



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 25 Samhain 2025

Tuesday, 25 November 2025

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 2 p.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

2 o'clock

Resignation of Member

An Ceann Comhairle: Before we move to Leaders' Questions, I wish to announce for the information of the House that I received a letter of resignation on 21 November from Paschal Donohoe as a Member of Dáil Éireann for the constituency of Dublin Central. In accordance with the provisions of Standing Order 230, the resignation took effect upon receipt of the letter.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Cá bhfuil an Taoiseach? I understand the Taoiseach is back in the country. He should be here taking questions. The cost of home heating oil has shot up €80 in just one month. It is a big blow. The average price for a fill of oil is now a staggering €980. This hike hits more than 1 million households, mostly rural families and the elderly, who rely on oil to heat their homes. Here is the real kick in the teeth. This unaffordable cost of home heating oil has been driven up by the Government's decisions. Some €220 of the cost of a fill of oil is already carbon tax. The Government's planned increases will add a further €150 in the time ahead. It has to be asked. How on earth does it think people can afford that? One family contacted me yesterday. They got a fill of heating oil last week and they have not turned on the heating since Friday because they need that fill to last over Christmas and throughout the new year. They are rationing their heat. The weather is colder now and the reality is that more and more working households struggle to pay their bills to light and heat their homes. Energy is unaffordable and people are being ripped off.

The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, met with the top brass at energy companies in September, and what happened? The majority hiked up their electricity prices with no fear of any consequence. Then, with winter on the horizon and energy bills going up, the Government chose to cancel energy credits in October's budget, a terrible decision, withdrawing the one bit of help people relied on to pay those rip-off bills. In fact, the Government delivered a budget of €9.4 billion

that left working people worse off with no cost-of-living package while households are being hammered with no end in sight.

Social Justice Ireland reported yesterday how the slashing of cost-of-living supports has ratcheted up pressure and pushed more households into financial distress. People literally live in dread of the next electricity, gas or heating bill and I meet working parents who tell me they have bought extra blankets for their kids' beds because they cannot afford to turn on the heat. Elderly people are going to bed early to stay warm. Couples, often with two incomes, are borrowing from family members to pay their energy bills. These are desperate situations, and the Government sticks its head in the sand.

Tá an Rialtas seo ag barr an ranga maidir le saol na ndaoine a dhéanamh níos deacra. Tá sé le feiceáil arís san ardú ar phraghas an ola don teas tí. Éilíonn teaghlaigh gníomhartha i dtreo saol níos inacmhainne. On the watch of the Government, the cost of lighting and heating a home has become unaffordable, and this simply cannot go on. Households cannot take any more. I know exactly what the Government has done to make life harder for people. It is obvious. It withdrew energy credits, it gives free reign to energy companies to hike up prices, it heaps additional carbon taxes onto home heating oil, it has cancelled cost-of-living supports, it delivered a budget of billions of euro that abandoned people - all bad choices that have made things even worse.

What action will be taken to make life affordable for people or will the Government simply continue to sit back and allow households to take the pain?

Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as ucht na ceiste ar an ábhar tábhachtach seo ach ní aontaím léi ar chor ar bith. I do not agree with her at all. The measures that have been taken in the budget are targeted to help those who need them most, particularly in the area of social protection. We have increased the fuel allowance substantially and expanded it to about 460,000 households right across the country. The Deputy has ignored that, one of the most significant changes we have made.

Another change, on foot of the interim report of the national energy affordability task force, is the effective permanent reduction of VAT from 13.5% to 9% on gas and electricity, bringing about a saving of over €100 per annum for households, a permanent change. Yes, the Deputy is correct that we have not extended the energy credits. That is because we believe that the €3.5 billion that was used there at the appropriate time is more appropriate to go into structural measures such as investing in our grid and in grid capacity. We have also provided equity of €3.5 billion to EirGrid and ESBN. That will allow them to finance the investment that is required in our grid in projects like the North-South interconnector, that one project that will deliver resilience for our grid and will allow-----

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Underground.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: -----the extension and expansion of renewables into our grid, a project that Deputy McDonald's party seems to be flip-flopping on north of the Border. I have met her party's ministers in the North of Ireland, who are for the project; its Deputies in the South are opposed to it. This is a permanent measure that will deliver affordability.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: We want it underground.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I have met Caoimhe Archibald and Liz Kimmins. All of the Deputy's colleagues in the North are taking the right position. They want to see this delivered.

