions on Israel for the illegal settlements in the West Bank but then after two years of a genocidal massacre, the Government still refuses to pass it, having made solemn promises in the recent general election that it would pass it, and is seeking to dilute it by leaving out services. It is an absolute disgrace. There is simply no justification for it. I hope the fact that the new Minister is not here is not a sign of a disrespectful attitude towards this Bill and towards taking the issue seriously.

As our motion sets out, there are simply no excuses left for this Government. Politically the Government promised the Irish people it would pass the occupied territories Bill, with no mention of leaving services out or anything. The Government made a promise and it should keep that promise. The joint Oireachtas committee, which includes Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael members, has recommended the occupied territories Bill be passed and the Government got clear legal advice from the Attorney General to the joint Oireachtas committee that there is no difficulty legally with including services in the occupied territories Bill and the ban on the importation of goods from the occupied territories. The Government has stated that the International Court of Justice advisory opinion is an authoritative statement on international law and that it requires all EU member states to prevent the importation of goods from occupied territories but, of course, this Government still refuses to do it, even when other governments in Europe have now done it. Slovenia, Spain and The Netherlands have all now passed Bills imposing sanctions on Israel in terms of the occupied territories. Yet, this Government that I do not know how many times I have heard come in here and claim it is the most pro-Palestinian voice in the EU still refuses to do so.

Of course, the double standards and contrast with what we heard last night in the statements on Ukraine is so blatant it is really outrageous. Rightly, the Government condemned Vladimir Putin for an imperialist invasion of Ukraine. What was the response of this Government to that invasion? It was instantaneous sanctions and 19 rounds of sanctions imposed on Putin for what is and was a bloody, brutal and unjustifiable invasion in Ukraine. However, in the case of Palestine, after two years of a genocidal massacre, 17 years of a criminal siege on Gaza, decades of ethnic cleansing, 700,000 illegal settlements on the West Bank, an apartheid system, denial of the right to return and ethnic cleansing on an ongoing basis and there is not a single sanction. It is shameful. Stop dancing to the tune of Donald Trump and the White House; the enablers of the genocide in Palestine. Do what was promised to the Irish people. Do what is right for the Palestinians and for humanity.

If the Government has any respect for international law and for human rights, it must pass the occupied territories Bill, which, by the way, is only the minimal sanction that should be

imposed on this regime. Let us be clear: all the occupied territories Bill does is impose a ban on the importation of goods from the illegal settlements. In our view - and I will be absolutely clear about this- we should be going a lot further than that. There should be a complete boycott, divestment, and sanctions from this criminal regime. A regime that is capable of genocide has no place in the civilised world. This Bill does not even address the issue of the right to return or the apartheid system and the criminal siege of Gaza. It is a minimal sanction in line with the Government's international legal obligations. Do what you said you would do: pass this Bill and finally impose sanctions on this criminal regime.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Two days ago, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2803, a resolution endorsing the so-called Trump peace plan - a peace plan that, disgracefully, was welcomed by the Irish Government. We will probably hear it welcomed again today. It makes the saying from Tacitus, "they make a desert and call it peace," the most appropriate it has ever been because after two years of genocide, after killing at least 66,000 people, over 20,000 children, after imposing famine, after mowing people down while queuing for food, after destroying the majority of buildings, the hospitals, the schools, the universities, the homes in Gaza, now a peace is declared but it is no peace at all. It is a continued colonial carve-up that is remarkable only for how naked it is.

The UN resolution explicitly endorses the so-called "board of peace" as a "transitional administration". This is a board to be chaired by Donald Trump. The only other member we know who is going to be on it is Tony Blair, a war criminal, but presumably he will be joined by a series of other war criminals and these people are to be imposed, without vote and without any consultation with the Palestinian people, as new colonial viceroys on the people of Gaza.

What Trump plans to do there is set out in his own Trump plan. It was set out in that disgusting video about the Trump-Riviera plan for Gaza and then, in slightly more polite terms, it is in the peace plan as a "Trump economic development plan" and "a special economic zone". There is going to be an army of occupation called the international stabilisation force answerable, not to the Palestinian people, but to the viceroys on the board of peace. What is absent from the UN resolution and what is absent from the peace plan is the Palestinian people; the Palestinian people's right to self-defence, their right to determine their own government and their right to self-determination.

However, the counterpart to the genocide we saw openly unfolding for two years in Gaza, backed by western imperialism, armed by western imperialism, supported by western imperialism, the US, Germany, Britain, the EU, is the expansion of settlements in the West Bank and in Jerusalem. This year, 30,000 settlement units have been approved by the Israeli Government. The term "settlements" does not capture what is happening. Palestinian people are being violently removed from their land. Their land is being stolen from them today and taken by these Israeli settlers. Later on, the Israeli Government authorises and recognises this and more Palestinian land is stolen. At the time of the Oslo Accords, there were 250,000 illegal Israeli settlers. When Senator Frances Black first introduced this Bill, there were 600,000 such settlers and today there are 750,000 of them. The latest settlement is the so-called E1, which divides the West Bank in two, further isolating Palestinians in Jerusalem. It is all about a logic of extermination of the Palestinian people. That is what the genocide and the settlements are about.

This motion is an extremely modest proposal, as Deputy Boyd Barrett has outlined. It is in line with international law. The International Court of Justice is clear that states are under an obligation to abstain from entering into economic or trade dealings and to prevent trade or investment relations with the settlements. There is no mention just of goods there. International law is very clear. It is also in line with the strong recommendation of the Oireachtas foreign affairs committee, which strongly recommended "progressing the Bill" and that the prohibition on imports "should be extended to include trade in services". It is line with the promises made by Simon Harris and Micheál Martin over a year ago during the general election debate.

This motion is extremely minimal in what it asks, as is the Bill. Our motion could not be simpler or clearer, with only two very simple asks. One is that the Bill be implemented in full before Christmas and the other is that services be included. We have a Government that says it is not going to oppose this motion, so this will be the position of the Dáil after this debate. However, in the same breath as saying that it is not going to oppose the motion, the Government is saying that it is not going to guarantee that it will implement it before Christmas and that it has not yet decided if it is going to include services. It is a complete joke. The Government makes a farce of this place by saying that the Dáil can pass whatever it wants, that it will allow a simple two-ask motion to pass, but it will not give any commitment to actually implement it. That is the height of cynicism. What is it about? It is about cowardice. The Government does not want to face the prospect of TDs who support this Government voting against it. It does not want to see Members who supported the call at the foreign affairs committee to include services being pressured to vote against including services now. It does not want to reveal its real position to the Irish people, which is that it does not want to include services. It wants to water this legislation down. That is the truth of its position, which is one of extreme moral cowardice and extreme cynicism.

I will now address both the so-called good reasons put forward by the Government to explain why, in reality, it wants to back away from this, as well as the real reasons. One of the good reasons put forward by Simon Harris on a number of occasions is that he wants to include services but is afraid that there might be legal issues with it. There is no basis to that whatsoever. First, there is the position of the International Court of Justice, upon which the whole change of Government position was based, which makes no distinction between goods and services. That is the fundamental point in terms of international law. Second, there is now talk of Attorney General advice. This is the most blatant retroactive getting of advice to suit a political position. The Attorney General already gave advice on this and made no mention of any problem in terms of services. This is simply an attempt to find legal cover for the political retreat that the Government wants to engage in.

A second argument is that we do not want to be alone, but we are going so slowly, under public pressure, that we are no longer alone. Slovenia has already moved to ban imports by immediate government decision. In Belgium, there is a government announcement in relation to the occupied territories and Spain has moved on the importation of goods, as has the Netherlands. We are certainly no longer alone. The other argument that is now advanced, which is absolutely threadbare, is the idea that this will be unimplementable. How could we possibly do this in terms of services? The problem the Government has there is that it already does it in terms of services in Russia. The Government has implemented full sanctions and a

ban on the import and export of goods and services with Russia, and IBEC accepted at a meeting of the foreign affairs committee that businesses had complied with that ban.

Now I come to the real reason for the Government's cowardice on this issue, which is pressure from US imperialism, lobbying from the US Chamber of Commerce and pressure from the US ambassador. It is very blatant that this is the case. There is an excellent new report from Uplift, called *The Neutrality Files*, which explains this bit by bit. Uplift's summary of the situation is that the Government's public justifications for not passing the occupied territories Bill, namely, EU law and costs, were a smokescreen for the real reason, which is capitulation to economic pressure from the US activated on behalf of Israel. In October 2025, Reuters broke a story that the Bill would be diluted as a direct result of corporate pressure. Later in October, speaking to the Dáil, the Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, signalled that the Bill would go ahead without services. That is the truth. In October 2024, the US ambassador to Ireland, Ms Claire Cronin, warned of "consequences" for US companies in Ireland if the Bill proceeded. Hours later, the then Tánaiste, Micheál Martin, announced that the Bill would be shelved for review. We know that back in 2019 the then Minister, Deputy Paschal Donohoe, in a confidential call quoted in leaked Israeli documents, confirmed that the Irish Government would be using a procedure known as a money message to seek to block the progress of the draft Irish legislation. That is all this is and the only thing that can force this Government to act is massive public pressure from below. That is why I will be on the streets with lots of others tonight at 5.30 p.m outside the Dáil.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I want to read a quote about this Bill:

If passed, Ireland and her Parliament will be sending a strong message, that it condemns the occupation of territories deemed illegal under international law. This Bill, at its most basic, is about upholding international law. It applies to illegal occupations anywhere in the world and not just to Israel and Palestine.

It was a member of the Minister of State's party, Deputy Niall Collins, who said that in this House in 2019. What has changed? What has happened in the intervening years is that there has been a genocide. Gaza has been reduced not to rubble or ruins but to ashes. Israel has carried out that genocide. The Irish Government says that it recognises the genocide. The Government was in here in 2019 saying "rah, rah, rah" but now it is sheepishly pulling back from its own Bill. It is a pity that the new Minister for foreign affairs is not here to listen to this debate. I cannot think of too many issues that are more pressing and that should be on her agenda right now. Again, this is another insult to the Dáil.

I issue a content warning for anybody listening, but soldiers accused of sexually assaulting handcuffed Palestinian detainees have received standing ovations in court in Israel. The stories that we have heard since the release of the Palestinian hostages have made our skin crawl. I am in a WhatsApp group called D15 with Palestine that has many local Palestinian members. They share videos that they get from within Palestine but we could not even post half of them on our social media because it would be too distressing.

We have heard a lot of guff in recent days, and I heard it again this morning as I drove in here, about the centre and how important that is to the Government. The centre is pro-genocide and pro-imperialism. Let us cut the crap here about the centre. The EU is not just trading with Israel; it is giving it favourable terms of trade. That is the centre. The centre is imperialism,

now carving up Gaza. The Irish people have done a lot but the Irish Government has done absolutely nothing but talk. By the way, as well as reports on the treatment of detainees, we have seen reports of a shoot-to-kill policy but I want to talk about public opinion and why the Government is so against what the Irish people want. As my colleagues have said, Ireland has compromised its own sovereignty due to our FDI model. Approximately 75% of corporation tax comes from American multinationals and 69% of FDI is US based. It has distorted our economy and many things relating to how we measure our success. It has created a deep structural link to Israel. I wondered why Ireland is the second largest trader with Israel. Lo and behold, when it is broken down, it is because Intel is here. According to a report into our FDI model and how it supports genocide, Intel had bespoke infrastructure created for it through investment from our Government. The Government's dependence on an economic model of capitalism in Ireland means that we are now not able to support any measures against genocide.

Ireland has become a financial offshoring base through the creation of the IFSC. It is a platform for companies, in particular US companies, to filter operations and profits through Ireland rather than Ireland creating its own industry. I do not have time to develop this point, but I will give some examples. The Azure cloud platform, which carries out mass surveillance of Palestinian mobile phones, came from data centres in Ireland run by Microsoft, as well as other countries. Project Nimbus, a €1.2 billion contract with Amazon and Israel, was possible because the data centres the Government loves so much create and hold that data here. The real reason for not passing the occupied territories Bill is not legal advice. Rather, it is the Government's cowardice and industrial policy, along with the Israeli lobbying that has been happening. This is about contagion. Israel does not want any government taking any action that will send a message across the world regarding what other governments could do. It is shameful.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Thomas Byrne): I would like to begin by restating the Government's commitment to achieving a just and lasting settlement of the conflict involving Palestinians and Israel. Appropriate, timely and effective action on this crisis has been a priority for the Government. Our foreign policy on this issue has been clear and consistent for decades, grounded in the commitment to uphold international law. We are in a better position now than we have been in recent months, notwithstanding everything that has happened.

The agreement on a ceasefire represents progress. It has brought desperately needed respite to Palestinians in Gaza and relief to the people of Israel, not all of whom support the actions of their Government. The long-overdue release of hostages held by Hamas is also very welcome and a significant development. It has brought relief to the hostages and their families. Hamas needs to complete the release of the remains of those hostages who were killed, so that their families can properly mourn them.

I commend the efforts of the US, as well as Qatar, Türkiye and Egypt, in securing this much-needed agreement. I commend efforts to progress the implementation of what has been agreed. The international community must play its part if these efforts are to succeed. We will have peace and two states in the region. The adoption of a resolution on Gaza by the UN Security Council is an important step towards implementation of the peace plan. The text provides clarity on how the next stages of the plan will be taken forward, including the creation of an international stabilisation force. The Security Council has the international authority to make

these decisions and I am glad it has done that. There are references in the text to working towards a Palestinian state, which is welcome.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Have you read it?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: We recognise the Palestinian state, as do many other countries, but not everybody does. We need international consensus on that. It is a fragile moment and there is a need to keep positive momentum. The ceasefire is fragile and must be preserved.

Much more needs to be done to scale up delivery of humanitarian aid into Gaza. The Opposition is not wrong. The people of Gaza have endured unimaginable suffering. We all see that every day. We need all crossings into Gaza fully opened for essential humanitarian aid. Efforts must advance to return essential services, provide for early recovery needs, including the basics of food, water, sanitation, shelter and heating, as well as medical needs and schooling for children.

We welcome the prospect of progress, even though it is incomplete and coming from a terrible base. We must maintain our focus on the situation in the West Bank. I remain extremely concerned by recent and ongoing developments across the West Bank, where Israeli military operations have displaced at least 40,000 people since January and caused widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure and homes. The scale, speed and severity of displacement and demolitions is unprecedented. The number of settlement plans and tenders advanced by Israel in 2023 and 2024 represents a 250% increase over the previous seven-year period.

At least 849 obstacles that permanently or intermittently restrict the movement of 3.3 million Palestinians are currently installed across the West Bank. The decision to approve plans for settlement construction in the E1 area is unacceptable and a violation of international law, and on that there is broad consensus. The Israeli Government must stop settlement construction in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2334.

Ireland remains deeply concerned by the increasing instances of extremist settler violence and illegal settlement construction, which continue within an environment of impunity, restricting life for Palestinians across the West Bank. It is wrong. The olive harvest this year has been marred by the highest level of settler violence recorded over the past five years. Over 1,000 Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank since 7 October 2023. This figure represents 43% of all Palestinians killed in the West Bank in the past 20 years.

Ireland, alongside our EU partners, is strongly opposed to Israel's settlement policy and activities, including in and around East Jerusalem. We have consistently called on Israel to halt these activities in our engagements at the EU and at the broader international level. The Minister, Deputy Entee, will raise these concerns at a meeting tomorrow of EU foreign ministers in Brussels.

It is within this context that we are meeting here today to discuss the Bill. In June 2025, the Government approved the general scheme. The Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade held a number of hearings on the general scheme and received submissions representing a range of views and perspectives. The committee published its report on the Bill. Work to analyse the report and its recommendations is well under way. There are quite a lot of recommendations to the Government as to what we need to do to analyse, in particular, the potential implications

of the Bill. That was agreed by all parties at the committee. The Department is finalising the regulatory impact assessment, which will be available on the Department's website when completed. The next steps in the process, including the timeline for the progress of the Bill, are being considered by the Government.

The main purpose of the Bill is to prohibit the importation of goods into the State from Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem. The programme for Government commits to prohibiting imports of goods. The general scheme, which the committee examined, does not prohibit trade in services with natural or legal persons located in Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory.

We have said we have no policy issue regarding the inclusion of services, but the Bill must be legally robust and withstand challenge. Similarly, the question of implementation must be carefully considered. The trade in services is considerably more complex than goods and there remains considerable legal uncertainty as to whether the inclusion of services is permissible under EU law. We know for certain that the inclusion of goods is permissible under EU law. We need legal clarity on the point on services. We must take into account practical issues with regard to implementation should services be included in the scope of the Bill.

It remains the Government's preference that collective action would be taken at EU level and Ireland continues to support and advocate for this. In this context, we have welcomed the announcements, as mentioned by Deputies, from the Dutch, Spanish, Slovenian and Belgian Governments, and I have discussed this with many of their ministers. By and large, the discussions relate to goods they have banned from illegal Israeli settlements. The Government has said repeatedly that we are committed to passing the Bill. Work is advancing across a number of strands at official level, as well as continued engagement at EU level - this would be much stronger if done at EU level - with like-minded partners.

Regarding the wider issue of EU trade with Israel in the context of the EU-Israel association agreement, which has been mentioned, the European Commission put forward proposals in September that included the suspension of the trade elements of that agreement. Notwithstanding the positive and welcome recent developments with regard to a ceasefire and hostage release deal in Gaza, Ireland has made clear at every opportunity our view that the EU must keep on the table the package of measures proposed by the Commission in response to Israeli human rights and other breaches.

In her State of the Union address, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, was clear on the rationale for tabling the package of proposals, which remains valid. The primary focus at EU level now is ensuring the success of the ceasefire and peace deal and making a contribution to international efforts in this regard. We do need to give peace a chance to succeed.

We also must address the humanitarian situation on the ground in Gaza, which remains no less urgent. Turning the tide on famine is likely to take a long time. More than 54,000 children are acutely malnourished and face increased risk of death if untreated. Infrastructure is in ruins, with over 80% of the Gaza Strip destroyed. Access to water, healthcare and shelter remains completely inadequate. Diseases are rife. Without urgent improvements and action, more people will die from preventable causes.

Despite improvements, the supply of humanitarian aid remains insufficient. The immediate focus must be on flooding humanitarian aid into and throughout Gaza. It is unacceptable that the majority of crossings into the Gaza Strip remain closed and that arbitrary restrictions continue to hinder the flow of humanitarian aid. With winter fast approaching, the vulnerability of already disenfranchised Palestinians living in these unstable and dangerous conditions grows ever more acute.

We have all seen the images Members have spoken about, including of people struggling to keep dry in rain-flooded tents in Gaza in recent days. In light of these devastating circumstances, Ireland welcomes the recent advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice, which affirms that Israel must uphold its responsibilities as the "occupying power" by ensuring aid can flow freely, and by respecting and protecting the rights of the UN and other humanitarian agencies and their workers. We welcome that the 20-point plan expressly states that aid should be provided, without interference, through the UN and its agencies and other international institutions not associated with either party to the conflict.

International collaboration and the multilateral system have never been more important as we work to implement the next phase of the peace deal and look toward new horizons for peace in Israel and Palestine. Only through upholding principles of collective engagement, dialogue, respect for international law, and through the steadfast support of the United Nations and its bodies - and the European Union using the leverage it has as well - can we advance efforts toward a just, lasting and viable two-state solution that ensures dignity and security for both Palestinians and Israelis alike.

Deputy Charles Ward: I thank my colleagues Deputies Paul Murphy and Richard Boyd Barrett and their staff for bringing forward this extremely important detailed motion. I am happy to cosign and support this motion and its calls for the Government to urgently progress this Bill on Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories and include a ban on trade services.

There is supposedly a ceasefire in Gaza. Let us be honest: if what is happening in Palestine today were to happen anywhere else, there would be outrage. The Palestinians have been abandoned and left behind. There would have been absolute uproar. There may have been a reduction in violence but hundreds of people have been killed by Israel since the ceasefire came into effect on 10 October and even more have been injured. According to satellite images reviewed by the BBC, Israel has destroyed more than 1,500 buildings in Gaza. Photos show entire neighbourhoods controlled by the IDF have been levelled in less than a month. We have only learned this through satellite images - God knows what is actually happening on the ground because it is extremely difficult to get reliable information because of the number of journalists who have been killed. Israel has killed 232 journalists in Gaza. On average that is 13 per month. This is the deadliest conflict for media workers ever recorded. More journalists have been killed in Gaza than in both world wars. That should be the cause of absolute outrage but it is not.

The information we receive about Palestine is unreliable and incomplete. As a result, people have been destroyed, their families wiped out and ceasefire violations are occurring. What are we doing about this? The occupied territories Bill passed Second Stage in the Seanad in January 2019. It has been left on Committee Stage for seven years. We sat and allowed this

conflict to escalate for seven years. We are meant to be doing something as a country but we have done very little. The Government is to blame for that.

We knew about Israel's treatment of the Palestinian people long before 7 October and we did nothing to intervene. Even since then we have not used our voice to condemn the role America and Europe have played in this and their actions. We recognised the State of Palestine but only after others did it. We should have been the first. We do recognise the State of Palestine. There is nothing noble about these people having been made to suffer and the horrors they have gone through over the past few years.

For years and years we have witnessed the suffering on a scale that will never be compared. We have seen children dying. We have seen families wiped out and we have done nothing about it. Israel must be held accountable for its actions and continuing violations. Passing the occupied territories Bill would send an important message that we will not stand by and allow genocide to be normalised. We must act today and every day. History will judge us on what we have done.

The Minister of State said this was a fragile moment. It is a lot more than a fragile moment as far as I am concerned. Genocide is genocide and the Irish Government is afraid to say it. Israel is complicit in genocide. It is ridiculous that we sit here and have not passed the occupied territories Bill.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Under international law, Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories are illegal. That is the basis of this. In July 2024, the International Court of Justice confirmed that and delivered an advisory opinion, which confirmed that under international law member states are under an obligation to abstain from entering into economic or trade dealings with Israel concerning the occupied Palestinian territories and to take steps to prevent trade or investment relations that assist in the maintenance of the illegal situation created by Israel in the occupied Palestinian territories.

There are about 250 illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank and this number is expanding on a daily basis. In February 2023 there were over 500,000 settlers. That figure now grown to over 700,000. In February 2024, the Israeli finance minister, Bezalel Smotrich, announced plans for 3,426 new Israeli homes to be built in the West Bank making a record of over 18,500 homes. In July 2024, Israel announced the biggest seizure of Palestinian land in three decades declaring 12.7 sq. km in the Jordan Valley to be state property. Settler violence is an ongoing threat to Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Campaigns of harassment continue daily. In 2021, the United Nations Human Rights Council reported that more than 400 incidents of violence had occurred. The Israel Defense Forces and outsourced private security companies stand by and take no action to prevent violence. Instead, they respond to settler violence by ordering Palestinians to leave the area and even actively supporting the settlers.

We know 2023 was the worst year of settler violence, even before 7 October, with 1,096 settler attacks on Palestinians. Israel Defense Forces and settlers have killed over 1,000 people in the West Bank since October 2023. The State of Israel must be held accountable for genocide and for the illegal occupation of Palestinian lands. Ireland, because of its colonial occupation, our genocidal famine and settler occupation, is uniquely placed to lead that accountability. Almost eight years after the introduction of the Bill, now supported by the Attorney General,

the Oireachtas joint committee, by promises in the general election campaign and by the introduction of similar bills in other European countries, it is time that this country introduced and passed the Bill. We are sick of waiting. The Bill should be passed now.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I thank colleagues in the Independent and Parties Technical Group for bringing this motion forward. I am pleased to speak in favour of it but I am absolutely dismayed to find myself a year after a general election, where the occupied territories Bill was a key part of the national conversation, to be still discussing the need to pass the OTB. Both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael made commitments to enact the Bill during the election campaign, which was a significant change from their previous views, and a promise to the electorate that they would not do anything to block the progression of the Bill anymore. Those changes came about in light of the opinion of the International Court of Justice, which gave the Government a much stronger legal footing to enact the Bill. There were previous legal concerns about the ability of the Bill to withstand challenges in the European courts but the ICJ opinion addressed those concerns. Indeed, it went further. The court noted that we are obliged to take steps to prevent trade or investment relations that insist in the maintenance of the illegal situation created by Israel. At the time, both the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste committed to progressing the Bill. What has happened since then? In January of this year, the Government announced it would bring forward its own occupied territories Bill-lite, abandoning Senator Frances Black’s legislation and removing the issue of services from the Bill. Neither the Taoiseach or the Tánaiste have ever been able to convincingly explain to the Irish public why they believe services need to be omitted. The Tánaiste told us he had received legal advice but, as someone who received the same legal advice from the Attorney General in the summer of last year, I can say there was absolutely no reference within it to a need to make a distinction between goods and services. It was a 23-page letter that went into great detail about the issues the Attorney General had with the Bill but, in 23 pages, there was not one reference to a need to make a distinction between goods and services.

What has happened since then? The Dáil has continued to raise pressure on this issue. In February, we debated a motion on the topic. There were statements on Gaza in May, July and October. We now have a recommendation from the foreign affairs committee to progress the Bill. Clearly and importantly, it recommends that we progress the Bill while including services. Despite this, we still have no occupied territories Bill enacted. Let this be the last time we have to bring forward a motion to discuss what the Government is doing. We have a new Minister for foreign affairs. I wish her well in her role. She has said this will be a top issue for her. There can be no question but that an occupied territories Bill that is passed without the inclusion of services is not what the Irish people want nor is it what the majority in this House wants. Most importantly, it will not meet the legal obligations of Ireland and other member states under international law, which were set out clearly by the International Court of Justice. We need to pass this Bill and it must include services.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Some 250 people have been killed in Gaza since the ceasefire. As of 11 November, there have been 282 breaches of the ceasefire. That is some ceasefire. That equates to about 10% of the number of people killed in the entire Irish War of Independence. The number of people being killed in Gaza every day is still enormous. There has been a lot of discussion about this ceasefire, this deal and so on. I certainly welcome any progress towards peace. I welcome the fact that progress is being made in that direction. I

welcome the release of hostages. Indeed, I echo the call for the release of the remains of those hostages who have died.

Previous speakers, including Ministers, have talked about it being a fragile moment. It is a fragile moment but in a different way from what I believe they meant. It is a fragile moment for the Palestinian people, their ability to have a state of their own and their right to self-determination. A lot of what is happening and a lot of what is being talked about only further highlights the needs for the occupied territories Bill and for pressure to be put on Israel and its allies to respect the rights of the Palestinian people. I refer to their right to life and to decent living conditions in the first instance, but I also refer to their right to an independent state. That is being undermined every day. Yet again, it comes back to the point that there is no accountability for Israel and no consequences for its actions. Every day, we see the Israeli state being more and more directed towards encroachment by means of the establishment of settlements, which is accelerating. Now we are even seeing Israel looking at some sort of erasure of Gaza or a reduction in its size. Statements in the Knesset suggest there may be settlements there in the future. All the while, Israel is undermining the potential future of the Palestinian state.

It is worth making the point that we have been talking about this occupied territories Bill. Deputy O'Gorman is right. I also felt there was a clear direction in terms of the occupied territories Bill but we have been talking about it for seven years at this stage. This Bill has been before these Houses for seven years. Elections happen, promises are made and then there is a change of heart. After the election, this Government seemed unable to decide whether it wanted to water down the Bill or to undertake a slow bicycle race in relation to it. Instead, it seems to have decided to do both. It is both watering it down and not progressing the legislation it has been talking about. It is unacceptable.

With regard to the situation on the ground, Médecins sans Frontières provided a briefing in the audiovisual room. A phrase used by a medical professional who had been in Gaza - I am not sure whether he was a doctor or a nurse - has stayed with me. He was not even trying to be poetic or anything like that but he said there is no colour in Gaza and that everything is grey. He was talking about the fact, which has been referred to here, that 80% of the Gaza area is rubble. There is nothing left. The ability of those people to put their lives together again requires the international community to keep the pressure on and not to look away from the situation, and that includes Ireland. We are not overstating the influence of Ireland. We are not an enormous state but we use what leverage we have. This is one of those pieces. The fact that this legislation was being debated here put the matter on the table at EU level, including in Slovenia and Spain, which are now going ahead of us.

I will come back to the legal question. I have never received a clear answer on this. I do not believe there is one. I think this is a political decision. The Government has told us that, because of the International Court of Justice decision, we can now, on the basis of a public policy exemption, institute a ban on goods. The sanctions and bans on goods and services imposed on Russia after the appalling and illegal invasion of Ukraine were undertaken on that same basis. If the public policy exemption for goods and services in the instance of Russia can be used, why is it only applicable to goods in relation to Palestine? There is no clear answer to that. It is a political decision. I inform the Minister of State and the new Minister and we will keep the pressure on because the correct political and moral decision is not to look away

but to continue to use Ireland's influence in whatever ways we can to stop what is happening in Gaza and to deliver a true and meaningful peace and a political solution.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Every town and village across this island has a Palestinian solidarity group. Some are small and others are much bigger. They are made up of thousands of people who are involved every single week in making sure we do not look away and that we do all that we can to sanction Israel and support the Palestinian people in the face of a brutal and vicious genocide. I refer to groups like Balbriggan for Palestine and Skerries for Peace and people like Dr. Sarah Taaffe, whose exhibition is running in Lusk Community Cultural Centre at the moment, and Mags O'Brien from Trade Union Friends of Palestine. She works every single day of the week and never lets us forget. She knows it is important. These groups and these people want this Government to do all it can to stop the torture of the Palestinian people. They want the Government to insist on sanctions, to lead by example and to explain why the new auto-enrolment pension scheme, which will be rolled out in January, is being managed by Tata Consultancy Services, a company that human rights organisations such as Salam for Democracy and Human Rights reported as early as 2021 provides the core digital infrastructure for Israel's settlement financing banks and is a key partner in Project Nimbus, a military cloud project. We do not want our money being spent on genocide.

Back in the 1980s, led by Mary Manning and the Dunnes Stores strikers, Ireland stood up to the vicious apartheid regime in South Africa. That was leadership. The same leadership is required today. There is nothing left in Gaza. It has been bombed into oblivion. If we cannot stand up and show leadership in this, when, in the name of Jesus, are we going to do it? The Bill is there. Pass the occupied territories Bill in full. Make Israel answer and pay for its actions. Do justice to the suffering of the Palestinian people. Do what Irish people the length and breadth of this State want. Pass the occupied territories Bill in full.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The saying goes "The axe forgets; the tree remembers". We are a colonised people. We understand the hardship, the suffering, the genocide, the starvation and the cruelty of occupying forces. Greta Thunberg said recently: "I'm not scared of Israel. I'm scared of a world that has seemingly lost all sense of humanity ...". What an unbelievable young woman that she and others have to lead the way while the world watches genocide takes place. She could have been speaking directly to the Minister of State and the Government. In a cynical move last year, like many other cynical moves they made before the election, its members committed to the occupied territories Bill. They said they would enact it. Now we have a Taoiseach who is saying it is not implementable. Shame on the Government. Its members gave their word to the people of Ireland, but even more importantly to the people of Palestine, Gaza and the West Bank, that we would lead the way in enacting the occupied territories Bill and that we would say to the world and to Israel in particular we will not stand idly by and we will do everything we can as a Government, a people and a nation to highlight the genocide that is going on.

Some 70,000 have been killed in Gaza by the Israelis. In the West Bank there have 260 settler attacks on homes, farms and people in the past month. It is the highest number ever recorded because the Israelis feel they can get away with anything. Since January, 44 children have been killed by the Israelis in the West Bank. A young lad named Mohammed got one of the blue schoolbags from UNICEF and was probably delighted. He was out playing with his friends

and he was shot. The bullet passed from hip to hip, so he had no chance. He was running to his grandmother's for safety. This Bill will not stop that, but for Mohammed and all his friends, it will send a message that we will not stand idly by and we will be the voice for the Palestinian people when the world will not be.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I extend my solidarity to the people of Palestine. We have watched in absolute horror the genocide inflicted on the people of Gaza. It is important to note that despite the ceasefire taking place, hundreds of Palestinians have been killed by this brutal Israeli military machine backed by weapons supplied by America. We have watched in growing horror the violence of Israeli settlers backed by the Israeli army, the police and the judiciary. The confiscation of homes and land is growing at a frightening pace and children are being murdered weekly trying to defend their land and their homes. That is why it is so frustrating to listen to the Minister of State's speech. I listened to the Taoiseach yesterday talk about Russia and Ukraine and if he had just switched the words to "Israel and Palestine" imagine the difference that would make to what is going on, because he talked about everything that is also happening on a massive scale in Palestine and Gaza.

There was no distinction between goods and services in the promises made by the Government prior to the election and I say that because it has changed its tune again. This is about Israel being allowed act with impunity and that impunity must end. If we do not act now against the genocidal apartheid regime in Israel, the Government's words on Ukraine will be hollow. The Government must pass the Bill without any further delay and it must include services. We need to impose sanctions on Israel because anything less is saying to the Israelis they can continue with their genocide, with destroying Gaza, with taking over as many homes and land as they want because we will sit by and watch.

Deputy Ann Graves: Israel's genocide in Gaza is happening in real time. We see it on our news feeds on our phones. It is beyond doubt. Since October 2023, 69,500 people, the majority of them children, have been murdered by Israel. A further 217 journalists and media workers, 120 academics and 224 humanitarian workers have been killed by Israel. This is the list of crimes against humanity carried out with precision by Israel, but it did not start in October 2023. This has been done with the support of Washington and Brussels. Israel must be held to account for its actions. The recent ceasefire, while welcome, has only slowed down the genocide. Israel continues to wage a war on Palestine with its restrictions on aid, man-made famine in Gaza and the ongoing murderous settler violence in the West Bank.

Here, the people have marched in their tens of thousands demanding justice and peace for Palestine. We know only too well about colonisation, division and conflict. We also understand how important international solidarity is to a people in struggle. By enacting the occupied territories Bill, the Government can send a loud and clear message of solidarity on behalf of the people. This Bill is the minimum that should be imposed on the apartheid Israeli state. It will only affect goods and services coming from the occupied territories. The effect of the occupied territories Bill will not only solely focus on Israel, but would also affect occupiers the world over. It would send an important message to the Moroccan Government that we will not stand idly by and allow it to illegally occupy Western Sahara, which is Africa's last colony. This occupation continues despite the ruling of the International Court of Justice that Morocco

has no right to occupy Western Sahara. It must immediately withdraw and allow the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic to determine its own future.

Both Italy and Slovenia are on the verge of enacting legislation similar to our occupied territories Bill. History will judge this Government, not on its words but on its actions. It must take strong and decisive action against Israel's genocide and ongoing occupation of Palestine.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Introducing the occupied territories Bill to the Dáil in January 2019, Deputy Niall Collins, who is now Minister of State with special responsibility for International Law, challenged those who would seek to dissuade the Dáil from passing the Bill and asked "If this is not the time to act, when will that time come?". According to the Government he became part of a little over a year later, it was not the time in 2022, which marked the deadliest year yet for children in the West Bank, with 34 Palestinian children dying, nor was it the time in 2023, when well in advance of 7 October, the toll had already surpassed that of 2022, with 38 Palestinian children being murdered by Israelis by late September. Following the ruling of the ICJ on the legal consequences of Israel's illegal occupation of Palestine, Ireland cosponsored the State of Palestine's first resolution before the United Nations General Assembly on its practical implications. That resolution did not distinguish between goods and services because the world court and international law do not, but that did become the brief time when Fine Gael's then Taoiseach, now the Tánaiste, in advance of the general election, pledged to support the Bill. However, very quickly after the election the commitments became less tangible again.

I welcome that the Government has chosen not to oppose this motion but it must implement legislation in full with services included. I put it to the Minister of State, Deputy Collins, that in the aftermath of the crime of our generation, namely, the mass murder of Palestinian civilians, if not now, when?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We have already taken too long with the occupied territories Bill. I, like many others, do not buy the legal arguments that are made. We have often said you can get the legal advice you want on the basis of what you pay for and I do not see this as being very much different. We have heard from many experts who say there is nothing stopping us from implementing the occupied territories Bill for goods and services now. This just needs to happen. Nearly 70,000 Palestinians have been slaughtered in Gaza. We have seen starvation used as a weapon of war. At least, in fairness to Smotrich and Ben-Gvir, they have been very clear. Unlike the spokespersons who are put across the world to tell us that black is white, they have been clear in relation to what they are, which is supremacist Zionists who want to remove the Palestinian people. Benjamin Netanyahu has also always been clear that there will never be a Palestinian state. We have a ceasefire of sorts. It is very difficult to call what is being proposed a peace plan. A peace plan that does not involve absolute justice, self-determination and freedom for the Palestinian people is a waste of time.

What are we going to do? Are we going to do what the Dunnes Stores workers did? They stood up and stood up properly against apartheid in South Africa. People would have asked then what the point was but those workers played a significant role in what became a huge movement and a huge facet in the anti-apartheid battle in South Africa. We need to see this happen here. We have seen the disgrace that the European Union has been. There is the EU-Israel Association Agreement and we have seen little moves but nothing significant in relation to allowing Israel to continue as per normal while it carries out absolute heinous crimes. We

know what is being proposed in the West Bank. We have seen the legislation introduced to try to ensure there is no possibility of ensuring a Palestinian state. All of this needs to be fought. The allies of Israel need to be fought at this point - those that provide it with support, resources and weapons. We need to keep the pressure on. We need to ensure the EU does the right thing around the EU-Israel Association Agreement, which it has failed to do. With the occupied territories Bill, we can, right here and now, do the right thing and stand by the Palestinian people and by promises that were made by this Government before the last election.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mairéad Farrell): Go raibh maith agat, a Theachta.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: However, it is about the Palestinian people; it is not about us. It is about doing the right thing.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mairéad Farrell): Bogaimid ar aghaidh go dtí Páirtí an Lucht Oibre agus an Teachta Duncan Smith.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I thank Deputies Boyd Barrett and Murphy and their colleagues for bringing this motion to the House today, which we are happy to support in a cross-party manner.

With all due respect to the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, I am absolutely disgusted, for want of a better word, that the Minister is not here on her first full day, at least even for the start of the debate. Along with Ukraine, this is the only show in town from a foreign affairs point of view. This issue is the only issue that has had pre-legislative scrutiny through the foreign affairs committee, on which I am privileged enough to sit. This committee agreed that it:

strongly recommend[ed] progressing the Bill and that the prohibition of imports from the Palestinian Occupied Territories should be extended to include trade in services, in line with the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice and the Resolution which Ireland co-sponsored at the United Nations General Assembly.

It was not just Opposition members of that committee who agreed this. Other ordinary Members of this House came in and contributed. Deputy Gibney came in and contributed a number of times in the pre-legislative scrutiny, as did members of the proposing groups. Members of Government on that committee agreed with the unanimous decision that services should be included. That was in the warm months of summer. We are now in the cold weeks of November. The previous Minister for foreign affairs, the Tánaiste, Deputy Harris, who in that seat during the Global Sumud Flotilla debate, committed to having the next Stage of the occupied territories Bill in this Chamber before the end of November. It is on the Dáil record. He said the end of November. It is 19 November now. Those on the business committee get indicative business for the rest of the month - Deputy Boyd Barrett will attest to this - and there is no sign of it. Another promise has been broken.

We are a year on from the election, when the Government went door to door and said that the Bill was a priority and would be passed. What has changed? First, the Government won the election so it does not have to live up to its promises. Second, we have seen an increase in pressure from mainly American lawmakers. We know the Taoiseach received a letter from Washington from 23 lawmakers and we have seen Lindsey Graham threaten Ireland

consistently. Why are we marching to their tune? These 24 lawmakers comprise 5% of all of Congress. To put it in perspective, it is less than the proportion of Government support in this House coming from the Lowry group. These lawmakers from America seem to have a disproportionate impact on this issue, compared with that group. We interrogated the threats to the Irish economy through the pre-legislative scrutiny. We asked IBEC if anyone had come to it to say they were going to pull out of Ireland or were not going to increase jobs in Ireland. It could not answer. We did not just take IBEC's word for it. We had the American Chamber of Commerce in before the committee not two weeks ago. We asked the same question. We asked if any company had come to the American Chamber of Commerce and said it was going to pull out of Ireland. The answer was "No". We asked if any company had said it would not grow in Ireland. The answer was "No". All it could refer to was this mythical, vague "reputational damage".

Ireland's reputation is being increased and improved by the fact that we in opposition, starting with Senator Frances Black all those years ago, are pushing this Bill. The Government, for a moment, had a chance to continue to push that reputation and improve it. It is sacrificing that now on foot of fear and pressure from the United States. It is absolutely disgraceful. The Government says it is a Government of delivery. It should prove it. It should deliver this Bill. The Bill has already gone through pre-legislative scrutiny. We have done that work months ago. We have done our part; we are asking the Government to follow through. We believe this Bill will not be in before Christmas. If that happens, it will be 100% down to the Government. If the new Minister for foreign affairs is starting as she means to go on by not turning up to this debate and by not showing this one issue the respect, interest and import it deserves, it says everything about the Government and how it feels about the Palestinian people and the people of Gaza.

Deputy George Lawlor: This is a moral test for us. In many respects, it echoes our own history. The occupied territories Bill has sat idle for about eight years now and in that time the situation in Palestine has spiralled into catastrophe. Over 67,000 lives have been lost in Gaza in recent years, with hundreds of thousands of illegal settlers entrenched in the West Bank. It is not a distant tragedy or anything like it. It is genocide unfolding before our eyes on a day-to-day basis. We know all about the fight against colonialism, yet as a parliament and as a nation, we hesitate. How much longer will we stand by and hesitate?

The occupied territories Bill is clear. It bans trade with illegal settlements. Goods and services produced on stolen lands should never enter Irish markets because that type of trade sustains the injustice that is happening daily in Palestine. Every euro spent on settlements goods helps to entrench an occupation that has been condemned by the International Court of Justice. The ICJ ruling in July 2024 was unequivocal. It stated that an end must be brought to all economic dealings that maintain this unlawful situation. Do we respect international law or do we ignore it when it is inconvenient? We have walked this road before. In the 1980s, we were the first western country, as has already been stated, to ban imports from apartheid South Africa. We did it because we believed no Irish hand should profit from oppression. That decision inspired others and helped to dismantle a system of racial tyranny. Today, we face that same question. Will we act now as we did then or will we betray our own history of courage? Apartheid in South Africa was propped up by trade and investment. So, too, is the occupation of Palestine. When Ireland cut ties with apartheid goods, we sent a message that

resonated across the globe: injustice will not be rewarded. Why should this be any different? Why should Ireland shirk away from the very principles that once made us very proud to be Irish?

Our solidarity with Palestine is not an abstract thing; it is rooted in our shared experience. We know what it means to live under foreign rule and to see land confiscated, culture suppressed and communities shattered. From the centuries of British domination to the Famine that killed over 1 million of our people, oppression is etched in our national memory. We remember the Black and Tans terrorising our towns and we know that the same forces later exported their brutality to Palestine under the British mandate. The same empire that partitioned our island also partitioned theirs. How can we, of all people, of all nations, turn away from a people enduring what we once endured? Arthur Balfour, who signed the infamous declaration that paved the way for Palestinian dispossession, was the same man, as Chief Secretary for Ireland, who crushed Irish nationalism. Our histories are intertwined. When we look at Gaza and the West Bank, we see echoes of our own struggle for freedom. If we do not act, who will? When Nelson Mandela visited Ireland after his release, he praised the courage of ordinary Irish workers who stood against apartheid during the Dunnes Stores strike. He said their actions demonstrated to South Africans that ordinary people far away from the crucible of apartheid cared about their freedom. He said the solidarity of Irish workers helped him to endure prison. Ireland's stand mattered then and it matters now. Will we honour that legacy or let it fade into history?

Some say this Bill is symbolic. Yes, it is symbolic but symbols matter. They ignite change. Do we want to be leaders or do we want to be laggards? The public has spoken, with 74% of Irish people supporting the Bill. Civil society, churches, trade unions and human rights groups have called for its enactment. Demonstrations outside this building almost daily demand action. Yet, the Government delays, waters down and hides behind legal smokescreens, even after EU law experts confirmed Ireland can pass the Bill without breaching EU rules. To whom are we listening? Are we listening to the Irish people or to foreign lobbyists?

History is watching us. Future generations will ask what Ireland did when genocide unfolded in Gaza and illegal settlements spread across the West Bank. Did we speak or did we act? We absolutely should pass the occupied territories Bill in full, with application to goods and services, before Christmas. There must be no more delays or excuses. Ireland must lead as it did previously and show the world that our principles are not for sale. Let us be the nation that stands for justice. Let us be the people who say Ireland will not profit from occupation, we will not be complicit in apartheid and we will act now.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank People Before Profit for bringing forward this motion. We in the Social Democrats are very proud to co-sign it. I thank the many parliamentarians since 2018 who have worked on this legislation, particularly Senator Black. I also thank the people in the Gallery - the activists who continue, on a daily basis across this country, to campaign in solidarity with the people of Palestine. The weekly vigil in Monkstown at 6 p.m. on a Sunday is a thing of beauty and has been running for almost two years. The Rathdown for Palestine group waves flags at passing traffic at 5 p.m. every Thursday. There is huge momentum and a huge sense of solidarity in this country. Yet, the Government chooses to ignore that and to continue on its path of inaction.