What do we do in the meantime? As regards energy, we unquestionably have affordability issues. That is why we established the national energy affordability task force. We have brought forward interim measures already. That work is continuing and we will publish a report in 2026 looking at some permanent measures that we can change. What the Deputy has not referred to either is the Eurostat report, published just last week, that shows Ireland as mid-ranking now with European colleagues in relation to energy affordability. However, for many households, these bills are expensive and some struggle to pay them. That is why I met the energy providers. All four of the main providers have confirmed again to me at my request that hardship funds will be set up. I say to people who are in arrears that the State is there to support them through the fuel allowance payments, and no one will be cut off. I have again had that confirmed at my request. People will work with providers through this winter period.

The reality is that we are still far too dependent on imported fossil fuel. That is why we need to expand renewables across the country. That is why 41% of our electricity last year was generated through renewable sources. We will continue to expand that - our own energy, in respect of which we are sovereign and we can control - and reduce our dependence on fossil fuels.

In relation to the carbon tax, the Deputy has not referred to how the carbon tax that relates to home heating oil has been deferred until May 2026. The carbon tax gives us the capital to bring about permanent affordability measures for families. We are targeting 60,000 retrofits in 2025 alone and €558 million next year in retrofits. That is delivering about a third in savings on average, according to the International Energy Agency, IEA. Those are not my statistics but the IEA's statistics. These are permanent changes for households, including schemes like the warmer homes scheme, which provides a 100% grant to fully retrofit homes, bring renewables to those homes, make them warmer and healthier, and bring about permanent savings for those households. We will continue to look at all of the measures on affordability.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Does the Minister know how humiliating it is for anybody to have to go to family members to borrow consistently to pay their household bills? Does he know how demoralising it is for working people to go out Monday to Friday, work hard and do their best and still not be able to keep their children warm? Does he know how unacceptable, in fact, how immoral, it is in a wealthy society under a government that boasts billions of euro in surpluses to leave people so stranded and so desperate in these circumstances? The Minister stands here today delusional as though he lives in another place, in another reality. Here is what Social Justice Ireland says. It reports that people are having to make impossible choices - its words, not mine - in order to remain within their weekly budget. That is a polite way of saying that people are struggling. People are now fearful.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Let me ask the Minister a supplementary on the energy credits.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The energy credit should be reinstated. I am right, am I not? Is that not a correct position in a wealthy society and from the Minister's Government?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I have answered the Deputy's question directly. For many families, it is not easy and the State is there to support them. That is why we have expanded the social protection measures that are targeted at those who need them. The Deputy made no reference to that. Again, it is in stark contrast to what her colleagues are doing in the North in relation to helping with fuel bills. The fuel allowance payment in the North of Ireland is between €113 and €340. The Deputy probably knows, but she will not say it here today, that it is only available to those over 66 years of age in the North where Sinn Féin holds the finance Ministry. In the South, the fuel allowance is worth about €924 per annum.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is pathetic.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: That is true. Let us leave the politics piece out of it. I can say to families out there that the Government and the State will work with them right the way through this winter to bring about permanent affordability measures. I have mentioned retrofitting.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Government has abandoned them.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy is opposed to carbon tax. The carbon tax is invested in people's households to bring about permanent changes to their homes, permanent affordability measures and permanent health measures to their homes. This year 60,000 homes will be retrofitted.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Tá an Taoiseach as láthair, it seems. It is a nice surprise to see the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, today.

Temperatures are dropping rapidly as winter approaches. Household heating bills are rising just as fast. One million households across Ireland use oil for home heating, representing 38.9% of all households. The price of their bills has rocketed up by 9% in just one month. On its own, that would squeeze any household but that spike comes on top of a barrage of other price hikes. Energia, SSE Airtricity, Bord Gáis Éireann and Flogas have all put up their prices again. These are highly profitable energy companies doing very well, some would say obscenely well, while bill payers face an impossible choice to freeze or to feel the squeeze, trying to make ends meet this winter. People simply have no more to give, as I know the Minister will be aware. Before this cold snap hit, 300,000 people were already in arrears on their electricity bills. The Government has offered nothing to help reduce household costs or to reduce reliance on fossil fuels.