I will reiterate the simple and succinct asks set out in the motion. They are to pass the occupied territories Bill, include services and do it all by the end of this year. On 19 November 2025, nearly a year into my role as a TD, I cannot believe I must articulate the need to fulfil those commitments. Both Government parties were clear on their absolute and unwavering commitment to act and their recognition of the sentiment of our people that this must be done. Yet, the Government has continued to prevaricate, to step into circular arguments about the Bill being symbolic and that it will make no difference and to point to people over there doing things one way and say we cannot do anything different. It is a simple enforcement of international law to pass the occupied territories Bill and prevent the State from trading with a state that is occupying another. These are the simple facts and I am trying to use simple language to move us away from the circular arguments and verbal dances the Government has created.

Its two main arguments do not stack up. The Government says the Bill is impossible to implement or it is unsure how to implement it. In fact, we did the same thing more than ten years ago with Russia. We imposed the exact same types of sanctions, on both goods and services, on another state. We can do the same again. Indeed, it is even easier now because the EU-Israel Association Agreement means we must, by law, differentiate between goods and services from Israel and goods and services from the occupied territories. The Government's other argument is that there is a legal impediment. We have heard that argument shattered again and again today. We have already seen the legal advice that supports the inclusion of services. The Government has simply chosen to recreate legal opinions to support its political decision not to include services.

The Government's lack of action is a betrayal of the trust the Irish people placed in it. We are a people who have a clear solidarity with the Palestinian cause that goes back decades and is unique across Europe and the globe. It gave us the opportunity to be the first to impose these sanctions and the first to take a case against Israel. Yet, we have wasted every opportunity to act on the mandate given to us by the Irish people. The Government's lack of action is a threat to global order. War crimes going unpunished will dismantle the decades of work people around the globe have done to maintain peace in our world. It threatens multilateralism and the rule of law. We need only look to the comparison with Russia to see this is the case.

Above all, the lack of action is failing the people of Palestine who have endured the most horrific genocide and who continue to endure in the occupied territories brutal settlement practices by the Israeli Government. I add my condemnation of the Minister, on her first day in office, for failing to be here for this debate on what she says is her biggest priority.

Deputy Jen Cummins: For years, we have watched mothers on our television screens as they scream, cry and mourn the death of their children. We have seen children and babies covered in blood and dust as they suffer in hospitals with no medical equipment. We have seen tiny bodies covered in white cloths waiting to be buried, their family members rocking them back and forth to ease the absolute horror of holding their dead baby or child. As a mother of four, I cannot imagine holding any of my children dead in my arms. It is every single mother's worst nightmare to have a child die but it is absolutely unimaginable and incomprehensible to hold the body of a child murdered by gunshot or bombs.

On the last occasion they were in to brief to us, the doctors from Médecins Sans Frontières told us there is no colour in Gaza. It is just grey. They said people, including children, are dying as they wait in the queues to see them. These doctors are working with no medicine, no pain relief and no possibility of saving people.

Since I was elected almost a year ago, I have received thousands of emails from people begging me to do something. I am sure every Member on the Government side receives the same emails. It is absolutely galling that there is no Government Member other than the Minister of State in the Chamber for this debate. The power lies with the Government to pass the occupied territories Bill. The parties of government made promises in the elections last year but they have done nothing. Are they waiting for more children to be murdered and the genocide to continue? Every minute the Government waits is an absolute shame on every single Member on that side of the House.

Deputy Rory Hearne: One of the most frustrating aspects of this is that the Irish people have shown leadership where the Government has failed. No other country has seen the level of protests, mobilisation and community action there has been in every one of our cities, towns and villages. We have seen Irish people take action on a daily basis in support of and in solidarity with Palestine. The Irish people gave the Government a mandate no other government in the world has been given, which was to take the strongest possible action to sanction Israel. The Government has squandered that mandate and refused to listen to the Irish people on our unique position as a former colonised country and one that has gone through famine.

The Irish people feel the pain of Gaza in a way unlike any other country because of what we have gone through in our history. That has given the Government a unique political mandate to stand out from all other countries and say we will take action against Israel because the people of Ireland understand occupation, famine and mass genocide and we cannot stand by and let this happen in our name. It is absolutely pathetic that Government members stand up in the Dáil and say the Opposition never congratulates them on doing more than any other country. They speak words but where is the action? The Government could be sanctioning Israel and implementing the occupied territories Bill. It should use the mandate the people have given it. It knows that the Occupied Territories Bill has overwhelming support in this country and it should implement it in full anois, now. Saoirse don Phalaistín.

Deputy Liam Quaide: I commend People Before Profit on its motion. The obstruction of the Occupied Territories Bill for the past six years since it was passed by a majority of TDs has shown up the utter hypocrisy of the Government when it speaks of the rule of international law, of the sanctity of human rights and of the importance of protecting our democracy from interference by nefarious regimes such as Russia. There was a cynical show of support for the Bill to win votes in advance of the general election last year followed by the rubbishing of the Bill by the Taoiseach, who said immediately afterwards that "virtually every section" of the Bill would need to be amended. This is a Bill his own party introduced to the Dáil in 2019 on behalf of Senator Black. The sound legal basis of this Bill has been established by a range of Irish and international experts, among them the former justice Minister and Attorney General, Senator Michael McDowell, who is not known for being on the radical left. The foreign affairs committee recommended the inclusion in the Bill of goods and services. How can you continue

to argue against it, and to delay and dilute it, as Palestinians in the West Bank are subjected to unprecedented cycles of abuse and harassment from extremist settlers? Property in the West Bank is routinely ransacked, demolished or taken over; families are terrorised off their land; farm animals are mutilated; and olive plantations are razed to the ground. All of this after Gaza has been destroyed with psychopathic relish by the Israeli army. To continue appeasing these thugs and terrorists is morally bankrupt. I do not know Senator Black has maintained such a level of diplomatic calm and civility with this Government and the previous two Governments over all these years of deceit and deflection. It is a disgrace how you have treated her as the lead campaigner on this Bill; how you have taken such a haughty, moral-high-ground position of Ireland having done more for the Palestinians than any other country; and how you have allowed our democratic process to be interfered with by a rogue state for the past six years. The Government needs to pass the legislation, include goods and services, and stop the deceit.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Cuirim fáilte roimh an rún seo inniu. Gabhaim buíochas leis an nGrúpa Teicniúil um Neamhspleáigh agus Páirtithe as an rún seo a chur os comhair na Dála.

The disaster unfolding in Gaza and Palestine is absolutely horrific. It is a significant stain on the international community that it has been allowed to proceed in the manner it has. The images we have seen over the past number of years of an enormously powerful, well-armed Israel Defense Forces absolutely crushing a very poor, unarmed state right beside it are incredible. The injustice of the disparity between the two states is shocking. It has been allowed to proceed. It has been underwritten by the West and by the United States of America. Many countries like Ireland have spoken but in general, for practical purposes, have sat on the sidelines. I believe they have played a role in underwriting it as well.

It is a human disaster. I recall when I was young, there were three intractable conflicts - Palestine, the North of Ireland and South Africa. It is incredible that both here in Ireland and in South Africa we have moved past those conflicts, yet Palestine is still locked into an intractable conflict 20 or 30 years later. It frustrates me because Ireland has a proud history in terms of democracy, anti-colonialism, pushing back against nuclear proliferation and pushing for self-determination across the world. In relation to this, we have been laggards in fulfilling our responsibilities. Many Irish people see themselves in the eyes of Palestinian people because our histories are so similar. During the plantation of Ulster, Irish people lost their property and homelands to people coming from Scotland and England at the time. That sowed the seeds for 400 years of conflict. One of the most damaging things to do is to occupy a location, take territory off a location, steal homesteads, property and farms off people, remove them from those locations and simply occupy that area because that grievance does not disappear. It exists for generations beyond that. In terms of Israel's own defence and security, it is sowing the seeds of future damage to its country in the occupation of the West Bank. The use of famine in recent times as a tool of war again strikes a chord with so many Irish people. We suffered shockingly. I think Ireland is the only country in the whole world whose population is still lower today than it was in the 1840s. It is so hard to see.

A big frustration of mine is that the Government is speaking from both sides of its mouth on this issue. One of the easiest ways for a government to say no is to say yes and do nothing. That is exactly what the strategy is here. I have seen so many campaign groups come to the gates of Leinster House and TDs file out, get their photographs taken, put their arms around them, have a smile with them and then come back in here and do nothing. There is a disaster

in that because the Government is not telling the truth about its purpose and motivation in relation to this. It is incredible that this passed Second Stage in 2018 - nearly eight years ago - and it has languished on Committee Stage since then. I do not believe the Government has the desire to see this through. As a result, I do not believe Ireland is using its potential position as a catalyst internationally to create the momentum that is necessary economically to check the actions of the Israeli state. That is a major loss and a major mistake. It is a dereliction of duty. There is a responsibility that comes with that. By not acting in those terms, we become responsible for the consequences. Those consequences are dire; they are shocking. They include the atomisation of young children by bombs in tents in places like Gaza and the stealing of land from families in the West Bank. The Government needs to get its act together and implement this legislation ASAP.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: If you did a search of the contributions I have made in this Chamber since my re-election in November of last year, you would find that Gaza, the West Bank and Palestine in general will come up top. That is a sadness for me. The relentless genocide in Gaza is continuing, as is the ongoing occupation of the West Bank, including settlers murdering innocent people in the past week. It is ongoing. It is a systematic tearing apart of the West Bank. I mentioned in previous contributions that the Israeli state - either directly, or by letting the settlers get on with it - is dividing the West Bank in such a way as to make it totally unviable as a territory. It is a deliberate policy, just like the systematic starvation and indiscriminate murder of Palestinian women, children and male civilians was also part of a policy.

This is something Ireland gets a lot of criticism for. An Israeli constituent of mine contacted me recently. They are a little bit behind the curve but they saw one of my speeches and said they would never vote for me again because I described what Israel is doing in Gaza as genocide. Well, I am sorry but the facts are the facts. To give credit to the Government, it has participated in the South Africa ICJ case along with Belgium and Spain. Some European countries have shown leadership. Ireland is to be commended on that. I hope the final judgment in legal terms will be in our favour to put additional pressure on the Israeli state. Any objective analyst has described what is happening in Gaza as genocide. We have a body of work to do to assist. I am not talking about financial contributions because that could actually do them more harm than good. There are a lot of decent, peace-minded people living in Israel who need our support. Most of all, they need access to unbiased information about what is happening because they are not getting it in their own country. It comes back to Israelis living in this country who think we are an antisemitic country. We do not have a proud history. We had a very mealy-mouthed attitude to dealing with Jewish refugees after the Second World War. That is to our shame. As a member of the EU, we have a huge impact on other member states. I referred before to a meeting with the Danish ambassador. Because Denmark did a lot of work rescuing Danish Jews during the Second World War, they have a certain relationship with Israel which they do not want to damage. I said that friends have to tell the truth to their friends. The same thing happens with the US. My question for the Minister and Cabinet colleagues is why it is now taking so long when earlier indications were that there were a few tweaks to go into Senator Black's Bill. Senator Black herself was reasonably optimistic and was taking on board some of the arguments and points that were being made, and wanted to move on.

When I raised this after the summer recess, my impression from previous Government statements was that a lot of work would have been done over the summer and that we were ready to have the legislation passed through the Houses before Christmas. We are nowhere near that stage. Has the United States Government, in any way, shape or form, verbally or in writing, put pressure on the Irish Government not to proceed with this Bill? If any such threats have been made, they need to be put into the public domain. The reason the Irish people are so pro-Palestine is that we have empathy and compassion for a people who have been oppressed, because of our own history of oppression. Work has been done and I will give the Minister of State credit for that but we have a moral imperative to bring this legislation as far as it will go. If the Minister says it is unworkable, let us test it to see if that is the case. Otherwise, we are just hiding in plain sight. We have to do better than this. We have to bring this legislation through all the Houses of the Oireachtas and show some moral courage and leadership.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I would like to join with Deputy Gogarty's point about the emails we get. We all get thousands of emails about what we need to do, but we also get the negative ones from the other side. After I came back from my humanitarian mission, I can sympathise with the Deputy about how there is a strong lobby against this. We have to really focus on this. The decision should be straightforward. When I was sitting over there, I was supporting the Government. I still am. I was told that if we amended it, it would be done within six months. It has now been 11 months. The only time I have ever voted against this Government was for Palestine and I will continue to do that. I am committed to the programme for Government. I am not shouting at the Minister of State, Deputy Moran. He was in negotiations with me and knew I was fighting for Palestine in there. We have a commitment for this. Before the election, the Government parties had a commitment to this. We have the strongest mandate possible. Look at what the Spanish are doing. They have done it. Look at what South Africa is doing. I do commend the Government on joining the ICJ case but I am disappointed with the delays, the excuses and, as everyone has said, the verbal dances. I met Senator Frances Black and she has shown so much patience, dignity and resolve. The rest of us should learn from her. She carried this legislation further and for longer than she should have had to. Patience cannot be extended any longer. Again, I urge the Government not to oppose this motion but to immediately enact it.

The Geneva Convention did not fall out of the sky. "Never again" means for everyone. I have been on the phone to Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank who I am now friends with. There is a young Palestinian living in Marino in my constituency, Amir. His family are in Gaza. His house has been blown up. His mother and father were doctors. All of their life savings are gone. They have nothing to go back to. How can I knock on his door again and not tell him that I did everything I could possibly do for him? That is the only reason I will not ever do it again. The international community has suggested that we did not know, that we were not sure, that we needed more time. It has been too long for that. Hundreds of thousands are dead. We do know. It is on our screens. How many reports have there been from the UN? Every country is now recognising the Palestinian state. What good is recognising a state that is on its knees, completely crumbled? I recognise what Deputy Gogarty said; we do know occupation. When our ancestors with grass-stained faces were on the side of the ditch during the occupation of country, would we not have liked another country to stand with us? We did have the Choctaw Nation. We did have the Ottoman Empire deliver three ships of grain, despite the UK insisting

that they send only one ship. What country was in the Ottoman Empire at the time? Palestine. They were under occupation at that time but we will not talk about that.

The Irish people outside this Chamber sometimes know about moral clarity. Over the past year, I have seen thousands of young people on the streets. Many of them are just so frustrated. When I am going to these doors, this is one of the main issues people still see. We need to do it immediately. These people out protesting are not extremists. They are not disrupters. They are the conscience of this country. I saw it in my own constituency two weeks ago with the Hope Palestine action, great northsiders who cycled and raised money for Doctors Without Borders. They understood that humanitarian organisations are often the last lifeline when politics fails.

I stood on the flotilla. When we were illegally abducted by the IOF, when I had a gun pointed at my head and was called an Irish terrorist, when we were mocked, I was told that Ireland is the most antisemitic country in the world. We are not antisemitic. We had Israelis on the flotilla with us who are against the current government. I have spoken to Israelis who are against what the current government is doing. When we are called antisemitic, we need to be clear and say we are not antisemitic. We are anti-Zionist and against what the current Israeli state is doing. When a TD and a Senator are illegally abducted, mocked and brutalised against every international law - look at where we were abducted - does Israel not have to abide by international law? It clearly has not. All the activists who went on those flotillas did not do it to be on the selfie yacht, as Israel portrayed. They did it to bring aid and open a humanitarian corridor to a population that is facing genocide and famine. Doctors Without Borders was in here last week talking about the struggles it is having getting the aid in. This is not directed at the Minister of State. I have spoken to him and know he is on the same side on this.

Ireland has always claimed to stand with the oppressed, from the anti-apartheid struggle, which I heard Deputies mention, to the Good Friday Agreement. We have never been neutral on injustice and we must not be neutral now. We have such great political power as a nation. As a small population, we are respected worldwide, which is why the enactment of this Bill will hopefully trigger more countries to act, like Spain has already done and as Belgium, Norway and other countries are now considering in their parliaments. Passing the occupied territories Bill does not make us radical. It makes us consistent and credible. It makes us Irish. We have done this before with South Africa. We triggered a bulldozer effect that led to peace and a solution. As Deputy Gogarty says, we know famine, occupation and hunger strikes. I bring attention also to the prisoners across England engaged in a rolling hunger strike for Palestine, refusing food to protest the repression of the Palestine Action group and the denial of the basic legal rights they are facing. Some are already in serious medical distress, with healthcare withheld and punitive measures imposed, yet they continue their strike in solidarity with the Palestinian people. They are joined by prisoners internationally, from Italy to the United States, showing that this struggle crosses borders. Their courage and refusal to be silenced, and their willingness to put their own bodies on the line, demand our attention and our action. I ask the Government today to honour the commitment it made to the Irish people, to honour the commitments it made to me during the Government formation and to honour the people who voted on those commitments. I always say that in politics you give a contract to your constituency on what you are planning to do. If you do not break that contract with your constituency, it will not break its contract with you. However, we are breaking that contract. We said we would enact the occupied territories Bill. Eleven months on and it has been kicked

down the road. I ask the Government to honour its commitments and to honour international law - legal obligations we proudly say we defend - because history will not remember the delays but it will remember how and whether we acted. Right now, we are not acting.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): It is clear the strength of opinion held across the House on the situation in Gaza and, indeed, in the West Bank and on the importance attached to this draft legislation. The programme for Government commitments to prohibiting the imports of goods from illegal settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory. The general scheme before the House delivers on this commitment. Trade and services are considerably more complex than is the case with goods. There remains considerable legal uncertainty as whether the inclusion of services is permissible under EU law. We also have to take account of practical issues with regard to implementation where services are to be included in the scope of this Bill. By their very nature, services are varied, intangible and do not lend themselves to ready identification in the same way that goods do.

The Government fully understands the depth of feeling on the subject of Palestine and is making every effort to contribute to work at EU and international levels to bring the current conflict to the end while continuing to work on a long-term solution.

The Government also understands the urge to do more, to force the dial and bring an end to the horrific suffering for Palestinians and Israelis alike. I wish to take the opportunity today to take stock of the contribution Ireland has made to date. The Government has not been a bystander in the face of tragic events. We have at all times sought to take action, both to address immediate needs and to make a longer-term contribution to peace and stability in the Middle East. Ireland's principal stance, backed up by concrete actions, has been widely acknowledging, including by partners in the region.

As Deputies will remember, Ireland recognised the State of Palestine long before the UN high-level conference on the two-state solution, which took place earlier this year. This was a step we took alongside Norway and Spain in May 2024. At the EU level, Ireland has been to the forefront in calling for appropriate European action in response to Israel's breaches of international law, often advocating for policies at an early stage that have later garnered widespread support. Ireland led the way on the proposal to review Israel's compliance to article 2 of the association agreement, first proposing this step alongside Spain in February 2024. The European External Action Service's subsequent review found that Israel is in breach of its human obligations. This is no surprise to anybody in this Chamber.

In September 2025, the European Commission announced a package of proposals in light of this review, including a proposal to suspend the core trade related provisions of the EU-Israel association agreement. Ireland has consistently called for the EU to take concrete action in response to egregious Israeli breaches of human rights and democratic principles. We have made clear our view that the EU must keep these proposals on the table regardless.

Ireland strongly supported successive rounds of EU sanctions against violent Israeli settlers under its global human rights sanctions agreement adopted in April and July 2024. We support further recent proposals from the European Commission to sanction extremist Israeli ministers and violent settlers as well as Hamas.

Ireland along with nine other EU member states also wrote to the High Representative and Vice President calling for the EU to undertake a detailed review of its compliance with the July 2024 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice, ICJ. We are taking extensive actions at the international level in response to the situation in Gaza and the West Bank and in support of the people of Palestine. Through our work as a co-chair of a working group alongside Türkiye, we are one of a small number of EU member states that played a central role at the high-level UN conference on implementing the two-state solution held in New York last July. The outcome document of the conference - the New York declaration - was endorsed by 142 countries in a vote at the UN General Assembly. The Taoiseach attended a reconvened session of the conference during the UN high-level week in September where he called for a political path to end the cycle of violence.

We also welcomed that a number of states took steps towards the recognition of the State of Palestine in the lead up to and during the UN high-level week last September. The working connection with the UN high-level conference and its output is an expression of relationships that we have developed, including with partners in the region in relation to the shared goals in support of the two-state solution. Ireland has been an active participant in the seven meetings of the global alliance for the implementation of the two-state solution that have taken place since its establishment at UN high-level week last year. We will be hosting a meeting of the global alliance in Ireland in January 2026.

Ireland is also pursuing action through the international courts to address breaches of international law and international humanitarian law in Gaza and the West Bank. On 22 October 2025, the International Court of Justice delivered an advisory opinion on the obligations of Israel in relation to the United Nations and other international organisations as well as third states in the occupied Palestinian territory. We have welcomed the advisory opinion which authoritatively affirms Israel's obligation under international law in relation to the presence and activities of the UN, other international organisations and third states in and regarding the occupied Palestinian territory.

In January, Ireland filed a declaration of intervention at the International Court of Justice in South Africa's case against Israel under the Genocide Convention. In February, Ireland filed a detailed written submission with the ICJ on advisory proceedings concerning the obligations of Israel in relation to the United Nations and other international organisations as well as third states in the occupied Palestinian territory. On 19 July 2024, the ICJ delivered an advisory opinion on the legal consequences arising from the policies and practices of Israel in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem. Ireland filed a detailed written submission to the court and the Attorney General on behalf of the governments that participated in our hearings. Ireland subsequently cosponsored a resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly on 18 September 2024, which seeks to implement the court's advisory opinion.

On consular assistance, the Department of foreign affairs has supported approximately 300 people to leave Gaza and travel to Ireland. This includes Irish citizens and their immediate dependants, scholarship students and individuals of critical skills who have employment in Ireland. The Department has conducted eight complex evacuation operations from Gaza over the past six months after borders reopened in April. In 2024, the Government approved the evacuation of up to 30 sick children from Gaza to Ireland for treatment and care. A total of 21 patients have already been medically evacuated to Ireland, along with 52 accompanying family

members. The Department of Health and the HSE continues to engage with the World Health Organization, WHO, and the EU to provide further missions.

Our financial and humanitarian response to the situation in Gaza has also been significant. Ireland has provided over €101 million in support to the people of Palestine since January 2023. More than €89 million has been provided since October 2023. This includes €20 million in core support to the UN Relief and Works Agency, UNRWA, this year which brings our support to €58 million since 2023. That additional €6 million brought Ireland's support to the people of Palestine to over €35 million this year. This €6 million will be allocated to Ireland's UN partners, including €2 million to UNICEF, €2 million to United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, OCHA, €1 million to the World Food Programme and €1 million to WHO. Ireland has provided 177 tonnes of supplies, including tents, blankets, water, cans and other vital household items to Gaza under Ireland's rapid response initiative.

In September, Ireland joined the emergency coalition for the financial stability of the Palestinian Authority. The coalition was established in response to the urgent and unprecedented financial crisis confronting the Palestinian Authority. The officials in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in headquarters and throughout the mission network, particularly in the region, continue to work tirelessly to represent Ireland's strong position on the conflict based on the fundamental principles of international law. Ireland's position - the fundamental belief that all states must adhere to international law - has never faltered. What we can do and do can make a difference. Ireland's engagement on the issue has not waned and will not. We will continue our work to promote peace and a path towards a negotiated two-state solution with Israel and Palestine living side by side in real peace and security.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this. It is long past time we passed the occupied territories Bill. We have a moral and legal duty to do so. There can be no half measures. Even if we are being bullied or leaned on by the richest people in the USA, we still have to go ahead and do so. We passed sanctions against Russia, quite correctly, and we need to stop the pussyfooting on the occupied territories Bill - no half measures. There have been no half measures from the terrorist state of Israel in the past two years: hospitals, places of prayer and tents housing refugees who are fleeing; women, children and men slaughtered; ambulance crews bombed; and aerial bombardment on a scale I have never seen before. The State of Israel has used Palestinian boys and girls as target practice for its soldiers. Throughout all the genocide and terror of the past two years, it has continued the campaign of murder and intimidation of people in the West Bank. That continues.

That is why this Bill is so important. We all know what the game plan of Israel is. It is to make sure that there cannot be a two-state solution, break up the West Bank in so many small pieces, make all the farms and businesses unviable and intimidate Palestinian communities out of their homes so as Israel can fully occupy their lands. Israel has bulldozed crops, farmsteads, businesses and homes right throughout the past two years while its campaign of slaughter in Gaza has continued, bullying families off their own land and replacing them with Yankees from Dixieland and North Carolina simply on the basis that they are Jewish. I do not care about anybody's religion. I do not care what religion anybody is. That has nothing to do with it. This is about right and wrong. This has been wrong from the beginning and we have to stand up for what is right. Israel's plan is to make the two-state solution unviable, and that is why we must stand firm on this.

The EU's response - and I know the Minister of State has a special responsibility here - has been absolutely disgraceful. The EU-Israel trade agreement should have been halted a long time ago. We are not powerless here to take action. We may be a small enough State. We took the decision to recognise the State of Palestine in this Chamber about a decade ago, and since then several other states have done so. We set an example 40 years ago. In fact, the women in Dunnes Stores here in Dublin set the example when they refused to handle South African fruit. That set in train a worldwide boycott of South African goods that brought to its knees the apartheid regime in South Africa, a regime that a lot of people thought could not be brought down.

We must stop pussyfooting. We are a neutral State. Given the scale of suffering of the Palestinian people and the slaughter and genocide carried out by the terrorist state of Israel, we must act. We have an absolute moral and legal responsibility to do that. I remind the Minister of State of the election promises made by the Government parties. We are a neutral state. International law is very clear. We have a responsibility to act. We cannot have any more excuses. It has gone long past time. I appeal to the Minister of State and the Government to do the right thing. It is disappointing to see all the Government benches empty. The Minister of State is here, he has a role in terms of his Government brief on this and he takes an interest in it but this is shocking. This is really important legislation. We have been dancing around it all year. We have a few weeks left in this Chamber between now and Christmas. Let us do the right thing and pass this Bill.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I thank my colleagues in Sinn Féin, the Social Democrats and the Labour Party and Independent colleagues who have supported and co-sponsored this motion. I thank Senator Frances Black for her ongoing efforts since she instigated this Bill in 2018. Most importantly, I thank the hundreds of thousands of people in this country who have mobilised again and again in unprecedented protests in every city, town, village and hamlet of the country against the genocidal horror that Israel has been inflicting on the Palestinian people over the past two years. All those people can see the political and moral bankruptcy of this Government when it comes to the issue of Palestine. The speech that was given really is shameful. This starts with the failure of the new Minister to come in here. People who are not familiar with how this place works need to understand that the Minister's absence is a studied exercise in contempt designed to make sure that this debate does not get any media coverage. That is why the Government has done that. It did not want this to get attention, even though it was clear it was the issue on which the Minister was under pressure. She spoke about it yesterday night on television and said she would talk to her Government colleagues about it today but she did not bother to come into the Dáil, the democratically elected Chamber of these Houses, where it is being discussed, to discuss it. It is a studied exercise in contempt and it speaks volumes about the Government's strategy on this issue for years, speaking out of both sides of its mouth on the issue of Palestine, mouthing solidarity but doing absolutely nothing - not a single sanction against the State of Israel.

I have been campaigning for and advocating sanctions on Israel since 1987, when I was in Palestine, because I was so shocked by the regime that exists there and the endemic racism and apartheid against the Palestinian people. There have been people campaigning in this country all those years, more than 30 years, demanding the end of the State of Israel's impunity for the ongoing crimes it has been committing since 1948. In fact, the Zionist movement has been

committing crimes against Palestinians since before 1948 and has been explicit about it. Zionism is clear: Zionists intend to ethnically cleanse Palestine. Zionism is genocidal in its very nature and character. There have been decades of ethnic cleansing and apartheid, the siege of Gaza and then the genocide of the past two years, with still not a single sanction from this Government.

The bankruptcy of the EU is equally on display. Last night the Minister and the Taoiseach came in here and said it was absolutely essential to impose sanctions and they imposed 19 different rounds of sanctions. That was done almost instantaneously. The double standards are absolutely clear. It is only really because of the heroic resistance of the Palestinian people that we have what is not even a ceasefire. Israel killed 13 people in Lebanon last night and has killed about 260 people since the so-called ceasefire, which was forced on Israel and Donald Trump. That is what happened. Trump even admitted it when he said he rang up Netanyahu and told him they could not take on the world. That is what he said. They were forced into the ceasefire. The Minister of State's speech thanks the United States for their efforts in bringing about a ceasefire. Is he joking? Israel could not continue the ethnic cleansing of Palestine, the illegal settlements and the genocidal horror it has inflicted on Gaza were it not for that "complicity", although that is too weak a word. Israel is simply acting as an outpost of US foreign policy, something Biden admitted when he said, "Were there not an Israel, the United States of America would have to invent an Israel". They would have to station US troops in the Middle East because this is all about American colonial and imperial control of that region, collaborating with brutal dictatorships and then with the State of Israel as their military watchdog to slap down any attempt by the people of that region to assert their right to self-determination. That is what it is about. It is absolutely shocking that the Government has failed to do anything about it but that is the truth. The Government is dancing to the tune of Trump and so on but showing utter contempt for the people of this country, for democracy and for the solemn promises the Government made. It was forced to make them in the run-up to the election because it knew what the people of this country wanted and demanded. The Government said it before the general election and then rolled back on it and did absolutely nothing because it is dancing to the tune of Trump and the US Administration. It is shameful. End this shameful failure to act and finally act against this regime for its criminal brutality, oppression and genocidal actions against the Palestinian people and pass this Bill. The Government should be doing a hell of a lot more. We should be completely boycotting the State of Israel. Can the Government at least do what it said what it would do?

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Question put and agreed to.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: That is a joke. They have no intention of doing anything.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: That is the will of the Dáil.

Visit of Chinese Delegation

An Ceann Comhairle: I welcome the delegation in the Distinguished Visitors Gallery to the House, including the speaker of the People's Republic of China. I ask my colleagues to extend

a warm welcome - a céad míle fáilte - to our guests from the National People's Congress who are here on a benchmarking visit to the Houses of the Oireachtas. The delegation is accompanied by the Ambassador of China to Ireland, H. E. Mr. Zhao Xiyuan.

Members applauded.

An Ceann Comhairle: I welcome all our visitors in the Public Gallery.

Appointment of Ministers and Ministers of State

The Taoiseach: I wish to announce for the information of the Dáil that having informed the President that Dáil Éireann had approved my nomination of Deputy Hildegarde Naughton to be a member of the Government, the President on 18 November 2025 appointed her accordingly. On the same day, I assigned the Department of Finance to the Tánaiste, Deputy Simon Harris, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Department of Defence to Deputy Helen McEntee, and the Department of Education and Youth to Deputy Hildegarde Naughton. On the same day, on my nomination, the Government appointed Deputy Emer Higgins to be Minister of State at the Department of Children, Equality and Disability with special responsibility for disability, and Deputy Frank Feighan to be Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation with special responsibility for public procurement, digitalisation and eGovernment. The Minister of State, Deputy Emer Higgins, will attend Government meetings.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Met Éireann issued a cold weather warning this morning. Temperatures are set to plunge to -3° with frost, ice and dangerous conditions expected over the coming days. People are anxious. People are preparing. People are scared because they simply cannot afford another winter like the last one.

One communication to my office this morning was from a person who wrote:

We got our autumn gas bill. It was €275. The heating had barely been on. We paid just under €20 in VAT, €20 in carbon tax and a standing charge of around the same, all totaling €59.80. The next gas bill will be double that as the weather has changed. This is nearly impossible for us. It looks like we will freeze again this year. It is just survival now.

When people are describing their lives as "survival", something is deeply wrong. However, this is the reality so many are living in and this is the Ireland of 2025. Yet, the Government has scrapped the energy credits just as people's bills are rising again. It leaves families to face the cold entirely on their own at the harshest time of the year. Yesterday, St. Vincent de Paul said it expects a quarter of a million calls for help this year. That is a quarter of a million people and families turning to charity because they cannot make ends meet. This tells us how serious, how widespread and how devastating this hardship has become.

Across the board, everything is getting dearer. Rents are through the roof as is the weekly food shop. Parents are budgeting down to the last euro. People feel it every time they go to

the supermarket or to the petrol station and every time they try to pay a bill. Life is getting harder, not easier.

This is the point: the biggest hit of all is one the Government chose to impose. By increasing student fees by €500, it pushed up the cost of education more than anything else this year. For families with students, this is a massive extra burden. It is the single steepest rise in any household cost and the Government caused it. Of course, it also hiked up fuel costs, petrol, diesel and home heating oil.

D'eisigh Met Éireann rabhadh aimsire fuair ar maidin. Tá an teocht le titim go dtí -3° le sioc agus leac oighir agus táthar ag súil le cúinsí contúirteacha sna laethanta amach romhainn. Tá imní ar dhaoine mar tá a fhios acu nach féidir leo teacht slán ar gheimhreadh eile cosúil leis an gceann deireanach a bhí againn. Bhain an Rialtas na creidiúintí fuinnimh uathu, ach tá siad ag teastáil ó dhaoine anois láithreach. Caithfidh an Rialtas an cinneadh sin a mhalartú.

The Government, of course, also removed the energy credits. These things did not just happen. These are deliberate decisions taken knowing full well the pressure families were already under. I have raised the issue of the energy companies and their exorbitant prices time and again in this Chamber. I warned repeatedly but the Government failed to appreciate the scale of what is happening out there. I have to continue raising these points because, as the weather gets colder, the hardship increases and more people are pushed to the brink. I have asked the Government before to tackle the energy companies and get them to end their rip-off.

However, in the here and now, people need help from the Government. The easiest, most direct and immediate way to do this is to restore the energy credits. I ask again, and I ask plainly: will the Government please restore the energy credits or is it prepared to allow families to struggle through winter under its policies?

The Taoiseach: Ar dtús báire, ní aontaím leis an Teachta. Cuirim fáilte roimh na cuairteoirí in Áiléar na gCuirteoirí Oirice. Is deas bualadh le leo inniu. Ní aontaím leis an Teachta. Admhaím go bhfuil dualgas ar an Rialtas gach aon tacaíocht is féidir a thabhairt do mhuintir na tíre, go háirithe do dhaoine a bhfuil ioncam íseal acu. Is é sin atá déanta againn sa cháinainéis a bhí againn le déanaí. Tá muid ag fós ag díriú ar na daoine bochta sa tír. Tá sé sin ceart agus cóir.

I disagree with the Deputy's analysis in terms of her analysis that Government has not responded to the needs of people in our economy. First of all, the economic resilience of Ireland has been significant coming through Brexit, through Covid-19 and through the invasion of Ukraine by Russia and the consequential energy crisis that ensued. I recall Deputy McDonald advancing the Liz Truss solution on that occasion, where she wanted to bail out all the energy companies. Liz Truss tried that and look what happened.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: No. The Taoiseach's recall is wrong; it is sketchy.

The Taoiseach: Deputy McDonald had the Liz Truss approach to the energy crisis. She quickly abandoned it as things went pear-shaped in the UK as a result of that particular policy.

In regard to the budget, we accept the situation is tough for many households and families out there. Even though inflation is coming down from the high of 2023-----

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputies.

The Taoiseach: In terms of where it was, it is coming down. Cop on. In 2021, 2022 and 2023-----

(Interruptions)

The Taoiseach: We need to be upfront with people here. The bottom line for us is that in the recent budget we have targeted resources at those most in need. We managed €10 for the pensioners. In terms of fuel, we increased the fuel allowance by €5 a week, from €33 to €38. That is an additional €140 over the fuel season. Fuel allowance now covers 26% of households. That is up from 23%. We have extended the reduced VAT on gas and electricity until December 2030. Substantial funding has been allocated for home energy upgrades and retrofitting, which really helps families and helps people. This Government has done more than any other for a long, long time in respect of the cost of education in terms of free schoolbooks at primary and at post-primary level. That was quite a radical move. It took Sinn Féin by surprise, but it happened. That has been a real reduction in costs. Capitation grants for primary, special schools and post-primary went up massively in this budget-----

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: That is not true.

An Ceann Comhairle: Could we please have one voice?

The Taoiseach: -----particularly to help primary schools and special schools as well. We have targeted the resources. Sinn Féin wants to look after millionaires and so on with energy credits. That is its business-----

Deputy Cathy Bennett: So now we are millionaires.

The Taoiseach: ----but as far as we are concerned, we need to target resources.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies.

The Taoiseach: Sinn Féin has had a few millionaires in its day across the water, some of them quite dubious by the way, but we will say no more about that.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: Bring back the Galway tent.

Deputy Thomas Gould: You went into Government with them.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Gould, Sinn Féin has a leader.

The Taoiseach: The other area that we focused on was public services. If we look at the economy now, our expenditure has gone up over 7% as a result of the Estimates in the budget this year. That is significant. Why? Because we are investing in disability services, and we need to. We are investing in child poverty-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: Child poverty has doubled.

The Taoiseach: -----with substantial increases in the child support payment, all of which is dealing with those families who are clearly under pressure and who need our resources the most. Sinn Féin has gone for all universal supports and ignoring those with the lowest incomes.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: All of the bragging in the world from the Taoiseach does not alter the fact that 250,000 people and families will reach out to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul for help. I am glad the Taoiseach's benches finds this amusing and that his would-be successor is grinning like a Cheshire cat while we have this exchange. I have to tell the Taoiseach that I do not find this funny. I do not need him to mansplain the economy to me. I do not need him to dodge and evade a simple question. I asked him about energy credits. I have set out for him the reality that people are now fearful, that people are not turning on their heat and that the heart is crossways on people when they are opening their bills. That is the reality. It may not land with the Taoiseach. I do not know what reality he lives in, but I know who I represent in here. I represent families that are struggling. I represent working people who are struggling and are now fearful that they cannot make their bills.

I asked the Taoiseach: will he restore these energy credits? I would like a straight answer to that precise question.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: We do not need lectures from the Deputy about who she represents or who we represent. The people on this side of the benches came from working-class backgrounds and got elected as Deputies because they are in touch with people and understand the realities out there.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: They clearly do not.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask Deputy McDonald to please allow the Taoiseach to answer.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy should stop that sort of pretence that she goes on with all of the time. Sinn Féin wants to support those on very high incomes with energy credits.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: No, we do not.

The Taoiseach: That is what she said. We decided not to do that. Sinn Féin wanted us to give energy credits to everybody, irrespective of income. Sinn Féin wants to give millionaires and people on €200,000 an energy credit. We have said that we will give child support

payments the biggest increase. Children over 12 will get €16 extra a week out of this budget up to €78 a week. Children under 12 will get an increase of €8 up to €58 a week. Job seeker's benefit allowance has been increased by €10 per week, as have State pensions and so on.

There has also been investment in public services in terms of education, health and disability. Yes, we made choices.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: They cannot heat their homes.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy had her chance to speak. We made our choices. We prioritised services for people.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: The Government finally published its long overdue housing plan last week. After all the anticipation, what it delivered was nothing more than old milk in new bottles. There was nothing new on affordable homeownership, no clarity on what new powers the Land Development Agency will have and no ambition on social housing. It is just an open door for speculators and land hoarders. Worse again, the Government has abandoned annual targets for new home building. Could there be a more blatant admission of failure than that?

The Government has also essentially confessed to the locked-out generation that it has truly run out of ideas, simply telling them to hang in there while removing the very tools needed to measure progress. It does not take a genius to understand why. When you scrap metrics, you scrap accountability. Worst of all, the Taoiseach's Government has normalised the eviction of children, at a time more than 5,000 children are without a home. This a national disgrace and the Government's housing plan is a disgrace.

People can see the Government has no real plan for housing. It is forming policy on the hoof, so it is no wonder its policies do not work. Let us take its recent plans to rip up minimum apartment standards and gut planning rules less than a year after the then Minister for housing, Deputy O'Brien, passed what he called "a comprehensive planning law".

On a random Sunday last July, the Government leaked to the papers new plans to make homes smaller by drastically cutting planning standards. There is nothing wrong with trying new things and, indeed, each week the Labour Party and others urge the Government to change its housing policies, but not like this because the Government tried this move before and it was a disaster then. If we cast our minds back to 2018, the then Fine Gael housing Minister, Eoghan Murphy, introduced similar plans to reduce standards and a regulatory mess ensued. Indeed, it was a mess that forced one of his successors, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, to amend apartment design rules again.

Why does the Government opt to repeat the mistakes of the past and, worse, to do more than merely repeating them? The current Minister for housing, Deputy Browne has sought to introduce a wrong-headed change without the required strategic environmental assessment.

Relaxing minimum housing standards was not in Fianna Fáil nor Fine Gael's election manifestos last year. That is no wonder because if it was, they would have spent the election campaign explaining why people should look for a return to shoe boxes and grotty bedsits. They would have faced the same critique they are getting now from the Irish Planning Institute.

Instead of announcing it, the two parties kept it quiet and ran on falsely inflated home building projections.

When the Government leaked those plans on a Sunday last July, the Cabinet agreed it by the following Tuesday and councillors justifiably brought a legal challenge to its hasty change. The Government lashed out. The Taoiseach and the Tánaiste attacked me and the Labour Party's housing spokesperson, Deputy Conor Sheehan, and accused our party of weaponising the courts because our councillor, Darragh Moriarty, was one of the councillors involved.

The Government then backed down in the courts on Monday of this week. It was a dramatic climbdown. This was a significant development that shows that there is no strategy and that no strategy underlies this change. It just an admission of failure. Does the Taoiseach admit that the Government's housing policies are failing, its attempt to reduce apartment standards has failed and its new housing plan is a further admission of failure?

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: When did the Deputy build houses?

An Ceann Comhairle: Will Deputy Healy-Rae please sit down?

Deputy Duncan Smith: Sit down.

An Ceann Comhairle: Will Deputy Healy-Rae resume his seat?

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: Will the Taoiseach wait until the circus is over?

The Taoiseach: I 100% reject Deputy Bacik's false narrative on the Government's position on housing and her vagueness about the Labour Party's position. I sum up the Labour Party's housing policy and the attitude of its members to housing as: whatever the Government proposes, we oppose.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: That is not true.

The Taoiseach: It is extraordinary-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Have the same discourse and respect.

The Taoiseach: ----that the Deputy gave a big opening critique of overall Government policy and then zeroed in on apartment standards because her party opposes that decision. That is all the Labour Party can do. The Deputy told an untruth when she said that the Government has no social housing targets. She knows full well that the housing plan is very clear-----

Deputy Ivana Bacik: That is not what I said.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: She said private housing developers.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Bacik did say that. She said that we had no social housing plans. The housing plan states that we will deliver 12,000 new social homes every year over the lifetime of the plan. We have significantly transformed the scale and pace of social housing delivery over the past five years. That has to be acknowledged. I have looked at the Labour Party's manifesto on housing. It is so vague as to be unbelievable. It is bereft of any depth or substance. The Labour Party has put no flesh on the bone of any of its proposals.

The housing plan has depth and substance. We have capitalised the Land Development Agency to about €8.75 billion. We are talking about a €50 billion plan for housing. In terms of the need for 50,000 houses a year, we will need about €20 billion to be spent every year. The State will not be able to spend €20 billion every year. The private sector has to be involved. The Labour Party has consistently been hostile to any private sector dimension to housing.

We say that the State will continue to allocate enormous sums to housing and to infrastructure that will enable housing, such as water services and the national grid. That is the fundamental big picture about housing.

The Deputy wants to get back down to apartment guidelines. We wanted to close the viability gap. We need more apartments built. We reduced the VAT on apartments in the budget. The Labour Party lazily and politically described it as a pro-developer measure. That is not the reason. It is to narrow the viability gap that all the analysts have identified in terms of apartment building in cities. We have done a number of other measures in terms of the reform of rent pressure zones. The Deputy opposed that too, of course, because she just wants to be popular all the time. We are focused since we came into government on doing things around housing to reform the rental market. That is in line with the Housing Commission report, by the way, which called for reform of the rental market. We followed through on that in an evidence-based and informed way in terms of those who made recommendations to the Minister to come forward with proposals for the rental sector. I get the sense all the time that no matter what Government proposes, the Deputy will oppose it. We need different housing types and apartment types for different cohorts of the population who require accommodation and housing.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I reject the Taoiseach's misrepresentations of what I said. He is trying to construct a false narrative. Labour has always been constructive from Opposition. Indeed, we supported the Land Development Agency, just as we support the tenant in situ scheme. As the Taoiseach knows, in our manifesto we set out clear plans for housing to ramp up the Land Development Agency to deliver homes at scale and have a State-led approach, of course recognising a role for the private sector but recognising also that the State must take on a much larger role in delivery of homes. I notice the Taoiseach did not mention the revised apartment standards.

The Taoiseach: I did.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: He did not acknowledge the considerable disquiet expressed by the Irish Planning Institute in July when he sought to bring them forward. He did not acknowledge that the institute said it was not convinced the announced changes would bring down

development costs or accelerate housing delivery, just as Government's misjudged VAT cut is based on no evidence that there will be any closure of the viability gap or any increase in the building of apartments or the supply of homes that communities need. The Taoiseach knows this.

The Taoiseach: I do not.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: His policies have failed.

The Taoiseach: Actually, no. People are saying the VAT cut will have an impact. The response from the market is quite clear that it is a significant step in narrowing the viability gap to get more apartments built. We gave the Land Development Agency its legislative underpinning-----

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Which we supported.

The Taoiseach: -----and will further add to its role. We have capitalised the LDA very significantly. If you look at the mortgage drawdowns, for example, the percentage increase in first-time buyer mortgage drawdowns has increased significantly from about 23% in 2015 to about 35% today. We are making progress but affordability continues to be an issue. We have a growing population. If we keep on opposing everything-----

Deputy Ivana Bacik: We are not.

The Taoiseach: That is what the Deputy is doing, come off it. If we are to hang around, no disrespect to anybody, waiting for this and that institute to get around to building houses, we will be waiting a long time. There has been too much of that in this country.

(Interruptions)

The Taoiseach: We need to build 50,000 to 60,000 per annum. We will not get there with Labour's policies.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: What about the Government's climbdown on the apartment guidelines?

Deputy Holly Cairns: In the lead-up to the last general election, the Taoiseach cynically misled the public about how many homes would be delivered. This was a blatant attempt to give the impression he was turning the corner on housing delivery. In reality, he was driving it off a cliff. We were told 40,000 homes would be delivered in 2024; in fact, it was 30,300, nearly 25% short of the target. The Taoiseach and Government have been consistently moving the goalposts when it comes to housing targets. Now, in the most blatant move to avoid accountability yet, they have elected to take the goalposts off the pitch entirely because not only have they removed annual targets from their long-awaited, much-hyped housing plan but the overall target goes beyond the lifetime of the Government. I have to ask: is the Taoiseach actually serious?

It is clear to everyone paying attention that the housing Minister is bereft of new ideas, dusting off old policy measures that have demonstrably failed. The Government wanted to reduce apartment sizes to reduce costs, something that has been tried not once but twice: Deputy Alan Kelly did it first when he was housing Minister in 2015, followed by Eoghan Murphy in 2018. It did not work on either of those occasions. I know, the Taoiseach knows and we all know it will not work now. The Government had a chance to abandon those plans this week when it was forced to withdraw them at the High Court but we are told it is still determined to plough on.

Tens of thousands of people across this country were hoping against hope for a radical reset of housing policy. With this plan, they are left with their head in their hands. Under the Government's latest so-called affordable housing scheme, a minimum salary of €56,000 is required to buy a one-bed apartment. What is affordable about that? That is too expensive for teachers, retail workers, gardaí, nurses and the vast majority of workers on average incomes. The Taoiseach's old plans failed these people and let us face it: the new one will too.

The Government has no credibility on housing. Its record is one of continued failure and continued refusal to acknowledge it, no matter how bad things get but strip away all the spin and this is what the latest housing plan amounts to: a public declaration of failure. Instead of changing course, it is trying to avoid being held to account, removing targets so it is easier to disguise its failure. You could not make it up. How many homes will the Government deliver over its lifetime?

The Taoiseach: The Government has set a target of 300,000 houses over the lifetime of this plan.

Deputy Holly Cairns: No, that is until 2030.

The Taoiseach: I am sorry, the Deputy has had her say. I say this respectfully to the Deputy. She uses language about a "radical reset of housing policy". What in the name of God does it mean? The Deputy has never put any flesh on the bone of anything she has ever proposed. She is bereft of policy. What is the radical reset? Spell it out.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: It is in the Housing Commission report.

The Taoiseach: All I ever get from Deputy Cairns's party is, "We're against this, we're against that, we're opposing that and we're doing that", for the past number of years.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I will send the Taoiseach a copy if he likes.

The Taoiseach: It does not have a radical policy. It is nice language. It appeals to those who, without question, are under pressure, but there is no substance or depth to it.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: It means nothing.

The Taoiseach: Absolutely none. By the way, under Housing for All, we exceeded our targets - an inconvenient truth for the Opposition. The problem was people then said the targets were not high enough.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: The Government missed its social housing targets.

The Taoiseach: The bottom line is the population is growing exponentially and has grown. The pressures are enormous. We need to build at scale and at pace. The housing plan has substance in it in terms of proposals to do that. We did not wait for it. We decided straight in to do, for example, the national planning framework to get more land zoned for housing. Deputy Cairns will have problems with that on the ground and no doubt her people will oppose it where there is extra zoning and so on.

In terms of apartments, we are not standing still and just looking at a problem. We come up with proposals and ideas but people from the Opposition will get into the courts and try to stem those. The apartment guidelines are one strand among a series of measures we are taking to get to the volume needed. We have moved. When the Government came in in 2020, only 20,000 houses were being built per year; now it is 30,000-odd but it needs to get to 50,000. That will need a combination of public investment at unprecedented levels, which is provided for in the national development plan and in our budget, and significant private sector finance. The only thing the Deputy has come up with is a savings and investment scheme. That is fine; in a couple of years' time that might be useful. It will not do anything now in terms of funding investment of houses.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The Government does not even have it in the plan.

The Taoiseach: It will not build a house this year, next year or the year after.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: It would if the Government had started it.

The Taoiseach: That is about the only concrete thing I have seen coming from Deputy Cairns's party in respect of a proposal. We have provided huge amounts of State funding. We need more private sector funding, particularly in apartments in cities.

We have also decided as a Government to invest huge moneys in water services, the national grid, public transport and roads to enable the construction of houses in cities and towns across the country. The issue will be delivering that. That means a more agile and effective planning system, which we provided for in legislation that the Social Democrats opposed. That needs to happen.

Deputy Holly Cairns: The only thing more predictable than this Government's plans failing is the Taoiseach's weekly attempt to come in here and blame the Opposition, the planning system or the courts for a mess of the Government's own creation. The fact is the Government is driving housing off a cliff and the best the housing Minister can do is to tell people to hang in there. Hang in there and do what exactly? Should they hang in there and pay rents of €2,000 or €3,000 per month indefinitely? Should they hang in there and pay €500,000 for what the

Government calls a starter home? At what point will the Government admit its plan is not working and listen to some of the ideas coming from the Social Democrats? We have continually proposed policy measures that would make a huge difference. The Taoiseach mentioned the State savings scheme. That is not in the plan. We put forward suggestions like the State acquiring a modular homes factory, zoning land for affordable housing and introducing a vacancy tax with teeth.

The Taoiseach: We are zoning land.

Deputy Holly Cairns: The list goes on and on. The Government votes them down consistently. I will ask again. What are the Government's targets for the lifetime of this Government, not to 2030?

The Taoiseach: On the scale of Ireland's ambition and the targets we have set, if you compare our housing plan targets with the United Kingdom, Germany or the Netherlands, on a *per capita* basis, our targets are nearly double their targets in terms of what they propose. Ours are approximately 9.3 per 1,000. The United Kingdom's is 4.5, Germany's is 4.8 and the Netherlands is 5.5. No one matches the ambition of this country in terms of house construction and planning-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Oh please.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach is delusional.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, please.

The Taoiseach: -----and when it comes to delivery, in 2024-----

An Ceann Comhairle: It is not Sinn Féin's question

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: We know where we stand.

The Taoiseach: In 2024, of 23 European countries, Ireland had the second highest housing supply *per capita*.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: The Government failed.

The Taoiseach: Therefore, in terms of targets and delivery-----

Deputy Cathy Bennett: The targets were down.

The Taoiseach: -----we are to the fore across the EU.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: He sounds like Trump

The Taoiseach: However, we need to do it at pace and with higher numbers. We want to get to 50,000. Genuinely-----

Deputy Holly Cairns: Will the Taoiseach answer the question?

Deputy Cathy Bennett: How many did the Government get last year?

The Taoiseach: I see nothing in the Social Democrats' presentation.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The Taoiseach did not read it.

The Taoiseach: The savings and investments thing would take years to realise funding-----
(Interruptions)

The Taoiseach: -----which is not the immediate issue, by the way.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.
(Interruptions)

The Taoiseach: The funding is going in. If people could only allow housing in our country-

Deputy Rory Hearne: The Government is ignoring the ideas.

The Taoiseach: -----in terms of the planning process, objections, judicial reviews and the rest of it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. Your time is up.

The Taoiseach: I do not see judicial reviews as a badge of honour, as Deputy Bacik does. I see them as a problem.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Gogarty

Deputy Rory Hearne: The Taoiseach has given up on its own plan already. Where are the targets?

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Paul Gogarty. Thank you.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I like a bit of banter.

The EPA's 2025 water quality report highlights that agricultural pressures, particularly from nitrogen and phosphorous - I will focus on nitrogen - from livestock manure, fertilisers, etc.,

remain the dominant threat to our rivers, lakes and especially our estuaries. The nitrates directive has been talked about for many years and Ireland's derogation is central to the findings in this and previous reports because stricter limits are now absolutely required to protect our water quality. This 2025 report shows that while some improvements have been made in specific areas, the excess nutrients continue to degrade our water quality.

These elevated nitrogen levels are particularly evident in the south and south east. That is no surprise as it is where the most intensive dairy farming is concentrated. These regions that are most affected by the nitrates derogation allow certain farms to exceed the standard limit of 170 kg of nitrogen per hectare. Under EU rules, the derogation farms in these sensitive catchments must now reduce their stocking rates from 250 kg to 220 kg, which is a recognition by the EU that we have to come down because we were not making any progress.

The report stresses that 44,000 sq. km of land has been identified as requiring additional measures to meet the EU water quality standards. The European Commission has also expanded its criteria for Ireland's derogation renewal, demanding not only progress on water quality but also conservation of designated habitats and species, which underscores how the nitrates directive and other environmental obligations such as the habitats directive are interconnected. Our whole environment is interconnected. It is not possible to put excrement on land at a certain quantity without it having an impact on the quality of the lives of all our citizens, especially young children who are most affected by nitrates.

The expansion of dairy farming is linked to the nutrient surpluses. If our dairy industry is not sustainable, we need to focus on lower intensity, organic quality produce for export. We are now the only EU country still seeking a derogation. Denmark, for example, has an intensive agricultural system but does not have a derogation. Therefore, we need to continue to reduce our nitrates or we will lose any flexibility we had and face tougher EU sanctions. We have the nitrates action programme but it is not enough. The consultation period ends on 1 December. Is the Government seriously considering getting rid of our derogation?

The Taoiseach: The Government is seeking an extension of the nitrates derogation. It is a critical element of the economic sustainability of many farmers, many family farms and the broader rural economy. However, we have established a water quality Cabinet subcommittee. There will be a new nitrates action plan and a new plan on habitats and so forth. We are different from other countries in Europe. Our farm system is unique in being a pasture-based outdoor system, with cows based outside 240 days per year on average. That is in contrast with other EU countries that have an intensive indoor system, with cattle not being outdoors very often.

It is a priority of the Government to secure a nitrates derogation but to do so in a way that will enable Ireland to meet its obligations on water quality. Farming has improved significantly and a lot of new measures have been adopted by the farming community in respect of climate change more generally and in terms of water quality. Many farmers do a lot of work in terms of assessment and measuring. I have been on farms and in catchment areas where water quality is measured every ten minutes. Many people operating under the derogation have more sophisticated systems in place to try to monitor their water quality.

Ireland is strong in food production and we need to move in a direction that brings people with us but also enables us to comply with the various water quality frameworks and directives

and to do so in a way that maintains a sustainable food production system, and dairy system in particular. I have discussed this with the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen. The EU Commissioner for the environment, Jessika Roswall, visited Ireland on 4 November to witness first hand our grass-based system and the importance of our derogation. The Minister, Deputy Heydon, attended and engaged with the Commissioner. There has been a lot of stakeholder engagement with the Government and Departments in respect of this. Farmers are doing a lot to reduce agriculture's impact on water quality and will be doing more. They will have to do more in that regard.

We are looking a more detailed programme to enable all this to happen. This work is continuing. There is continuing engagement between the Government, the European Union and the Commission about this issue-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: -----and we know it has to be in compliance with the habitats directive in addition to meeting the objective of the water framework directive.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: It is not really possible to talk about economic sustainability without environmental sustainability because the true cost of doing that business is not being taken into consideration. It is also about the impact on our tourism offering and jobs for people in rural areas and our viability as an industrial location in terms of our water quality. Many other factors are involved. Our healthcare system is also affected and the cost of our healthcare system is affected when our rivers are not at optimal quality. The Government can wheel in as many senior officials from the European Commission as it likes to witness first hand our outdoor grass-based system but in reality the system is not working. We are just kicking the can down the road. Are we hanging on a bit like climate change to see whether Europe will water things down? I note that at the last EU nitrates committee meeting member states voted to approve the use of processed manure above excess nitrogen limits. We should be showing leadership. We can be sustainable, profitable and show leadership.

The Taoiseach: We are showing leadership. Our dairy and beef production system is probably one of the more carbon efficient systems in Europe and the world. That is the other side of the coin. I am not saying the Deputy is saying this but essentially the import of what he is saying would be to shut down our farming, dairy production and food production system. That would allow less carbon-efficient systems to fill the gap. I do not believe that is logical either. We should not dismiss - I am not saying the Deputy is doing this, to be fair - the fact that food security is becoming an issue because of climate. I accept the point about complementarity, that there is balance in all of this. To the Deputy's fundamental point, I accept that environmental sustainability is important, and is not separate from economic sustainability, but we are endeavouring to create a pathway to environmental sustainability in the context of food production that reflects economic sustainability as an imperative as well.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I return to the saga of Dundrum House Hotel in Tipperary. On Monday, the High Court delivered a judgment that quashed the section 5 planning exemption granted for Dundrum House Hotel. The ruling confirmed what local communities have been saying for over a year, that there is no legal or planning basis for an IPAS centre at this site. The certificate underpinning this arrangement should never have been issued. Despite this, the Taoiseach's Government continues to stand over a multi-million euro contract with Utmasta Limited, worth up to €8.5 million a year, to operate a facility that is clearly operating outside the law.

This is not simply a legal failure; it has been a social, economic and financial disaster for Dundrum and south Tipperary. There are serious moral questions for the Government about how it could engage with contractors who have not filed accounts and are not compliant with our laws. The High Court has ruled definitively that Dundrum House Hotel is non-compliant. We know that more than 20 IPAS contracts have already been terminated this year for non-compliance with planning, building or fire regulations. Why is Dundrum House Hotel allowed to operate continually like this when it is in this category? Continuing to fund this contract undermines the integrity of the Government's decision-making and shows absolute disregard for the authority of the courts and this country's planning laws.

We have already seen the loss of 48 jobs here when Dundrum House Hotel closed its doors, and the collapse of a vital tourism and leisure hub that sustained golf, hospitality and community life, and indeed tourism and culture events as well. Let us not forget that when people stood up against this, and for their rights, they were met with a tyranny of force by An Garda Síochána's riot squad, canine squad and God knows what.

I have some questions for the Taoiseach. Will his Government immediately revoke the IPAS contract for Dundrum House Hotel in light of the High Court ruling? Will he confirm that no further taxpayers' money will be paid under the contract, which has no legal foundation whatsoever? Will he acknowledge the grave wrong done to the people of Dundrum village and community, who have been vindicated by the courts, and commit to restoring this amenity to its rightful role in supporting rural development and to changing how decisions about these contracts are made by the Government? Finally, will the Taoiseach commit to a full review of how the contract was awarded, given serious concerns about planning compliance, transparency and the suitability of Utmasta Limited? High Court evidence shows that companies associated with Dundrum House Hotel have not been tax compliant for six years. Just imagine. Any other citizen would not offer that company their business, so what kind of example are we showing? Why was the company deemed suitable for a State contract worth up to €8.5 million annually when all this was known and pointed out by the people and by us as public representatives too?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising an important issue. We fully acknowledge that. My understanding is that Dundrum House Hotel had not been operating as a hotel since 2015, so I do not think it ceased being a hotel because of the decision in 2022 to use it for, initially, the beneficiaries of temporary protection following the war in Ukraine. I understand the first initial use of Dundrum House Hotel was for Ukrainians fleeing the war. The Deputy might clarify that for me. I understand that it had not been in use as a hotel since 2015, which would be about seven years earlier. I think the adjacent golf club and catering facilities are still being used by the public and the community since that time.

The Deputy is correct that the Department of justice entered a contract in April 2025 with a company called Utmasta Limited to provide international protection accommodation at Dundrum House. That followed a detailed appraisal process and community engagement since summer 2024. My understanding is that it has a contracted maximum capacity of more than 200. About 190 people are accommodated there at the moment. Part of that appraisal process for a new contract included a review of the property services and compliance. This was done in conjunction with the local authority in the case of this contract, and a section 5 exemption was granted by the local authority. That is my understanding of what happened. Utmasta Limited has engaged with Tipperary County Council and has given a commitment to regularise any outstanding planning matters at the wider site. My understanding is that there are two separate legal matters ongoing relating to the property, neither of which involve the Department of justice or the Government directly. There was a judicial review into the planning exemption granted by Tipperary County Council to Dundrum House. This was initiated by the local heritage group. I understand that the owners decided not to continue to defend the proceedings.

The accommodation provider lodged its own section 5 application to Tipperary County Council in October of this year. This was referred to An Coimisiún Pleanála by the local authority for a decision, as the local authority said it was unable to make a decision on the matter. As the Deputy knows, the case is due to be decided by 13 March 2026, according to *pleanala.ie*. There is another dispute, which I do not want to comment on, which is not really relevant to me, about ownership and so on. The Department is saying, based on the fact that the contract and leases were and still are in place, that IPAS is continuing to use the property. If any action should be required as a result of any court proceedings, this will be addressed by officials as appropriate.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: That is not accurate. The hotel was closed but the Crowe family operated a successful and wonderful business there. I was at numerous weddings and many other events there. The golf course and the pro shop were open and indeed the venue was operating as a restaurant and everything else. It was effectively running while the hotel was damaged by fire. The Taoiseach does not seem to get the issue. We are dealing with rogue contractors. We pointed out to the integration team - Deputy Michael Murphy and I pointed this out to the Minister - that it was outside the law and that the council gave a section 5 exemption in error. It has conceded that. Now the hotel has gone back for another section 5 exemption, which the council has kicked to An Coimisiún Pleanála. It is just a game of Russian roulette and money for fat cats. The real problem is that the Government is paying too much per person who is being housed by IPAS. The Taoiseach is wrong in saying that the Department of justice gave the contract. It was the former Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, and his Department at the time that ran amok and invited everyone from Timbuktu to Ireland, to come and have their own front door in 30 days or something. This is crazy. The people deserve better here. They deserve a better reply from the Taoiseach. I want the Taoiseach to instruct the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, to meet Deputy Murphy and me. We have been trying to meet him to look at this situation urgently.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is correct that, while it was the Government overall, the Department of children handled migration. This Government has decided to move migration matters and asylum-seeking issues to the Department of justice. That is happening and that is why I mentioned the Department of justice in this context. It is now dealing with this. The

Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, has no issue meeting Deputy McGrath or other Deputies. We need to be careful with our language. I do not think we can be calling people "rogue contractors" in the House. That is unfair to people. It can create all sorts of-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The High Court has found that, not me.

The Taoiseach: I know, but it is a term that could cause difficulties for people outside the House. We need to be careful about that. I want to pick up on a comment. The gardaí do not do "tyranny".

Deputy Mattie McGrath: That is what it was. I was there. Bhí mé ann.

The Taoiseach: The gardaí keep the peace and uphold the law. We are very grateful. I was in Templemore last week with the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan. It was wonderful to see so many new gardaí coming out enthusiastically-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: They were misused.

The Taoiseach: -----and 220 new gardaí going into Templemore, which shows the pace and momentum behind Garda recruitment. We should keep affirming the gardaí and all that they do. I will ask the Minister to meet the Deputy and his colleagues.

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The case of nine-year-old Harvey Morrison Sherratt exposes profound and systemic failures. This child was left waiting years for essential spinal surgery, then removed from a waiting list without his parents' knowledge or consent. His experience was by no means unique. The Taoiseach has now committed to a statutory public inquiry into scoliosis and spina bifida services. When will the legislation to establish this inquiry be brought before the Dáil? Can the Taoiseach also confirm that it is parents, families and advocacy groups that will shape the terms of reference for this inquiry? Can I also ask the Taoiseach to confirm that the whistleblower evidence that has come forward, which goes to the very heart of what happened in this service, will form a core part of the inquiry's work? In the meantime, as this inquiry is being established, what immediate action is the Government taking to ensure that no other child is abandoned in the way that Harvey was?

The Taoiseach: First, I offer our deepest condolences to Harvey Morrison Sherratt's family. It is a very serious case. A memo to the Government recommending a statutory public model of inquiry into spina bifida and complex scoliosis services at CHI was approved by the Government, but considerable work will be required. There is a time-bound scoping exercise to happen first. A facilitator will be appointed to scope potential terms of reference in collaboration with all involved, including advocates, parents and others. It is proposed to appoint an independent person, a senior counsel, following that consultation, and it will also involve the Office of the Attorney General. Concluding terms of reference, the modality of an

inquiry and the costs associated takes time, but we want it time-bound so it will be as efficient as it can be.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: The Labour Party certainly welcomes the fact that the Minister for Health has brought a memo to the Cabinet to establish a statutory inquiry into care for children with scoliosis and spina bifida. Again, I express my deepest sympathies to Gillian and Stephen and the family of Harvey Morrison Sherratt, who so tragically died. All of us are concerned to ensure that the newly announced inquiry will be comprehensive and effective in getting to the root of the issues here. As my colleague, Deputy Sherlock, has said, a twin-track approach is needed, first to address the disgraceful failures in respect of children like Harvey, and, second to get a handle on what is continuing to happen for children in the system today. I know all of us hear from families who have been told their child requires surgery, yet are given no date, no confirmation of treatment and no offer of treatment abroad. We also need to hear whether further protected disclosures are being made and what is to happen to children on waiting lists now.

The Taoiseach: I think I have answered the issue in terms of the inquiry. With inquiries, the terms of reference are very important because there needs to be some timeline to it, for the sake of all concerned. That is an issue to be worked out. About 446 spinal procedures were completed so far this year to the end of October. That is up on last year, but there is rising demand and, over the same timeframe, a total of 462 procedures were added to the waiting list. At the end of October 2025, about 68% of patients on the active list were waiting less than six months, an improvement from this time last year, when about 56% of patients were waiting less than six months. There are improvements happening, notwithstanding the very serious issues that we have to deal with. Some 6% were waiting over 12 months, which is a significant improvement against this time last year, but, of course, that is too high.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you. I call Deputy Jen Cummins.

The Taoiseach: I could go on, but I do not have the time as I have only one minute to respond.

Deputy Jen Cummins: The St. Vincent de Paul is expecting 250,000 calls in advance of Christmas this year. It outlines that one-parent families and low-income workers, as well as people with disabilities and carers, are those who are most likely not to be able to afford the basics. St. Vincent de Paul has said that it is ready and that it will spend tens of millions of euros supporting people with food, vouchers, groceries, electricity and fuel. As the Taoiseach is aware, I worked in the school completion programme and in youth work for decades. In the communities where I worked, workers will go out to support families coming up to Christmas. I want to know what the Government is doing to make sure that no family has to rely on charity or loans to support their family coming up to Christmas, and also throughout the winter.

The Taoiseach: In the budget, we took significant measures to particularly target resources at low-income families, such as those on the working family payment, for example, in terms of their inclusion in the free fuel allowance. There is also the children's support payment for those over 12, which is up to €16, the highest ever, and for those under 12, it is €8. This is the

point. We have been targeting our resources at the lowest income groups. That is why we took the decisions that we did in the budget. We did not go for universal payments, which some Deputies wanted us to do. We targeted resources at those most in need, and likewise in terms of free schoolbooks and hot school meals. That is all to reduce costs for families, and it particularly helps families on low incomes. There are other measures that we have taken, such as extending the VAT reduction on fuel costs, which will go out to 2030, and many others.

Deputy Brian Stanley: At the weekend, the towns of Portarlinton and Mountmellick were flooded again for the umpteenth time. There are flood relief schemes planned in both towns. These were decided on after the serious flooding in both towns in 2017, which was eight years ago. Work is ongoing, and Laois County Council is playing its part in trying to advance those schemes as quickly as possible. However, because of all the different hoops that these schemes have to go through, schemes are taking between 15 and 17 years. I think we can all agree that is too long. It is a ridiculous length of time. The Mountmellick scheme has gone to An Coimisiún Pleanála, which is welcome. Hopefully, it can make a decision soon. However, as things stand, the Mountmellick scheme will not be done until 2031 at the earliest. For the Portarlinton scheme, we are looking at 2033.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy should conclude. The time is up.

Deputy Brian Stanley: That is a crazy situation. A huge amount of study needs to be done.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call the Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The studies need to be done in parallel. There is a commitment in the programme for Government to move on these schemes.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call the Taoiseach to respond. Your time is up.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I am asking the Taoiseach to take this up with the Department of public expenditure and the OPW to try to get these schemes under way. I was with two pensioners last night.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, your time is up.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Their house was flooded again at the weekend-----

An Ceann Comhairle: If you cannot make your point in the time allotted, do not apply for QPL.

Deputy Brian Stanley: -----and again last Friday.

The Taoiseach: I empathise with the Deputy. I fully agree that flooding schemes take an inordinate length of time. We have improved. We have resourced An Coimisiún Pleanála and

it is now statutorily bound to give timelines for the issuing of decisions. The Minister for public expenditure is coming to the Government in the next number of weeks in respect of measures that will accelerate the infrastructure development in the country. To me, flood protection is a key infrastructure that is required. Where we have implemented flood relief schemes, they have been very effective. In fact, the report on Storm Amy was that the flood relief schemes, where they have been constructed and built, worked, by and large. There is an urgency, but everybody wants to have their say, as the Deputy knows, and we end up in An Coimisiún Pleanála.

Deputy Paul Lawless: The people of Mayo, represented so courageously by the Mayo Pyrite Action Group, are living in homes that crumble around them. Their walls weep damp, their children breathe mould and their lives are suspended in uncertainty, yet the Government offers schemes that are actually defective in themselves. They exclude, they delay and they diminish. The families are not looking for charity. They are looking for justice, they are looking for 100% redress, they are looking for retrospective payments and they are looking for fair timelines. IS 465:2018 is unjust and, indeed, has become a barrier to so many families. Recently, a family in Mayo bought a house in good faith and got an engineer's report. However, they bought after the cut-off date that the Government introduced in its scheme and, as a result of this cut-off, cannot avail of the defective concrete scheme.

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up, Deputy.

Deputy Paul Lawless: This is a family that has children with disabilities. They are in immense difficulty, with rodents in the house.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Lawless, your time is up.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I am asking the Taoiseach what he can do for this family.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call the Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Is he going to develop a new scheme to actually include these families that are so excluded by the scheme?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, your time is up. Do not apply for QPL if you cannot make your point in 60 seconds.

The Taoiseach: The Government has responded in an unprecedented way to the pyrite issue and to defective concrete blocks more generally. The State is taking up the issue where, originally, insurance companies or bonds should have. The State has intervened in an unprecedented way in terms of the amount of funding that has been allocated, and we are doing that to help the homeowners involved. I cannot speak on individual, specific cases. We have extended the scheme beyond Donegal in terms of the defective blocks. The pyrite scheme has been ongoing for a decade or more. The schemes are not never-ending. There have to be clear protections. I do not know the engineering-----

Deputy Paul Lawless: But the cut-off-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: I do not know the engineers' reports and cannot comment on individual cases.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: I seek the support of the Minister in the Department of housing and local government to increase the number of personnel and improve efficiency in Tailte Éireann, formerly the Land Registry. There is total frustration as to how it is currently handling dealings. I have received numerous complaints from constituents and those in the legal profession regarding significant delays, some exceeding three years, in the registration of properties. Previously, once a dealing was lodged, it went through all departments, and any errors or omissions were highlighted and returned in one correspondence to the lodging party to be amended before being resubmitted. Tailte Éireann's current practice appears to be to send dealings to the first department, and if an error is identified, the dealings are immediately returned for amendment before forwarding them to the next department. As a result, a dealing can be returned several times without explanation, leading to huge delays. Tailte Éireann can take an untold amount of time to deal with applications, and if a lodging solicitor has only 28 days to respond, a lot could be done to improve the system and provide a lot more information-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy. I know he has raised this issue consistently. I have spoken to the Minister for housing about it and will do so again. The Deputy has summed up exactly what needs to change within the delivery of public services. He stated that Tailte Éireann's process could be faster and more efficient. I will engage with the Minister on the nature of the issues and whether more resources are required, and also consider the possibility of different models of delivery and efficiency.

Deputy James Geoghegan: Officials from Tusla and the Department of justice were before the public accounts committee in recent weeks. Tusla alerted us to concerns it has in respect of its capacity to carry out age verifications for unaccompanied minors in the international protection application system. It seems, at a policy level, that it is being left to Tusla to carry out these age verifications, whereas as a matter of law, there is at least some doubt as to what body is actually legally responsible for doing so. None of the officials from the Department of Justice, when they were before us, was able to tell us who was legally responsible, and although they indicated they would come back to us immediately, that has not happened.

There is to be change under new laws but there is an ongoing concern that adults may be mingling with children in an unaccompanied-minor setting. I say this without prejudice to live issues before the courts. There is an issue that needs to be clarified and dealt with swiftly.

The Taoiseach: Certainly, there is an issue with age verification for those who present as minors when they come into the country unaccompanied. Tusla has articulated that concern. It is not a simple issue to resolve because the initial response has been a humanitarian response. If someone presents as an unaccompanied minor, the obligation on Tusla is to make sure that they at least receive accommodation and some shelter. Tusla is criticised if something untoward happens and so on. It is a very serious issue. I will talk to the Minister for justice in respect of it. Again, it is in the context of migration and possibly trafficking. We do not always know what is occurring, but there is certainly an issue regarding the potential mixing of adults with young minors. That is a problem. Other issues can also arise.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Ba mhaith liom ceist maidir le stáisiún dóiteáin i Mainistir Eimhín i gCill Dara Theas a chur ar an Taoiseach inniu. I want to raise the urgent need for a modern, fit-for-purpose fire station in Monasterevin. The current building is outdated and inadequate, and it no longer meets the needs of a growing town. The previously proposed site on the Dublin road has fallen through again, leaving the project stalled while the community waits. Other viable sites have been identified in the area, so this project is possible if we have the political will to back it up. It is not only a planning issue but a matter of public safety. The latest report by the National Oversight and Audit Commission, NOAC, shows that Kildare's retained brigade takes an average of seven minutes and five seconds to mobilise after being notified of an emergency. This is significantly higher than the national average, which is five minutes and 31 seconds. When Monasterevin does not even have a fit-for-purpose station, those delays become even more dangerous. Will the Taoiseach ensure that the purchase of a newly identified site is fast-tracked, that funding is released immediately and that a new station is delivered within this term?

The Taoiseach: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as an gceist a ardú. Gan amhras, ó thaobh an rud atá á rá aici – go bhfuil stáisiún dóiteáin á lorg ag muintir Monasterevin – níl aon easpa tola polaitiúil ann. Ní fheadar cad a tharla leis an suíomh. Níl a fhios agam ó thaobh an suímh de ach tá mé sásta labhairt leis an Aire agus déileáil leis an mbardas nó an gcomhairle áitiúil chun an fhadhb a réiteach maidir leis seo. I do not know whether a site has been identified.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: A couple of sites have been identified.

The Taoiseach: It is very hard for the Government to act until a proposal comes from the local authority.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Tá liosta agam. Tiocfaidh mé ar ais chuig an Taoiseach.

Deputy Willie O'Dea: There has been much commentary about Government plans being stymied by bureaucratic inertia and delay. I will give a textbook example. After years of effort, we finally persuaded An Garda Síochána of the necessity for a new Garda station to serve the Castletroy–Monaleen–Annacotty area, a rapidly growing suburb of Limerick city. The Government accepted this, and I have been informed that capital funding has been provided. For a period going on two years, we have been consistently informed that the OPW and Garda are liaising on the matter. This liaison is threatening to go on longer than many marriages I

have come across. I ask the Taoiseach to use his good offices to bring this liaison to an end and move the project forward. Over 20,000 people live in the area and there is a tsunami of antisocial behaviour because the area is not being properly policed.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. In many ways, the growth of Castletroy owes a lot to Deputy O'Dea as he was the first to approach me, when I was Minister for Education, to get Castletroy College built. At the time, he helpfully pointed out that the civil servants were working off the wrong census in identifying the demographic requirements for a new school in Castletroy. Anyway, we went ahead and built the new school but the population has grown exponentially. I will endeavour to turn the liaison between the OPW and An Garda Síochána into a more mature contract but I take the Deputy's point that the station is required. I will talk to the Minister for justice to determine whether he can move this on and I will also talk to the Minister of State responsible for the OPW, Deputy Moran. He tends to get things done.

Deputy William Aird: Following the recent withdrawal of strike action by school secretaries and caretakers represented by Fórsa, can the Taoiseach provide an update on the current status of the negotiations regarding pension parity, pay frameworks and other employment conditions? Will he outline the timeline for implementing the commitments agreed through the Workplace Relations Commission? Will he list measures the Government is taking to ensure the negotiations are concluded promptly?

I thank the Taoiseach for his work in convincing the industrial school survivors to come off the hunger strike. I spoke to them daily because my family had a home in Roscrea. My grandmother, when she was a public representative in the fifties, did a lot of work with those concerned. I thank the Taoiseach for his work. It is great to see the issue resolved and that the survivors do not have to be outside the gates anymore.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for his kind remarks. I will talk to the Minister for education about an update in respect of a resolution for school secretaries and caretakers. I will also speak to the Minister for public expenditure to see where we are in bringing the process to completion. It is a significant issue and a lot of people are awaiting the outcome. I will come back to the Deputy on that. I thank him for his remarks.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: Nine weeks ago, on the return of the Dáil, I wrote to the Minister for Health in relation to a decision made to remove hundreds of births from the maternity service in Portiuncula in Ballinasloe. I looked for a meeting for all Oireachtas Members and all parties, not just myself, with the Minister for Health. We have had mixed messages. We have had the 2018 Walker report on maternity services in Portiuncula. HSE management and the hospital manager told us the report's recommendations were implemented in full. The chief executive of the HSE, however, has said that in no way, shape or form could it be suggested that they were implemented. We need answers. To me, this issue is way above politics. I want us to have an opportunity to sit down with the Minister. She needs to be able to stand over the decision that has been made. This affects women giving birth to their babies, who will have to travel farther. They are worried sick at what should be the happiest time of their lives. I am simply asking for the Minister for Health to sit down with Oireachtas Members from the area

so that we, as their elected representatives, can answer, engage and tell the truth to these pregnant women.

The Taoiseach: I am sure the Deputy will accept that the Minister will work with absolute bona fides in this regard. Any decision the Minister makes, on foot of advice, will be in the best interests of the safety of women and also for the best outcomes in terms of the delivery of their babies and children. I will ask the Minister to engage with the Deputy. The Minister has a lot of issues on the table at the moment. This is an issue the Minister has discussed with us, but I will ask her to engage with the Deputies locally. I understand the issues of concern, but please accept that everything is motivated by safety and best outcomes.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The children's disability network team in Clonmel is in crisis. Over 60% of posts are vacant and by year end, that will rise to 72%. Eleven positions have been unfilled for years. Two therapists are going on maternity leave, whom I wish well, which will leave only three administrative staff, one social worker and one disability nurse. There will be no occupational therapist, physiotherapist, psychologist or speech and language therapist. This is a service meant to support hundreds of children with complex needs. Right now, 114 children are waiting for assessment, 59 of them for more than 12 months, breaching legal limits, as Cara Darmody pointed out to the Taoiseach. A total of 475 children are on the case load, facing huge delays. Families are desperate and children are regressing. Parents fight daily for basic rights. This is just not acceptable. Funding is not a problem. Does the Taoiseach accept that this is a crisis? What emergency measures will he take to fill these vacancies? Will he acknowledge that this is a national scandal because people have contacted me from all over the country? It is the same in Kildare and all over. Cashel is the same way, with only 35% occupancy. This is not acceptable for young people. Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí. I know the Taoiseach wants to do that but this is just unacceptable. Some intervention has to be made to rectify this.

The Taoiseach: Nationally, CDNT waiting lists have fallen by 18%. More importantly, workforce growth is a priority. Despite recruitment challenges, staffing across the 93 CDNTs grew by 26%. That is an extra 415 people between October 2023 and 2025.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am talking about Tipperary.

The Taoiseach: The vacancy rate has come down. It now stands at 18%, down from 29%. What the Deputy has outlined in Tipperary is a very serious issue. I think the Deputy said the vacancy rate will be 72% by the end of the year. Something is wrong there. I do not know what-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is serious.

The Taoiseach: We will engage with the HSE to try to get to the bottom of that.

Deputy Gary Gannon: The Taoiseach's office oversees the north inner-city task force in Dublin. I imagine this week he was as proud as anyone else in the country when a young man

from the north inner city captured the nation's heart by scoring two goals against Portugal and three against Hungary, namely, Troy Parrott. Whenever we have these heroes from the north inner city – I assure the Taoiseach we have many of them - inevitably, the conversation turns to the lack of facilities. Once again, when we talk about soccer, there are no football or AstroTurf pitches in the north inner city. When it was Kellie Harrington, there were no boxing facilities that were well funded by the State. The north inner-city task force has been well funded - I admit that - but we still have the same lack of facilities, meaning these sporting heroes have to travel outside of their own communities. There are very few places in the country where people have to travel outside of their own communities when they are starting off in the sport for which they will reach such acclaim. The Taoiseach should address that from his office.

The Taoiseach: First, the north-east inner-city task force has been very effective and impactful. We salute the extraordinary performances of Troy Parrott, Kellie Harrington and many others. A person on the radio the other day listed all the internationals in one street alone, as well as the local football clubs and so forth. In fairness to the sports capital grant, it has funded a lot of facilities. When I was Minister for education, we built Larkin Community College, which has been an impactful resource to the locality and so forth.

Deputy Gary Gannon: That is what you are supposed to do.

The Taoiseach: I have asked successive Ministers for sport about this. Some issues in the boxing area relate to the administrative capacity to get the applications in and get them done. There is no want of political will to support boxing and boxing clubs. There is a bit of work in that regard. I just spoke to the Minister for sport last evening about the next capital grant. For those people who get to the Irish team or whatever, we have a high level of elite sporting supports and grants. We are trying to improve them for those who graduate and are in development squads or development teams. We are developing the league academy in the League of Ireland. A total of €3 million was provided to try to home-grow a competitive League of Ireland and have a pipeline of young talent who can develop in Ireland. All of that is going to be built on and will grow.

There is an issue in Dublin. The local authorities need to be engaged with when it comes to the provision of sporting facilities. Other local authorities around the country do it far better.

Deputy Gary Gannon: The Taoiseach oversees the task force.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I want to raise the issue of prison overcrowding, particularly in relation to Limerick Prison. The Office of the Inspector of Prisons' report is damning. Limerick Prison and its women's wing have one of the worst levels of overcrowding in the prison estate. The official bed capacity was at 155% last year. Overcrowding is impacting on the physical, psychological and emotional safety of women who are living in rooms originally intended as single accommodation. Overcrowding is a result of the failure of criminal justice policy. It compromises the provision and effectiveness of rehabilitation. Deaths in prison are up by 50% in the last year. What action will the Government take to reduce the number of

women in prison? What credible alternatives to custody will the Government bring forward for women to address this? We have had so many reports but little action.

The Taoiseach: We have had a lot of action, actually. I would question some of the premises on which we base all of this talk. First, I accept that there is a big overcrowding issue.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: It is a huge issue.

The Taoiseach: I accept that fully, Deputy. I take that on board, but we have a lot of youth diversion and school completion programmes. We have the highest school completion rate in Europe, so we need to do a bit more analysis-----

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I am asking about women in particular.

The Taoiseach: I am just talking about society in general. The Deputy spoke generally about overcrowding and how it is a failure of the criminal justice system, but I am not sure it is. We need a broader analysis of the forces that are giving rise to some people ending up in prison who, perhaps, should not have ended up in prison. I refer to the whole addiction issue, the issue around drugs, drug trafficking and all of that. It is a bit more complex than just blaming the system. A societal response is required. The Minister has come up with short-to-medium-term measures to try to deal with overcrowding and get buildings built. Youth diversion programmes, alternative rehabilitative pathways and alternatives to custodial sentences are also being perused.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Yesterday, families from Rathmolyon, County Meath, gathered in a Dublin hotel to attend a liquidation meeting. These families spent tens of thousands of euros on deposits for homes five years ago. In the intervening period, many have put off having a family while they were waiting, some were forced to move back into their parents' houses and others have spent €50,000 on rent. Two companies with the same owners and directors have used company law to allow the developer to become a secured creditor, putting himself at the top of a hierarchy of people to be paid in his own liquidation. He has also been put in charge of the liquidation process. His actions will lead to other creditors, families and Revenue getting burned for what is owed to them.

The meeting I attended was chaotic. Everything was disputed. It exposed great wrongs in the system. The key issue for the Government is that Revenue is likely to get burned for €700,000. Will the Taoiseach raise with Revenue the need for it to appeal to the High Court to overturn the current liquidator and seek an independent third-party liquidator?

The Taoiseach: I fully accept the appalling situation in Rathmolyon, County Meath. It is a very distressing situation facing a number of individuals and families who entered into contracts in good faith for the purchase of their houses and homes in the Ringfort development. I understand the frustration and the anger. I will talk to a number of Ministers. Again, this is the behaviour of companies and individuals. There are legal frameworks governing all of this. I do not want to comment in terms of where this might go but my ultimate priority is to try to

see how we can help the families concerned. Again, the State is not responsible for what has transpired here.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: It is unacceptable and a terrible imposition on the families concerned.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Can the Taoiseach talk to Revenue as well? It has a role here.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. That concludes Questions on Policy or Legislation.

Central Bank (Amendment) Bill 2025: Referral to Select Committee [Private Members]

An Ceann Comhairle: I understand that Deputy Catherine Ardagh, in accordance with Standing Order 187, intends to move the referral to committee of the Central Bank (Amendment) Bill 2025.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure, Public Services Reform and Digitalisation, and Taoiseach pursuant to Standing Order 187.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Cabinet Committees

1. **Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on water quality will next meet. [46873/25]

2. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on water quality will next meet. [48529/25]

3. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on water quality will next meet. [56902/25]

4. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on water quality will next meet. [56996/25]

5. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on water quality will next meet. [57002/25]

6. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on water quality will next meet. [57037/25]

7. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on water quality will next meet. [58034/25]

8. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on water quality will next meet. [58231/25]

9. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on water quality will meet next. [59583/25]

10. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on water quality will next meet. [59735/25]

11. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on water quality will next meet. [61677/25]

12. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on water quality will next meet. [63177/25]

13. **Deputy Erin McGreehan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on water quality will next meet. [63428/25]

14. **Deputy Malcolm Byrne** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on water quality will next meet. [63480/25]

15. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on water quality will next meet. [63511/25]

16. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on water quality will next meet. [63527/25]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 16, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet Committee on water quality oversees implementation of the programme for Government commitments in relation to the range of issues affecting Ireland's water system. The committee last met on 30 October and the date of its next meeting has not yet been scheduled. The committee is informed by the work of the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, which monitors and reports on water quality in Ireland. The EPA recently published its report Water Quality in Ireland 2019-2024, which shows water quality improvements in some areas but also an overall decline in waterbodies in a satisfactory ecological condition. While the overall ecological status of Ireland's waters is significantly better than the European Union average, the downward trend is a matter of concern. The report shows that targeted actions in the agricultural sector and improvements in wastewater treatment appear to be paying

dividends, with lower reported levels of nutrients in water bodies where targeted actions have been taken.

The Cabinet committee has also examined the investment programme of Uisce Éireann to improve wastewater treatment capacity and meet best practice in managing its existing infrastructure. Last week, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage published a sectoral plan for water services and water quality. This includes record investment of €12.2 billion, largely allocated to Uisce Éireann to support the delivery of the additional water services capacity required to deliver the Government's housing plan and to improve water quality. This investment will help to deliver the Government water action plan, Ireland's roadmap to protect and restore our rivers, lakes, estuaries, coastal waters and ground waters.

Last year, the Government also published *Water and Agriculture: A Collaborative Approach*, and this report sets out measures to address the twin objectives of improving water quality and demonstrating that a robust case exists for the maintenance of a derogation for Ireland from certain aspects of the EU nitrates directive. In October, the Minister, Deputy Browne, published a draft nitrates action programme, which will form the basis of Ireland's ongoing discussions with the European Commission on a new derogation. The Minister has invited submissions from the public on its contents. A public consultation process on the strategic environmental assessment and appropriate assessment of the plan is also live, with submissions invited by 1 December.

European Union environmental Commissioner Roswall visited Ireland last week and met with the Minister, Deputy Heydon, as well as farmers and other stakeholders to discuss Ireland's application for a derogation and the importance of its continuation to Ireland's outdoor, grass-based livestock systems. The visit provided an opportunity for the Commissioner to visit a farm in County Kildare to see at first hand the efforts towards improving water quality and to engage with public representatives and stakeholders. Discussions with the Commission are ongoing to find an approach that facilitates the continuation of high-quality dairy and beef production by derogation farmers while ensuring sufficient protection for the quality and ecological status of our rivers, lakes and estuaries.

An Ceann Comhairle: We have 16 speakers. They have a minute each and I ask them to be as concise as possible. I call on Deputy Cleere.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: Last week, we saw serious disruption for towns and villages like Thomastown, Graiguenamanagh, Inistioge and Freshford, which are currently faced with significant backlogs for the implementation of effective flood relief schemes. I acknowledge there has been extensive consultations with local communities to achieve a solution that satisfies those communities and the needs of the local environment. However, the delivery has been delayed far too long. The conversation needs to move to action. It is all about implementation and delivering effective solutions for these communities at risk.

Let me give the Taoiseach a brief example. In Graiguenamanagh, my own town, there was a major flood issue in 2016. In 2018, funding was announced. In 2020, a design team was assigned. We are now in November 2025, and we have not even gone for planning permission yet. It is anticipated that the planning process will take two years. Construction will then start

at the end of 2028, with a two-year timeframe for completion. That just gives an example of the length of time these projects are taking.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has five seconds.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I understand that fish life is important, but what about the lives of Johnny and Mary, living in a house that has been flooded? The people in Freshford, Graiguenamanagh, Thomastown and Inistioge are going to bed at night from November to March wondering if their houses will be flooded come the morning.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: The injustice to these communities has gone on far too long.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Farmers are very keen to improve water quality. The recent oversubscription of environmental schemes reflects that appetite. Our grass-based system differs very much from what would be found across Europe. Family farms right across Ireland need to be able to plan for the year ahead and the nitrates derogation is very much part of the planning for the day-to-day operation of the farms. Farmers are really keen to know where they stand and they are going to need to know that for the start of the year. Retaining this derogation is vital. I very much impressed this on Commissioner Roswall during her recent visit to Ireland. She did acknowledge that progress had been made but she was also keen to see that there would be ongoing progress and improvements. Will the Minister and the Government be able to win support across EU colleagues to ensure the derogation will be retained? Additionally, farmers are also being told they are not alone in respect of improving water quality. They are keen to pull their weight and they will, but they also need to know that municipal waste inputs and Irish Water will also pull their weight.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Two years ago, I raised with the Taoiseach a repeated problem of sewage overflowing in Dodder Valley Park beside Balrothery weir. When there is heavy rainfall, the sewage shoots out beside a residential area in a beautiful park. It is still happening. It happened again last weekend with the heavy rainfall. In March 2024, I got a reply from Uisce Éireann accepting that it was impacting the environment and posing a risk to public health through flooding. At that time, it said it was at stage 3 of a four-stage process and it would have options and costings in quarter 4 of 2024. In August 2024, I followed up on this matter. I got a response in February of this year, over six months after the promised commencement of stage 4. The company apologised for the delay and said it was concluding stage 3 and moving into stage 4. I have followed up again with the company. It is simply unacceptable that the health of residents and park users is put at risk and that the deadlines for action keep getting delayed. Does the Taoiseach agree that Irish Water, Uisce Éireann, must act?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I would like to use this time to remember Chloe McGee, Chloe Hipson, Dylan Commins, Shay Duffy and Alan McCluskey. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a n-anamacha dílse. We think of their families and friends. It is going to be a very difficult time

over the next couple of days for communities right across counties Louth, Monaghan and Meath. I have been in O'Fiaich College and DkIT and seen huge supports for students and staff. It was the same in the Sean McDermotts club last night also. This is the level of resilience we will see. My thoughts go out to those affected by what has been an absolutely desperate tragedy. I also think of those injured. We hope for a speedy recovery. Beyond that, we think of the emergency services, whose members saw things nobody should have to see.

An Ceann Comhairle: Go raibh maith agat. I appreciate that yesterday's proceedings overtook us and we did not get to pay our due respects. What the Deputy said goes for us all. I thank him. I call on Deputy Conor D. McGuinness.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Go raibh maith agat. I want to raise with the Taoiseach the situation of two households living in Lyre, Mahon Bridge, County Waterford. They live in two adjoining council-built cottages constructed in 1949. At the time, the local authority installed a water supply from an open stream flowing off the Comeragh Mountains, and that is still their only source of water 75 years later. It is untreated and coming from a roadside stream. The water runs black and is full of silt, filth and worse. Each of the men has pulled dead rats and badgers from it on occasion. The supply is so unsafe that the health authorities have warned them not to even wash their hands with it. I have raised this directly with the Minister for housing and with Uisce Éireann. A brand new public mains runs just 500 m from the townland of Fewes across from these men's homes. Connecting these homes would require just a short bore under a regional road but Uisce Éireann has refused to fund it and instead told residents to apply for a private well grant. Unfortunately, the land in the area they live in is not suitable for a private well and they have that on good authority from several professional well drillers. Will the Taoiseach please act in the interests of these two households and instruct Uisce Éireann? I will show the Taoiseach, very briefly, a bottle with a sample of water they provided me with recently. It illustrates the depth of what their public water supply is.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, we do not allow displays of such nature but I understand it is your first time. I call Deputy Barry Heneghan.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I have raised the issue of water quality in Dublin Bay time and time again. I am not going to just single out the north side. This is a north and south Dublin problem. We saw the rain that fell at the weekend. We have all seen the drone footage of the bay being polluted. I have swimmers whose only way of socialising is getting into that water and having the chats but the E. coli levels are not acceptable at the moment. In Dublin Bay and with the way the plumes work with the tides, the north side is affected worse when there is a high level. Some of these constituents are here today with the visual artists from Palestine who raised money for Artists Without Borders in Clontarf Castle. They are going to be swimming in that water. These are the people who need this water protected. We see in Dún Laoghaire that oysters are being brought in to treat the water. Can we get that on the north side as well? I have a mandate for that. It was on my four-pager. Oysters are great natural filters of E. coli and other contaminants.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The EU drinking water regulations came into effect in Irish law in March 2023.

The Taoiseach: Sorry, the which?

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The EU drinking water regulations. I raise it in the context of the ongoing intolerable situation where 500 households in Ballycroy and Inishbiggle, in County Mayo are left without water for days on end. The way to solve this is to allow some flexibility in the multi-annual water programme to enable moneys that have been returned to the Department, or are to be returned to the Department, from one scheme can be reallocated to another scheme that desperately needs it. There is a gravity-fed group scheme in Ballycroy and it is run by volunteers. What has happened is some of the volunteers have passed away so they are trying to reconfigure the volunteers in the parish to be able to apply for the necessary funding. There is a way to solve this. Mayo County Council applied for emergency funding earlier this year but was unsuccessful so we need emergency funding and some flexibility around the framework.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I also wish to raise the issue of water quality in Dublin Bay, for the umpteenth time. Every time there is a massive downpour like the ones we had very recently, rainfall water or stormwater mixes with sewage and pours into Dublin Bay. The pumping station at the west pier in Dún Laoghaire pumps stuff out to Ringsend but Ringsend does not have the capacity. It overflows, goes into Dublin Bay and then water quality is very seriously undermined.

I was looking at a question I asked back in 2019, and it was not the first time. Even then, the Government was promising it was going to upgrade Ringsend. That was 2019 and it still has not been done. It still happens every time it rains. It is unbelievable. When is the Government finally going to make sure that the upgrade at Ringsend and the rehabilitation of our decrepit water infrastructure, which is jeopardising water quality, swimmers and health and causing all sorts of bad, adverse problems, is going to be finally addressed by this Government?

Deputy Liam Quaide: I know the Taoiseach will reject the claim that rural Ireland is being left behind by his Government but many residents of the village of Ballyhooly in my constituency beg to differ. They have good reason to. The very basic need for a consistent supply of water to drink, bathe in or use in appliances such as dishwashers and showers has been denied to them for many years. Residents in Ballyhooly have to deal with extremely low water pressure alternating with a non-existent supply of water for prolonged periods. This has hit people with chronic illness, disability and age-related care needs the hardest. It has also severely impacted the local school and farming community. In recent months, there has been a reprieve from a full-scale outage but water pressure remains very low and there is no clear timeframe on the extent of works required to resolve the issue. Short-term fixes will no longer cut it for Ballyhooly. When are we going to see movement on this essential project that will allow the village to thrive?

Deputy Erin McGreehan: Along with my constituency colleague, I want to pay respects to those poor five souls, the young people who lost their lives in the car accident at the weekend: Chloe McGee, Shay Duffy, Alan McCluskey, Dylan Commings and Chloe Hipson. It is a desperate loss for their families, friends, work colleagues and everybody. I only hope their families can find the strength to walk along the pain and agony that comes upon a family when

they lose someone so tragically. It seems almost futile and frivolous to mention it during a discussion on water quality.

I have raised on several occasions the state of the water and rivers around Dundalk Bay. Research was published recently in a local newsletter spelling out clearly issues around repeated sewage discharge and wastewater plants operating beyond capacity, with visible waste near Blackrock and protected habitats being steadily damaged. People are seeing it, smelling it and living beside it. As the Taoiseach knows, I raise these concerns regularly and I get very dismissive responses from Irish Water. I often feel almost gaslit by them. I hope that when the Cabinet committee is working on water quality with the infrastructure Department that it will consider fast-tracking projects to make sure our water quality is up to standard.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Keeping the lights and on and water in the taps is surely one of the basic responsibilities of any administration but we live in a country where that is simply not happening. For a country where it seldom stops raining, it hardly goes a week before there is a water or hosepipe ban in this country. In my county of Meath, things are out of control currently. As we speak, a burst mains causing major disruption in Navan. There are multiple outages every week in the system in Enfield. People in Trim can hardly turn the water taps on because of discoloured water or bans on water being used at certain times of the day, etc. Councillor Dave Boyne and I have had to campaign to get water trucks to bring water to other towns in the county. The Taoiseach talks about massive investment, which is welcome, but it is not making a difference on the ground because there are major problems for Irish Water to deliver on infrastructure in terms of planning, permits and tendering etc. When will those be fixed so we can get the system fixed?

Deputy Paul Lawless: I have raised this many times previously but the water quality in Clew Bay, County Mayo is being massively damaged at the moment. Raw sewage from Newport town is collected and stored in containers. When the high tide comes in to Clew Bay, it washes raw sewage on to the shoreline. Everyone is in agreement that a water treatment plant is needed for the town and it has been in the planning process for decades. There are significant issues in relation to the Maritime Area Regulatory Authority, MARA, which is not meeting its statutory timelines, and indeed Uisce Éireann. It appears that what is happening is a letter-writing club between the two organisations, with no progress being made. I have raised this previously and I ask the Taoiseach to intervene. We cannot have critical infrastructure delayed for decades as a result. I have raised this with Uisce Éireann and MARA but it is time the Government intervened and injected some urgency into this.

The Taoiseach: I thank all of the Deputies. A comprehensive number spoke in respect of the responsibilities of Irish Water, particularly in terms of wastewater treatment plants and flood relief schemes.

Deputy 'Chap' Cleere raised the issue of a series of flood relief schemes in his constituency. I do not know why the planning process should take two years and that is something we need to analyse further but measures will come to Government in respect of critical infrastructure in the next number of weeks. Flood relief schemes are taking too long because the urgency is very real. Given the worsening climate, we have more frequent storms and rainfall that is heavier and comes in short bursts and that is creating huge pressure on our systems. I have

been to many flooding scenes where the devastation is appalling and negatively impacts on households and businesses. We then have consequential compensation schemes and everything we try to do to alleviate the pressure but there is nothing worse than being the victim of a flooding incident. I will take a look at those schemes and talk to the Minister of State with responsibility for the OPW, Deputy Moran, to see how we can accelerate this. We are also looking at a critical infrastructure Bill and will see whether we can include wastewater and flood relief schemes.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan raised the derogation and I fully agree with him that retaining the derogation is vital for farm families and for the food production system and the dairy industry. We need a sustainable farming industry but farmers are working with us on various water improvement schemes under the European Union framework and have been doing a lot to measure and assess this work. I have had discussions with the President of the European Commission explaining the unique position in Ireland because we have a pasture-based system that is outdoors more than indoors. Most other European systems are indoors. The Minister for agriculture, Deputy Heydon, has been working with Commissioner Roswall, who came to Ireland last week. She met farmers in Kildare and saw first-hand the measures we are taking to make farming and agriculture more sustainable. We know farmers do need to know. I take the Deputy's point in respect of other contributors to waste and I met representatives of Irish Water recently in the context of the Cabinet subcommittee meeting. Representatives from the Environmental Protection Agency were there as well. In my view, Irish Water has to get it right in respect of its own actions. It cannot contribute negatively to water quality, being a water body itself, nor can local authorities. They also certainly need to step up to the plate in protecting our waterways.

Deputy Murphy raised the issue of Balrothery estate in terms of sewerage overflow. Again, I will talk to Irish Water in respect of where that is at. We have allocated unprecedented resources to Irish Water as a result of the national development plan and we have given it multi-annual funding. Irish Water knows what its funding will be for the next five years, which should enable staff to get on, to plan and do things. There is a lot of work to be done. Our population is growing exponentially, and has grown during the past two decades. That is creating pressure on water services. What will be important as well, for those who correctly referenced wastewater treatment plants, is that we have to try to create a narrative and a consensus in society not to object to wastewater treatment plants, to their upgrade or to supply projects. An awful lot of these projects are getting snarled up in planning and being delayed for far too long. What is happening in the preparation of the schemes, stage III to stage IV, is that everybody is dotting the i's and crossing the t's because they are anticipating an objection or a judicial review so they want to make sure they can be resilient in the face of a court case being heard or a judicial review of a decision taken during the planning process. What we are getting is a very slow process in getting projects through. We will have to deal with that and the Government is determined to deal with that because we have to push ahead. Even on a small issue like apartment guidelines, and we had it earlier this afternoon during Leaders' Questions, we get public representatives judicially reviewing regulation. Then people complain about things not moving. We cannot have it our own way, every way, but that is a general comment on where we are and it is important.

Deputies Ó Murchú and McGreehan correctly articulated all of our shock and horror at the devastating accident in Louth. Five young lives were lost. They were going out for a nice

evening. We are all parents and we are all afraid of something like that happening when our young people go out and so on and we all want them to come home. On this occasion, they did not come home and the impacts on the parents are beyond comprehension. It is very difficult for them. We hope the beautiful memories they had with their young children will sustain them in the time ahead. I thank the Deputies for raising this in the House.

In regard to Deputy McGuinness's contribution, I will talk to Irish Water. I cannot get involved in every single case. This relates to two houses. Surely the county council and Irish Water should knock heads together and get that issue sorted if the water mains are 500 m away.

Deputy Heneghan has left the Chamber. He has gone with the swimmers; I would say they are gone too. Deputy Boyd Barrett raised the issue of Dublin Bay as well. It is a very serious issue. E.coli levels are too high and when there is heavy rain, people cannot swim. That is not satisfactory. I am back to the issue that we need wastewater treatment plants. The whole Dublin water project is being judicially reviewed. The Arklow wastewater treatment plant was conceived at the same time as the Dublin scheme. It has opened - I opened it - and the Dublin scheme has not even gotten off the ground. There are other projects of that kind we need to get off the ground and to get going. The points were well made by Deputies Boyd Barrett and Heneghan in that regard.

In terms of the drinking water regulation and the 500 households, again it is a specific issue and I will talk to Irish Water in respect of that.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: That is not Irish Water

The Taoiseach: Is it a group scheme?

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: It is a group scheme.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy wants flexibility in the multi-annual funding. I will talk to the Minister to see whether there is anything that can be done there or not.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Thank you.

The Taoiseach: There is a combination of issues in terms of the reconstitution of the group of volunteers. Deputy Boyd Barrett raised the issue that Ringsend does not have capacity. We have been engaging and have appointed-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It has been going on for years.

The Taoiseach: I know and we have allocated billions of euro now so hopefully we can get it done.

Deputy Quaide raised the issue of Ballyhooly and the basic quality of water. I have spoken to Irish Water representatives about the Cork situation more generally in terms of water quality issues and they are working on that.

Deputy McGreehan again raised the issue of habitats and Dundalk Bay. Again, I asked Irish Water to engage with public representatives. All State agencies should engage with public representatives in a respectful and engaging way and should give proper responses. The State funds these agencies. In many ways they are created as agencies to get things done but that should not absolve the agencies then of their responsibilities to communicate to democratically elected Deputies and Senators or indeed councillors on the local authorities as well. I will have a look at what the story is in Dundalk Bay.

Deputy Tóibín raised the issue of Trim again in terms of keeping the taps on and water quality. Again, it relates to wider issues. They had the plan, we have now funded the plan, and the issue now is getting things done as quickly as we can.

Deputy Lawless raised Clew Bay and Newport. Again, it is about getting the infrastructure in place as quickly as we can. I will relay all of those to Irish Water for a response.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. We will move to the next questions, which is the grouping of Question Nos. 17 to 31, inclusive, to ask the Taoiseach for a report on the work of the shared island unit. We have 17 minutes and 14 seconds left.

Cross-Border Co-operation

17. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Taoiseach for a report on the work of the shared island unit. [48516/25]

18. **Deputy Erin McGreehan** asked the Taoiseach for a report on the work of the shared island unit. [48519/25]

19. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Taoiseach for a report on the work of the shared island unit. [50000/25]

20. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach for a report on the work of the shared island unit. [56576/25]

21. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach for a report on the work of the shared island unit. [56979/25]

22. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach for a report on the work of the shared island unit. [56997/25]

23. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach for a report on the work of the shared island unit. [57003/25]

24. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach for a report on the work of the shared island Unit. [61452/25]

25. **Deputy Michael Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit in quantifying the economic and social dimensions of greater North-South integration (details supplied). [62809/25]

26. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach for a report on the work of the shared island unit. [63178/25]

27. **Deputy Shane Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach for a report on the work of the shared island unit. [63180/25]

28. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach for a report on the work of the shared island unit. [63429/25]

29. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach for a report on the work of the shared island unit. [63463/25]

30. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit. [63512/25]

31. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the work of the shared island unit. [63528/25]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 17 to 31, inclusive, together.

Our programme for Government sets out an ambitious agenda for building our shared island. Yesterday, the Government made a major funding commitment of over €50 million through our shared island fund to ten new programmes.

We are investing for the future to improve people's lives and strengthen connections across the island of Ireland. We are moving forward with €14 million for a major new shared island media initiative by Coimisiún na Meán, delivering on our programme for Government commitment to resource schemes to encourage cross-Border journalism on an ongoing basis;

A sum of €5.9 million is being allocated to the fire and emergency services from North and South to deepen their co-operation to enhance capacity and training on management of flooding events

and on search and rescue operations. There will be €6 million for the new shared home place programme, which will foster a sustained, broad engagement with all communities on this island and with our diaspora on the island of Ireland's diverse heritage, and how this can shape our shared future. Funding of €14.5 million is being allocated for an expanded creative Ireland shared island programme and arts projects. There will be a €1.8 million contribution to the next phase of the all-Ireland pollinator plan to protect the island's unique biodiversity. Ministers are also working with confirmed shared island fund resourcing to establish a new air link between Derry and Dublin next year; support development of new cross-Border and Border region greenway routes; deepen our co-operation with Northern Ireland Executive counterparts on tackling bovine TB, the information service for cross-Border workers and

commercialising research. The Government also yesterday, as part of the national development plan review, published our shared island investment priorities across virtually all sectors out to 2035, backed by our shared island fund and other resourcing.

The iconic Narrow Water Bridge and Ulster Canal restoration projects are forging ahead. Next year, Government resourcing will enable commencement of construction of a new teaching building at Ulster University in Derry and continue the transformative hourly frequency Dublin to Belfast rail service. In April, I launched a new phase of my Department's joint research programme with the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, with a focus on strategic policy and co-operation considerations for the island, and research projects for 2025-26 are under way. This includes a new annual report series by the ESRI assessing economic trends across the island of Ireland, which will be published next month.

Through our shared island Initiative, the Government will continue to invest in strategic all-island co-operation and deepen our partnership with the Executive and UK Government as we work every day to build reconciliation between the different traditions of this island.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: The shared island unit has real potential and has had real results and benefits for County Louth and the country, as the Taoiseach said, in terms of the arts, emergency services and biodiversity. Yesterday's announcement that Dundalk Institute of Technology, DKIT, will gain university status alongside Queen's University Belfast is incredibly exciting news. It will be transformative for the north east, and will be a really complementary match-up with Queen's University as well. This is a huge opportunity for the shared island unit to invest in the future, to invest in our young people and to invest in our economy and our industry.

I wish to ask the Taoiseach about the investment in people and about deeper health care co-operation with our neighbours in the North. There have to be synergies and opportunities there that we can look at with Daisy Hill Hospital in Newry and even further afield in Dundalk. We can start looking at how we can look after the communities in the Cooley Peninsula, Carlingford and Omeath, and how we can reflect this in our usual daily life and health care. They do not match up at the minute and we can do more.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank the Taoiseach for the reply and in particular the announcement of €50 million for the new projects, which is very welcome. We need to see more of the practical people-focused projects like those. The Taoiseach mentioned the Dublin-Derry link among other initiatives. The Enterprise rail link between Dublin and Belfast has proven very popular. I ask that it be considered to extend that further to support the night-time economy of both cities. That would be a very important move.

In the same spirit, the announcement by Minister for higher education, Deputy Lawless, of a major new partnership between Dundalk IT and Queen's University, establishing DKIT as a University College of Queen's University is a landmark development for higher education and for the Dublin-Belfast corridor. Will the Taoiseach set out how these shared island allocations and DKIT-Queen's partnership will be aligned as part of a cohort plan for the Dublin-Belfast corridor? Will the Taoiseach confirm that the necessary policy and legislative frameworks will be brought to Government early in 2026 so that students, staff and local communities can see these benefits on the ground as quickly as possible?

Deputy Paul Murphy: I will quote the Taoiseach who told an international audience at COP30:

The science is undeniable. Temperatures are rising, and the clock is ticking. If we are not prepared to tell our citizens the truth about this, we are failing them, and this planet, in the most profound way.

Has the Taoiseach tried telling the truth to the big dairy farmers and the big dairy processors who are driving up carbon emissions and are polluting our waterways, North and South? I have raised the issue previously in terms of Lough Neagh. Lough Derg is the latest of our lakes to turn neon green, a 41st shade of green that the Taoiseach will not be plámáising world leaders about. The main cause is nutrient pollution from agriculture, accelerated by the nitrates derogation. When will the Taoiseach tell the truth that environmental protection and intensive for-profit animal agriculture are incompatible, that we need to reduce the number of dairy cattle, that we need to compensate farmers with a herd reduction scheme and that the nitrates derogation must go?

An Ceann Comhairle: I will just pause the clock for a minute. We have only eight minutes left in this session and we cannot go over time, I am afraid. I do not have that discretion for Taoiseach's Questions. I will have to limit each Member's contribution to 30 seconds give the Taoiseach an opportunity to respond.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I would like to bring up the fabulous news about the partnership between DKIT and Queen's University. We are talking about a greater level of provision of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and an innovation and research hub to be based in Dundalk. We know that this can definitely develop the Dublin-Belfast corridor. There is a necessity to follow through with legislative support. Beyond that, this could be part of a vital shared island project. I would like to know what will happen in that regard.

Deputy Michael Murphy: The question of greater North-South integration and any future constitutional change carries profound economic implications. It is really important that we approach this debate with honesty and clarity. Further integration will require significant investment, aligning public services, connecting infrastructure, integrating health and education and ensuring social welfare compatibility. If we are to maintain public confidence, we need transparent, independent economic analysis. We need to be honest about the challenges and the opportunities.

Deputy Liam Quaide: In recent times we have seen an alarming escalation in racist violence against immigrants and minority communities both North and South of this island. According to An Garda Síochána statistics, race crimes and related incidents rose by 24% between 2021 and 2024. There were similar increases in such crimes in the North between July 2024 and June of this year. Amnesty International has described this period in the North as "a year of hate and fear". There is a striking similarity of experiences of minorities both North and South in respect of these increased threats. There is also clear potential to collaborate on an all-island basis. What initiatives are under way or planned to help support integration through communities North and South to help them learn from each other in terms of best practice?

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Yesterday's announcement is very welcome in terms of the infrastructure foundations put in place to harness the economic potential of the shared island. Part of that, which we have discussed in this House, is the role of the all-island labour market and the need for focus and skills. I would love to hear from the Taoiseach about what engagement is happening with the Northern Ireland Executive with regard to building up the SME sector across both sides of the island. They will be the fabric that knit the economic fabric of this island together in creating the shared island and creating a shared and united future for all. What schemes are being put in place to incentivise and promote that?

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I commend the work of Dublin City University, Aberdeen University and University College Dublin on the constitutional deliberations from grassroots that is being done by Dr. Shelley Deane, Professor Joanne McEvoy and Professor Jennifer Todd. I raise this because this work has been done with focus groups in Mayo, Bellaghy, Longford, Cookstown and Monaghan. The shared island unit, which is very much welcome, is doing work on women and the Constitution. I ask that the unit uses this academic work to underpin what the unit is going to do. The credibility of the work the academics are doing would really carry this forward. Why has it not got academic underpinning?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Across Britain and the North of Ireland people are being arrested, prosecuted and, in some cases, imprisoned because they support Palestine Action, on the basis that the British Government has designated Palestine Action, a group campaigning against British complicity with the genocide that Israel is committing, as a terrorist organisation. It is absolutely outrageous. There will be a protest this Saturday in Belfast as people stand in solidarity with it. Sally Rooney has written an article in *The Guardian* this week about prisoners being close enough to being tortured in British prisons who are in prison awaiting trial on this. Will the Taoiseach speak out against the British Government's outrageous decision to designate protesting against genocide as somehow terrorism?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: BBC Northern Ireland runs a podcast called "Borderline". The podcast is part of the significant debate on Irish unity that is happening across the country. One of the themes of that podcast is the fact that the Irish Government is not participating in that discussion. Many voices have stated there is a serious reluctance from the Government to even discuss the issue of Irish unity. The debate has moved on. People North and South are now talking about what planning and preparation is necessary for the referendum to be held. Brexit shows the danger of holding a referendum without doing the planning and preparation in the first place.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. I call Deputy Lawless.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: This morning the BBC mentioned that the Irish Government is the only place where this planning and preparation could happen.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Lawless.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: When will the Taoiseach step up to the plate?

Deputy Paul Lawless: I want to raise concerns about the Supreme Court ruling in Britain on religious education and collective worship in the North of Ireland. Aontú is a pluralist republican party. I believe it is really important that all parents can choose the ethos of the school they wish to send their children to. Catholic schools played a significant role in the lives of nationalist families. They were a safe place for Catholics in the North and promoted the Irish language and games.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Will the Taoiseach engage with his counterpart-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you.

Deputy Paul Lawless: -----in Britain to ensure we can retain our Catholic schools in the North? Schools can be an inclusive-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. Your time is up. If you want a response-----

Deputy Paul Lawless: -----place and a religious place.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call the Taoiseach, who has limited time I am afraid.

The Taoiseach: I thank all of the Deputies for raising important issues. Deputy McGreehan in the first instance correctly identified that we are delivering results in respect of the shared island unit. It is practical and impactful. It is not about rhetoric. We have had rhetoric for 60 or 70 years and longer. It is about getting things done and delivering, and that is what we are doing. I take the point the Deputy made in respect of Dundalk IT and Queen's University. That is a very exciting development. It is a huge opportunity. Both institutions have to work now, as Deputy Ó Murchú said, to get the heads of agreement worked out and proper understanding for the benefit of students and staff. Deputy McGreehan has been a strong advocate of this. Deputy Ó Murchú has raised it as well. I have made it clear to the Minister, Deputy James Lawless, that I am supportive. I have no doubt that if the shared island unit gets a concrete proposal, it can respond positively. Obviously there is a lot more detailed work to be done. We need to do this properly, which is why the fund goes out to 2035. We do not need to rush things. We need to get them done properly and effectively so it is informed.

Deputy Devlin used the phrase "practical people-focused projects". This sums it up. No other Government since the foundation of the State has invested in Northern Ireland like this Government has. The shared island unit is a unique departure. It speaks far more than a lot of the rhetoric. I have been reading a lot about the 1940s, the 1950s and the 1960s. Some pretty good histories have been published recently on partition. Some good work has been done on all of this. Throughout the decades people spoke about four green fields, unity and all the rest of it but very little happened. We have come through 30 years of horrific violence, which was unnecessary in my view. We have an opportunity now. People are entitled to their constitutional positions. There is no issue there. There is nothing stopping any political party,

by the way, from advancing a detailed blueprint. I have yet to see one. There is nothing stopping any political party doing this but we can come back to it on another day.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Government is the best place to do it.

The Taoiseach: These questions are on the shared island unit so I will keep it there.

Deputy Devlin raised Dundalk IT and Queen's University and I have explained this. With regard to Dublin and Belfast and the night-time economies, we are very anxious to really develop the Dublin-Belfast economic corridor. The councils are good. I get the point on the night-time economies. I will look at it in terms of what we can do.

To respond to Deputy Paul Murphy, COP is a bit outside the shared island unit but he got it in. When he speaks about "the big dairy farmers" - he is classic at this - he is pretending that medium-sized and small dairy farmers would be okay under him. What he is saying would wipe out dairy farming entirely. This is what he is saying and he should be honest about it. The Government has made its position clear on this.

I agree 100% with Deputy Michael Murphy that we need evidence-based, informed and objective research and data. The shared island unit has a separate strand for big funding where we commission the ESRI to do major research. It did one on school completion North and South. The North was higher. We now have an initiative under the shared island unit on healthcare.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: It has done economic studies as well as studies on primary care and health. Very good studies are being done by the ESRI and there will be more. More data will be coming next month. Research is also being done by the National Economic and Social Council.

To respond to Deputy Quaide, we are doing work in the area he mentioned but there is potential for more work if we can get a viable project. He is correct that attacks have increased. People are living in fear and this is a big concern.

To respond to Deputy Shane Moynihan, work has been done under the shared island unit in terms of enterprise centres and on SMEs. Deputy Moynihan can look at InterTradeIreland's project under the shared island unit, which I launched recently. Tremendous work has been done joining companies North and South together using shared island unit funding.

To respond to Deputy Conway-Walsh, there is commissioned research from the ESRI on economics. The shared island unit is outside of the constitutional issue and will remain so to try to get buy-in from all communities without prejudice. This is one of the reasons it has buy-in across the board from all communities and traditions.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I am trying to avoid reinventing the wheel.

The Taoiseach: Yes, but we do not want to undermine and kill what is a good initiative.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: It is not-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We are out of time.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Boyd Barrett raised what is a separate issue really. I would disagree with Deputy-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is not a separate issue. People in the North are being arrested.

The Taoiseach: I cannot account for the British-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach, we are out of time. That concludes Questions to the Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: I will come back to Deputy Boyd Barrett another day on that.

Teachtaireacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad

An Ceann Comhairle: Seanad Éireann has passed the Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Bill 2025, without amendment.

Estimates for Public Services 2025: Message from Select Committee

An Ceann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Social Protection, Rural and Community Development has completed its consideration of the following Supplementary Estimates for Public Services for the service of the year ending 31 December 2025: Votes 37 and 42.

Post-European Council Meeting: Statements

The Taoiseach: I attended a meeting of the European Council on 23 October in Brussels. The substantial items on the agenda included support for Ukraine, the situation in the Middle East, European security and defence, competitiveness and the green and digital transitions. Leaders also had a first strategic discussion on housing and the Euro Summit. Migration was also discussed, as well as Moldova following its recent parliamentary elections. I will deal with Ukraine, the Middle East, European security and defence, housing and competitiveness. The Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, will later speak to all other issues.

Almost four years after Russia launched its full-scale and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, President Putin repeatedly shows us that he is intent on disregarding alternatives to his chosen path of needless and brutal war. Support for Ukraine in the face of this aggression continues to be a top priority for the European Union and was a key focus of the October European Council. President Zelenskyy, who attended in person, briefed us on the current situation and

recent developments in Ukraine, including Russia's escalation in strikes on civilians and civilian infrastructure. These attacks have continued since.

I and my fellow European Union leaders reconfirmed the European Union's unwavering support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders. The European Council recommitted the European Union to providing, in co-ordination with like-minded partners and allies, comprehensive political, financial, economic, humanitarian, military and diplomatic support to Ukraine and its people. The European Union has provided substantial assistance to Ukraine to enable it to defend itself against Russia's ongoing aggression and to support the people of Ukraine to withstand the terrible effects of Russia's indiscriminate attacks.

Ukraine requires our help now even more urgently and at an even greater scale. With this in mind, leaders discussed how the EU can help to step up military and other supports for Ukraine, and apply greater pressure on Russia to agree to an unconditional ceasefire and engage in a meaningful peace process. The European Council also considered how the European Union can contribute to security guarantees for Ukraine as part of any future peace agreement, working with the United States and other partners as part of the coalition of the willing. The European Council also welcomed the adoption of the 19th package of European Union sanctions against Russia. Our sanctions are having an impact - it is important to say that - and we must continue to maintain this pressure on Russia. Russia should be held accountable for its actions and should have to pay for the destruction it has caused. There must be an economic cost to such flagrant violations of international law. Such a cost should also act as a deterrent to Russia and other countries contemplating any future violation of the UN Charter and international law.

To this end, the European Council discussed the further use of immobilised Russian assets as well as their use to provide reparation loans to Ukraine to finance its needs at this critical point in its fight against Russia's aggression. Ireland supports the European Union's initiative for reparation loans. We agree that it must be in line with applicable laws and should be undertaken in co-ordination with international partners. As agreed by the European Council, the European Commission has presented options on how best to meet Ukraine's financing needs in a sustainable and comprehensive way. These options will now be fully considered by EU member states with a view to reaching a decision on the way forward at the meeting of the European Council in December.

The European Council also called for further measures to disrupt the operation of Russia's shadow fleet, which is helping Russia to circumvent sanctions and finance its war. Action in this area is also important to address the significant environmental and security risks the shadow fleet poses. Ireland supports European Union efforts to further counter the shadow fleet. Ireland has always been a strong supporter of Ukraine's ambition of EU membership and I continue to advocate at European level for progress on Ukraine's EU accession. EU membership must be part of a comprehensive package of security guarantees for Ukraine. I am deeply frustrated by Hungary's blocking of progress in Ukraine's European Union accession process. Ireland will continue to work with our partners in the EU to find a way to unblock and accelerate this process to match the ambition and efforts of Ukraine in implementing the required reforms.

Turning to the Middle East, the European Council met against the backdrop of a new era of hope for the people of Gaza. It is a fragile ceasefire, but a ceasefire nonetheless. European Union leaders welcomed the agreement reached on the first phase of the comprehensive plan to end the Gaza conflict put forward by President Trump and commended the diplomatic efforts led by the United States and the role played by the regional mediators, which the European Union has consistently supported. European leaders recalled the high-level conference for the peaceful settlement of the question of Palestine and the implementation of the two-state solution and reiterated the European Union's commitment to international law and to a comprehensive, just and lasting peace, based on the two-State solution.

An important aspect of our discussions was the role that the European Union can play to contribute to peace efforts and to actively engage with partners on the next steps. These will include supporting the rapid, safe and unhindered delivery of humanitarian aid in co-ordination with international partners, the reintroduction of the European Union's border assistance mission to the Rafah crossing point, EUBAM Rafah, and the European Union police mission for the Palestinian territories. These are important contributions to Gaza's stabilisation, transitional governance, recovery and reconstruction. The European Union's support for the Palestinian Authority is crucial. European Union leaders called on Israel to release withheld clearance revenues necessary to ensure that the proper functioning of the Palestinian Authority and the delivery of essential services to the population happens. In this regard, Ireland has joined the emergency coalition for the financial sustainability of the Palestinian Authority and will attend the first meeting of the Palestine Donor Group later this week. The European Council also stressed the importance of de-escalation in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and called for an end to settler violence and the expansion of settlements, which are illegal under international law, and an end to Israel's military operation. It called for an end to all of those. We also called on Israel to reverse the E1 settlement plan that further undermines the two-state solution. Ireland has been clear that the West Bank must be centrally considered as efforts continue to reach agreement on a durable peace plan with the implementation of the two-State solution at its core. We welcomed the inclusion of the developments in Lebanon and Syria in the European Council conclusions. Events in these countries challenge regional stability and require continued European focus.

The European Council reverted to the topic of European security and defence. President von der Leyen and High Representative Kallas presented the Commission's Preserving Peace - Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030. The main elements of the roadmap include addressing capability development through member states' capability coalitions, flagship projects, strengthening industrial capacities and supporting Ukraine's defence capabilities. The roadmap is an important contribution to enhance Europe's defence readiness to respond to real and emerging threats, not least from Russia. Ireland will continue to engage constructively in discussions around the priority capability areas that have been identified.

I made it clear that Ireland is determined to step up our own security, to confront new threats and to protect the well-being of our citizens and our economies. European countries, including Ireland, are investing more in their national security and defence capabilities. Each is doing so in a way that makes sense for its own particular situation, policy approach and the specific characteristics of the foreign policy of every member state. In Ireland's case, that is and will remain a policy of military neutrality. However, there are synergies that we can achieve through working together at EU level in a way that complements what we are doing at national

level. The international security environment continues to deteriorate and to be contested, dynamic and volatile. The EU is acting with greater decisiveness, ambition and speed to tackle the threats we face. Ireland must be a part of this process because it is in our interests to do so as an active member of the European Union and because such threats put at risk the values we hold dear as Europeans.

Following the debate in this House on the previous European Council meeting, I was somewhat concerned that Members opposite in this House accused Europe of warmongering and described Europe as having a military industrial complex. I could not comprehend such a detached view. The fear in European Union member states is a very real one. They really fear Russian aggression and Russian undermining of their political systems and their economies. We just have to look at what happened in Poland during the week, in terms of more arson attacks, hybrid attacks and so on.

Improving Europe's competitiveness is also crucial for our security and *vice versa*. The October European Council meeting set further important orientations on strengthening Europe's economic competitiveness and unlocking the full potential of the Single Market, including a particular focus on regulatory simplification. The European Council reaffirmed the urgent need to advance an ambitious and horizontally driven simplification and better regulation agenda at all levels, consistent with protecting high standards and the integrity of the Single Market. Leaders welcomed the progress achieved on the six omnibus simplification packages already presented by the Commission in the first half of the year, and called on the Council and the Parliament to swiftly conclude their work on the remaining elements. Leaders also called on the Commission to bring forward proposals across a range of specific areas. This includes proposing, without delay, an optional 28th company law regime, allowing companies to scale up, as well as further ambitious simplification packages in the financial services, transport, energy, digital and food safety areas. The European Council also called on the Commission to intensify efforts to stress-test the EU *acquis*, including exploring new proposals to streamline and accelerate planning and permitting procedures for infrastructure development.

I strongly welcome the broad-based political agreement we have established on the need for continued efforts at all levels to ensure a clear, simple and smart innovation- and SME-friendly regulatory framework. Leaders also held a strategic discussion on how to progress the green transition in a way that supports and drives European competitiveness. As I made clear during Ireland's national statement at COP30 in Belém, Brazil, climate change is no longer a distant threat - it is a daily reality and we are all feeling its consequences. I also expressed the serious concern that the spirit of common purpose is weakening. There are other threats and crises that can seem more pressing, including geopolitical turbulence, economic pressures, conflict and dislocations, but global temperatures are rising and the clock is ticking. Decarbonisation and sustainability are central to Ireland and the EU's competitiveness and the well-being of our people.

Following guidance provided by the European Council, an ambitious greenhouse gas reduction target for 2040 was agreed by environment Ministers ahead of COP30. These were difficult discussions and I welcome the fact the final agreement reflects the importance of food security, forestry, land use, renewable energy and a just transition, including energy affordability.

Meeting existing and future EU targets is very challenging but Ireland must continue to be part of that effort. At a global level, we will continue to provide climate finance and continue our support for small island developing states. I was delighted to announce at COP30 a new UNDP project office to be hosted in Dublin, dedicated to advancing sustainable finance.

For the first time ever, European Union leaders held a strategic discussion on housing. I welcome the opportunity for such a discussion as it reflects the challenges being experienced in many EU member states. While housing remains a national competence, there are steps we can take at EU level to better support member states in addressing the crisis. This includes the upcoming European Affordable Housing Plan, the aim of which is to support and complement member states in their efforts to address their respective housing challenges. We are managing our particular housing difficulties in a context of very strong population growth, rapid urbanisation, an infrastructure and housing supply deficit, as well as construction cost inflation and affordability challenges.

The Government's new housing plan, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities: An Action Plan on Housing Supply and Targeting Homelessness*, is ambitious. We are creating the conditions to enable a step-up in private sector delivery while trying to break down the barriers that are holding back construction; to support people directly in securing a home of their own; and to support renters and tackle homelessness. The challenges differ across EU member states with varying root causes. In the discussion among leaders, I stressed the point that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. I underlined that the European Affordable Housing Plan should have a strong focus on addressing affordability and viability challenges. Ireland's ranking is very high in terms of supply and delivery across Europe.

I strongly support the incorporation of affordable housing in the EU's simplification agenda to support the delivery of affordable housing. I would be in favour of a review of the impact of existing EU legislation and policies on housing delivery. There is also merit in a pan-European investment platform that would help to develop innovative funding methods for social and affordable housing providers, helping to attract private investment. I also called for stronger co-operation at EU level in the elimination of homelessness, which is a key national priority for Ireland. Leaders will return to many of these issues to assess progress and discuss further actions at future meetings of the European Council.

This meeting of the European Council was very busy, addressing many pressing issues that are of vital importance to our people and to the future of the European Union. As Taoiseach, and as a Government, we will continue to ensure that Ireland plays a very active and positive role at the heart of the European Union. This will take on even more significance as we take on the Presidency of the EU in the second half of 2026 when it will be our responsibility to drive this ambitious agenda.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I want to take the opportunity to condemn the Russian attack on Ukraine last night. The latest reports are that at least 20 people have been killed, including two children, in a Russian drone and missile attack on the western city of Ternopil that hit two blocks of flats. Another 66 people were injured, 16 of them were children, in one of the deadliest Russian attacks on western Ukraine since the full-scale war began in February 2022. Yesterday evening we had statements on Ukraine, in which I had the opportunity to outline in detail my views and position and those of my party on Ukraine. I will try to cover

some other issues today. For the record, I want to reiterate Sinn Féin's solidarity with the people of Ukraine in the face of Russia's brutal invasion of their country and condemn the attacks we have seen in the past 48 hours.

The scenes we are seeing from Sudan, in particular El Fasher, are horrifying and appalling. Tens of thousands of people are unaccounted for. We have seen huge numbers of civilian casualties as the RSF forces have gained control of the city and surrounding areas. I have been raising concerns for a number of months in the Dáil with the Tánaiste and the then Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Simon Harris, at the situation in El Fasher and Darfur, the inability to get humanitarian aid into the city and our concerns for the civilian population. This situation has since escalated very significantly and the world can no longer avert its eyes from what is happening in Sudan. Tens of thousands of people have reached safer places. However, tens of thousands of people are still unaccounted for in a city of about 100,000 people. There is huge concern as to their welfare. People were being cut down in the street and slaughtered in cold blood. This is one of the largest humanitarian crises in the world. More than a year and a half of siege warfare made this one of the most horrific places in the world and among the world's worst humanitarian crises.

The flow of weapons continues into Sudan in which the United Arab Emirates is complicit. There are credible reports that the United Arab Emirates is arming the RSF. The European Union has very strong connections and ties with the United Arab Emirates. The EU needs to step up and put pressure on the UAE to stop the flow of weapons into Sudan and to hold it to account for its complicity in this dreadful conflict.

On Palestine, we have just had a substantial debate on the Occupied Territories Bill. What we have witnessed in Gaza and in the West Bank is utterly horrifying. The widespread nature of severe malnutrition in Gaza and the effective starvation of much of the population, in particular children, has been nothing short of horrific, a living hell for the people of Gaza. It is worth highlighting once again that, unfortunately, at European Union level, we have seen how Ursula von der Leyen's unconditional and unqualified support for Benjamin Netanyahu at a pivotal point provided political cover for the genocidal destruction that followed. These partisan interventions have damaged the credibility of the EU. There is now a need for action. I welcome that more countries are now considering the suspension of the EU-Israel association agreement. That is the minimum the EU should be doing.

We are now at a point where the existence of the Palestinian people, in particular the ability to deliver an independent Palestine as part of a two-state solution, is very much at stake. There was much discussion in the Taoiseach's speech in regard to the two-state solution and the formulas of words that exist. However, we have had 20 years of formulas of words, positions, statements and so on, and all the while the West Bank has become nearly like Swiss cheese in terms of the extent to which it has been pock-marked by more settlements, undermining the viability of the West Bank to exist as a political entity. We now have a so-called ceasefire but dozens of people are still being killed. If we want to avoid further conflict and escalation in the future, there needs to be a stable and sustainable political solution. That has to mean a viable Palestinian entity and a pathway to self-determination for the Palestinian people.

In our view, actions such as enacting the occupied territories Bill remain necessary in terms of consistency with international law and of exerting maximum pressure on Israel to enter into and abide by political peace agreements. Spain and Slovenia have already taken the lead in

this regard. The new Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Helen McEntee, needs to be proactive on this and, after years of delay, needs to follow the lead of these two EU member states.

In regard to the Presidency of the Council of the European Union from July to December 2026, this is a major opportunity for our country. It is an opportunity to promote Irish interests abroad, to improve our country, to make it a better place in which to live, work and to attract investment. It will also be an opportunity to raise key issues of Irish foreign policy, including the devastating cuts to overseas development aid. However, concerns have been raised in recent days among Irish and European military leaders in relation to Ireland's ability to resource security operations during the upcoming EU Presidency. This is completely and utterly down to this Government and its predecessors in how they have completely neglected our Defence Forces. They have allowed the Defence Forces to become depleted. It is an absolute disgrace that the Government has left us in this vulnerable position and that events around the EU Presidency could be exposed due to a lack of capability, particularly in relation to tackling drones but also our ability to monitor and police our own waters. The reality that we still do not have a full radar picture is an indictment of successive governments.

This argument should not only apply to the EU Presidency. The neglect of our Defence Forces over the years has resulted in our not being able to police our waters and our skies and being seen as a soft touch for major international drug cartels. In Sinn Féin's view, an Irish Government should be strong on neutrality and strong on defence. This Government is strong on neither of those. We have had the embarrassing situation where ships have been put to sea with no functioning main gun because of a lack of specialist staff to deliver that. Our Defence Forces are effectively at rock bottom in terms of morale and seriously struggling in terms of recruitment and retention. I hope the new Minister for foreign affairs and defence takes a proactive role in that without any further delay.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: A serious piece of work has to be done to reassure the agricultural sector and farmers of Ireland, particularly in relation to issues that can detrimentally impact the future of farming in Ireland. We want to see maintenance of the nitrates delegation. There is absolute fear in respect of what the impact of Mercosur will be. There is deep annoyance, as we heard it yesterday, at the Government's position on that. I would like to see commentary that would actually settle people's minds in respect of the Government having their back.

Deputy Ó Laoghaire spoke about the European Union and its power and leverage and how it could play a decent role in this world. He also spoke about Sudan and the fact that weapons still flow. We are looking at an absolute calamity and chaos. We need the EU to act.

Huge solidarity has been shown to Ukraine, and rightly so. I also condemn the attacks in Ternopil in Ukraine and the 25 deaths. Unfortunately, this is nothing shocking from the corrupt regime in operation in Russia. We need to see that that solidarity continues, but I would also say we have a part to play in world affairs and that is about being an independent voice. It is our anti-colonial history not to be part of anything that is a move away from neutrality, which would be absolutely abhorrent to the Irish people. It goes without saying it is not much of a peace plan if it does not lead to the end of the deaths of Palestinians.. More than 70,000 people have been slaughtered in Gaza and there have been attempts at greater levels of annexation in the West Bank. As for Smotrich and Ben-Gvir, in fairness, they are brutally honest about what

they are offering up, and that is about ensuring there is no room for a Palestinian state. Beyond that, they would like to see a huge number of those Palestinians displaced by whatever means. I am not sure they are particularly worried about the means. We need to stand firm. It is a disgrace that the EU-Israel association agreement is still standing at this point. Pressure needs to be maintained. It goes without saying we must move on the occupied territories Bill.

We have also seen in the past while what Israel has done in firing at UNIFIL troops in Lebanon. We have also seen attacks on Palestinians in Lebanon. Not only do we have to look after those who are serving, but we need to make sure we follow up on what is necessary to see right by Seán Rooney and his family.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I ask the Minister of State to urge the Minister, Deputy McEntee, to ensure the issue in relation to the pension of John McNeela, the father of Michael McNeela, who was killed in Lebanon, will be sorted because it was promised by the Tánaiste but it has not happened yet.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. Ar son Páirtí an Lucht Oibre, glaoim ar an Teachta Bacik.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: As others have done, I wish to utter words of condemnation of Russia as we see its brutal escalation of its war on Ukraine. In last night's horrific attack there were 25 casualties, as we are hearing. This is yet another indication of Russia's brutality, following on from what is going to be four years next February since it launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. All of us stand in solidarity with the people of Ukraine.

Since we elected our new MEP for Labour last summer, Aodhán Ó Riordáin, the Labour Party has been working ever more closely through the Party of European Socialists with our European allies on a programme for change across Europe, and in particular on issues around housing, climate action and our vision for a social Europe. I attended the Party of European Socialists' summit in Amsterdam just last month, where we developed policies and a programme for change, in particular focusing on those issues of housing and climate.

On housing, we were really glad following the last European elections to see the Party of European Socialists and S&D group in the parliament focus on seeking action at Europe-wide level to tackle the housing crisis. There is now a special committee on housing, and Aodhán is the S&D group rapporteur on that. For the first time, there is now a housing Commissioner at EU level, which the Minister is well-aware of, in Dan Jørgensen, the Commissioner for energy and housing. A key priority is to ensure we can see reform of state aid rules in order that homes can be built at the scale so badly needed through the deployment of state investment. We have called for a common housing policy, just as we have a Common Agricultural Policy. We must now see Europe-wide action to tackle housing and ensure better levels of state intervention.

We must also work together across the EU on climate. COP talks under way in Brazil have really illustrated the strength of the EU as a bloc pushing for stronger action on climate. It is not just stronger action to tackle climate change for its own sake, because through a just transition we can also see a new green industrial revolution and the creation of hundreds of

thousands of new jobs through the roll-out of wind energy and solar power through emerging technologies. I welcome the appointment of a socialist commissioner, Teresa Ribera, who is now the Commissioner for a Clean, Just and Competitive Transition. She is pushing hard at EU level for change on climate.

In the Taoiseach's speech to us earlier, he spoke about action at EU level on Israel and Palestine. I reiterate how disappointed most people in Ireland were at the lack of action taken by the EU to ensure accountability by Israel for its brutal genocide on the people of Gaza. There are clear steps the EU can and should take, even at this late stage, such as the suspension in full of the EU-Israel association agreement, tougher trade sanctions and a complete arms embargo, in particular. In Ireland, of course, we can and should be passing the occupied territories Bill in full to cover trade and services by Christmas. It is instructive that the Government did not see fit to oppose the Opposition motion that was passed earlier in this House, and in doing so, it has signed up again to passage of the Bill. We in the Opposition will continue to hold the Government to account on that.

On workers' rights and the adequate minimum wage directive, just last week, the European Court of Justice issued its judgment upholding the EU directive. This was nothing short of a landmark moment for workers' rights and I welcome it. Fair pay is at the heart of the European social model, the model that we, the S&D group and the Party of European Socialists have been pushing for. We have also been pushing for formal, statutory recognition of collective bargaining. We need to see decisive measures to accompany that to expand collective bargaining coverage and improve rights for those who are members of unions. We welcome the fact the Government finally published its collective bargaining action plan earlier this month, but the Government will be judged by the concrete actions it takes. Here in Ireland, just four in ten workers are covered by collective agreements. This is far below the EU average and just half the 80% benchmark required by the directive. What concrete steps will the Government be taking to ensure we close the gap to the threshold and see that directive implemented in full?

On the EU-Mercosur trade agreement, there are huge concerns about the damage it risks to our climate commitments and the livelihoods of farmers and, of course, about the well-documented potential for abuses of workers and human rights. Did the Taoiseach make opposition on these grounds clear at the European Council? Is the Government working with like-minded member states to ensure that this deal does not proceed at this late stage?

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Finally, the Party of European Socialists is standing firm against the far right at EU level and, unfortunately, the EPP is not. That is a matter of grave concern.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call on Deputy Crowe.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I am glad to have the opportunity to speak here today. At the outset, I say well done to the Minister of State. I am following his work in Europe and he has acquitted himself very well and is representing Ireland, Inc. very well while in Brussels and other locations.

There is a whole national debate about the occupied territories Bill, and it is very important legislation that we must pass. Indeed, it was the focus of some of the debates in the presidential election and it was said flippantly in one of those debates that it could be just a symbolic Bill. It is important that it be far more than that. If the occupied territories Bill is to have full effect, there should be some European-wide approach. There are far too many countries in the European bloc stifling what really needs to happen in terms of Gaza. Of course, they have historic hang-ups relating to how they treated the Jewish population of Europe during the 1930s and 1940s. They should have shame and historic hang-ups about that but those hang-ups should not determine how they govern and the right actions to be taken for humanity in the year 2025. It is reprehensible that some European countries continue to stifle and block things that should happen in Gaza and the Middle East to restore peace and, more important, protect humanity there. I do not think Ireland, Spain and some other countries have been found wanting but I hope there will be a common position. The more that people can see the suffering there, the more their conscience should be attuned to what should happen, rather than what happened 70 years ago and how wrong that was. Things need to be done right in the year 2025.

In terms of the war in Ukraine, I join others in condemning the ramping-up of acts of aggression against humanity in Ukraine in the past couple of days. I do not believe President Putin is a man who wants peace. He has totally played other leaders in peace negotiations for what he really wants out of them. He is hellbent on getting more territory. It seems his country, economically at least, will be able to see out this war. For that reason, it is important that the European Union bloc significantly ramps up restrictions and sanctions on Russia. Frozen financial assets and aircraft confiscated during the early days of the war should be seen as European assets that can be used to fund humanitarian efforts in Ukraine. I do not think they should be held in reserve indefinitely.

Ireland in the early days and months of the war was proud to play a major role in providing accommodation to beneficiaries of temporary protection. At one point, 3,000 or 4,000 Ukrainian refugees who had fled war in their country lived in County Clare and that was replicated throughout the country. In preparing for today's speech, I looked and discovered that Ukraine is a very broad and wide country. From the west to the east, it measures 893 km as the crow flies. From Dublin, 893 km would take in cities like Bordeaux and Genoa. If there was conflict in Genoa or Bordeaux, I would like to think Dublin would be somewhat safe and removed from that. As the war in Ukraine continues, attacks happen in various cities. It is not all in the eastern flank of the country but it is important that the European Union reflect on the temporary protection directive and refine it geographically. I do not know if someone who is 893 km from the front line requires the same level of protection within the EU bloc as someone living on the eastern flank. The war has gone on a lot longer than everyone expected and that should be a discussion point at this time.

Ireland will host the EU Presidency next year. With that comes great pride in our country. There are certain policy areas we can lead out on. I had a good meeting with the Minister of State last week to discuss some of those areas. With this also comes risk. In the past 24 hours, a Russian spy ship, as it has been dubbed, has been carrying out surveillance in British territorial waters and is tracking in a southerly direction from Scotland towards Wales. It is being tracked all the time by the British Royal Navy and Royal Air Force. Lasers have been used from the ship to blind the eyes of pilots trying to track it. It is important during our Presidency of the European Union that we have increased capacity to patrol our territorial

waters and ensure Ireland, Inc. and the European Union are safe and defended from rogue elements and the Russian defence forces, which are quite malignant forces at the moment.

This Government is committed to ramping up investment in the Defence Forces but it is a big ask for any country to match the might of a superpower. It is important that we look at new forms of technology to track what is off our shore and how safe our undersea cables are. I ask the Minister of State to visit the centre for robotic and intelligent systems, CRIS, operating out of the University of Limerick. It is incredible what they have there. They have undersea drones capable of going 300 km or 400 km off the Irish coast. They can be manned and controlled from shore and have the ability to track gas leaks, interference, bad actors at sea and what they might be trying to do to our undersea network of cables and infrastructure. This is far cheaper than commissioning new frigates for the Naval Service or having more aircraft patrolling our skies. There is a whole space here that other countries have embraced but that we, as a nation, have not embraced yet. I recently attended a conference in the University of Limerick that brought the Commissioners of Irish Lights, the Naval Service and stakeholders from the offshore wind energy sector together in one room. I had discovered before I left that we are the laggards in Europe. Every other European Union country has a national laboratory for robotic excellence but we do not have one in Ireland. It is a relatively cheap, modern and innovative way to monitor our territorial waters and our skies and protect our country from bad actors. We need to embrace the idea of a national laboratory for robotics and all that could do.

Others have mentioned the Mercosur deal and it is something I have been following quite closely in recent months. I will give my slant on it. In the interests of transparency, I have to declare I am a suckler farmer in County Clare. Beef prices have never been as high. Many farmers would say it is not that prices have spiked but that farmers are being paid what they should rightly be paid. It is probably a stabilising of the market that we have never seen before. If the fear is unwarranted, that needs to be clarified by Government, but there is a real fear among farmers that prices will be destabilised if there is a signing-up to the Mercosur deal. I would like to know how Mercosur would be ratified. I think it requires a simple majority decision to sign up to it.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Qualified.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: It requires a qualified majority. I beg your pardon. That is important to establish. The more assurances given to the farming community, the better. Prices at the mart last weekend were around €5.50 to €6 per kilo, which has not been seen in years. It was €3.70 or so this time last year. Without European Union grants, farming in Ireland for most people would not be viable. This is the first time they can go to the mart and get something good out of this. People will say this is good for the dairy sector, Irish butter, Irish dairy produce sold overseas and Irish whiskey. In the west of Ireland, in counties like Clare, Galway and Limerick, 85% of farming is based on the suckler herd, so it is important clarity is brought to that. The timeline for Mercosur would be interesting to know. I think it could be brought up just before Christmas. Is there a date for that? What position will we be taking as a country when Mercosur is put to a vote?

Deputy Mark Ward: I was going through the minutes of the European Council meeting. They state, "The European Council welcomes the agreement reached on the first phase of the

Comprehensive Plan to end the Gaza Conflict put forward by President Trump". The minutes went on to call on "all parties to fully commit to implementing all phases and to refrain from any actions that jeopardise the agreement". The ceasefire in Gaza has been in place for five weeks. This is not a ceasefire that operates as I or ordinary people would expect. Since the ceasefire, hundreds of Palestinians have been killed, according to the Gaza health authorities. Much of Gaza remains under Israeli military control. Humanitarian organisations argue much of Gaza is still suffering as a result of insufficient aid coming in and talks of lasting peace have somewhat stalled. The number of Israeli strikes across Gaza has decreased but they have not stopped altogether. A ceasefire to me means that firing simply ceases. Last Thursday, the Palestinian health authority said 260 Palestinian people have been killed and 632 injured since the ceasefire began. Is this really a ceasefire? Among the civilians murdered and injured in recent weeks are dozens of innocent men, women, children and elderly Palestinians. Collective punishment of the Palestinian people by Israel has not ceased. We need the European Council to call out Israel's ongoing and blatant disregard of the ceasefire, and not only that, but to place real sanctions on Israel. This morning, we had a debate on a collective Opposition motion on the occupied territories Bill. The Government did not oppose the motion, but not opposing something and supporting it are two different things. My problem is that during my time in the House, the Government has been a serial offender in breaking its commitments and promises. I am simply asking that the Government keep its promise in this regard and pass the occupied territories Bill in its entirety, not in a watered-down manner. As we speak, Israel continues to act with impunity. There has to be accountability and passing the occupied territories Bill is a necessary step for the Irish Government if it wants to be taken seriously at all about its commitment to uphold international law and human rights.

I welcome one line in the statements of the European Council, where it stresses the importance of the de-escalation in the West Bank and calls for an end to settler violence. What the occupied territories Bill aims to do is sanction Israel for illegal land grabs of Palestinian land, which cannot go unpunished. One thing I am really concerned about at the moment is the lack of media focus on Palestine. It used to be the first thing on the news. My concern is that when eyes are not on Gaza and Palestine, Israel will continue to act with impunity and to inflict genocide on the Palestinian people. I am very concerned about that.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I condemn this week's attacks on Ukraine by Russia and particularly the deaths of civilians, including children. I extend my solidarity and that of the Social Democrats to all those affected by these latest acts in Russia's illegal war of aggression. Now more than ever, in particular in advance of our Presidency of the EU next year, it is crucial that Ireland assert itself at EU level on the issues we hold dear. Being a good European or member state does not mean being an uncritical one. That often gets lost in the discourse, but it is particularly important when we want to fight for a European Union that supports social cohesion, protects citizens from big industry and big tech harms and fulfils its original promise of being a peace project. Ireland can play a powerful role in making Europe stand up for these principles and I have serious concerns that when it comes to defence, corporate regulation, the Mercosur trade agreement and the erosion of a social Europe, we are not raising our voice to an adequate volume. We cannot go with the flow on these issues if we want a Europe that works for everyone.

In particular, I raise the status of any discussions at EU Council level on the digital omnibus and Ireland's position on it. A very serious piece of business that has recently passed through the European Parliament is the omnibus package on the corporate sustainability due diligence directive, on which Fine Gael MEPs allied with the far right to row back laws that guaranteed that slavery, child labour and environmental crimes would be kept out of our supply chains. In response to my party colleague Senator Stephenson, a commitment was made in the Seanad by the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, that the Irish Government would defend the four pillars of the directive, which are due diligence duty, an EU-wide civil liability regime, climate transition plan implementation and stakeholder engagement. It is unfortunate that he did not communicate the Government's position to his party colleagues in Europe. Now we have a potential omnibus deregulation package that, from the leaked draft, looks as though it is poised to dismantle data protection rules and the AI Act in a similar way, at a time when ordinary people want us to protect their data and to protect them from AI harms. Have the Minister of State and his colleagues raised this at EU Council level? Will the Irish Government defend us from further deregulation of big tech?

It has become clear in recent weeks that the Commission is out of its depth when it comes to understanding AI and is parroting industry lines that have no basis in reality. More than 200 scholars and scientists were so concerned about the rhetoric of the President of the Commission that they asked President von der Leyen to retract her comments. We cannot allow the tail to wag the dog on regulation of technology that can pose a threat to our democracies, health, communities, livelihoods and ability to trust the images and words put in front of us. If Ireland wants to be a leader in this space, we must defend the rights of our citizens at EU Council level.

On the multi-annual financial framework, MFF, we need to see a system that delivers for member states, protects our future and ensures EU funding and support is directed at things that improve people's lives and support regional development and the cohesion of our societies. Particularly concerning are the plans for this MFF to be used to build a European defence union. This is not bluster or exaggeration; it is the exact wording from the Commission. While we talk about foreign affairs and defence being national competences, we sit idly by as EU funds, which Ireland contributes to, will spend five times more on defence, including unprecedented investment in the arms industry. Irish taxpayer money will be used to give handouts to arms manufacturers. While arms manufacturers can sell their goods to European countries, they also supply Israel and many other global actors with their weapons of war.

I am deeply concerned that we are seeing the EU come closer and closer to a defence union and that the narrowing of the definition of neutrality by this Government is serving the express purpose of sleepwalking the Irish people into exactly that. This is against the express will of the Irish people. I understand that other countries in Europe have different views on defence and neutrality from ours. That is why there are defence organisations for them, which Ireland is not a part of. This is even more of a reason that we need the Irish Government to resist the shift of the European Union into a defence union. I want to know whether this Government is taking this shift seriously and is willing to stand up for a Europe that is not a defence union, which is what people wanted us to do when they voted for the Nice and Lisbon treaties.

My final point is about sanctions. A key provision in this Council meeting was the suspension of visa-free travel for particular groups or nationalities and human rights violations are cited as a possible ground for suspension. Has the Government given any thought to its use for those

implicated in genocide in Gaza and those setting up and living in illegal settlements in the West Bank? Did it raise expanding the sanctions regime, particularly as the proposals brought by Ursula von der Leyen to do so are still on the table? We have seen a dragging of heels on action at EU level and it is particularly vital, first and foremost, that the EU sanctions regime be expanded beyond the approximately 100 settlers, in recognition that all settlers in the West Bank are violating international law. In the absence of that, we need to push for action using every possible lever available to us and I encourage the Irish Government to do so.

I look forward to hearing the Minister of State's answers.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Tá ár n-iascairí ag dul thar imeall na haille agus beidh na cainteanna cuóta iascaireachta ina nóiméad cinniúnach. Tá na cainteanna nua maidir le cuótaí ag tosú an mhí seo chugainn agus tá ár bpobail chósta ag éileamh toradh atá cóir agus buan. Leis an drochscéal is déanaí faoi pelagic quotas agus titim tubaisteach i stoc cloicheán i Muir Éireann, tá géarghá anois go seasfaidh an Rialtas go daingean ar son na hÉireann agus go n-éileoidh sé go gcuirfear na Hague preferences i bhfeidhm.

In recent weeks, our coastal communities have suffered another hammer blow with the collapsing pelagic prospects and devastating outlook for Irish sea prawns. These warnings are not theoretical; they are existential for our industry. For years, the Irish fleet has absorbed the impacts of Brexit, shrinking quotas and entrenched inequity in EU allocations and next month's negotiations cannot be another exercise in accepting the least and giving up the most. The Hague preferences were created precisely for countries like ours that are highly dependent, acutely exposed and have long been denied fair treatment. The Government must now stand up for our coastal communities. Ireland cannot walk away empty-handed again. These negotiations must deliver a fair correction. Anything less will accelerate the collapse of coastal livelihoods that have already given more than they can bear.

The Irish people have just delivered the strongest defence of neutrality in decades. The mandate for neutrality is unquestionable. They elected a President who has championed neutrality throughout her political life and they did so by an unprecedented majority. This result is a signal and the Government must listen. People are deeply uneasy about the steady political drift towards military alignment being pushed by a small group of commentators and politicians with a clear agenda. Neutrality is neither symbolic nor outdated. It is the backbone of our independent foreign policy, peacekeeping credibility and capacity to act as honest brokers in a world defined by conflict. People see what is happening with the softened language, blurred commitments and the slow normalisation of military integration. The Government must end the ambiguity and reaffirm that neutrality is not optional. It is a democratic mandate and demands protection.

Israel has never stopped its assault, not for a single day, despite the so-called ceasefire. Killing continues in Gaza. Displacement and siege continue in the West Bank. The machinery of apartheid, land seizures, settlement expansion and economic repression advance openly with the stated intention of closing the door forever on a two-state future. Twice in recent months, hundreds of retired EU and European diplomats have made the legal position unmistakable. When the EU fails to act on sanctions - and it has failed catastrophically; it has looked humanity in the eye and failed it - member states can, and are obliged to, act unilaterally or with willing partners. Ireland cannot hide behind collective paralysis. The Government can no longer wring

its hands and say, "Europe will not move so we cannot either". If the EU will not impose sanctions, Ireland must. The injustice continues because the impunity continues and that cannot remain Europe's position and it certainly must not remain Ireland's.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I want to raise the genocide that has been happening in Sudan. It is the forgotten genocide because so much of our focus has been on Palestine. There is a large and important Sudanese community in Ireland. I had meetings with members of the community before the election. Many of them are doctors, contributing massively to our health service, engineers and so on. They are living with the reality of trying to keep in touch with relatives at this time.

I want to mention how this relates to the EU. Interestingly, when we are apparently sending off our Minister for Finance to the World Bank, I just looked up Sudan's debt, which is 70% of its GDP. Maybe the ex-Minister might have a word in the ear of the World Bank. Imagine that we are fund-raising for Sudan when it is crippled with debt to western governments. Over two years, we have seen this conflict escalate, most recently with the RSF. The RSF has been encouraged by the EU traditionally. It was involved in the migration process or the Khartoum process. It has also helped to shape some of the proponents of the genocide. The genocide has killed about 150,000 people and 12 million people have been displaced.

What is it all about? Once again, it is about resources. It is about access to the River Nile, agricultural land and gold because Sudan has massive resources like this, which are some important for control. Ironically, the quad powers that are being asked to broker a ceasefire are also involved in backing one side or the other, and sometimes both. It is absolutely critical that we end the chokehold of colonial and regional powers over Sudan. The Sudanese people had a brave revolution in 2018 and 2019. Both sides, the army and the RSF, are partners in crime against that revolution. They drowned it in blood and ensured that it would not go forward. I want to identify the UAE in particular. It did not want a democratic regime in that area. It did not want a successful revolution to send a message to others in that area, and that is behind this. The EU needs to support the people of Sudan.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I want to raise the race to the bottom in migration policy that is happening right across the European Union and Europe. We witnessed it unfold over the past few days when the British Government announced that it was going to implement a Danish-style asylum system, cracking down further on already very limited rights of people to asylum, with the Labour Party Government dancing to the tune of Nigel Farage. That was followed immediately by a statement from the Minister for justice, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, who said he is aware of these changes in the UK and committed to ensuring that Ireland is not viewed more favourably. He said he will monitor the changes in the UK to make appropriate changes here. We have reached a situation where, effectively, Nigel Farage is writing Irish migration policy. Nigel Farage calls for something, the Labour Party jumps in Britain and now the Minister jumps after that. It is disgusting. It is a policy that is marked by performative cruelty. It is cruelty that does not make life any better for any ordinary person in this country. It does not build one more house or make one more house available. It does not deal with our crisis in public services or anything else. It just makes life harder for the most vulnerable people.

After talking about a firm but fair system, the Government is talking about making it harder for refugees to reunite with their families. These are refugees who have gone through the

asylum process and have been granted refugee status. They recognise that it is not safe for them to go home to a country like Afghanistan. The Government is now saying that even though we say it is not safe for them, we are not going to allow their children or their partners to join them, even though, clearly, they are very unlikely to be safe either. It is a horrifically cruel policy.

The Government should look at what is happening in Denmark, which is inspiring all this. The reality is that the European Court of Human Rights has found that Denmark violated the right to family life under the European Convention on Human Rights. The European Court of Justice accused Denmark of racial discrimination. Refugees have spoken about feeling that integration is pointless because they are effectively not allowed to integrate. I do not suspect the Minister of State cares about any of that, but maybe look at the election results. Denmark's Social Democrats just took a hammering because people who oppose racism voted for parties to their left and they have lost control of Copenhagen as a result of parties to their left. They have lost other voters to their right, which they have legitimised. The Minister of State maybe will not listen to the basically calls about humanity, but maybe look at, politically, where this will lead for him.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Following the European Council meeting, there were significant issues discussed, between Ukraine, defence, the Middle East, competitiveness, climate and digital transitions, but particularly housing. Often, when we speak about housing, not only in this House but across the country, we think that it is an isolated problem in Ireland. What we are seeing is that this is a problem facing all of Europe. It is the first time that housing has featured in European Council conclusions. The Commission has been tasked with a comprehensive and ambitious housing plan. There will also be a European housing summit in 2026. We need to reflect on that as a Government but also as a Parliament, between the Dáil, Seanad and society, that the challenges we face in housing are not solely located here in Ireland. Our colleagues in Spain, France, Germany, Denmark, Belgium and most other European countries are experiencing the same problems. We are seeing a huge increase in populations and we are seeing the impact of migration and the need for more housing.

The core issues that are affecting us here include affordable housing for families, young people and vulnerable people and tackling rent and the cost of rent throughout the country, particularly in more urban settings, such as Dublin, Galway and Cork. In my constituency of Kildare North, we have nearly 17,000 students and nearly the same indigenous population, as we like to call ourselves, in Maynooth.

Moving on to Ukraine, we have seen a ramping up of violence of Russia against Ukraine. There has been significant investment by the European Union in assisting Ukraine, with €177.5 billion provided to date to help it with its defence. We have seen more sanctions on Russia and a condemnation that is rightly done for the support that Russia has been getting from Iran, Belarus and indeed North Korea. We need to reaffirm our support for Ukraine. We had statements on Ukraine yesterday. It is vital that Ukraine stays at the top of the agenda, that we reiterate our support, and that our colleagues and friends in Ukraine know that they have our full support.

Another area that was dealt with was the Middle East, the need for a two-state solution in the Middle East and the US-proposed peace deal at the Sharm El Sheikh summit. While many of

us are hopeful that this peace deal will progress to a stage that will allow a two-state solution, it is imperative that the funding that has been kept from the Palestinian Authority be released to it and that we start to see resolutions in that peace deal, and more aid flowing into Gaza in particular.

While we are speaking about Gaza, Sudan is starting to come into public discourse more. It is important that we speak about what is happening in Sudan. I would love to see statements here in the House on Sudan, because while what has happened in Palestine and the genocide there is truly horrific, what is happening in Sudan is also horrific. We need statements here about how the Government can support an end to violence in Sudan. There was also discussion about European defence and security, which other member states have to grapple with. While we remain a militarily neutral country, it is important that we have our own defence capabilities, particularly with regard to subsea cables, 70% of which land in Ireland from the US on their way to Europe. We need to ensure that we can protect those core pieces of infrastructure.

I completely appreciate and believe that we should always remain a neutral country. While there is no mandate for neutrality, the will of the people is that we remain a militarily neutral country. However, that does not mean we should not invest in our defence and defensive capabilities.

It is important for rural communities that we discuss the nitrates derogation. We need to ensure that we maintain the derogation. It is an important topic for rural communities in Kildare and throughout the entire country.

While there have been a lot of positive outcomes from the meeting, what is important is that we see follow-through and progress, a point that we often hear in the House in relation to our own Government. One issue to take from what I have said today is housing. This serves as a reminder that we are not isolated when it comes to the housing issue. We sometimes think we are the only country in the world that has issues with housing. There is a genuine attempt to solve the housing crisis in this country, and the Minister, Deputy Browne, delivered his housing plan last week. I will do all I can to ensure that we deliver as much housing as possible throughout the country, particularly in Kildare North. However, as I have said time and time again in this House, we do not just have a deficit in housing. We also need the social infrastructure to go with that, such as crèches, schools, playgrounds and so on. Any housing demand needs to be looked at in the round, taking in the infrastructure deficit as well as the housing deficit.

I thank the Minister of State for his work throughout the European Union. I look forward to working with him in advance of the EU Presidency coming to Ireland next year.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: I have looked over the reporting on the recent European Council meeting. While the situation in Gaza was touched upon, it is striking how lightly it was addressed. The Council reiterated its opposition to settlement expansion and Israel's military operations, but where is the action? Why does the European Union continue with business as usual, trading with a state that operates a system of apartheid?

Let us be clear; Israel is not a normal state. It is an apartheid state. Since 10 October, it has violated the ceasefire 393 times, killing almost 300 people and wounding over 600. Let us just consider the past 24 hours, which have seen more air strikes across Gaza and on Palestinian

refugee camps, killing 13 people. In the West Bank, Israeli forces shot a child and a journalist. The scale of the slaughter may have reduced but it has certainly not stopped. Until it stops and until Israel abandons its policies of apartheid, the EU must not continue with business as usual. Moral condemnation is empty without concrete consequences.

The Council addressed the green transition. It clearly references the extreme threat posed by climate change and how that underpins the EU's commitments to the Paris agreement. Therefore, I was astounded to find absolutely no mention of the EU-Mercosur trade deal, an agreement that, as we all acknowledged in this Chamber last night, would devastate Irish and European agriculture and cause untold damage to the environment. This is a deal that has been causing widespread deforestation with the sole purpose of clearing the land to produce more beef for the likes of the UK market. The research has clearly shown that our beef is produced with a significantly lower carbon footprint compared to beef produced in the Mercosur states. It is a deal that puts customers at risk by allowing beef, chicken and pork produced using banned substances like GMOs and growth hormones onto our shelves. These are products that we in the EU have rightly classified as a health risk.

Given the profound implications, it is beyond me how such a major agreement was not discussed at the Council. The Minister of State and his colleagues agreed to our motion last night. We cannot afford passive opposition. We need to see the Government proactively reaching out, building a coalition with like-minded states across Europe and putting the brakes on the Mercosur deal before it is too late. The time for rhetoric is over. Our farmers, consumers and planet demand decisive action.

The time dedicated to discussing the ramping up of defence readiness was something else. We should be under no illusion. More weapons and bombs will not bring peace and security. If they did, the United States and Israel, with their vast arsenals, would be the most peaceful and safe nations in the world. If the EU truly wants global security and lasting peace, it must invest in the well-being of our people.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I was not able to listen to the Minister of State's earlier contribution so I am not sure what was said. However, I did read through the points that were made in relation to the meeting, and I have taken some notes. The key focuses were on Ukraine, the so-called Middle East peace process, defence readiness, competitiveness, the energy transition, digital sovereignty, migration and the ongoing enlargement process. I have a couple of comments to make on those.

On the Ukraine issue, it is heartening that member states again gave support, both from a military and a humanitarian assistance perspective. I welcome that an exchange of views took place with President Zelenskyy. As I said last night, he is very welcome and we are looking forward to his visit in December. I suggested last night that there is no long-term tangible commitment that would replace the wavering US support. Ukraine is in a very tenuous position. A lot of platitudes have been given to it from an EU perspective. Aside from some of the Baltic states and the other states on the border, we are not seeing the commitments that are required, although I welcome France's recent announcement.

In the Middle East, to use the Hebrew phrase, *yada yada*, it is the same old story. The EU, for historic reasons within various member states, is not willing to collectively call out the Israeli genocide. There were meaningful, worthy references to the peace process and to EU

missions, and a call for Israel to release withheld revenues, but nothing that is going to force Israel to do anything meaningful. Collectively, the countries that have shown a little bravery such as Ireland, Norway, Belgium and Spain will have to do more in a co-ordinated way on this issue.

On defence and security, I will head to a meeting of the Joint Committee on European Union Affairs shortly. I want to know how the roadmap for defence readiness 2030 ties in with our military neutrality. I will read the Minister of State's speech later. Obviously, we have to develop our defensive capabilities, especially with regard to Russian threats off our coast. We should be able to report that we are increasing spending on our defences without it being part of a collective EU pact.

I also want to get further information on the energy self-sufficiency angle that Europe is pursuing. I would still see that we are not putting in the long-term investment in our own infrastructure. In that regard, I would like the Minister of State to focus on that sector, in particular the decarbonisation of Europe. There have been threats to the environmental aspect in other parts of European affairs. Does he believe the commitment to decarbonisation is continuing?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I want to raise the issue of the Mercosur deal. It is a significant threat to the livelihoods of farming families across this country. It was designed by industrialists in the rest of the EU seeking to improve their export opportunities to South America. The Mercosur deal was designed by industrialists in the rest of the EU seeking to improve their export opportunities to South America. It looks like Irish agriculture has been sacrificed on the altar of Mercosur. It beggars belief that, at a time of serious conversation around climate change, beef that has been raised on South American land where trees have been felled and ecosystems have been destroyed is to be brought thousands of miles to this country and the rest of Europe to supplant Irish beef that is produced to a far higher environmental standard. This is at a time one third of farmers are earning a living off the farm, one third are only making a living because they are also doing another job and the remaining third are in poverty. It is absolutely incredible. Where does the Government stand on this issue? From what I can see, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are speaking out both sides of their mouths on the issue of Mercosur. Neither farmers nor I have confidence that the Government will use every available lever to ensure that this deal is ended. Will the Minister of State make a clear declaration, without any equivocation, that this Government will end its passive attitude towards Mercosur and ensure it does not pass? Will he make arrangements and alliances with other European countries with similar views so we can put an end to this threat to Irish farmers?

An Ceann Comhairle: That concludes our contributions from speakers, so we will move to questions and answers. I call Deputy Ó Laoghaire. We have a 20-minute slot, so I ask him to be as concise as possible. I will be as fair as possible.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Some other Deputies and I referred to the situation in Sudan. While the EU is not a party to that conflict, there are concerns regarding a significant flow of weapons from the United Arab Emirates to Sudan. It has denied that but there are credible reports that suggest this. Some of the commentary in recent days indicates there may be a change in the United Arab Emirates' position, at least outwardly. Was this discussed, and

does the Irish Government have concerns regarding the connections between the UAE and the RSF? Has this been articulated at European level?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I can say in the most general way that the Irish Government is fully aware of the situation in Sudan and has been vocal about it for some time. Members opposite have raised this from time to time as well. Significant funding has been given by the Government for humanitarian purposes in Sudan this year, and probably last year. The matter is on the agenda tomorrow at the Foreign Affairs Council. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, will be present. It was on the agenda at the previous Foreign Affairs Council, which I do not attend. The Minister can give an update following the discussion. The Taoiseach is going to the EU–African Union Summit, which I believe is next Monday, and will undoubtedly bring forward a very strong Irish position that is consistent with what he has said as Taoiseach and as foreign Minister previously.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I welcome all that but the point still remains that Ireland and the EU have no direct influence over the RSF. The United Arab Emirates does. Has Ireland raised directly, or at EU level, the need for the UAE Government to reduce its impact on the area? Who have we influenced in this conflict? It is not the RSF. We have limited influence on the Sudanese Government. Are we raising this directly, either through the EU or independently, with the Emirati Government?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I will just speak generally. There are various issues concerning that conflict that I am not working on directly, so I do not have the detail. However, the Minister will raise all concerns at the Foreign Affairs Council. I am sure our ambassadors are also doing so at UN level. The Tánaiste was at the previous Foreign Affairs Council, where the matter was on the agenda. It is on the agenda again tomorrow. These issues are generally dealt with at the Council, and sometimes, of course, at the European Council itself. The EU is fully seized of this, and the Irish Government has been very consistent on it, including through speaking out and financial support.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: As I mentioned towards the end of my contribution, a key provision related to the Council meeting concerns the suspension of visa-free travel for particular groups. Human rights is one of the bases offered for that. Has the Minister of State given any thought to using this tool to extend sanctions against Israeli settlers and those involved in genocide in the West Bank? The proposal regarding the tool is currently on the table, submitted as it was by President von der Leyen. Has the Minister of State given any thought to it or pushed the tool as a means of pursuing action?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: We have been strongly pushing for those types of sanctions. As the Deputy knows, we have been seen as one of the strongest at EU level. We have sought for some time the suspension of the trade agreement, which President von der Leyen proposed, and sanctions on violent settlers. These proposals and all the others put forward require Council decisions. Some, such as that to suspend the trade agreement, require a qualified majority, while others require unanimity. Other member states have considered or taken measures themselves in this space. We are at the forefront of the discussions and debates.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I have listened to the Government state consistently it is at the forefront. I am speaking about a specific example covered at the latest EU Council meeting: the suspension of visa-free travel. My party has identified this potentially as a way to find a lever the Government can pull that will have results. Is the Minister of State doing anything specific on this measure?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I have discussed this in the past couple of weeks with the Minister for justice, Deputy O’Callaghan. Work is ongoing in the Department of Justice on travel bans for certain individuals. That is happening at national level. We are also pushing at EU level. It is more relevant to the Schengen zone but we can proceed nationally. That is a matter that the Minister for justice is working on.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I do not know whether the Minister of State has dealt with my question because I was at a meeting earlier. Where are we on the EU–Israel agreement? Has there been any movement? At one stage, there was discussion to the effect that a number of countries might be able to deal with aspects of it. We all know the issues concerning what Israel has done to the Palestinian people. We hope something can come from this ceasefire. It is very hard to call it a peace plan at this point. The EU has serious leverage and has let itself down collectively, but that is not to take away from what individual states have done.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I have been saying for some months that the EU has leverage and should use it. We call for the measures President von der Leyen put forward in September and certainly support them. We do not believe they should be taken off the table while illegal occupations and annexations continue. There is an embryonic peace process that we want to support to bring genuine peace to the people of Palestine and Israel.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I accept that. We all want that embryonic process to go somewhere. We all know the issues over what has happened not only in Gaza but also in the West Bank. We have seen the movements that have been caused by the Israeli regime, including through the huge annexation splitting the West Bank from East Jerusalem. We are not quite sure where this will go. I know where some in the regime want to bring it, but it is a matter of us maintaining whatever leverage we have. What conversations have been had on a best-case scenario, putting a real dent in the EU–Israel association agreement, ideally across the EU but, if that is not possible, among a number of countries acting on aspects of it? We have had a discussion on the occupied territories Bill, and that is something we could do straightaway in relation to goods and services.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: We want to keep these measures on the table. Some other member states do also. The High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy wants to keep them on the table too. They require more than our support, however. The EU–Israel association agreement is an agreement between the EU and Israel and I do not believe there is any possibility for groups of member states to start veering out of it. It would have to be done at EU level. This is exactly what the Taoiseach would have said in the room at the European Council, and it is exactly what we have been saying. I am sure the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade will say it tomorrow. It has been said all along. In fact, I said myself at the General Affairs Council in preparation for the European Council that we must keep these measures on

the table. This is Ireland's position. Obviously, when it comes to the EU-Israel association agreement, you need a qualified majority of member states. A Commission proposal is needed first, which we finally achieved. A qualified majority of member states is needed thereafter. We will continue to work on that but the position of Ireland could not be clearer.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Danny Healy-Rae.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Is it one question?

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes, as briefly as possible.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: How much longer does the Minister of State think Ireland can pay over €1 billion per year to accommodate Ukrainian refugees? The other question, which I have asked several times, is: if we can give €600 to assist Ukrainians to pay their rent, can we give it to Irish people as well?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The detail of the matters Deputy Healy-Rae brought up are under the Department of justice. There was a discussion on Ukraine at the European Council where President Zelenskyy spoke. European leaders spoke pretty directly to him as well. The war against Ukraine is costing us all a lot of money. We need it to end for our financial and economic security, as well as our own security in general. We want that war to end. The EU must continue to put as much leverage - I again use that word "leverage" - on Russia. There were serious efforts at and around the European Council to put huge pressure on Russia to end this and that work continues. The war is costing Ukrainians their lives and homes. The destruction there is absolutely unbelievable. There are quite a number of Members who have visited Ukraine. I have visited myself. It is absolutely frightening. I would like to think that if it happened to us, we would have the same help from other member states. That is what solidarity is about. It was necessary to do that at the time. We want this to end because it is costing a lot of money. There is no question about that. Let us end it and save lives.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I asked earlier about the digital omnibus. I am curious to understand Ireland's position on this. Specifically, what is our stance on the digital omnibus and how will we be able to protect citizens against big tech if we are allowing GDPR and the AI Act to be gutted?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I just do not accept that we are asking anyone to gut the AI Act or GDPR. The whole simplification agenda is designed to cut red tape and unnecessary bureaucracy that are costing companies a lot of money and, quite frankly, jobs in all of our constituencies. At the same time, however, it will protect basic rights that we and the European Union have fought hard for and developed, such as the areas of workers' rights, data privacy, equality and environmental protections. These areas are absolutely central to what the European Union is about. The simplification agenda is not in contradiction to that. What European leaders agreed to at the European Council is that "... the EU will continue to foster human-centric technological solutions that protect individuals and their data, and safeguard digital accountability, transparency and societal resilience. The European Council stresses the

importance of protecting minors ...". This is what the European Union and the leaders agreed to do. That is what will happen through the simplification process. We do not want unnecessary red tape on companies. That is what the prime ministers, the Taoiseach and all of them agreed on. What the Deputy is saying is not a reflection of what the prime ministers agreed at the European Council.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Ó Laoghaire.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Do I not get to respond?

An Ceann Comhairle: No, only the first time. The second time we just go around again. I call Deputy Ó Laoghaire.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Referencing briefly my first question, we have gone past the time for speaking generally. We need to be more direct. My next question is separate and relates to the area of overseas development. Obviously, a significant crisis is being caused by the huge cut in USAID. Whether anyone can fill the gap is a question. One of the proposals being explored by development organisations is the issue of debt held by Third World countries. I am curious as to whether this is being discussed at an EU level. I know the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, has spoken about it as potentially being an element of the discussion that Ireland will be looking at as part of its Presidency.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: First, Ireland is one of the champions of overseas development aid.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: That is not disputed.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: We are known for that around the world. I am very proud of it. It is a consistent policy of my party to be as generous as possible because we know it is necessary in many of these countries. I am very proud of the work that our Department does, working with both Irish and local people on the ground in foreign countries. The very issues Deputy Ó Laoghaire raised will be on the agenda of the G20 in South Africa, where Ireland is a guest this year, and at the EU-African Union summit. The position of Ireland, as the Deputy knows, is very progressive on this. We want to see these countries allowed to blossom from under the weight of all the various burdens they have, including debt.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Finally, the last topic I wish to raise is around the use of Irish taxpayers' money to fund arms manufacturers. Is the Government raising any issues or resistance to Irish taxpayers' money being used to fund arms manufacture as part of the competitiveness fund? In the context of both this question and the last one, it is not what the Minister of State is saying that I am questioning because I hear what he is saying and all the narrative and rhetoric. Rather, I question what is actually going into law. That is my issue with regard to the digital omnibus we have just discussed. I hear all of the messages but, unfortunately, we are gutting and hallowing out the AI Act and GDPR from within, just like the Government hallowed out the term "neutrality".

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I wish to go back to the exact wording of the European Council because it is very important. Paragraph 30, which relates to all of the defence conclusions, states: "The above is without prejudice to the specific character of the security and defence policy of certain Member States, and takes into account the security and defence interests of all Member States, in accordance with the Treaties". That is a specific mention to Irish, Austrian, Cypriot and Maltese neutrality.

Member states do feel a threat. If you go to Lithuania, Poland or Finland, you will see cross-party support on all sides of the houses for their own sovereign decisions to pay and invest in their defence to ensure they are secure from the threat of Russia. If the Deputy is criticising Irish taxpayers' money going to the defence industry, the Irish Government will be spending a lot of money on our defence industry and I am glad to see Sinn Féin has seemed to change tack on that today. It seems to now support increased spending on defence from an Irish perspective. It is coming to the Fianna Fáil policy of protecting, but also investing, in neutrality.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: That is not new.

An Ceann Comhairle: This is not your question, Deputy.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: We need to go to the defence industry-----

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: None of us denies that.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: -----regarding radar, sonar, equipment and material that we need for our Defence Forces. We absolutely will be spending that money. Our neutrality is well known and well noted but during our Presidency, we will be the independent arbitrator in the Presidency chair for the needs and necessities of all the member states. Defence still remains a member state competency. It is absolutely a member state competency. There are no instructions from the European Union as to what we do. We saw the SAFE mechanism recently, which Ireland certainly facilitated. Ireland did not stop or object to it but Ireland is not taking part in all aspects of it because that is our own sovereign decision. Other countries make their sovereign decisions about these things as well. We, and all member states, value very strongly that our defence policy is our own policy.

Some member states want to have more co-operation, whether that is through NATO, which they have chosen to be a member of, whereas we have not, or through the European Union in terms of getting efficiencies and working together to get value for money. What is happening in many eastern European countries is that choices are being made, choices supported by entire parliaments, to spend more on defence and maybe less on social spending. These are really difficult choices but, quite frankly, countries like Finland, Lithuania and Poland feel backed into a corner that they have to do this because of that serious threat from Russia.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We are obviously in support of ensuring that we have a sufficient amount of capacity in our Defence Forces. We also need to ensure that we have the capacity to deal with some of the hybrid threats that are in the world that we have to deal with at this point of time. That is everything from cyber to the issue of disinformation, whether organised

or disorganised, and the huge harm they can cause. When we are dealing with artificial intelligence, it is about having a sufficient amount of protection across Europe while, at the same time, still having the capacity to use AI into the future.

I have another issue I wish to ask the Minister of State about. What can be done to reassure farmers about the detrimental impact of Mercosur and ensure we maintain the nitrates derogation? I also remind the Minister of State about the issue of John McNeela's pension because it is something that needs to be addressed.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I will remind the Minister.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I understand that.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Mercosur has been raised and it will continue to be raised. There was a vote in the European Parliament on safeguarding measures yesterday and one at the Council of Ministers today. I met my French counterpart yesterday about a number of issues but, obviously, Mercosur was on the agenda. I met the French foreign minister the week before last. It is quite a topic of discussion. Clearly, France is one of the key countries. People have asked us here to continue to work with like-minded countries, and this is exactly what we have been doing.

Our starting point for all these trade agreements is that Ireland is pro-trade. Why is this? It is because we make more products and provide more services. We do not have enough people on the island to buy or consume all those products and services, so we sell them around the world and we create economic benefits for all of us and for all the factories in the various constituencies. There are loads of them around Deputy Ó Laoghaire's constituency, as well as in Dundalk, Waterford, my area and everywhere. Those places are selling products and services all around the world.

The fundamental starting point, therefore, is that we support trade because it has led to our economic growth. We must also protect our vital interests. There are obviously serious concerns here in relation to agriculture. These are genuine concerns, and we have been talking and listening to farmers on this issue. We have stated our position in the programme for Government that we have serious concerns, and this has not changed. We are working with member states, and this includes my meeting yesterday with the French Government. The Taoiseach has also been in touch with President Macron on a number of occasions about this matter.

We want to fully interrogate the draft agreement and make absolutely sure this legally binding safeguards instrument can work for farmers. We are carefully assessing all of this now to understand if it is dealing with the well-known concerns that Deputies have addressed around the House, particularly around farmers and food.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I will say this. We had all sorts of scare stories before about the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement a number of years ago. People went to the

High Court and everything else. Trade with Canada has massively increased and more people are employed in all our constituencies because of that trade agreement.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Yes, but the investor–state dispute settlement-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister of State. He now has five minutes to conclude these statements.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: We have dealt with many of the issues that were raised. The October European Council adopted certain conclusions on strengthening and protecting the digital ecosystem, including through reinforced international partnerships and close collaboration with trusted partner countries and international organisations on digital innovation and governance. Leaders stressed the need to address the risks related to hybrid threats and cybersecurity, as well as reducing strategic dependencies. This includes the need to diversify EU sources of critical raw materials, advance the roll-out of connectivity infrastructure, deepen the Single Market for electronic communications and promote the development and deployment of sustainable digital systems. Leaders also stressed the importance of protecting minors in the digital space. The European Council also welcomed the recent Commission initiatives on artificial intelligence, AI, and quantum technology, and it urged a high level of ambition in the forthcoming proposals on the EU cloud and AI development.

On migration, there are challenges. This issue is now a standing item on the European Council agenda. Leaders welcomed an update from the Commission President on migration patterns and the actions the Commission is taking in response. Ireland believes Europe must address the shared challenge of unplanned migration through collective effort. We have always supported a predictable and flexible system of responsibility and solidarity regarding the reception and management of protection applications. We know well the major burden that front-line states and, indeed, most member states, have borne in recent years. Ireland has long advocated that this crucial issue needs to be addressed based on strong solidarity and responsibility among member states. The EU migration and asylum pact represents a necessary improvement on the current protection system, as well as a new dawn of burden sharing across the EU. We would like to see sustainable progress on irregular migration, including returns, ideally based on genuine partnerships with countries of origin and transit and a common European asylum system, but one that complies with international law and respect for fundamental rights.

The Republic of Moldova was also discussed. That country had a recent parliamentary election and it safeguarded the integrity of its democracy in the face of Russian interference. This Russian interference in Moldova was absolutely off the scale in terms of the amount of money it spent, but it did not succeed. The EU leaders rightly commended Moldova's achievement. Ireland views the lessons learned in Moldova as vital to countering Russia's hybrid activity for all of us. Our support for Moldova's EU accession remains solid. As Ireland's EU Presidency approaches, we look forward to further supporting Moldova's progress on the EU accession path.

EU leaders also met in Euro Summit format. They were joined by the president of the European Central Bank, ECB, and the now former president of the Eurogroup, Deputy Paschal Donohoe. I thank him for his leadership as president of the Eurogroup for quite a number of years. He would always come into these meetings. He has hugely enhanced Ireland's reputation abroad. I wish him every success in his challenges ahead.

Exchanges at the Euro Summit focused on the current economic and financial situation. EU leaders welcomed the resilience of the euro area economy despite multiple shocks, as well as price stability. The robustness of the labour market, reflected by record low unemployment, was also welcomed. EU leaders affirmed their unity and commitment to enhancing economic resilience and competitiveness. They invited continued close monitoring by the Eurogroup of economic and fiscal developments in the present geopolitical environment.

The Euro Summit also reinforced the political commitment to strengthening the international role of the euro, including its role as a reserve currency and transaction currency, by deepening integration in capital markets and completing the banking union. The Euro Summit also welcomed recent progress on the digital euro and stressed the importance of swiftly finishing legislative work and advancing other preparatory steps. EU leaders look forward to welcoming Bulgaria as the 21st member of the euro from the beginning of 2026. I thank and congratulate the Government of Bulgaria on this important milestone, because it takes a lot to achieve euro membership.

I thank everybody here for their participation in the discussion. As we ramp up our preparations for the Presidency, I look forward to our continued discussions on the work of the EU as we work to address the most pressing issues of the time. The Presidency is going to be very interesting. We are going to have a meeting of the European Political Community, which will be the largest meeting of its kind ever to be held in Ireland. There will also be a leaders' summit, 22 ministerial meetings and 250 other meetings in Ireland, as well as many meetings in Brussels and Luxembourg.

Ireland will also take charge, or, at least, take responsibility for gathering and presenting the EU's position at international events, such as the COP. There will be four COP summits next year. There might be an International Maritime Organization agreement, a World Health Organization agreement and many others. Ireland will actually be taking the lead in those contexts. A huge amount of work is going to happen, much of which will not be seen by the public. It is a huge opportunity to enhance our reputation as a country and to do a good job from the level of the Taoiseach and Ministers to civil servants and all of us. I should remind colleagues as well that a portal is open now at *gov.ie* for a public consultation on what Ireland's priorities should be during our Presidency. I welcome every response we get to that consultation. It is very important we hear from as wide a range of people as possible.

Estimates for Public Services 2025: Message from Select Committee

An Ceann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Health has completed its consideration of the following Supplementary Estimate for Public Services for the service of the year ending 31 December 2025: Vote 38.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 3.47 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 4.47 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 3.47 p.m. and resumed at 4.47 p.m.

Paediatric Spinal Surgery Waiting Lists: Statements

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I thank the House for the opportunity to discuss what is a most important issue to all of us.

At the outset, it is important that I clarify a technical piece in relation to protected disclosures and how they work. I am conscious that it was the subject of debate among the leaders last week, which I totally understand, but it is important that the House has clarity on it. The Protected Disclosures Act was agreed by this House without a vote. Everybody supports the idea of it and the purpose of it is to protect whistleblowers. It creates an obligation on the Minister to establish a channel on their website and an email process for whistleblowers to be able to make disclosures. That exists in the Department of Health. On the website, it is very clear that this is a channel to reach the protected disclosures commissioner. It is a separate, dedicated, secure mailbox, one that I do not see or have access to, nor do my private secretaries. The purpose of maintaining that separation is exclusively for the protection of whistleblowers. I know it was mentioned that this represented a lack of curiosity on my part but I would say to the House that if I or any other Minister were to start checking what is coming into the protected disclosures mailbox, it would create a completely new and different problem for whistleblowers. It would undermine the idea of there being a protected channel specifically for that. I know the House is already aware of that because of its support for the Act but I wish to put beyond doubt the need to protect whistleblowers and the reason for those steps. It is not, in fact, something that comes to a Minister's desk, nor should it come to a Minister's desk. It should be investigated separately and appropriately. If we had a Minister like me or anybody else who was interfering in a curious sort of way in what was in the mailbox, that would raise important confidence issues in that Minister. It is important to be clear in relation to that and I thank the House for indulging me in that way.

Much more importantly, on the question of paediatric spinal surgery waiting lists, which is the subject of our discussion today, I wish to thank all the Members of the House who have engaged with me on this in the past number of months since I became Minister for Health. I have tried to place a significant and systemic focus on productivity, generally in our hospitals, but in this most acute area of need of pediatric spinal services. All of us do this because we are concerned about the children on whom this impacts. We are concerned about their quality of life, the nature of the supports and interventions they get and the necessity for those to be timely. In particular, I thank all of the patients, families and advocacy groups I have spoken to at different times throughout this year because, while we speak about numbers, initiatives and reforms what we are speaking about, of course, are children - patients - many of whom have quite complex medical conditions, a multiplicity of medical conditions, and who need very great care. I want to assure patients and families I have heard what they have said to me and that their perspective is vital in ensuring the reforms we know must be ongoing to ensure better, timely care.

I also say to Members of this House that I, like them, am the recipient of people coming to me with complex cases; cases where there is a sense that intervention is necessary now, that intervention has been too late and that there is a difficulty with communication. In my case, as

Minister, I can take those cases up with the National Patient Safety Office and have them advanced and I know that has been the case with some of the people who have come to me and brought cases to me. I wish to say to Deputies that there is an open invitation to my door to anybody who wants or needs to bring a case to my attention. Deputies will appreciate we do all of this scheduling in a particular way and it is not perfect. Tomorrow I will be meeting CHI on two issues. One is the children's hospital and the second is yet another meeting in relation to what is happening on spinal services and what has happened since our last meeting. One of the things I will want to look at most closely is the specific care plan for all of those children who are at the level of most complexity in the system. There are certain GDPR constraints to the information that can be shared with me but I have several cases on my desk, as I know other Deputies have. There is a real openness here to get to an understanding that the most complex children can get the care and intervention they need in a timely and appropriate way. I want to say that as a general opening statement and invitation to all.

As we know, scoliosis affects about 1% of children and adolescents in Ireland. Many of those children do not, in fact, require surgery but for those who do, timely access to intervention and treatment is critical. For those children who need surgical intervention, we agree the waiting times are too long. I am acutely aware of the burden that long wait places on those young patients and it can make their situation very much more difficult.

Improving access to spinal surgery has been the focus of sustained and determined efforts over several years by several Ministers for Health and we have not fully reached our goals. I want to acknowledge that the efforts that have been put in so far have yielded tangible progress and I also acknowledge the dedication of the nursing team, the healthcare professionals, the multidisciplinary teams and, indeed, the surgeons who are delivering better outcomes than we have had before. In this House, we are dealing with patients on a day-to-day basis and we know we need to go further and do better.

There has been a significant focus on investment for those services. There has been new infrastructure. We have a fifth theatre in Temple Street, an additional MRI scanner in Crumlin, and 24 additional new beds. In 2024, my predecessor ensured 52 new full-time equivalent posts were approved to strengthen services, including surgeons, nursing staff, administrative staff, and all of the different pieces of that, including four orthopaedic surgeons, one of whom has been in post since August of this year. Of course, we would like to recruit all four but we have only been able to recruit one to date. Some 41 of the 52 staff are in post and we are actively trying to recruit the rest, especially at consultant level.

It is important to say we have tried to increase capacity in a range of different ways, both domestically within CHI and internationally. Let me address some of the complexities of the issues I have seen as Minister. For example, in 2024 we agreed with the Mater hospital that it would conduct an enhanced transitional service, adding to the transitional services already in place, and indeed it was funded to do so. An additional 29.5 posts were approved for the Mater hospital to enhance the adolescent transitional spinal service and try to improve the seamlessness with which transitional care would occur. It was only at the beginning of the second half of 2025 that this service began to operate, which I think is deeply regrettable. I know from my engagement with patients and parents that the service is, in fact, operating, and that there have been, I think, four outpatient clinics to date in the Mater during the second half of 2025, and three surgeries have been scheduled. I believe it is problematic and regrettable

that that intervention and step taken by my predecessor in 2024, for which posts were allocated and funded, in fact only began in 2025. It is now the case that those posts are all in recruitment because the service has begun and there has been a commitment by the Mater for that to begin, and those posts should all be fully in place during the first quarter of 2026.

On international outsourcing, again my predecessor approved over €16 million for international outsourcing initiatives since 2024. That was designed to support earlier surgery for children with very complex cases to get the care they needed abroad as clinically appropriate. However, it is a source of great frustration to me that a total of only 19 children have been the beneficiary of that. It is a source of frustration to me that the number is not higher and it is a source of frustration to families who would like to travel and who either have not been offered the opportunity to do so or who believe they would have been suitable. I acknowledge that not every child is suitable for travel. There may be some for whom it is not suitable or who cannot travel. There is a tension here where I believe more should be done but there is a clinical element to those decisions and it is not appropriate for me, as Minister, to interfere with that on an individual clinical basis. Yet, when I look at the system, what I see is 1,000 surgeries, essentially - 500 last year and slightly more than 500 this year - available for children who have needed surgery and in the period of 2024 to 2025 where the international outsourcing option was available only 19 of those 1,000 surgeries have been done internationally. From a systemic perspective, that does not ring true to me. That has been the case to date but we are trying to expand our international options to drive even further the opportunities to travel, both in Europe, and for additional surgeries in the United States. At the moment we have the New York-Presbyterian Hospital and we have Great Ormond Street Hospital but CHI has gone through a tender process during the past number of months, at the direction of the Department of Health and at my direction, to try to expand opportunities internationally. That is being finalised shortly and I believe it will involve multiple additional hospitals.

The point I am making to the House is that if the experience to date has been that there has been an international option but it was not available to patients at the rate that might be suggested with 19 out of 1,000, then it is essential that if we are providing additional international options, that there is a very clear understanding those options can and should be used. That is extremely important.

From an operational level within CHI, the paediatric spinal surgery management unit was established last year. It is a dedicated unit to try to co-ordinate surgeries better across Temple Street, Crumlin and Cappagh hospitals. It is working more closely with multidisciplinary teams to do that. Efforts to expand capacity within CHI progress and, indeed, will be the subject of my dialogue with it tomorrow, including ring-fenced theatres and dedicated orthopaedic beds. To be fair, that implementation has in fact reduced the waiting times for spinal surgeries in general. Additional outpatient clinics have also begun to assess new patients more promptly and that is both necessary and helpful. Since April 2024, over 800 new patients have been seen in those clinics and that has reduced the time to be seen by a consultant in addition to the dedicated referral pathways.

Domestic outsourcing arrangements have also been expanded, using pathways to Blackrock and Cappagh more quickly for non-complex spinal procedures. Over 74 children have used

those pathways since the beginning of this year. As I said, we have tried to expand the international option.

In regard to these initiatives and investment, while I have expressed a measure of frustration with the pace and wanting to do more, I need to acknowledge all of the dedicated team - the nurses, anaesthetists, surgeons and so on - who are doing the work and that there are surgeries happening. We know children are getting surgeries and it is at an increasing rate. In 2024, CHI performed 513 spinal procedures, which was a 10% increase on 2023 and 35% increase on 2019. Already in 2025, 446 procedures have been completed, which is an 8% increase on last year. There is growth and there is more activity. Also, this year there has been an 8% increase in referrals and at this time we are 7% behind target. So, the picture is yet to improve but there are also an increase in referrals. What matters most, of course, is the length of time that children are waiting on the procedure. There has been an improvement in the longest wait lists. At the end of October 68% of patients on the active list were waiting less than six months, which is an improvement on last year, which was 56%. Further, at the end of October, only 6% of patients were waiting 12 months, which again is an improvement on 16% at this time last year. Again, at the end of October, 38% of patients were waiting within the Sláintecare targets, although I would like that to be substantially increased. I will acknowledge all of the difficulties, the challenges and frustrations that I have but I will also acknowledge the progress that has been made and which we want to see continuing to improve. I am also seeing improvements in the outpatient wait list. The children without an appointment to date on the new outpatient waiting list has reduced by 48% since the start of the year. I am informed by CHI that currently there is no child waiting over nine months without an appointment for a new outpatient appointment. That improvement is ensuring children are seen more quickly.

While we absolutely must acknowledge progress, we also cannot mask the ongoing reality that too many children are still waiting and that too many children with complex cases are still waiting. Up to the end of October this year there have been an additional 462 children, or 8%, who have been added to the active surgical waiting list. It does reflect a growing need and it reflects a better referral pathway, but it is still children who need spinal surgeries. There is also a shift in the complexity of cases presenting at CHI because non-complex cases are now being referred to other hospitals to be done more quickly. That in itself is a good thing. I am, however, concerned about the children with complex cases who may need several procedures and who may need very significant multidisciplinary support.

I am also concerned about the communication. This is something that families have repeatedly expressed to Deputies across this House as being very challenging for them. I have made it clear that the nature, the style and the promptness of communications has to change. The way in which families are discussing surgeries, surgical interventions and the overall plan for their child is everybody's responsibility, and it is not to be approached in a siloed way. It is difficult for us to build a new theatre and to recruit a new surgeon, to be fair, but it is not difficult to pick up the phone to talk to somebody properly and in a comprehensive and timely way about the needs of their child. These are things that can be done and I have said this in the House before. To support improvement, we have appointed a spinal patient advocate liaison co-ordinator. There is a patient panel for spinal services to try to improve communication. There are 14 members on that panel at the moment. A key worker, or patient advocate function, is also being rolled out. I am saying to Deputies that there have been efforts made to try to improve communication. While I understand from parents that the benefit of this is not yet

universal, steps are being taken and we have more work to do on it, which, essentially, is what I am trying to say in a truncated way to make the all of the points that I hope to make.

I will address some of the different reviews and issues that are occurring more broadly in CHI historically. Of course what we want is to have a future-looking system where everybody has confidence in the system. The difficulty with the issues of the past is that they must be addressed, there must be transparency, and it is very important to acknowledge that, while we try to look to the future and try to improve services, we also have to hear and understand the experience of the past and difficult experience of the current day. In April I stood in this House and we discussed the HIQA review of the governance of implantable medical devices in CHI, including the use of non-CE springs in Temple Street hospital. A month later we were here to discuss the Thomas independent external medical audit for Children's Health Ireland and pelvic osteotomy. At an early stage in April, I had a very clear concern about the culture in orthopaedic services, as I know Deputies across the House had, including the way in which waiting lists have been managed to date and how that has operated. A month later we had the 2022 report, the unpublished report, and the Nayagam review is also under way, phase 2 of which is reviewing the service, including the governance. There is a series of different reports and I am conscious that, behind every one of those reports, there is a patient and there is a child.

In response to the multiplicity of reports and in response to the concern I have about the culture and the waiting list management, I commissioned an audit the details of which we have not yet received. It is very important that we debate this when we do receive it. That audit has two elements. I commissioned this via the CEO of the HSE. It consists of an audit of governance and of equity in patient access and waiting list management, and that commenced in June. The audit is being undertaken by the HSE internal auditor. It is independent. I am told it is nearing completion and I expect the outcome shortly. It is really important to note that, at the time, I also asked for there to be a qualitative patient experience element to this. I asked Lily Collison, who is an advocate for spinal services, cerebral palsy and epilepsy, and who is, among many other things, a member of the HSE board, to complete that. Ms Collison has been in CHI this past number of months doing a survey of parents, speaking to parents who wish to speak to her, and trying to better understand the patient experience by asking how they ended up on a waiting list, what was their experience and what has happened to date. I expect her report shortly. I did not publicise her name at an early stage because I wanted to give her the opportunity to get on with her work in a quiet and effective way and to give her the privacy to do that. It is very important to say that we did both of those things at that time. I expect to have that report very shortly.

I will not address the spinal task force, which continues its work, as it is a question of time, but I do want to talk about the inquiry the Cabinet agreed to yesterday. It is our intention to have a statutory public inquiry into the care generally received by children with scoliosis, complex scoliosis, spina bifida and hydrocephalus, and the care issues around that. It is really important now that I become extremely careful with what I say about the detail of that. I am conscious that we want to establish a process that is legally robust and that has very clear terms of reference. We have asked the parents, the advocacy groups and the breadth of stakeholders, including the advocacy groups that are on the spinal task force, to engage with a facilitator who will help and listen to understand the best scope and help develop a proposal to me so I can properly draft terms of reference and have those agreed by the Government. It is the intention to do that with families in the most appropriate way, recognising that it is, of course, the

Government and the Oireachtas that will have to ultimately sign off on them. The Attorney General is already engaging with potential people and potential names, including senior counsel and so on, to determine who may have availability to do this work and to get that going as quickly as possible. Of course, the calibre, the quality and the experience of the people we want to do this work is not always immediately available tomorrow. They have schedules and commitments already, so we are trying to do our best to get somebody as quickly as possible but also who is as capable as possible for doing that.

I am very conscious that my colleague is going to speak and I do not wish to speak across her. Perhaps I can address any questions that Deputies have in my concluding remarks. I am conscious there will be a lot of interest in that.

We are continuing with the journey in relation to the integration of CHI into HSE. I am not sure I have had the opportunity to formally update the House in relation to the board members who have been appointed or the chair being confirmed by Cabinet last week. That work is ongoing. We will need to now prioritise the legislative element of that and bring it to the House, I hope in 2026, to begin the process of making that transfer more formal. I wish to give my colleague the opportunity to speak now.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I thank the Minister for her opening statement. I know how hard she has been working on this for the last few months. My heart goes out to the families. The Minister and I are thinking of them, the children who are on waiting lists waiting for surgery and those who have lost children.

It is right to say that we are not where we need to be, as the Minister has said. We need to address the urgent problems in spinal care, despite sincere efforts of successive Ministers, and that is true. I acknowledge again the Minister's work on this in the recent months in driving measures to address the urgent problem. She has met with the family of Harvey and she is working to improve access to services. This is under way, including a ring-fenced theatre, extra outpatient clinics, and national and international outsourcing to maximise capacity. Every effort is being made to reduce waiting times but we know that there are still challenges and reform is needed.

I welcome the Government's approval yesterday of the Minister's proposal for a statutory public inquiry. I fully support this inquiry. I have met with affected families from my own area and I know that they are keen for this inquiry to take place as soon as possible. It is a very important step to ensure that we have the best healthcare system possible for our children.

Every child's journey to spinal surgery is different. Some steps may take longer, especially when the case is complex and several specialists are involved. Every precaution must always be taken to make surgery as safe as possible, to ensure that the children who need complex care are fully prepared, and that their care plan is the right care plan for them. I understand this can take time. Strengthening governance and oversight, driving down waiting times, and ensuring increased engagement and timely communications with families must be priorities. As the Minister said, working with families and making them a priority is very important. I know she is also committed to this. We must work to ensure there is a cultural change so that families can have trust in the system. I know the CEO of the HSE has established the CHI improvement steering group and has commissioned an audit to assess equal access to care in CHI, and this is a welcome step.

We must continue to listen to and work with the parents and advocacy groups who are highlighting hugely worrying and important issues. Like the Minister, I have been there, speaking to families and working with them. I assure her I will be working with her to give any help and support I can. I know the Government is committed to this. As the Minister has said, our aim is that children receive the care they need when they need it. I look forward to the inquiry taking place as soon as possible.

Deputy David Cullinane: In 2017, the Tánaiste, Simon Harris, made a promise to children with scoliosis and spina bifida that long waiting lists would essentially end and that children would no longer wait in pain, deteriorate or lose the chance of life-changing and, in some cases, life-saving intervention. He promised that no child would be left waiting longer than four months for surgery. Since then, as we know, countless children have suffered in agony, without surgery within four months and, in many cases, tragically, without surgery at all.

We have to go back to the very beginning. Children's Health Ireland was legally established by Simon Harris in 2018. Yet, from its first days, it has lurched from crisis to crisis and the children who depend on the services have paid the price. CHI, as we know, was formed to amalgamate, essentially, the children's hospitals in Dublin, with a promise to provide a world-class service for children. Despite the Trojan work of healthcare workers in Crumlin, Temple Street and Cappagh, and I know that many people who work in these hospitals provide a tremendous service, the promise of providing a world-class service for all children never materialised. At the heart of this is exceptionally poor governance, which is made worse by four years of delays to the new children's hospital, a hospital that has made a mockery of the State because of a fundamentally flawed contract. It has to be said that this another calamity with Simon Harris's fingerprints all over it because he was, after all, the Minister who greenlit that project and signed off on the contract.

We know that children with spina bifida and scoliosis have waited far too long for essential surgeries. Even today, there are 232 children on waiting lists for spinal surgery, with most of them having waited longer than three months. We do not know how many have waited for longer than four months because CHI does not publish this information. Even when it comes to waiting lists and how they are presented, there is an appalling lack of transparency. What we do know is that behind every number is a child sometimes in pain, losing mobility and getting worse. The waiting list figures are concerning. The number of children without a date for surgery is up to 139, and another 43 are waiting on a date for a further procedure. Only nine actually have a date; the rest are suspended for various reasons. One child has now been waiting over 48 months for surgery, more than four years on the waiting list. Seven more have been waiting over a year. Children cannot wait months or years for time-sensitive and, at times, life-saving and life-changing spinal surgery. We know that many have not received proper pre-operative or post-operative care. We also know that many children are staying in hospital longer than expected because of high infection rates. This means many children stay in for weeks instead of days, causing distress, pain, time lost in school and time lost with family, and knock-on delays for other children waiting for care. Families tell me they are not being given the real data on infection rates, so they cannot give proper, informed consent. They are told to trust an organisation that has repeatedly abused and broken that trust, according to these very same parents.

One of the saddest failures in CHI is the abandonment of a group of children who came to be known as the Crumlin orphans. These are a group of children left without the care of any consultant in orthopaedics or urology. When this group of children was identified by what was known as the Dixon report, CHI said nothing. In fact, it never published the report and, worse than this, it never accepted the findings, despite the fact that we all know the findings were conclusive and were correct. CHI could not even say how many children were in this group. When this issue was identified again a few years later in another unpublished report, CHI still did not know how many children were in this group. This is a group of children who simply fell through the cracks. It is not that nobody knew this. The parents knew. They were screaming from the rooftops, but nobody in CHI management or in Government Buildings was listening.

Since then, we had the case of unauthorised non-medical-grade springs being implanted in children's backs. The HIQA review of these cases found severe governance failures, which allowed these tragedies to occur in the first place. HIQA found a lack of formal approval processes, inadequate oversight, poor record-keeping or a lack of consent from parents - the Minister mentioned this and poor communication earlier - poor tracking and traceability of devices and hygiene standards, and exceptionally weak clinical governance structures. These were not one-off lapses. They were the product of a system where governance was weak, where oversight was absent and, as the HIQA report said, where children were not protected from the risk of harm.

This scandal goes beyond spinal surgery waiting lists. We also know there have been potentially hundreds of unnecessary hip surgeries carried out on children. We have unpublished reports raising even more serious concerns about how CHI is governed and how children's services are delivered. We are still waiting on the Nayagam review, which may be next year. We were promised interim reports but they never materialised. We still have questions over new funding for children's orthopaedics. The Minister mentioned funding that is available. There are question marks around whether this is sufficient, whether it is targeted and whether it will deliver the capacity that children urgently need.

If anybody wants to understand the cost of these failures, they need look no further than the case of Harvey Morrison Sherratt. Harvey Morrison Sherratt was just one year old when the Tánaiste made his four-months-to-surgery promise. It took another seven years for Harvey to get that surgery. During the delays, Harvey's spinal curve deteriorated from severe to catastrophic. By 2022, his spinal curvature was 65° and by 2024, it had reached 110° and then 130°. Harvey was placed on an urgent waiting list for scoliosis surgery but he was also taken off that urgent waiting list and his parents still do not know why. Why was he taken off? Who took him off? I know the inquiry will obviously have to answer these questions. What we do know is that it happened without the consent of his parents, and his parents were not even informed. It is breathtaking to think that would happen.

It has since come to light that Harvey was allegedly and wrongfully removed from the list because he was listed as a palliative care patient, despite the fact that a consultant at Great Ormond Street Hospital had assessed him and found him as suitable for surgery. This compounds the anger the family justifiably have. While there was still potential to save young Harvey's life, it seems that someone took him off the list, and worse, it seems that someone decided not to communicate this to his parents. It was only late last year when Harvey

eventually received his first surgery. Harvey's condition was entirely treatable, as far as I am concerned. His parents, Stephen and Gillian, campaigned with extraordinary courage to get the care of their son needed but, after years of delay and avoidable decline, Harvey tragically passed away this year, at the tender age of nine. Harvey was entirely failed every step of the way. CHI failed to give him the care he needed when he needed it. His case is now a defining symbol of systemic failure.

When I think of Harvey, I also think of the countless children and young adults who have been failed by CHI. I think of Dollceanna, who died at the age of ten after complications during surgery on her spine at Temple Street. I think of young TJ, who was diagnosed with spina bifida and scoliosis. He was denied early intervention and has now been told his condition is inoperable because he spent his childhood on waiting lists. I think of Mikey from Mayo, who is still waiting for care. In fact, I think his parents have reached out looking for a meeting. These are just three children and there are many more names that we do not know. However, we know these children's names because their parents were forced to campaign, go public and have their cases raised here in this Chamber. It is only because of the courageous work of advocates that we know any of this. If CHI had its way, none of this would have come to light.

The tragedy here is that if the Government had listened to parents and advocates sooner, we might not have been here today discussing this issue at all. If it had delivered the resources and funding sooner, many of these tragedies would have been prevented. I pay tribute to Stephen and Gillian, Harvey's parents, as I have done in the past, but also to Amanda, Una, Claire and all of those advocates and mothers and fathers who went above and beyond the call of duty. They became advocates for others, not just their own children. I also pay tribute to the whistleblowers who came forward. We owe them a debt of gratitude as well.

What is needed now is not another internal review, another limited report or another chapter in a long pattern of deflection and delay. We need a full, independent, statutory public inquiry that is fit for purpose and can establish the facts, trace decisions and failures and finally deliver real accountability. Crucially, this inquiry has to have the full backing of families and advocates. It must be developed with them and it must get answers to the questions they have. It is important that we also improve the services. While an inquiry will be established, it is equally important that we invest in services. We have to make sure that every single child has timely access to care. I know from dealing with and talking to many parents that it is not just the surgeries. It is the pre-operative and post-operative care and the totality of that child's care that are really important.

I am thankful for the opportunity to raise these issues today. I know we will have an inquiry but we will watch the terms of reference and see exactly what that inquiry will be. I really hope that it is fit for purpose. I hope we see full co-operation from everybody involved and that all of those children and families get justice. I hope we can learn from this but also crucially invest in the services that need it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I move forward, this is not a reprimand to Deputy Cullinane in any way but I ask Deputies to be mindful when we mention children's names as to the consequences or a request to have that deleted from the record. That is all. I am sure everybody is well aware but this is just a reminder.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I very much welcome our having these statements today, and the big breakthrough that has happened over the past week in terms of the agreement to the inquiry. Obviously, we have to see what the exact form of that inquiry will be. We have seen scandal after scandal in spinal services within CHI over many years. It is very welcome that there will now be a proper investigation of that. I know we have had statements before and have paid tribute to the parents of Harvey Morrison Sherratt but in particular, I pay tribute to their immense dignity and incredible strength in dealing with the revelations they have had to encounter over the last fortnight and in the face of their absolutely devastating loss. How badly failed they were by the health system that should have been there for their son has played out so publicly. I am also hugely mindful today that when we talk about spinal services, for some children and young adults it is now too late because of the failures within the system. They carry those questions for the rest of their lives about what could have been if their treatment and care had been different and if those failures had not been present. To those families who are currently fighting for surgery, of whom there are many, there is a bitter irony that the families of these children, some of the sickest children in this State, are having to put up the greatest of fights for appropriate care. That is wrong.

While we talk about the patient, the child and the family at the heart of this, we know there are many nurses and doctors who are going day in, day out into a very difficult work environment and trying to do the best by their patient. Unfortunately, however, there is a system and there are some decision-makers and clinicians who have failed in their duty. That is what needs to dramatically change. I do not think it is an understatement to say what has happened has been a national scandal. When we look back in ten or 20 years, we will wonder how children have been so badly failed. These are children who have been in the health service for a long time. Their conditions have been recognised for a long time, yet the systems of care have failed so badly.

In that context, I welcome the Government's announcement that it will have an inquiry, but I have to ask what it will lead to. To my mind, it is not just about what has happened but what is currently happening within CHI. If we think back - other Deputies have referred to this - over the past eight years, we have had at least five reports into the failures within CHI. There was the Dixon report, which now seems to have been disowned by CHI because it was then obviously known as Temple Street. There was the Boston report in 2023. There was the HIQA report, which was commissioned in 2023 and published earlier this year. The Minister referred to the Simon Thomas report and, of course, we are awaiting the Nayagam report. Between the Boston report and the HIQA report, there are 59 recommendations as to how to overhaul services within CHI. Those are recommendations that all arise from the same dysfunction and the lack of proper processes, toxic culture, appalling management and lack of collegiate responsibility.

The reports themselves should be sufficient to bring about necessary change, but the Government's agreement to an inquiry is an admission that they are not. The devastating allegation that Harvey Morrison Sherratt was moved to a palliative care list is a really distressing new low for CHI. If it is true, how could anybody in good conscious make that change and not follow up as to how that child was doing? Time and again, there is this bitter irony that we are not talking about thousands of children. We are talking about a small number of children who have been so badly failed. One parent whose child has now passed away said to me that her child became a political football between the egos of consultants. While, as I

said, there are some really good spinal surgeons out there working in our system, we have to ask how we have got to this place.

With regard to what is happening now, we know the list is longer this year than it was last year, as the Minister alluded to, and there are 139 on the list now. There is an element of us not even running to stand still. We understand that no child has been scheduled for treatment abroad over the past number of months, and we have heard the Minister's frustration on this. A big deal was made about referring children to Great Ormond Street Hospital or Morgan Stanley hospital. One family have told me their child has been on the waiting list for 12 months. The child has been told they need surgery. The family believe the child can travel. They have not been offered the option to travel and when they spoke to their surgeon, they were told that surgeon does not have a list in the Blackrock Clinic and, therefore, could not refer that child to the outsourced option, whereas that option appears to be available to other children. How can we have a dysfunctional system where one surgeon decides who gets outsourced, whereas another surgeon cannot? This is the dysfunction at the heart of CHI.

With regard to this inquiry, so much is riding on what it will produce where it seems a number of reports have failed. Obviously, it is really important that it will have compellability because, ultimately, any inquiry is only as good as the fulsome participation of the clinicians and management. There are serious questions as to whether they will participate willingly or not. I, and we in the Labour Party, believe that compellability will be important. It is vital that the advocacy groups be there all along the way. I pay particular tribute to the tenacity and perseverance of the Scoliosis Advocacy Network and the Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus Paediatric Advocacy Group. Many of those parents already have so much on their hands trying to care for their child. They are fighting for their family but they are doing much more than that. They are fighting for other families who do not have that capacity. It is absolutely exhausting and they have been at it for so many years.

With regard to getting truth, accountability and justice out of this inquiry, the critical thing for us is that we believe a twin-track process needs to be in place. There will have to be a series of stage reports. First, we need a module on whether CHI is implementing the change that it has promised to deliver. In effect, we need a mediated process whereby the record is set straight between clinicians and parents as to the status of the child's care. All too often parents come to me and to other Deputies here who feel gaslit, who feel they are not being told the truth and who feel they are being told conflicting stories by the clinicians and the health staff that they interact with. I hear what the Minister said regarding the process that is up and running with regard to that lady who is already interacting with those families but it needs to be a mediated process between the clinicians and the families because ultimately many of the families feel they are not getting the truth they so rightly deserve.

The second key issue is the investigation into the cases of children who passed away because of the failings in care and those children for whom surgical intervention was too late. There will inevitably be allegations that will lead to litigation and so on. It will potentially go on for a very long time. We believe the onus is on the Minister to ensure that this inquiry will deliver the answers that we, the public and particularly the parents, so much need. Our request to the Minister is that this inquiry can get those answers, which may turn adversarial, while also ensuring that the system improves. There are very real question marks about how that can happen with a very limited number of staff at the heart of these questions over the coming

years. That will be no easy task. We in the Labour Party have said for many months now that the HSE needs to take over the board of CHI. We very much welcome the Minister's move in that regard. We urge her to move with speed on that issue. It is no silver bullet but it will be progress. Ultimately, the biggest question in my mind now is getting this inquiry right, getting the answers and making sure that systems improve at the same time. The people needing to provide the answers will also have to improve their act with regard to the services.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Doherty missed his speaking slot due to a conflict with a committee meeting. I propose that he would take his four minutes with the agreement of Members. It will not put anybody out. It is the four minutes that we are ahead. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I thank the Ceann Comhairle and Members for facilitating me. We are here today because of the heroic efforts of the parents of children with scoliosis and spina bifida, because of their determination and because their love of their children. We are also here because they never stopped fighting tooth and nail. In particular, we are here because of the parents of Harvey Morrison Sherratt, Stephen Morrison and Gillian Sherratt. They found the will, even when grieving the loss of their son, to take on the Government. I cannot imagine the suffering they have been through or even fathom as a parent myself how to find the strength to keep fighting. They want to know how their son and many others could have been failed so badly by the State and why children continue to be failed in the most horrifying ways. The removal of Harvey from surgical waiting lists to be treated as a palliative care patient without any discussion with his family is the most recent, shocking piece of information to come to light. What else remains hidden? What other cover-up is there in the hope it never sees the light of day? Let us be clear: a public inquiry is no one's first choice. People want public services to work for the State to function properly. When things go wrong, people want a system that can respond. Instead we have a system that is threatened by transparency and allergic to accountability and that looks to protect itself at all costs. When all else fails, people expect the Government they elect to be on their side, not to turn a blind eye to their suffering; a Government that takes responsibility, not leaders that default to spin and deflection when people are crying out for help.

Eight years ago, Deputy Simon Harris, when Minister for Health, promised that no child would be waiting longer than four months for scoliosis surgery. That promise has never been delivered. It is a shameful chapter in this State and it is not over. How could this ever have happened? How could failure get stacked on failure without any accountability or action? The HSE was set up in 2005. It was billed as some type of innovation at the time. However, it created a buffer between the Department of Health and the Government on the one hand and the health service and the people within it on the other. At the time, Dr. Liam Twomey, a TD representing Fine Gael said: "One can only imagine the scapegoating that will be due to the CEO of the HSE when the Government fails." Last year, the then Taoiseach of this State, Deputy Simon Harris, fulfilled that bleak prediction. When it was put to him that he and his Government had actively, consistently and comprehensively failed children with scoliosis and spina bifida, that children's spines twisted and curved, leaving them in agony as little rib cages pressed against lungs making it more and more difficult to breathe, and that children were left waiting so long that they became inoperable, he said, "It was said to me by the then director general of the HSE that the executive would have put a plan in place to ensure that no child

waited longer than four months." The Taoiseach of the day, a former health Minister, said he was only the messenger. Someone told him that they would make a plan and it was nothing to do with him. That is why we are here today. That is why we need a public inquiry. It is because of gross political failure, a failure of leadership. Children and families have been left with no option. A public inquiry is their only hope. It has to deliver the answers. It has to deliver accountability and real change. That is why the process needs to be fully independent of CHI and the HSE.

I commend every parent and family, every loved one of those children who have been failed by this State. We on this side of the House commit on behalf of Sinn Féin never to give up and to continue their fight.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: It important to speak on this issue on behalf of children and families who have been let down. I am devastated for them. Deputies across the House are angry and upset because what unfolded in our paediatric spinal service is not just some abstract policy failure. It is a human tragedy. It is a breach of trust. It is so profound that any parent would question how they would ever rely a system that left their own child waiting in pain again. I am glad the State is confronting this horrendous situation fully and, in particular confronting how we allowed children to suffer under our watch. I appreciate and respect the work the Minister is doing. She is clear and unapologetic in her statements. The country now knows of the heartbreaking story of Harvey Morrison Sherratt, a nine-year-old boy removed from an urgent spinal surgery waiting list without his parents' knowledge or consent. Parents were begging for answers that never came. Now those same parents live with their unthinkable grief. No parent in Ireland should ever fear that their child has simply vanished off a waiting list. No parent should be forced to battle a system that feels faceless, careless or evasive. No child should ever be left to suffer because of a broken system that could not protect them. That is exactly what happened.

In my previous contributions in this House, which I firmly stand over, I said that when the State asks families to trust us with their children, we must be worthy of that trust. In the case of Harvey and so many others, we were not. Now families across the paediatric spinal services understandably ask whether this will ever change. I know the Minister is committed to that change, to rebuilding that trust, to ensuring that our children receive the care they deserve. Progress has been made, additional clinics and a ring-fenced theatre, increased activity with 446 spinal procedures this year, reduced lists of long waiters. More children are being seen sooner. These reforms matter. I acknowledge the extraordinary staff who are pushing beyond all reasonable limits every day.

However, numbers will never balance the scales where there is the loss or ill treatment of a child. They cannot ease the fear, stress or the anguish families feel, watching their children deteriorate while surgery seems endlessly out of reach. Multiple reviews are under way, which the Minister highlighted them in her contribution. They will be important but reviews alone will not heal the trauma. Families need the truth, they need justice and they need a system that will not hide from the convenient ambiguity of fractured governance. That is why I am delighted at the Government's decision to move ahead with the full statutory inquiry, beginning with the facilitator to scope its terms of reference. It is not just welcome; it is essential. It must be thorough. It must place the voices of children and parents at the centre. We owe parents nothing less and we owe every family living in fear nothing less than reform. Reform cannot

pause while the inquiry proceeds. Failures in communications must be fixed. The Minister noted these in her contribution as well. Clinical governance has to be tightened, not on paper but in practice. No child must ever again be removed from a list without explanation and capacity must continue to expand so children are treated before harm becomes permanent.

I acknowledge the significant structural reform under way. In September, the Minister confirmed her intention to integrate Children's Health Ireland into the HSE. The decision follows careful reflection on the governance structures underpinning our health system, engagement with stakeholders and discussions with Government colleagues. It is really important. During previous contributions, Members spoke about how our faith in CHI had diminished.

Finally, I wish the Minister the very best as she takes on this work. This crisis was not of her making but it is absolutely in her hands now. I am confident she will bring this to a conclusion. I know she is committed to ensuring that families and children finally get the timely and proper care, as well as the answers, justice and decency that they deserve. While none of this is easy, the Minister has the determination to bring it through.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I am glad to have the opportunity to speak on this issue. I apologise; I was gathering notes when I came into the Chamber.

I want to join others by referring to poor little Harvey Morrison Sherratt and all that he endured, as well as the arduous campaign his family have waged for justice ever since his death. It is very important to recognise that there is going to be the statutory public inquiry that they have long sought. I look forward to that getting under way.

I know these are statements, but at the end of these statements, the Minister gets to respond to some of the points raised. I hope she will give some detail. We have certain briefing notes on what is at stake and we have read about it in the media, but it is important that the Minister gives whatever additional detail she can about the statutory public inquiry. Do not get me wrong: these public inquiries are very important. This campaign ran across the summer. Justice for Harvey trended on X, formerly Twitter, for several weeks and it was also front and centre of all newspapers in this country.

A statutory inquiry is crucially important. It is central to the ask of the family and has been a central political ask in these Houses for a long time. How long will it all take? Unfortunately, there are many Harvey Morrison Sherratts in queues in Ireland. Their families do not know when their children will get this all-important medical care. They also do not know what it will look like, when it will happen or where it will take place. A statutory inquiry is important, but timelines and some parameters would also be helpful at this point.

A whole other body of inquiry and investigation is also under way. CHI has suspended surgeons and so forth. I do not want to get into the depths of all of that. However, that there are two sides to this. Unapproved medical springs were used and that has been well-documented. There has been an in-depth investigation into that issue and the Minister and her Department were very much involved in that.

While I am not going to name people here today, there is a body of parents, whom I and many other Members from both sides of the House have met, who feel aggrieved that one of the key surgeons that their children was on the list to see is no longer performing surgery in Ireland for

many reasons. This issue has to work its way through due process and all of that. One issue mentioned to me was that at an Oireachtas health committee meeting that took place on 8 July 2022 someone shone a spotlight on a €90 million scoliosis fund, which was misused. These parents believe that this issue has been used as a stick to beat a certain surgeon. It is important to say that on the record.

In the Minister's summing-up at the end of this debate, I ask that she gives the House any additional detail she is able to regarding the statutory public inquiry. It would be very much appreciated. She has been in this job for nine or ten months and, like my colleague who spoke previously, I have full faith in her to fulfil her duties. This problem was not of her making but she will be the Minister who oversees the establishment of the statutory inquiry and please God the outcome of it.

It is very important that Harvey's family are not locked out of the process. When inquiries are set up, parameters become very rigid. This needs to be delicately handled and Harvey's family needs to be front and centre in everything that happens over the coming months. Ultimately, there also needs to be a strategy that is effective, that does not involve arduous waits and that ensures children who have scoliosis have a pathway to treatment.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Let me make it clear: we have only reached this point of establishing a statutory inquiry into the failures in paediatric spinal care in Ireland solely due to the brave families and advocates who have forced the Government to act. I acknowledge that the Minister has listened to the families and they are taking it in good faith that she will do what they are asking her to do.

It should never have taken years of campaigning, media appearances and unimaginable heartbreak to secure a statutory inquiry. These families refused to be silenced. They deserve the truth and proper accountability. To do these families justice, this inquiry must be fully independent, legally underpinned and completely free from the influence of CHI and the HSE. There must also be compellability. CHI has resisted transparency for far too long. Only an inquiry with real powers that moves quickly, compels co-operation and establishes all of the facts can deliver the truth and rebuild trust in the system.

This inquiry stems from a broken promise made by Deputy Simon Harris in 2017 when he pledged that no child would wait more than four months for scoliosis surgery. Years of delays have led to disability for many children and for others, like Harvey Morrison Sherratt, it cost them their lives. Harvey should have had the surgery when he needed it. Instead, he and his family were failed again and again by a system that hid the truth. The revelation that Harvey was removed from the surgical waiting list and treated as a palliative care patient without any discussion or disclosure to his family is profoundly shocking. No parents should ever learn after the fact that the system, which was meant to protect children, effectively gave up on their child.

I again send my sincere condolences to Harvey's mum and dad, Gillian and Stephen. We are all mindful as we come up to Christmas how excruciatingly painful it must be for the family and other families as well.

Shamefully, Harvey is not alone. The Minister knows about Mikey Henry Benson from my constituency. I thank the Minister for meeting them on Monday, giving them time and listening to what needs to be done.

While the inquiry will cover the scandal of what has gone on in the past, we have to keep alive the children who are still alive today. They have been absolutely neglected, but they are alive and must be kept alive at all costs. We will work with the Minister to ensure that is done but there is a real urgency around what needs to be done. Other ancillary supports that are needed for these families need to be provided as well in combination with the disability services.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I too welcome the establishment of a statutory public inquiry and the decision by Cabinet to appoint a facilitator on the matter. This public inquiry must have the power of compellability to establish facts. It must be independent and the voices of the children, their parents and families must be at the centre of this. Crucially, these families must get the answers to the long list of questions they have.

Public interest must be at the heart of this and nothing else. It must not be rushed, but it cannot go on forever either. Having looked at some examples of tribunals and commissions of inquiry, I have yet to find one where the State has got it right. There are real challenges in setting this up and getting one that is fit for purpose. There is a real challenge here to get a public inquiry that meets the needs of the families and parents, gets them the answers, does not get stuck in legalistic disputes with huge costs and runs for ages.

We need to learn from the lessons of the past in this regard. In particular, we need to learn from the Grace case and that commission of investigation. Inclusion Ireland published a damning report into that inquiry last month, stating: "From the outset the design and approach of the Commission sidelined and devalued many of those most affected by the issues it was considering." That cannot happen here. We cannot have the voices of the children and the families sidelined. The public inquiry must be fully human rights compliant, based on what is the best practice in other jurisdictions such as those identified by Inclusion Ireland in that report. Hopefully, that can be looked into.

When the Minister was talking about the issues in CHI, she referred to some of the reports published in the past two years. We have reports in this area going back to 2013. There was a report into the services for children with spina bifida that found major deficiencies in services at national and local levels, including limited co-ordination services. That report made recommendations for service improvements that were never implemented. In 2017, the Ombudsman for Children's report found serious and ongoing violations of the rights of children waiting for scoliosis treatment. In response, the then Minister for Health, Simon Harris, promised no child with scoliosis would wait longer than four months for surgery. In 2023, the ombudsman published a report into CHI's care of Ivy, a child with scoliosis. It found numerous failings of governance and communication within CHI. Ivy had been waiting for spinal surgery for five years, during which time the curve of her spine went from 30° to 135°. The same year saw the Boston review, which found infection rates at CHI were way above international norms. In 2024, a follow-up report into Ivy's case was published and revealed that surgery had been delayed so long that Ivy was no longer operable. In 2025, an independent audit revealed nearly 80% of hip surgeries on children at Cappagh and nearly 60% on those in Temple Street were not clinically indicated, meaning potentially hundreds of children underwent unnecessary

surgeries. In the same year, HIQA published a report into the use of unauthorised springs in spinal surgeries on children with scoliosis. It found there was no evidence of ethical approval and identified issues with culture, governance and internal communications. A report compiled in 2021, which CHI refused to publish in full, was leaked and uncovered bullying and a workplace culture with the potential to put patients at risk.

We also know there are outstanding reports. There is the Nagayam review into spinal surgery at CHI commissioned in 2023. The 2017 Dickson review into paediatric neurology services remains unpublished, with CHI rejecting its findings. We also have the audit into the waiting lists and equity of access the Minister mentioned. We have here evidence of over a decade of failure and findings that need to be implemented. We cannot have this inquiry stop this reform. All these recommendations need to be implemented and lessons need to be learned. That work needs to continue.

We also need continued reform of the culture within CHI. We know from parents and advocates about the issues around transparency and the culture in the organisation. Úna Keightley, cofounder of the spina bifida and hydrocephalus paediatric advocacy group said CHI is not an entity that values transparency, that it functions on a reactive basis to political, media and advocacy measures and that it does not follow any rules in terms of giving parents the information about their children. It knows parents have nowhere else to bring their children. I have seen this in terms of some of the parliamentary questions I have submitted to CHI. It refused to answer questions saying it was almost too busy to answer my questions. I sent them back and we had to push back on that. That is not acceptable. We need greater transparency and accountability from CHI.

We must not forget those children who remain on waiting lists for these services. There are 233 on CHI's spinal waiting list and 139 on the active list, up from 112 in January, and 45 waiting longer than six months, up from 37 in January. Just five children are listed for surgery abroad. In total, only 19 children have availed of surgeries abroad. I want to know why this is so low. The Minister said it is a source of frustration but we need more than that. We need to know why it is not happening and every mechanism and tool at our disposal needs to be used to ensure these children get the surgeries they desperately need. They cannot be left waiting months and sometimes much longer.

The children affected by unnecessary hip surgeries cannot be forgotten. It is welcome that the multidisciplinary team meetings moved ahead. However, there are concerns about the delay with the external review panel. That cannot be delayed too long. There are also concerns about the lack of accountability and transparency. The Minister said in July regarding referrals to the Medical Council that her Department had written to the HSE to clarify the matter and the HSE had contacted CHI. Will the Minister update us on those referrals to the Medical Council? What is possible in relation to those cases? We need greater accountability. Legislation for accountability is crucial. That is a part of the Sláintecare reforms that was never done. It should be done.

My thoughts are with the families and children affected. As time goes on, they have more questions than answers. Harvey Morrison's parents are an example of this. They want to know why Harvey was removed from the surgical waiting list. Was it a clinical error or a clerical error? How could this have happened? How many children and parents in continuous contact

with CHI have been forgotten? Why were these children failed? Who is to blame and who will be held to account?

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I welcome the opportunity for statements on this topic though I pushed for this to be questions and answers rather than statements given the sprawling nature of the issues that surround CHI. I want to cover three key points: the human impact on these families, the constant crisis, which is unnecessary, and the fact we seem to want to hide from our failures instead of addressing them as a State.

It is important to spend some time reflecting on the human impact and the realities of the long and painful wait for spinal surgery in this country. These children are left in limbo and are denied the opportunity to enjoy their childhood and have the best possible chance at life. Long waiting times have resulted in children no longer being able to get surgery because their condition has progressed so much. They do not get to enjoy school, playing sport or hanging out with their friends without the worry of medication, pain and hospital appointments, or, even worse, no hospital appointment at all. My heart goes out to the family of Harvey Morrison Sherratt and all the children and families who continue to be affected by a lack of care for scoliosis and spina bifida. They deserve better from this State and we must deliver better.

This constant crisis is unnecessary. In the face of repeated failures and the promise years ago from Deputy Simon Harris that no child would wait longer than four months for surgery, and in every new revelation about how these children and their families have been let down, most frustrating is that all this suffering is entirely unnecessary. We are an incredibly wealthy country with billions of euro going into our health service. We have a national focus and public backing for issues to be addressed. We have a plan to fix the problems in our health system and to introduce an efficient, public and robust healthcare system in Sláintecare yet we still have children becoming inoperable because they have waited so long and children in pain while their families watch on given we seem to want to hide from our failures instead of addressing them. Children's Health Ireland has been plagued with scandal, with each new detail worse than the last. We have clear systemic problems in our health service when children are being implanted with non-medical grade devices, when unnecessary hip surgeries are performed on children and when children who do need treatment cannot access it or are removed from waiting lists without their or their families' knowledge. These revelations came out piece by piece. We need a public inquiry that delivers for those affected and the publication of all reviews. We should not have to be here to talk about what we can do to give these families justice and services. They should have received timely care but it is left to us now to deliver on the broken promises and ensure change.

I am very familiar with the Commissions of Investigation Act and agree with my colleague that it has not yet yielded enough examples of human rights-compliant commissions of investigation, public inquiries or tribunals. It is up to the Government to use that legislation in the right way and meet the standards and obligations we have to be human rights-compliant in this inquiry.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I acknowledge the Minister's ongoing efforts relating to this emotive issue, particularly in relation to CHI. I thank her for her help with some constituents in Kildare North and her work with the families. It is important that is acknowledged. However, it is incumbent to speak of the hundreds of children still waiting for spinal operations

that are time-sensitive. In October, CHI reported 223 children on a spinal surgery list. Around 140 of them are actively waiting. That means they are ready for surgery but still have no date. Some children have been waiting more than 18 months. A very small number have waited more than three years. For a child, three years can change everything. No one should spend their childhood waiting for essential surgery.

These delays are not just numbers; they are children in severe pain. They are nights when a child cannot sleep comfortably, school days missed, opportunities lost and parents watching their child struggle while feeling they cannot do anything to fix it. Families are trying to stay hopeful but long silences, sudden cancellations and mixed messages take a huge emotional toll.

I recognise that progress has been made. CHI has increased throughput. The spinal surgery management unit has been established to strengthen co-ordination. Additional surgeons, nurses and specialist staff have come on board and new theatre spaces and a new MRI have helped speed up care. Children have been sent abroad when needed and that has offered timely treatment for many families. These steps matter and I welcome them but progress is still uneven. Capacity has improved yet cancellations continue to disrupt families. Communication gaps leave parents unsure and anxious and too many children continue to wait far too long for surgery that could prevent long-term deterioration. When a surgery is cancelled at short notice, it affects children and their families and their sense of trust in the system. If we want to fix this properly, we need four things: accountability for delays; full transparency about waiting times and cancellations; clear communication so families know exactly where they stand; and follow-through on our commitments to reduce long waits. Promises must become practice.

This is not about blaming staff. Ireland has outstanding clinicians who want to give all children the care they deserve. They need a system that supports timely planning, consistent scheduling and clear, reliable pathways. Children only get one childhood. We cannot let long waits define or limit it. If we stay focused, support the health service and its staff and work with families, we can build a spinal service that is timely, transparent and fully centred on the child. We owe that to the children waiting today.

One image that will stay with me was tweeted by Harvey Morrison Sherratt's mother, Gillian, this morning. It was of his bedroom door. As I have a nine-month-old child at home, it really shook me and I cannot imagine the pain she is going through. It is important that we all think not only of Harvey but of the other children who have been affected.

As I said previously, I thank the Minister for her work. A lot more can be done.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before Deputy McGuinness begins, I welcome members of the Dublin Chamber who are here as guests of Deputy Devlin.

Deputy John McGuinness: This scandal has gone on for years under the noses of the Department of Health and all those involved in what should have been the management of a serious issue. Nothing was really done during those years to encourage parents to engage with consultants and hospitals to ensure there would be early intervention for them. We have seen failure after failure and nobody is held to account. In that time, we have seen significant money being allocated to the Department of Health and all to no effect. We are now talking about more action and more people being involved in the management. This is a failure of the

Department of Health and those who work in administration of the hospitals and so forth, and a failure to look after young people who deserve a hell of a lot better.

I cannot express my position any better than Claire did when she wrote to me about her son, Darragh:

At Darragh's outpatient appointment in November 2024, I asked directly whether he could be considered for surgery in New York, London or the Blackrock Clinic. I was told emphatically "No". In the months that followed, Darragh underwent all required pre-op assessments, which were completed and signed off in early 2025 confirming he was ready for surgery and despite that, no date was set for that surgery and no further information was provided. His clinical plan was for surgery to take place before Easter 2025. That was considered the timeframe for the best possible outcome. That is why it mattered. This is a child that has already been brought through so much. He deserved the chance at a best outcome, but that chance has now been lost. As a result of the delay to surgery, Darragh's spinal condition has progressed. He now has a worsening lower curve while the upper portion of his spine has become auto-fused. At his most recent appointment, I was informed that the section of the spine can no longer be surgically addressed due to its complexity.

I find it harrowing that a mother would have to look at her child going through this and then for that child not to be able to have the surgery that is required. Claire goes on:

To make matters worse, I have learned that visiting spinal surgeons from Morgan Stanley were in CHI, not only on 31 March and 1 April 2025, but also in December 2024. These were at least two clear opportunities to put Darragh forward for potential care on an international pathway and both were missed instead. When we attended the clinic on 3 April, we were told plainly that there is no date and there is no timeframe for surgery. That is not waitlist management. That is abandonment.

I agree absolutely with Claire. I have mentioned Claire, but there are many mothers like Claire and many sons like Darragh fighting to have their cases heard and to have the surgery that would make life very different for them. Claire continues:

I also know that not one child under the care of the Temple Street service has accessed surgery at the Blackrock Clinic via CHI in the past years. That is a deeply troubling fact. It means that a large cohort of children, entirely based on the CHI site they attend, have had no access to major outsourcing initiatives. This is not equity. This is not national planning. This is exclusion. This causes a fundamental and urgent question. What is the pathway for access to Blackrock Clinic, Morgan Stanley and Great Ormond Street Hospital? Who decides which children will be selected? It feels like my lovely son was simply overlooked, forgotten and that is something no parent should have to live with.

I can point to a second case, again in Kilkenny, in which the operation was carried out in 2004, which Deputies might say was a long time ago. Conor was seen in 2004 when he was four. Then in 2009 he had surgery. In 2013, he was seen again. Surgery was promised in 2014. Now he is starting to fall out of the system and he has still not got the surgery required for the problems he is now experiencing. I want the Minister to take note of this. When his mother went about getting the information from 2009 and the various other dates from then to now, she was made to ask for that information through all kinds of avenues. She got little or no help. No one reached out to her. No one understood or wanted to understand what she was trying to

achieve. Now, this young man has carried the problems of his childhood through his teenage years to his life as a young man. How is that right? There is nothing the Minister can say to these parents this evening that will satisfy them in the context of dates and times and the reduction of the waiting list. However, I encourage her to read her emails. These emails have been sent to her by the parents. I urge her to respond, engage and prevent further pain for the families.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I welcome the opportunity to make a small contribution to this debate. I pay tribute to the parents of Harvey Morrison Sherratt, people like Claire Cahill of the Scoliosis Advocacy Network, the parents of Mikey and all those campaigners who time and again have brought to the fore the issue of the scandalous treatment of children with scoliosis. We should not know the names of these children. They should be able to live their lives in peace and not have to continually waive their anonymity and beg for every tiny bit of attention to get the treatment they need.

Families have been advocating, as I am sure the Minister will agree, for far too long. I imagine they are worn out. This issue is not new. This is not even the first or second scandal that relates to this area. Children have been utterly failed by the State and successive governments. When I looked back at the record, I saw that the first time I raised this was in 2016. In 2017, I debated this matter with the then Minister for Health, who is now Tánaiste and Minister for Finance. The debate started with a reference to the great efforts of campaigners like the Scoliosis Advocacy Network. The staff in RTÉ were thanked for highlighting the issue. The then Minister thanked me for raising this serious matter and for giving him an opportunity to update the House. This, of course, was following on from an RTÉ programme. As often happens, people have to go to the media to bare their soul to get any attention from the Government. The then Minister for Health, Deputy Harris, continued:

I assure colleagues that improving scoliosis services is an absolute priority for both me and the Government. I am monitoring closely - indeed, on a weekly basis - the progress being made on addressing waiting lists

He said that "the HSE and the Children's Hospital Group have confirmed that they are committed to ensuring that no child will be waiting over four months". I emphasise that the then Minister for Health said that he would be monitoring the waiting lists not on a monthly basis but "on a weekly basis". What happened? The attention of the Minister was right on this "on a weekly basis". He confirmed it in the Dáil. What happened? Hopefully the inquiry will get some answers because parents have waited for far too long. They have been let down by far too many health Ministers and I really, genuinely hope that they get the answers that they so desperately need.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I welcome that we are finally going to have a statutory inquiry into the care of children with scoliosis and spina bifida at CHI. It is unfortunate and outrageous that it has taken what it has taken to get to this point where we have an inquiry. Campaigners have been calling for one for a long time, as have some of us in the Dáil. It is not just about the hundreds of children who have been left waiting in pain, getting worse and in some cases becoming inoperable; it is not just about the scandal of the unnecessary, unlicensed, non-medical grade, non-medical devices - springs - being inserted inside children; it is not just about the death of Harvey Morrison Sherratt after having previously been wrongly taken off a waiting

list; and it is not just about the outpouring of anger we saw on the streets at the end of the summer around the idea of justice for Harvey, which represented the idea of justice for all our children who are being failed, in particular by CHI but also in general by the State. It is also about the really horrifying revelations from a whistleblower about the treatment of Harvey and the idea that he was palliative, and yet nothing seemed to happen in palliative care, and about what we heard at the weekend - that Harvey was "not fit for a sneeze", which is an awful way to speak about a young child. It is awful that parents have to hear it and then speak out about it.

I pay tribute to Gillian and Stephen for speaking out, obviously at a moment of immense grief, and to all the campaigners and advocate groups who have been pushing for so long for justice and answers when they really should not have to. For me, the key issue in the inquiry is that it is done and that it is co-designed with the agreement of families and advocacy groups. I understand that they want to see a tribunal of inquiry that happens in public, with powers of compellability and all of that. If we could have a reassurance that this will be the approach of the Government, that would be welcome.

I want to raise some related issues. I ask the Minister about the status of the Nayagam report. I got a parliamentary question reply in October saying that this started in September 2023 - we are now in November 2025 - and that "the risk assessment aspect of the review has been completed and is being considered." I ask the Minister if the risk assessment will be published in full and not be redacted. The Nayagam report obviously relates to a particular surgeon. We should not be limiting an investigation of what happened to children. I have been contacted, as I have mentioned twice on the Dáil record before, by an adult patient of this surgeon with many concerns. I am obviously not qualified to say whether there were problems but at the very least, given what we know, adult care also needs to be looked at.

I also want to ask about Cappagh hospital being fully included. I previously referenced the email from the clinical director at Cappagh hospital about ending the multidisciplinary teams, MDTs, because of osteotomies not happening. I got a new parliamentary question reply saying that hip dysplasia and osteotomies are still only going back to 2010, even though we know that these novel osteotomies go back to 2002. It makes no sense to me.

On another issue, the Minister might help me to get parliamentary question replies. I tabled parliamentary questions in early September about diffuse intrinsic pontine glioma, referred to as DIPG, a form of very aggressive brain tumour, and the number of biopsies that are happening. I am still waiting for answers to those questions from the HSE. It has come to my attention that Ireland may be doing an unnecessary number of these biopsies. There are many biopsies when other countries are not doing them, potentially with fatal results for children, so I am looking for answers to those questions.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I am in a small party so I do not get as many speaking opportunities on this issue as other, bigger parties, but I have been in here many times asking for a public statutory inquiry from the word go. I have known Gillian and, particularly, Stephen for just over a year, from before the tragedy with Harvey. We have to learn lessons from this because time and again, on so many issues, parents and relatives have had to campaign for years and years for justice on these questions. I remember saying that we would be in here and we would have a statutory inquiry. It should not have taken the death of Harvey to get this,

because I wonder, had he not died, if we would still be here asking for this. We have to be honest about that. What if the whistleblower had not spoken out?

I want to make a quick point about the inquiry and about the waiting lists. Participation in the inquiry has to be mandatory. Importantly, because this has been raised by parents, children who were affected by this should be allowed to testify. Many of them are older now and they should be listened to. That is really important. If issues are found in the process of the inquiry, they have to be dealt with there and then. You cannot just wait until the end of the inquiry because we all know that it could take some time.

Parents have raised this. Does the Minister still have faith in the spinal task force, given how badly it has failed in its role? The paediatric spinal task force group was explicitly created to decrease the waiting lists. It had its first meeting in May 2024 and at that time there were 246 children on the waiting list. In October 2025, there are 223 and another 139 actively waiting for surgery. It has failed in its objective. It was complemented by the paediatric spinal surgery management unit. It is hard to get your head around all of these terms. That was meant to be in charge of managing spinal surgeries. That is the unit that is directly implicated with Harvey falling off the list. Whether it was a clinical error, as the whistleblower claims, or whether it was an administrative error, as a newer report claims, is irrelevant. That group of people still failed to treat Harvey. There are other examples of incompetence there, with ten children who were crossed off the waiting list by somebody under orders. That person apparently was disciplined for that when they were actually just carrying out an order. Other children have been harmed, as Harvey has.

I also want to raise the issue of staffing, although I will not have time to raise all of the points. It is very hard to fill posts throughout the care system, as we know. Of 52 approved posts, 34 have been filled. Is this another problem that we have? There is also the culture of staffing. Anyone using the term "not fit for a sneeze" should not be working in the health system, or it should be taken up with them how acceptable it is for people to talk like that.

As to what needs to be done very quickly to bring down the lists, two things were raised: either requisitioning space in other hospitals in the private health system, which is packed to the gills with equipment and money, or sending children abroad. Yet, we find that only two children were sent abroad for treatment despite a ministerial order to give all parents that option. It has to be questioned why the lists are still so high after all this time.

Deputy Martin Daly: Every one of us in the House has met families whose lives have been shaped by scoliosis or spina bifida. These are families who do not have the luxury of waiting until next year for improvements. They need treatment now. As a GP, I have seen how timely spinal care can change the entire trajectory of a child's life, and that perspective shapes what I want to say today. Yes, progress is being made, but we have a long way to go before any of us can be satisfied. We need to be honest. Too many children have waited too long for spinal procedures. While some indicators are now moving in the right direction, nobody should pretend that the job is done or that families can suddenly feel reassured. They do not, and I do not blame them.

Up to the end of October, 446 spinal procedures were completed, slightly more than last year, but demand is rising even faster. Some 462 new cases have been added to the list this year, which tells its own story. We are adding cases more quickly than we are clearing them.

Nonetheless, there are improvements. Some 68% of children are now waiting less than six months compared to 56% a year ago. The number of those waiting over a year has halved and outpatient lists have fallen by almost 50%. These are signs of a service that is trying to pull itself out of a very difficult period, but it is also a reminder that the gains are fragile and that the system is still heavily stretched, especially when one retirement or one ICU bed shortage can derail a week's worth of surgeries.

I welcome the hard work of clinicians, the spinal management unit, the multidisciplinary teams and the new transition pathway for adolescents because it is their efforts that are turning numbers into reality for families. However, I will also say this. They need more support, more capacity and more consistent communication structures. Families cannot be left chasing letters, clarifications and updates. The various reviews, the HIQA report, the Boston review, the internal examinations and the ongoing Nayagam review are not comfortable reading, nor should they be. If anything, they show that oversight did not come soon enough. The audit into governance and equity of access is essential and, frankly, overdue. Families deserve transparency, not a maze of inconsistent processes and varying standards. The planned statutory inquiry into spina bifida and complex scoliosis services is a necessary step. It is not a tick-box; it is not a gesture. It must be a turning point.

I want to acknowledge the families and advocates whose persistence has brought us to this point. They have shown more courage and patience than any system should ever demand of them.

As for the integration of CHI into the HSE, it may well be the right long-term move, but let us be clear: structure alone will not fix culture. Governance changes must be matched with accountability and day-to-day improvements must be felt by real families. Progress is real but it is not enough. We need more theatre capacity, more consultants, better planning for surgeries and demand, and communication that treats parents as partners, rather than supplicants. If we want families to regain trust, we have to earn it. As a GP and someone who believes the health system should serve the most vulnerable first, I will continue pushing for urgency, honesty and accountability because these children deserve nothing less.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I acknowledge the work of the Minister, Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill, who, since she became Minister for Health, has been proactive in tackling many pre-existing inefficiencies in the health system. It is also important that I acknowledge and recognise the very hard-working staff within our hospital system. None of what I am saying is a slight on those dedicated and committed members of the hospital network, the HSE or CHI.

It has been apparent since Deputy Carroll MacNeill became Minister for Health that she is actively driving multiple efforts to address the challenges that have been ongoing in relation to paediatric spinal surgery waiting lists. I know from conversations we have shared that the Minister met with the HSE and the CHI board and executive in August and September, and that she was very clear in ensuring that everything possible must be done to reduce the amount of time children are waiting for procedures. I am heartened to know that further meetings will be taking place and are scheduled.

At the end of October, 68% of patients on the active waiting list were waiting less than six months, which marks an improvement from this time last year, when 56% of patients were

waiting less than six months. However, any time a child is waiting for spinal surgery is too long and, therefore, I have to share the following example with the Minister.

A young child in my constituency has been recommended for surgery for over two years. They had pre-operation appointments in early 2024 and 2025. They were offered surgery abroad and were due to travel to New York for spinal fusion last March. However, the child's parents were then advised by the medical team that surgery in Ireland was in the patient's best interests. The family was assured that surgery could be and would be completed by summer 2025 because the child is only ten years old and was, therefore, classed as a priority case. In June, the family was informed that before spinal fusion could take place, additional surgery was also needed, even though this was first identified by MRI in 2019. That is a wait of six years before the surgery happened. I am happy to report that the surgery was successfully performed on 1 July, and by August, the child in question was ready for spinal fusion. A date for surgery was confirmed for last week, that is, not the end of summer 2025, but in November. Unfortunately, four days prior to that surgery date, the surgery was cancelled. That was due to an emergency case, which I can appreciate, but no further plans or details were given to the parents. We can imagine the feeling in the family at that time, and the child asking, "Why am I not an emergency case? I have been waiting so long."

Children and parents like the ones I have just spoken about are at their wits' end. I appeal to the Minister to keep up the drive that she has brought to this role and to ensure her ambition is carried through. I understand it is a challenge, and I recognise the work she has done up to this stage. The children of Ireland need that drastic change to happen at speed so they can access the treatment they so desperately need. The prolonged waiting needs to stop.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I want to express my sincere condolences to the family of Harvey Morrison Sherratt. While he was failed by this State, he was very lucky to have such loving, strong parents, Gillian and Stephen, who fought and did everything they could to get him the treatment he needed. Unfortunately, it was too little, too late, but they continue to fight for all children like Harvey.

Before coming to the House today, I rang a constituent of mine who has a son with scoliosis who is in a wheelchair. I want to let the Minister know that these are issues that are coming directly from people on the front line. Her child does not qualify for scoliosis surgery because the curvature of his spine is not considered severe enough to join the waiting list. If he lived in England or America, he would be on the waiting list for surgery. From what I am being told by parents, the criteria for children are too strict. The most severe cases are on the waiting lists but these children are left waiting for months, if not years, for urgent treatment and surgeries. The boy's mother believes early intervention will give him the best opportunities in life and the best chance to correct the curvature of his spine. The system is in chaos while parents hear about scandals over springs and hip operations. How can parents trust the clinical decisions they are hearing about right now? The woman's son is losing out because he was born in Ireland, and he is also losing out because he was born in Cork. I will explain why. He has two choices at home: to be in his wheelchair or to be in bed. There is nowhere else for him to be. He does not have a second chair, a specialist chair, in which he can sit, watch television, have meals or play games. What kind of system are we running when a child who uses a wheelchair cannot access another suitable chair? These are basic necessities for children who have disabilities. This is all wrong. How are we running the health service like this? It should be

based on need, dignity and clinical decisions, but instead it depends on where someone lives. Is it a postcode lottery? This parent told me she knows of other parents whose children do have access to the equipment I have mentioned.

The Government should be ashamed of itself over how it has acted and treated these children and their families. Yesterday, we were in here and Simon Harris, the man who broke his promise to them, gave himself another promotion, to the position of Minister for Finance, but the only legacy people will remember is one of broken promises and his failure of the most vulnerable children in this State.

Deputy Michael Collins: Our health system has failed some of the most vulnerable children in the State. In 2017, a clear promise was made that no child would wait more than four months for spinal surgery. That promise was broken, with devastating consequences. Right now, 139 children are actively waiting for spinal surgery this year. Four hundred and forty-six surgeries were completed, yet 462 new patients joined the list. We now know that the pledge of four months was based on assurances given to the then Minister by HSE leadership and senior officials at CHI, who told him the target was achievable. Those assurances were wrong and parents paid the price. The tragic death of Harvey Morrison Sherratt and the allegation that he was removed from the waiting list because he was deemed palliative have shattered public confidence. His parents have been clear that they want a statutory public inquiry with full powers to compel evidence and broad scope to uncover systemic failures over decades, accountability in respect of those who made harmful decisions, and above all, real change with ring-fenced funding, stronger governance and a national spinal treatment service so no child will suffer like Harvey did. The Government has now agreed to an inquiry, but this cannot be a box-ticking exercise; it must be family led, transparent and fearless in exposing the truth. When it concludes, its recommendations must be implemented, not ignored. I ask those on the Government benches to commit to implementing in full every recommendation of the inquiry and guaranteeing ring-fenced funding and a timeline for reform. Anything less represents another broken promise. There can be no more broken promises and certainly no more preventable tragedies.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The Minister came to Limerick and we opened the 96 beds. I welcomed it. We now have options A, B and C, which we were looking for in Limerick for the care of the people of the mid-west. Developers have come to us saying that if the State does not have the money to build the facilities, they will build them for it and sell them back for €1 after 35 years. The reason I am saying this is that I hope our new Minister for Finance, who was in the position of the current Minister for Health and failed in it in areas where she is excelling, will not stop the funding for the delivery of healthcare. I hope a political situation does not develop in which the Minister for Finance sees the current Minister for Health as a threat to his leadership and also fails in this respect. We now have a chance to deliver infrastructure for the people of the mid-west and the rest of Ireland if the Minister for Health is allowed to put procedures in place whereby we can have buildings in which we can actually care for people. I do not want money to stand in the way. I want delivery on budget and on time, and I believe the Minister can deliver in this regard. I hope nothing stands in the way. If the budget does not allow for it, there are people who will develop the projects for the Minister and give her the infrastructure she needs to ensure the delivery of care for people in a short length of time.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I have been 18 years in public life, having served as a city councillor in Cork and as a TD for almost a year in this House. Not a day or week goes by when I do not meet a parent with a child with a special need or difficulty, or a child in need of an operation. They are put to the pins of their collars and are desperate. Although I am not a parent myself, I see from my brother and in-laws how they rear their kids. They would kill for their kids. If you could take on their pain, you would. I see parents struggling to secure operations, services and attention that their children need, and also trying to meet the social welfare criteria, and then I hear excuses in this House about dissatisfaction with the numbers sent to Great Ormond Street or elsewhere. This has been going on since 2012, over ten years ago. In September 2023, safety and governance were raised. In 2012, concerns were raised about the hospital. In 2016, failures regarding the pledge of four months were first noted in this House. This goes on and on and on. I welcome the inquiry and I wanted it. We agreed we would have it, but it must have teeth and finish, and there must be accountability. The assurances the Minister gave this afternoon will not help any parent worrying about a sick child to sleep well tonight.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: It is good that we have the opportunity to make some statements, particularly after the announcement that a tribunal of inquiry is to be set up. It is welcome news, but I will be very interested in the terms of reference when they are on paper and when we have sign-up involving all the families and children involved. We may have made some progress in reducing numbers, but more children are joining the lists and at a faster rate. There have been questions about why children were bumped off the list before. They have not been answered and there is no accountability. In my previous contribution, I mentioned parents who have had legal action threatened against them for trying to advocate for their children. Unless these issues are dealt with concurrently with the tribunal, we are going to have problems.

I want to talk about some of the demands made by the children with scoliosis and spina bifida and their parents: children who have aged out of services must be included; there should be a transition pathway for scoliosis and spina bifida; the consequences of neglect by CHI should be addressed; children who have passed away must be included; there should be power to compel persons to provide evidence and provide documents; and healthcare reforms must be implemented while the inquiry is ongoing. I hope these can be dealt with.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: In her opening remarks, the Minister said her door was open to TDs to bring specific cases to her attention. I have engaged with her Department on, for example, the case of Mikey, who was so long on the waiting list that he aged out. The Department shut the door on me and said it was not its place to intervene with clinicians regarding the care of children. That is one problem.

Second, if we are honest, the Minister has for several months been stonewalling those asking questions on this issue. It has been 14 months since I raised the question of Harvey Morrison Sherratt's removal from the waiting list. I asked how many other children have been removed from the list and the Minister told me she would answer that question soon. She said in October that she would answer the question in November, but that question has not been answered as of yet. It is absolutely startling that information is still not available to people at this time. When will the Minister let the Dáil know what is happening in this regard? I asked why CHI

has not published its 2024 annual report on its accounts and spending. I have also asked questions around the funds for surgeries for children abroad and why no one on that list at the moment is scheduled for operations abroad. In all the months that we have been talking about CHI, the situation is actually getting worse for so many families.

We in Aontú have difficulties regarding this inquiry and, first of all, how it refers to complex scoliosis. There is no definition of complex scoliosis in the document so far and we are worried that this is an attempt to water down the number of children who will form part of that inquiry. I am also disappointed that the statement announcing the inquiry was first seen by the advocacy groups of these children in the media.

How many children have been removed from CHI waiting lists without their parents' knowledge? I will ask the question again: how many children like Harvey Morrison Sharrett were wrongly removed from the waiting list? How many children have died while awaiting surgery in this country? How many children have been removed from the waiting lists without surgery having aged out? Outside of the inquiry process, will the Minister commit to furnishing this House with that basic information and detail, which should be available at any stage to any TD who is asking a parliamentary question of the Minister? The Boston report said that one child went back for 33 surgeries but, because of CHI data, it looked like 33 children were operated on. There is a lot of confusion and a lack of transparency in relation to these figures. Given all that has happened here, the very least that the citizens of Ireland, elected representatives and these families themselves are entitled to is transparency.

Deputy Gillian Toole: Níl a fhios agam an mbeidh mo chairde sa tSeomra i gceann tamaill. I thank the Minister for her update. It was very comprehensive. I was here earlier but I had to step out for a while. I will confine my comments just in case my colleagues thunder in, but I can jump back if necessary. I will consider five As, like an A rating. The first A is that consideration be given – the Minister has even addressed one already – to the asks of the parents and advocates of the children. The second is to acknowledge the conscientious and hardworking healthcare professionals already involved over the past 13 years, and probably longer. The third A, which is probably the most serious and one, to my science background mind, I consider the common denominator no matter what subject of healthcare we discuss here, is to always get the why. What has happened and, more importantly, why has it happened? It is that issue of accountability, particularly the accountability of senior HSE management. If we look at the mission statement and values of the Health Service Executive, they are listed as care, compassion, trust and learning. We have had a breakdown on several fronts in that regard. That is a key area. The fourth A is action. Again, that is linked to the first A, namely, the asks. I ask the Minister to consider the 2024 scoliosis Bill brought forward by Senator McDowell because the accountability is built in. The fifth A is, to go back to the beginning, to acknowledge the efforts of the Minister in a short space of time against a system that is stacked against her.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am a bit out of breath but I am delighted to be able to speak on this. I am delighted go bhfuil an tAire anseo and listening to the debate. It is very important. This has to be sorted out. I raised today during Questions on Policy or Legislation the issue of CDNTs in Clonmel. They are so depleted. There have been 11 staff vacancies there for years. I said mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí. There are children who have varying degrees of needs -

some with very little - in need of assistance. This scoliosis issue beggars belief. It is such a profound, challenging illness that is so obvious to parents and everyone.

Some years ago, when this was debated, there was some proposal to send children and patients to America by aeroplane. Obviously, that was a no-brainer given they could not travel by aeroplane because of their condition. I suggested at that time that if we were serious about this, we would get some specialist surgeons from the United States or wherever and bring them here to deal with the backlog and waiting lists. I do not have to remind the Minister of what her party leader and current Tánaiste promised and what happened there. Money went in and it was ring-fenced, but it turned out it was not ring-fenced but, rather, was used up elsewhere. What kind of out-of-control HSE health system do we have? It seems to totally lack in compassion and empathy. There are many good people involved. My late brother was a paediatrician of some renown and he cared deeply. I know many health people do but it is the management. “Management” is such a bland word. How can these systems be so callous and unempathetic in how they deal with people on a daily basis? How can they see a problem and just walk away from it? It would not happen on farms. It would not be allowed to happen. It is so devastating for families. We saw loss of life and how files were wrongly entered or classified. It is so simple to say that but it is so deeply hurtful, sad and troubling to parents, anyone with a heart and anyone who is human.

The HSE is not fit for purpose. It has not been for a while. CHI is not fit for purpose by any means, nor is Tusla, but we keep piling on, giving them more and more money, adding more directors and letting them all have big fancy titles while the basic, decent humanity of a required surgery cannot be done in a timely manner. If we do not have the expertise here, we should be importing it from abroad and trying to show some compassion. Otherwise, we should fold up our tent in here and go away. We are like a Third World country. It is shocking. It hurts me deeply to have to talk about it.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Más rud é nach bhfuil fadhb ag duine ar bith, tá muid ag dul ar ais go dtí Sinn Féin leis an Teachta Ward.

Deputy Mark Ward: I wish the Minister well as she tackles this issue. There is no one on any side of the House who does not want to see children get timely access to the care they need. I commend the advocates who have long been calling for a statutory public inquiry into spina bifida and complex scoliosis services. I cautiously welcome the fact the Government has agreed to this. The reason I say I cautiously welcome it is because the terms and references have to be spot-on in this. We have all heard about the unregulated springs used in operations of children and the unnecessary hip operations, so we need to find out from a governance level what actually led to these failures in the first place so that they do not happen again. We simply cannot allow the wreckage of the past and a toxic culture in CHI to take hold in a new CHI hospital.

The scope of this public inquiry must not be too narrow. We do not need to see little bits of the jigsaw but, rather, the whole picture. The public inquiry must look at this and it must be able to compel people to appear to simply get the answers. Documents must also be compelled to help the inquiry. The facilitator appointed to consult stakeholders must be independent and he or she must ensure that no cohort or particular group of children are left out of this process. We need to have an overall view of the care children have received. This includes an

investigation into the deaths of children and whether these deaths are linked to waiting on scoliosis surgery. The inquiry must also look at children who have post-op complications, including infections. The inquiry also needs to look at HIQA's role in all of this and why it did not sound the alarm bells sooner. We need to see full accountability.

The tribunal should be able to issue recommendations while it is ongoing. That is what the advocacy groups have been calling for. While the inquiry is ongoing, these recommendations must be implemented in a timely manner.

It would be remiss of me if I did not mention the tragic death of nine-year-old Harvey Morrison Sherratt. I have got to know Harvey's parents, Stephen and Gillian, over the last couple of years. They have tirelessly campaigned, both before Harvey passed away and since his untimely death, for better healthcare for children. Last year, I asked in this House why Harvey was removed from the waiting list without his parents' knowledge. Today, as we speak, Stephen and Gillian still do not have an answer to this. We have seen reports from a whistleblower - reports I know the Minister is well aware of - stating that Harvey was removed as CHI deemed him to be palliative. This is totally unacceptable. We just need to get to the truth of this matter. Why was Harvey removed from the list, who knew about it and when did they know about it? This is about what happened at CHI level and at Government level. It is not about a witch-hunt or anything like it. It is just about finding out what happened so that it does not happen to another child. Harvey's case must be a reminder that management and political failures have real-life consequences. We need to see full accountability. The statutory inquiry should be how we finally get justice for Harvey.

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I want to try to address all the points, but there is a time limit. Let me try to address a couple of things quickly, and then some of the more detailed issues. In relation to the 2024 annual report for CHI, the annual financial statements are with the Comptroller and Auditor General. The intention is for it to be published by the end of the year.

Forgive me, but I cannot recall who mentioned infection rates. It is important to acknowledge that there has been significant difficulty in the past but that is reducing. For example, the surgical site infection, SSI, rate was 8.7% in 2022. In 2023 and 2024, respectively, it was 4.3% and 4.4%. This year, I am pleased to be able to say it is below 3%, at 2.9%. That is a significant improvement, and I hope it will provide some confidence to families who have correctly raised this issue in the past as being a big issue. It is very much reduced. I think that is important.

My door is open to bringing cases, but it is not as though I will be able to clinically intervene. What I can do is to try to shine a light on the management of cases, particularly for those most urgent cases, which are of real concern to me. I have met many of the families directly and I am aware of the difficulties. I am not a clinician and I never will be, but I will do everything I can to make sure the correct attention is shone on those most urgent of cases.

In relation to the Nayagam report, there are two things. The CEO of the HSE has assured me that the matters that led to the report are being attended to in major improvement plans and patient safety measures. The report itself is not being waited upon to action that. Nevertheless, the CEO has also advised me that for significant legal reasons, he cannot at this time apprise me of the report, but we hope he may be able to do so in the near future. There is a significant legal issue in regard to that and I cannot go any further than that.

A number of Deputies correctly asked me about the audit because it is a really important part of waiting list management. I am informed that the qualitative element of it should be with the CEO at the end of November, so I would expect to be in a position to publish it in December. The technical draft of the more quantitative audit element being done by the internal auditor will be technically available in December, but there is always a procedure to triple-check - I cannot recall the audit phrase - when producing data of that kind. That will happen within December. We will publish it as early as possible outside of the normal quarterly cycles, but that has to happen.

Turning to the task force, there was some very strong, and somewhat unfair, criticism of the paediatric spinal task force that I think it is very important to address. The paediatric spinal task force is an entity separate to the management of lists within CHI. I think it is important to say that. Regarding its membership, Mark Connaughton SC the chair. Exceptional advocates for spina bifida and scoliosis are on the task force. There are also exceptional advocates who are not on it. All of them are contributing to the improvement of services. I thank all the advocates, both those on the task force and those not on it, and they will all contribute to the development of the terms of reference. They all have direct lived experience, either as a parent or as somebody with spina bifida or scoliosis. They all have very important perspectives and all have done exceptional work. The members are Gerry Maguire of Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus Ireland, Elaine Kelly and Deirdre McDonnell of Scoliosis Awareness Support Ireland, and Lily Collison of the Cerebral Palsy Foundation. There are then different departmental, HSE and CHI representatives.

The terms of reference are to engage with stakeholders, listen, engage and act on advice and the concerns of parents, outline improvements, engage on the development and delivery of services, engage with the HSE and its spinal surgery management unit and provide oversight and assurance. I thank them for their work. It is ongoing work. It really has contributed valuable information, as have those advocates outside of it. Neither is better. Everybody is contributing their experience for the improvement of services. I really do thank all of them. It is important to say the task force has no operational oversight. I think Deputy Coppinger may simply have confused the two elements, but the task force is not responsible for operational oversight. It is a group to try to improve the services. It is different from the unit established in CHI last year that is responsible for managing the waiting lists.

The issue of the inquiry, possibly most important, was raised by several Deputies. I need to try to address a number of different issues, but what we can say with certainty is that it will be a statutory public inquiry. It will have the power of compellability, of necessity. We will also continue to try to drive improvements at the same time. Those things are not incompatible. We will absolutely engage with families, with children, in a voice-of-the-child appropriate way, and with stakeholders, the different representative groups and the different advocacy groups, all with a view to developing the best possible terms of reference.

If I may say so, Deputies have said a couple of slightly competing things that I think it is important that we together address. We want an inquiry that can have the power to investigate the issues of shared concern to us. We also want it to be an inquiry that will report and have teeth. It is a fact-finding inquiry and, therefore, we cannot take things necessarily as they are happening if the chair of the inquiry has to go through their own process. We are moving into a legal process that has to be managed by the chair of the inquiry. We will not be able to

interfere with the inquiry and nor should we. It is also a legal process that is capable of legal challenge. As we are drafting the terms of reference, we do not want them to be so tight that they do not do the work we want them to do. Equally, we do not want the terms of reference to be so wide as to either run into legal challenge or get to a point where we do not ever get an outcome to the inquiry in an appropriate way. I am not time-binding it or limiting it in any way. I am just very conscious that in the past we have had discussion in this House about the need for an inquiry into a matter of significant and urgent public concern and it has taken many years. I am thinking of Siteserv, for example. As Deputies may agree, it went considerably beyond the terms of its discussion.

I am not trying to limit this inquiry in any way. What I am trying to say is that it is the Government and the Oireachtas that both set and sign off on the terms of reference. In every way imaginable, that will be done in collaboration and agreement with the advocates. There will come a point, however, where we will have to agree that we are reaching the best possible position for the functionality and legal robustness and endurance of an inquiry capable of challenge, that is, one that is going to be operationally effective and possible for the person chairing it and which will reach the sort of outcomes and findings that will be found. If I do not say this now, and if something happens to the inquiry in six, 12 or 18 months, the Deputies will quite correctly say that I did not set up the terms of reference properly. I am trying to set out at a very early stage the need for honesty and the understanding that we are operating within legal constraints that have important implications.

I will work with the members of the health committee in a public and private way, for example, to try to outline all the different issues I see coming up. It is really important we have the advice of the facilitator. I suggest that we work together, publicly and privately, because it is the Government and the Oireachtas that sign off on it, to ensure we have the best possible expression of all the stakeholders that contribute to it and to take the steps with legal advice that we believe will give us the best and most robust model of an inquiry as well. I am just trying to set that out honestly. I do not want to walk into a brick wall with something we all know is so very important.

There was a question about hip dysplasia. The chair was appointed on 24 October and that work will begin. I also understand CHI has written to patients in the last two weeks. It is important to say this to the House because I have this knowledge and I want to make sure I share it in the most appropriate way. I would like the opportunity to delve into this tomorrow but I do not want to withhold information I could give to the House. CHI has written to 81 patients who have been waiting longer than the period we would want to try to set out the parameters of international travel and how that might work, recognising, of course, that it has to be clinically appropriate and that it takes a certain length of time. There has, within the last two weeks, been an effort to engage in a different way with families and look at that international travel option. I will get more understanding of this as I meet with CHI tomorrow and over the next period but I think it is an important update for the House that I could not have and not share. I hope I have tried to address as many questions as possible and I thank the House.

Estimates for Public Services 2025: Message from Select Committee

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): The Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure, Public Service Reform, Digitalisation and Taoiseach has completed its consideration of the following Supplementary Estimates for Public Services for the service of the year ending 31 December 2025: Votes 7 and 9.

Health Information Bill 2024: Instruction to Committee

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I move:

That it be an instruction to the Committee on the Health Information Bill 2024 that, pursuant to Standing Order 194(2), the Committee has power to make amendments to the Bill which are outside the scope of the existing provisions of the Bill in order to introduce a technical amendment to the Patient Safety (Notifiable Incidents and Open Disclosure) Act 2023, in order to bring public nursing homes within the remit of section 68 of that Act and to make other consequential amendments required to take account of the changes above.

Question put and agreed to.

Health Information Bill 2024: Report and Final Stages

Bill recommitted in respect of amendments Nos. 1 and 2.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Amendments Nos. 1, 2 and 6 are related and may be discussed together.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I move amendment No. 1:

In page 5, line 31, after “Act;” to insert “to amend the Patient Safety (Notifiable Incidents and Open Disclosure) Act 2023;”.

I am pleased to bring forward the Health Information Bill for consideration on Report Stage. Its purpose is to bring forward a number of statutory measures around the consistent sharing and use of health information while ensuring it best serves the individual patient, healthcare practitioners and society as a whole.

However, amendments Nos. 1, 2 and 6, which I understand are related and can be taken together, concern technical amendments to section 68 of the Patient Safety (Notifiable Incidents and Open Disclosure) Act 2023, which I have agreed to carry as part of the Health Information Bill. The Patient Safety (Notifiable Incidents and Open Disclosure) Act 2023 is significant legislation signed into law on 2 May 2023, but section 68 has not yet been commenced due to the need for a technical amendment to an existing provision.

Alongside a number of other provisions, the 2023 Act amends the Health Act 2007 to extend the powers of HIQA. Section 68 provides that a new section be inserted into the 2007 Act to provide the chief inspector with a discretionary power to carry out an independent review of a defined type of serious patient safety incident where some or all of the care of the patient was carried out in a nursing home. Prior to commencement, a query was raised as to whether the provisions of section 68, as it stood at the time, included public nursing homes. It is essential

that public nursing homes are included. This was considered by the Department's legal department and the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel. As the current definition of a relevant designated centre does not include public nursing homes, these amendments are necessary to ensure that public as well as private nursing homes are covered by the provision and therefore to bring the section in question in line with the intent of the Act, which it currently is not.

It is important to note that it is not a new provision but the amendment we are bringing forward today would allow us to then commence the rest at the earliest possible date. I also apologise to the House for the non-textual amendments but there is nothing I can do about that.

Deputy David Cullinane: I will not hold the Minister up on this. I would say we will get through this very quickly. It is a technical amendment and the Minister is right. It is the only section of the Bill that has not been commenced, but obviously it is an important section. As the Minister said, it gives the chief inspector the discretionary powers to commission an investigation, and that is an important part of the Bill we had passed.

Will the Minister say, if this Bill is passed, does it have to go to the Seanad or are these the final Stages of it? When will this section of the Act actually be commissioned? What is the timeframe for it? It is an important part of the Bill that has already been passed and it is something I have raised in the past. I am anxious that it would be commenced as soon as possible.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: This whole Bill has to go to the Seanad yet and, once that is done and this Bill is enacted, then that other provision can essentially be commenced.

Deputy David Cullinane: We are into next year, I take it.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: January.

Amendment agreed to.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Pursuant to Standing Order 194(3), it is reported to the Dáil that the Long Title has been amended.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I move amendment No. 2:

In page 6, line 5, after "Act" to insert " , other than *section 25*,".

Amendment agreed to.

Bill reported with amendments.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I move amendment No. 3:

In page 8, line 17, to delete "2004," and substitute "2004, or".

This is a minor technical amendment to add the word "or" between subsections (b) and (c) and the definition of "relevant person" under the Bill.

Deputy David Cullinane: It is very controversial.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: It is indeed, one of the more controversial things we will deal with today. The definition of "relevant person" primarily relates to Part 4. Part 4 concerns the secondary use of health information for specified public interest purposes, namely, a public interest purpose in the area of public and occupational health, policy and regulatory activities, including in respect of service planning and performance management, and statistics. Under this Part, the HSE will be empowered to request and receive from a relevant person health information for these specified public interest purposes. The provisions set out under Part 4 will, therefore, support greater and effective use of information and data, including in support of a number of activities. It is a critical step in ensuring we move beyond our current, often fragmented and even reluctant, approach to information sharing. These obstacles to information sharing remain in place. They do not serve the interests of the public. They frustrate our collective efforts to provide for health service improvement commensurate with the sustained and substantial public investment in health and social care. The Bill will provide a clarity in law that will allow us to surpass these obstacles and join other EU nations who have made more progress in digital health and social care.

A "relevant person" is defined under the Bill as a body established by or under an enactment to perform functions in relation to health services, including section 38 and 39 bodies under the Health Act 2004 or private providers who have entered into an arrangement with the HSE to provide health services. This amendment is, therefore, a technical amendment to clarify that a relevant person can fall under any one of those three categories. Deputies may wish to note that under Part 4, the HSE also has the power to specify, among other matters, the structured collection of health information to be provided as well as the digital format in which the information should be provided. Requests under Part 4 must be complied with and, in the event of non-compliance, the HSE can apply to the Circuit Court for an order directing compliance.

The Bill is clear as to the powers provided to the HSE in recognition of its role as the custodian of public investment in health and social care services. The Bill is also clear as to the positive obligation it places on health service providers, including section 38 and 39 bodies, to provide this information when and as requested to do so. Of course, it should not be necessary to wait for legislation to be enacted to ensure there is a full alignment of reporting across our publicly funded health and social care services and to ensure an effective and efficient use of resources. This should be happening in any event under existing provisions and arrangements, including the service level arrangements that section 38 and 39 bodies are required to enter into with the HSE in return for the very significant levels of public funding received.

I will continue to reflect on my engagement with the sector. I know this is something that is of great importance and interest to the health committee and the Deputies across from me, who have already expressed their support for the full integration of, for example, the integrated financial management system throughout the voluntary hospitals as well as the HSE hospitals and more broadly. I will continue to reflect on our engagement with the sector, and should I or Deputies consider it necessary, we will bring further legislative provisions or other measures to ensure this obligation is complied with without exception.

Deputy David Cullinane: On the issue of voluntary hospitals, as the Minister has raised it, I raised this issue with the CEO of the HSE, Bernard Gloster, when he appeared before the health committee last week, as well as with Derek Tierney, the assistant secretary in the Department of Health. I have seen media reports of attempts to make sure the voluntary hospitals play ball in relation to the integrated financial service management system.

This is something I raised with staff in the HSE when we were looking at the health regions. Muiris O'Connor and others were in briefings we got when the health regions were at that point - this was before they were established - on what they would do and what they would look like. The issue of voluntary hospitals came up and it came up again in the Oireachtas Committee on Health today. There is value in them, obviously. There is a value in those hospitals having boards. They value that themselves. They are very protective of and precious about it.

It is important for all of us, whether we are in government or in opposition, to make it very clear that there is a very high expectation from this House and from, I would imagine, the public who signs the cheques for those voluntary hospitals, that they provide all of the data asked for by the HSE. The HSE is the funder on behalf of the taxpayer. There have been incidents when it has not happened and if we want consistency across all hospitals we need every hospital, including voluntary ones, to play ball. From my perspective, it is important there is not any division between the Government and Opposition and that a very clear, unified message is sent to voluntary hospitals that there cannot be any excuse for not operating these systems in full.

I would expect voluntary hospitals to engage with all of those systems in the exact same way as any other HSE publicly-funded hospital.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I support those calls in relation to the voluntary hospitals and the requirement the right information systems are put in place and that we have robust systems and the same systems across all of our hospitals and all of our health services. We are dealing with very large sums of public money. I believe €5 billion goes into voluntary hospitals. We need to ensure there are levels of accountability and transparency there. That is required so I support the calls from others around that and support the Minister's work in that area. If we require additional amendments to this Bill to require voluntary hospitals put these systems in place, does the Minister intend to bring forward more amendments in that regard?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank both Deputies for their very clear political direction and statement of intent on this issue, which align with mine and with the broader public interest in the supervision of public funds.

From the perspective of the patient, I honestly believe the patient does not know whether he or she is attending a voluntary hospital or HSE hospital. If you are attending hospital due to a trauma or in a vulnerable situation, you honestly do not care whether the structure of the hospital to which you are presenting in need is a voluntary one or otherwise. Patients particularly do not care when they know that, as taxpayers, they are funding all of the hospitals. Indeed we are essentially funding all of the hospitals between 95% and 100%. There is simply no question that they are publicly funded and the staff are public servants. The background to voluntary hospitals is that they come from the days before when health services were in large part provided by religious orders and that is as may be. Many of them are providing a simply

exceptional service with extraordinary clinical outcomes and research but they are nevertheless entirely funded by the public system and must adopt those structures.

I set out some measure of reserve, as it were, to bring Seanad amendments because I am very conscious that there has been sustained engagement for a number of years on this and it has not happened. There has been sustained political direction and engagement from me and from the Minister for public expenditure in this part of the year and the service level agreement going into 2026 will be exceptionally clear as to the need to do this. However, I reserve some position because what I would like to see from the voluntary hospitals is communication to me about their timeline for this. It is incumbent on me to provide to the health committee or the public accounts committee a list of the voluntary hospitals, the budget each of them received in 2024 and 2025 and the number of public servants that are working there. I believe it is appropriate for me to be able to provide the Deputies with a timeline as to the implementation, hospital by hospital, of IFMS. I am not in receipt of information that enables me to do that at present. Were I to receive that sort of enthusiastic engagement from the voluntary hospitals within the next number of weeks, it would ease my path to providing that sort of accountability both to the Comptroller and Auditor General and to your good selves as the lead members of the health committee.

Deputy David Cullinane: I have a final point on this issue. I do not want to hold up the discussion on the Bill itself. I have read media reports between tensions between the Minister and some of voluntary hospitals. I do not want to get into that because I do not know the accuracy of it and I am not really that interested in it, in any event. The only interest I have is that the voluntary hospitals are fully compliant, play ball and implement in full the new financial management system that has been put in place, and any other system because I hope we will roll out electronic health records or summary care records at some point so we want the voluntary hospitals to be compliant with that as well.

The Minister is talking about amendments that may come to the Seanad as well in that area but has there been any pushback? Is there cause for concern about the voluntary hospitals? Notwithstanding what I said about reading in the media about tensions between the Minister and some of the voluntary hospitals, what has the engagement been like? Are there fears within the Department and the Minister that there is a reluctance from either all or some of the voluntary hospitals to comply with the new system that is being put in place?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: There is no tension between me and any part of the health system. There is a report of an engagement in relation to one of the voluntary hospitals and the Chair and there is a difference of opinion that was aired in the media. My broad sense is that there is exceptionally good work being done in voluntary hospitals. Many of them, for example, have addressed their trolley situations in exceptionally good ways and are to be commended on that.

I think there is a difference of understanding in relation to the role of the board and the obligations of the board, who take their obligations under the Companies Act very seriously. Of course, the first obligation of any company director is to comply with the law of the land and to comply with the direction of the funders and shareholders, where that is appropriate within certain sectors. It is fair to say in the same way we have had the Health Information Bill, there has been a difficulty of engagement over different issues, whether it is sharing of

patient data or the adoption of certain systems. There are already media reports of voluntary hospitals buying other systems that are not IFMS and it is the taxpayer who is paying for those as well so there simply has to be an alignment. It is fair to say I would not be doing this if there had not been a reluctance of some kind. That reluctance has been expressed directly to the CEO of the HSE, less so directly to me, but obviously the CEO and the chair of the HSE are working at my direction on Deputies' behalf and there has been a specified and written reluctance in relation to that. I have written directly to the CEOs or chairs. The Minister, Deputy Chambers, has supported that so there is very clear political direction on this and it really is up to those entities that are entirely publicly funded. They are staffed by public servants who will of course not just get public service salaries but public service pensions. They are entirely public servants. It is up to them to adopt the systems that in a small country help us to have visibility over how tax payers money is used, to have consistency and also better opportunities for realising savings and efficiencies through better procurement management.

Amendment agreed to.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I move amendment No. 4:

In page 9, between lines 30 and 31, to insert the following:

“Review of data protection compliance

7.The Minister shall, within 18 months of the passing of this Act, prepare and lay a report before both Houses of the Oireachtas evaluating compliance with relevant data protection legislation and regulations in the collection, usage, and storage of patient health data.”.

This is long overdue and much needed legislation that will provide for a legal basis for electronic health records and patient information sharing. More generally, it represents a critical step towards digitising our health services and this is crucially important. Digitisation is an area the health committee is quite interested in and one we will engage with the Department on and engage on during a public session.

However, it is important to note the process of transforming our health service from paper files to digital files comes not just with benefits but also with risks. Privacy and security risks are unavoidable but the majority can be prevented by having the right safeguards in place. I accept that safeguards are being put in place via the Bill but ehealth represents a big change for our health service that will undoubtedly have teething problems. Significant and meaningful ongoing engagement with the Data Protection Commissioner will be crucial and more tangible action is needed given the sensitivity of the data concerned. This is why I believe it is essential a review is carried out early and that it is put on a statutory footing. We need to be sure the safeguards put in place are working effectively and that we identify areas for improvement early because the opportunities for breaches will increase as we digitise, particularly as new systems are implemented. As we all know, healthcare data is a prime target for a cyber attack. We should not discount the impact on AI on future healthcare provision either.

I also have a concern regarding the level of preparedness in respect of the secondary use of data. Such use is vital for scientific research, policymaking and the development of treatments, but the State is poorly prepared to utilise it. In 2023, a pan-European steering committee stated that Ireland's infrastructure for secondary use of data will need to be built almost entirely from

scratch and will be managed by people who are not yet on the payroll. I accept that the secondary use of data will be dealt with in future legislation, but all of these issues are interlinked. If we do not put these reviews on a statutory footing from day one, then I am not convinced they will happen. For those reasons, I am of the view that a review of data collection usage and storage needs to happen within 18 months.

Deputy David Cullinane: I support the amendment, but I will pretty quickly make a point about the digital transformation of healthcare. This is something the Joint Committee on Health has spent a lot of time looking at over the past number of years. I will not rehearse all of the arguments, because we know we have a long road to travel. There is a direction of travel now with summary care records. It will take some time to get all the bells and whistles and electronic health records similar to those that exist in many other European countries. It strikes me that it is red tape that frustrates the system. I was in a hospital recently visiting a patient. We hear about patients on trolleys, but a trolley was rolled past me that was loaded with files. The nurse said that this is where we are in 2025. There were a huge number of patient files and records on that trolley. I do not know how any system could operate like that.

I have also dealt with many cases where the families request the records of patients who may have passed away in circumstances where there may be concerns about how they were treated. Again, in the context of medical records, I sometimes wonder how things are not missed and how doctors and nurses can keep on top of everything in a paper-based system. I have to reinforce that point. We need to do more.

The Oireachtas committee again stands ready to assist in respect of this matter and to do everything we can to support the Minister and the officials. Obviously, it will require funding. There is an amount of funding ring-fenced for this. The Minister cannot or will not say how much is involved because, obviously, contracts have to go out to tender. I accept that, but it is important for us, as spokespersons on health, to again point out the urgent need to invest in this area. There is or was a reluctance on the part of the Department of public expenditure and reform to invest in health, possibly and probably because of what happened with the personnel, payroll and related systems. Fingers were burnt in the past. We have to move away from that. We have to accept that the world has moved on and that everybody is using IT and digital systems now. The healthcare system has to keep pace with that.

While the Bill is important, it is only the starting point. It provides a legislative framework. The funding, the urgency and the delivery have to come from the political system. In the past, the health committee has played a very constructive role in working with officials. We will do so again if required.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: It certainly will be required. I am very glad. I understand that there will be a technical briefing next week or the week after in relation to that, which is a step in the ongoing engagement that is appropriate of that nature. I agree with what Deputy Cullinane said in respect of taking forward electronic health records generally, but, if I may, I will deal with the amendment before us.

It is important to say to Deputy Rice that there has been a really sustained and positive engagement with the Data Protection Commission throughout the drafting process relating to this Bill. It is envisaged that this engagement will continue into the implementation phase.

Consultation is specifically provided for in relation to data processing safeguards, ministerial regulations and HSE guidelines, among other things. This is going to be a constant frame of engagement. In addition, the Bill already provides for a full review no later than five years after the passing of the Act. That has to be done in consultation with the Commissioner for Data Protection.

The Health Information Bill complements and builds on the rights of natural persons provided under the GDPR in respect of their personal data. By way of example, it provides that a patient or their representative may restrict access by health service providers to all or part of their electronic health records, subject to being advised of the consequence of their decision. Importantly, if a health service provider accesses restricted information, the HSE has to keep a record of that and the reasons why it was accessed. Patients have the right, subject to some caveats, to obtain information on access to their records, the date and time of access, how it was accessed and the personal health data that was accessed. This is an important transparency measure to ensure patient confidence in the health record system.

We can imagine the circumstances in which this may be important. If I was in long-term care in, for example, a particular hospital in Dublin and then was involved in a car accident in Cork and is brought to Cork University Hospital, which is a major trauma centre, I would very much want my electronic health records to be immediately available to the staff there in order that they could treat me in the best way possible. That is the huge advantage of electronic health records generally and of the sharing of information that is enabled by this legislation. It is not something that I would opt out of, but the Bill provides for people to be able to do that and to have that respect afforded to them, as long as they are advised of the potential consequences of doing so. We are not trying to force anybody to do anything in particular, but there are major advantages to the sharing of information in their own interests.

It is also important for the Deputy to note that this Bill is the first of a suite of legislative measures to give full effect to the EU regulation on the European health data space under which member states are required to appoint a digital health authority to oversee governance of the primary use of electronic health data. Member states must formally appoint their digital health authorities by March 2027. As part of its role, the digital health authority must publish an activity report every two years. That report must contain the measures to implement the regulation and information on the percentage of the population with access to the various data categories in the electronic health records and on the handling of requests from individuals regarding the exercise of their personal rights under the regulation.

The digital health authority will also be expected co-operate with a range of health stakeholders. This will include the Data Protection Commission. The authority will be mandated to accept complaints in respect of infringements and patient rights, and to immediately refer those to the Data Protection Commission. I am not sure if Deputies received an update on this, but I can confirm that it is intended to appoint the HSE to the role of digital health authority. The Bill provides the HSE with the clarity in Irish law that it will need.

For all of these different reasons and the safeguards that are built in, I am not in a position to accept this amendment. I hope I have given the Deputy some comfort as to the level of detail of engagement the Data Protection Commission will have at all stages.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I move amendment No. 5:

“Review of accessibility of health data

7. The Minister shall, within two years of the passing of this Act, prepare and lay a report before both Houses of the Oireachtas outlining -

- (a) the steps taken to assist persons with lower digital literacy or connectivity issues to access their health data and exercise their right to restrict access to information, in accordance with the legislation, and
- (b) the specific supports made available to vulnerable populations to address barriers to understanding and utilising digital health.”.

This amendment relates to the review of the accessibility of the data. While the digitalisation of our health service is essential, it does risk deepening the digital divide. Digital literacy, access to technology and language barriers present challenges for some groups, such as, for example, older people, lower income households or migrant groups. The inability of certain groups to access their health data in line with legislation should be a real cause for concern. In 2021, the ESRI recommended the development of specific supports for vulnerable populations in order to address barriers to understanding ehealth, such as lower digital literacy and language competency. I accept that these supports may not be set down in legislation, but that does not minimise their importance. The Sláintecare 2025+ plan identifies health literacy as an issue and refers to developing a health literacy toolkit. That is very welcome, but I encourage the Minister to ensure there is a similar focus on digital health literacy.

Equally, it is important to ensure that patients can exercise their rights to restrict access to their healthcare data. This is provided for in the Bill, as mentioned, but some people will need additional support in exercising those rights. With this in mind, I am of the view that it is reasonable to assess these issues within two years of the enactment of this legislation. We cannot allow some people to be left behind as we digitalise our health services. We have to bring people with us to ensure that public trust in the entire system is not undermined.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Digital health literacy is critical to fostering trust and safety around the use of health data. For example, the HSE is working with a number of advocacy organisations to ensure that its app can be used by people with a wide range of needs. It is also seeking to ensure that the app uses inclusive language and takes into account additional requirements that patient groups may need by conducting user research and testing groups to see where people might be experiencing challenges in using the app.

I am not in a position to accept the amendment for a number of reasons. Primarily, section 21 of the Bill empowers the HSE to prepare guidelines to enable patients to access their electronic health record as well as to set out the additional targeted measures to enable persons with a disability to access their electronic health record. These guidelines are to be prepared in consultation with stakeholders, including patient representative groups and the National Disability Authority.

In addition, the European health data space regulation we have discussed previously requires that health data be easily accessible for persons with disabilities, vulnerable groups and persons with low digital literacy. The regulation provides that member states should create targeted

digital literacy programmes as well as providing patient-centred guidance in relation to the use of national guidelines, with specific attention paid to vulnerable groups. The digital health authority will be required to publish an activity report every two years and it must contain detail on how it does this. It is also required to facilitate persons with disabilities to exercise their rights under the regulation and to facilitate the submission of complaints, including providing easily accessible tools in this regard.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Bill recommitted in respect of amendment No. 6.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I move amendment No. 6:

In page 23, after line 22, to insert the following:

"PART 5

Amendment of Patient Safety (Notifiable Incidents and Open Disclosure) Act 2023

Amendment of section 68 of Patient Safety (Notifiable Incidents and Open Disclosure) Act 2023

25.(1) Section 68 of the Act of 2023 is amended, insofar as that section inserts section 41A(10) in the Health Act 2007, in the definition of "relevant designated centre", by the substitution of "paragraph (a)(iii) or (c)" for "paragraph (c)".

(2) The amendment effected by subsection (1) shall come into operation on the date on which section 68 of the Act of 2023 comes into operation.

(3) In this section, "Act of 2023" means the Patient Safety (Notifiable Incidents and Open Disclosure) Act 2023."

Amendment put and declared carried.

Bill reported with amendment.

Bill, as amended, received for final consideration and passed.

Courts and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025: Committee and Remaining Stages

SECTION 1

Question proposed: "That section 1 stand part of the Bill."

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): I invite the Minister to speak. Leanaimid ar aghaidh.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I am pleased to commend the Courts and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025 to the House. No amendments to the Bill have been tabled on Committee Stage. I particularly acknowledge the co-operation and support that has been given to the Bill by colleagues and

party spokespersons across the House. I also extend my thanks to the Oireachtas staff, in particular the staff of the Bills Office for their assistance.

As the House is aware, the purpose of the Bill is to provide, by amendment of various Courts Acts, for an increase in the maximum number of ordinary judges of the Court of Appeal, the High Court, the Circuit Courts and the District Courts by 21 judges. The Bill also provides for amendments to the Child Care Act 1991, the Family Courts Act 2024 and the Gambling Regulation Act 2024. Having brought the Bill before the House, the Government is satisfied the additional judicial positions are warranted to address the current demands being placed by the courts and to improve efficiencies across all our courts, providing a vital bulwark of our judicial system. The amendments to the Gambling Regulation Act and the Family Courts Act will provide for the more efficient operation of these Acts when fully commenced. I commend the Bill to the House.

Deputy Mark Ward: Sinn Féin will not oppose the Bill but I believe the Government has missed an opportunity with the Bill to include the introduction of compensation for expenses in court by those who undertake jury duty. Deputy Carthy has raised this with the Minister on numerous occasions. The absence of such a payment impacts on people already struggling with the cost of living, as well as those with caring responsibilities and the self-employed. Self-employed people and full-time carers can be excused from jury service but this means these groups are under-represented on juries. Simply speaking, those who wish to serve as jurors should not be out of pocket. Low income jurors face barriers due to inadequate allowances and the time commitment required. Deputy Carthy tabled amendments to the Bill but they were ruled out of order for some reason. It is important that the Minister makes a commitment to revisit this to make sure jurors are not out of pocket in order that they can take part in the judicial system.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy Ward for his contribution. This is an amendment that was mentioned previously by Deputy Carthy. The purpose of it is to try to provide for the payment to jurors of travel and subsistence expenses, and for reimbursement for financial losses incurred in the exercise of their responsibilities as jurors. It is important to point out that jury service is a very important civic duty. In many respects, it is a bit like voting. It is one of the requirements we demand of a citizen. Deputy Ward may say that when it comes to voting, it is something you can do in the space of half an hour or an hour but when it comes to jury service you can find yourself on a jury for very lengthy periods of time. I take this opportunity, by the way, to commend members of the public who have done such service on juries over the years because the criminal justice system could not operate without individuals serving on juries.

No expenses are paid to people called for jury duty but they do get lunch and refreshments provided on a daily basis. There is also a requirement to ensure that employers continue to pay an employee while he or she is on jury service. Employers cannot say they will not pay someone called for jury service. There is a requirement for them to pay an employee while they are engaged in jury duty.

I know also that section 9 of the Juries Act 1976 allows a county registrar to excuse a person from attendance. I have seen frequently, with the call-over of the jury panel, that jurors will approach the registrar and give circumstances and details as to why they say they are not able

to serve on a jury. Sometimes the judge will hear this application as well. It is certainly the case for people who are self-employed, for example, those who run a shop on their own, that county registrars and judges take this into account and excuse people if it appears to be the case that it is essential they are not selected for jury service. There have also been a lot of improvements in the jury experience in recent years. There was the introduction of a digitalised jury summons. In fact, I got one myself recently. I responded to it and said I was not available. I was able to say I was excused because, as a Member of the Oireachtas, that is permissible. The Courts Service has also invested in the provision of improved jury facilities in modernised courthouses across the country. That is something we need to take into account. I want to ensure the jury room and the facilities for juries are appropriate in order for them to carry out the very important part of the criminal justice process. There are too many courthouses around the country where the facilities for jurors, practitioners and more importantly, litigants, are not up to standard.

My Department is currently undertaking a review of jury service, which will be informed by research on the topic, including the Law Reform Commission's valuable report on jury service, as well as submissions made by the Bar Council and the Law Society and legislative and policy developments in related areas over the past number of years. The approach proposed by Deputy Carthy's amendment raises concerns as to how it will operate in practice. It would be a complex issue and would require processes and procedures to be put in place to ensure its efficient delivery. It would require additional resources being allocated to the Courts Service, as I am sure the Deputy can understand. The roll-out and operation of such legislation would require significant public engagement. I know the amendment has not been formally put down but since Deputy Ward raised it, I am not capable and ready at present to proceed down that route. As I say, there is research ongoing as to what can be done to facilitate further the importance service that is carried out by jurors.

Question put and agreed to.

Sections 2 to 11, inclusive, agreed to.

Title agreed to.

Bill reported without amendment, received for final consideration and passed.

Estimates for Public Services 2025

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I move the following Supplementary Estimates:

Vote 20 — Garda Síochána (Supplementary Estimate)

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €20,424,000 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 Garda Síochána, including pensions, etc.; for the payment of certain witnesses' expenses, and for payment of certain grants.

Vote 21 — Prisons (Supplementary Estimate)

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €27,859,000 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 Prison Service, and other expenses in connection with prisons, including places of detention, and for payment of certain grants.

Vote 22 — Courts Service (Supplementary Estimate)

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €1,000 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 such of the salaries and expenses of the Courts Service and of the Supreme Court, the Court of Appeal, the High Court, the Special Criminal Court, the Circuit Court and the District Court and of certain other minor services as are not charged to the Central Fund.

Vote 24 — Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Supplementary Estimate)

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €46,000,000 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 Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, Probation Service staff and of certain other services including payments under cash-limited schemes administered by that Office, and payment of certain grants.

Votes put and agreed to.

Supplementary Estimates for Public Services 2025: Leave to Introduce

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I move:

That leave be given by the Dáil to introduce the following Supplementary Estimates for the service of the year ending on the 31st day of December, 2025:

Vote 32 — Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (*Supplementary Estimate*).

Vote 33 — Culture, Communications and Sport (*Supplementary Estimate*).

Vote 34 — Housing, Local Government and Heritage (*Supplementary Estimate*).

Question put and agreed to.

Arts (Recognition of Comedy) (Amendment) Bill 2024: Second Stage (Resumed)
[Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh on Thursday, 6 November 2025:

"That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

The following amendment No. 1 was moved by the Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, Deputy Alan Dillon:

To delete all words after "That" and substitute the following:

"Dáil Éireann resolves that the Arts (Recognition of Comedy) (Amendment) Bill 2024 be deemed to be read a second time this day eighteen months, on the grounds that this amendment is premature as the Minister proposes to await the report of the Expert Advisory Committee on the Arts Council before giving consideration to what legislative changes to the Arts Act 2003 would be appropriate."

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1 to amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "2024" and substitute the following:

"be deemed to be read a second time this day one month."

-(Deputy Ciarán Ahern)

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before I explain the division, the parents of Deputy Keira Keogh, Vinny and Mary, are in the Gallery and she has asked each and every one of you to behave yourselves in order to impress them. I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion on the Arts (Recognition of Comedy) (Amendment) Bill 2024. On Thursday, 6 November 2025, on the question, "That the amendment to the amendment be made", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment to amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 69; Níl, 83; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Aird, William.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Boland, Grace.	
Brady, John.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Buckley, Pat.	Brennan, Brian.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brennan, Shay.	
Carthy, Matt.	Brophy, Colm.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Browne, James.	
Collins, Michael.	Burke, Colm.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Butler, Mary.	
Coppinger, Ruth.	Butterly, Paula.	
Cronin, Réada.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Cullinane, David.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Cummins, Jen.	Cahill, Michael.	
Daly, Pa.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Calleary, Dara.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Canney, Seán.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Chambers, Jack.	
Fitzmaurice, Michael.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Gannon, Gary.	Clendennen, John.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Collins, Niall.	
Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	Connolly, John.	
Gould, Thomas.	Cooney, Joe.	

Graves, Ann.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Cummins, John.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Currie, Emer.	
Healy, Seamus.	Daly, Martin.	
Hearne, Rory.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
Kelly, Alan.	Devlin, Cormac.	
Kenny, Eoghan.	Dillon, Alan.	
Kenny, Martin.	Dolan, Albert.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Dooley, Timmy.	
Lawless, Paul.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Lawlor, George.	Fleming, Sean.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Foley, Norma.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
McGrath, Mattie.	Geoghegan, James.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Grealish, Noel.	
Mitchell, Denise.	Harkin, Marian.	
Murphy, Paul.	Harris, Simon.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Heydon, Martin.	
Nolan, Carol.	Higgins, Emer.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Keogh, Keira.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	Lawless, James.	
O'Flynn, Ken.	Martin, Micheál.	
O'Hara, Louis.	Maxwell, David.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	McAuliffe, Paul.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	McCarthy, Noel.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	McConalogue, Charlie.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	McCormack, Tony.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	McGrath, Séamus.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	McGreehan, Erin.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
Quaide, Liam.	Moynihan, Michael.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Moynihan, Shane.	
Rice, Pádraig.	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
Sheehan, Conor.	Murphy, Michael.	
Sherlock, Marie.	Naughton, Hildegard.	
Smith, Duncan.	Neville, Joe.	
Stanley, Brian.	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
Tóibín, Peadar.	O'Connell, Maeve.	
Wall, Mark.	O'Connor, James.	
Ward, Charles.	O'Dea, Willie.	
Ward, Mark.	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
Whitmore, Jennifer.	O'Donovan, Patrick.	
	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	

	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Fearghail, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Richmond, Neale.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Smyth, Niamh.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Ciarán Ahern and Duncan Smith; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Amendment to amendment declared.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 83; Níl, 70; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Brian.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brennan, Shay.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Brophy, Colm.	Carthy, Matt.	
Browne, James.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Colm.	Collins, Michael.	
Butler, Mary.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butterly, Paula.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cronin, Réada.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cullinane, David.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cummins, Jen.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Daly, Pa.	
Calleary, Dara.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Canney, Seán.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Chambers, Jack.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Clendennen, John.	Gannon, Gary.	
Collins, Niall.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Connolly, John.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gould, Thomas.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Graves, Ann.	
Cummins, John.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Currie, Emer.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Daly, Martin.	Healy, Seamus.	

Dempsey, Aisling.	Hearne, Rory.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dillon, Alan.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kenny, Martin.	
Donohoe, Paschal.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Lawless, Paul.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Lawlor, George.	
Fleming, Sean.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Foley, Norma.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	McGrath, Mattie.	
Geoghegan, James.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Harkin, Marian.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Harris, Simon.	Murphy, Paul.	
Healy-Rae, Danny.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Heydon, Martin.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Higgins, Emer.	Nolan, Carol.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Lawless, James.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Martin, Micheál.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McCormack, Tony.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Quaide, Liam.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Murphy, Michael.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Neville, Joe.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Connor, James.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Donovan, Patrick.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		

Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell.

Amendment declared carried.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Cost of Motoring: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

Debate resumed on the following motion:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— there are 11 toll roads in operation across the State, 10 of which are on the national roads network with two of these being in full public ownership and eight roads across the State are tolled under Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) with the Minister for Transport holding responsibility for overall policy and funding in relation to the National Roads Programme;

— motor tax can either be paid in one less expensive lump sum or more costly instalments disproportionately impacting lower-income motorists; and

— annual increases in Carbon taxes raise the price of motor fuels, with the Minister for Finance holding overall responsibility for tax policy;

regrets that:

— despite a raging cost of living crisis, motorists are faced with price hikes at every turn, particularly those living in rural areas, who are forced to use a private car due to the failure of successive Governments to put in place sustainable public transport options;

— the average cost of motor insurance rose by nine per cent last year to its highest point in five years, which is almost double the European average and over four times the rate of inflation; and

— Irish motorists pay some of the highest prices in the European Union for petrol and diesel;

further acknowledges that:

— private toll companies have recorded millions of euros in after-tax profits in the past year and the profits of motor insurance companies in the state have been way above industry norms in recent years;

— the existing gold-plated PPPs contracts that permit these toll increases, and generous traffic guarantee payments, are a legacy of bad economic policy choices and decisions made by successive Fianna Fáil-led administrations; and

— the Government's latest action plan to lower insurance premiums follows a similar action plan during their previous term which failed to make any difference;

condemns:

— the failure of the Government, in particular the Minister for Finance Paschal Donohoe and Minister for Transport Darragh O'Brien to respond and include the necessary financial provisions in Budget 2026, and to cancel these planned increases and lessen the burden on workers, families, and businesses in the midst of the cost-of-living and fuel crisis; and

calls on the Government to:

— reverse the carbon tax increase of May 2025 on home heating oil and gas, reverse the carbon tax increase of October 2025 on diesel and petrol, and do not proceed with future scheduled increases;

— end the financial penalty imposed on people who cannot afford to pay motor tax in one single payment;

— stand up to insurance companies to ensure fair and stable motor insurance costs and to address the disproportionate profits in this industry;

— progress and enact Sinn Féin's Judicial Council (Amendment) Bill 2021, to ensure the benefits of reforms are passed onto customers in the form of lower premiums, rather than captured as higher profits for insurance companies; and

— stop the proposed toll increases planned for January 2026.

-(Deputy Pa Daly)

Question put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 70; Níl, 82; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Aird, William.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Boland, Grace.	
Brady, John.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Buckley, Pat.	Brennan, Brian.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brennan, Shay.	
Carthy, Matt.	Brophy, Colm.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Browne, James.	
Collins, Michael.	Burke, Colm.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Butler, Mary.	
Coppinger, Ruth.	Butterly, Paula.	
Cronin, Réada.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Cullinane, David.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Cummins, Jen.	Cahill, Michael.	

Daly, Pa.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Calleary, Dara.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Canney, Seán.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Chambers, Jack.	
Fitzmaurice, Michael.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Gannon, Gary.	Clendennen, John.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Collins, Niall.	
Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	Connolly, John.	
Gould, Thomas.	Cooney, Joe.	
Graves, Ann.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Cummins, John.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Currie, Emer.	
Healy, Seamus.	Daly, Martin.	
Hearne, Rory.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
Kelly, Alan.	Devlin, Cormac.	
Kenny, Eoghan.	Dillon, Alan.	
Kenny, Martin.	Dolan, Albert.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Donohoe, Paschal.	
Lawless, Paul.	Dooley, Timmy.	
Lawlor, George.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Fleming, Sean.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Foley, Norma.	
McGrath, Mattie.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Geoghegan, James.	
Mitchell, Denise.	Harkin, Marian.	
Murphy, Paul.	Harris, Simon.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Healy-Rae, Michael.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Heydon, Martin.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Higgins, Emer.	
Nolan, Carol.	Keogh, Keira.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Lawless, James.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	Martin, Micheál.	
O'Flynn, Ken.	Maxwell, David.	
O'Gorman, Roderic.	McAuliffe, Paul.	
O'Hara, Louis.	McCarthy, Noel.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	McConalogue, Charlie.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	McCormack, Tony.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	McGrath, Séamus.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	McGreehan, Erin.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Moynihan, Michael.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	Moynihan, Shane.	
Quaide, Liam.	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Murphy, Michael.	
Rice, Pádraig.	Naughton, Hildegard.	
Sheehan, Conor.	Neville, Joe.	

Sherlock, Marie.	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
Smith, Duncan.	O'Connell, Maeve.	
Stanley, Brian.	O'Connor, James.	
Tóibín, Peadar.	O'Dea, Willie.	
Wall, Mark.	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
Ward, Charles.	O'Donovan, Patrick.	
Ward, Mark.	O'Meara, Ryan.	
Whitmore, Jennifer.	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Richmond, Neale.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Smyth, Niamh.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Question declared lost.

An Bille um an Aonú Leasú is Daichead ar an mBunreacht (An Aois Vótála a Laghdú go Sé Bliana Déag), 2025: An Dara Céim (Atógáil) [Comhaltaí Príobháideacha]

**Forty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Reduction of Voting Age to Sixteen Years)
Bill 2025: Second Stage (Resumed) [Private Members]**

Thairg an Teachta Aidan Farrelly an tairiscint seo ar an Déardaoin, an 13 Samhain 2025:

"Go léifear an Bille don Dara hUair anois."

The following motion was moved by Deputy Aidan Farrelly on Thursday, 13 November 2025:

"That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

Atógadh an díospóireacht ar leasú Uimh. 1:

Go scriosfar na focail go léir i ndiaidh "Go" agus go gcuirfear an méid seo a leanas ina n-ionad:

"mbeartaíonn Dáil Éireann go measfar an Bille um an Aonú Leasú is Daichead ar an mBunreacht (An Aois Vótála a Laghdú go Sé Bliana Déag), 2025 a bheith léite an Dara hUair 12 mhí ó inniu, le tuilleadh breithniú ar an mBille a cheadú."

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "That" and substitute the following:

"Dáil Éireann resolves that the Forty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Reduction of Voting Age to Sixteen Years) Bill 2025, be deemed to be read a second time this day twelve months, to allow for further consideration of the Bill."

-(Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, Deputy Colm Brophy)

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I must now deal with a deferred division relating to the ministerial amendment to the Second Reading motion on the Bill. Last Thursday, on the question, "That the amendment be made", a division was claimed and that division will be taken now.

Cuireadh an leasú.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 86; Níl, 65; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Brian.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brennan, Shay.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Brophy, Colm.	Carthy, Matt.	
Browne, James.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Colm.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butler, Mary.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Butterly, Paula.	Cronin, Réada.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cullinane, David.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cummins, Jen.	
Cahill, Michael.	Daly, Pa.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Calleary, Dara.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Canney, Seán.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Chambers, Jack.	Gannon, Gary.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Clendennen, John.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Collins, Michael.	Gould, Thomas.	
Collins, Niall.	Graves, Ann.	
Connolly, John.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Cooney, Joe.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Healy, Seamus.	
Cummins, John.	Hearne, Rory.	

Currie, Emer.	Kelly, Alan.	
Daly, Martin.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Kenny, Martin.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Dillon, Alan.	Lawless, Paul.	
Dolan, Albert.	Lawlor, George.	
Donohoe, Paschal.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Dooley, Timmy.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Feighan, Frankie.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Fitzmaurice, Michael.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Fleming, Sean.	Murphy, Paul.	
Foley, Norma.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Geoghegan, James.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Harkin, Marian.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Harris, Simon.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Heydon, Martin.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Higgins, Emer.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Lawless, James.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Martin, Micheál.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Maxwell, David.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
McCarthy, Noel.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	Quaide, Liam.	
McCormack, Tony.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Rice, Pádraig.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Sherlock, Marie.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Smith, Duncan.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Stanley, Brian.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
Murphy, Michael.	Wall, Mark.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Ward, Charles.	
Neville, Joe.	Ward, Mark.	
Nolan, Carol.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.		
O'Connell, Maeve.		
O'Connor, James.		
O'Dea, Willie.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Donovan, Patrick.		
O'Flynn, Ken.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		

Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Jen Cummins and Aidan Farrelly.

Amendment declared carried.

Faisnéiseadh go rabhthas tar éis glacadh leis an leasú.

Aontaíodh an tairiscint mar a leasaíodh.

Motion, as amended, agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 8.29 p.m. go dtí 8.47 a.m., Déardaoin, an 20 Samhain 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 8.29 p.m. until 8.47 a.m. on Thursday, 20 November 2025.