I know the Minister has just said of course we need to reduce reliance fossil fuels but the Government is way behind on retrofitting targets and so carbon emissions continue to rise. People living in draughty homes have no option but to rely on fuels that are unsustainable both for our planet and for household finances.

It is three and a half years since Russia's horrific onslaught on Ukraine but now in 2025 energy providers are hiding behind what is a geopolitical tragedy to justify price hikes that cannot be explained by supply costs. The Minister just spoke about Ireland's energy bills compared with our European counterparts. Our energy bills are still markedly higher. The driver of those prices is not war; it is corporate greed. We see that elsewhere too with supermarkets hiking their prices at the tills, rents and mortgages climbing, and people's personal finances under attack from all angles, having less and less left over at the end of each month - less for Christmas, car repairs, a burst pipe or any unforeseen eventualities.

What is most galling is the sense that things are much worse than they could be because the Government could be doing more. The Government has given a message to hang in there but is offering no evidence that its policies are anything worth waiting for. In the Minister's previous response, he talked about a report due in 2026, but in a cost-of-living crisis, people need protection now against corporate greed. Labour has called on the Government to force supermarket giants to publish profits, yet the Government has refused to do so. It has refused to use its legal powers to control energy prices. The Government has spoken about meeting with energy companies in September, but what has come of that? Where are the promised hardship funds? Where are the promised supports for households? All we saw was one-off measures stripped away in the last budget in the service of VAT cuts for fast food giants. People are at the pin of their collars and the Government needs to take on these corporates. Will the Government finally tackle profiteering in energy prices, in groceries and in housing?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: First, may I deal with this charge that the Leader of the Opposition and the leader of the Labour Party have made that the Taoiseach is in some way absent. He is on Government business.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: We were not notified.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: He is at the G20 Summit. Should he not go to that as Head of the Irish Government? Should he not go EU-African Union Summit?

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Bacik asked a question. One voice.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Is he in Dublin?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Where is he now?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I know Deputy McDonald is just back from New York as well, but he was actually on Government business. Deputy McDonald was probably fundraising over there, filling the Sinn Féin bag full of cash.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Ivana Bacik: On a point of order, a Cheann Comhairle, all we look for is notification.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, resume your seats. Minister, please continue.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: It is Leaders' Questions, not aspiring leaders' questions.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I will answer the Deputy's questions. Energy affordability is critical and I am glad Deputy Bacik raised the point. I have already answered Deputy Mary Lou McDonald. If we look at the measures that have been taken in the budget, they are targeted measures. They are very targeted across all areas, not just energy. If we look at social welfare rate increases, the renter's tax credit and the mortgage interest relief payments as well, all of those are targeted at people and are significant. It is unquestionably a very significant budget for people. We have got to keep the economy going as well and support the jobs that are there also. Jobs underpin this and it is the hard work of the State and the people that ensures we can have the resources to support our people through difficult times, as we did through Covid and as we did through the cost-of-living crisis, which was acute post the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. We now have to look at measures we are taking, particularly on energy, that are permanent. Deputy Bacik skipped over retrofitting. On retrofitting alone, we are looking at--

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I mentioned it. The Minister skipped it.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: -----64,500 households that will be retrofitted this year. Next year, we are providing €558 million through the carbon tax receipts to put that directly into homes and small businesses to reduce their energy costs. The IEA has said it, not me, that those cost savings are between €900 and €1,200 on average per annum. Permanent changes for households, that is what we need. We need to expand renewables as well. The Deputy is correct in saying that. I have said that, too. Last year, over 40% of our electricity was generated through renewables. We have had a further successful auction in relation to solar and wind energy and we are within grasp of becoming energy sovereign in the next ten years. That will be critical to reducing our dependence on fossil fuels, particularly imported fossil fuels, where we are at the mercy of the vagaries of the market. The Deputy knows how the energy markets work. We are purchasing forward and a lot of our companies are. I insisted - I asked the energy companies - to make sure those hardship funds were brought back in place, and they are in place. No one can or will be disconnected through the course of this winter either. I say to people who are in arrears that there is assistance from the State, they should contact their energy providers and we can work through measures with them. Our work on that is not concluded.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I would certainly like to hear more on that from the Minister, but on the Taoiseach's lack of presence here, of course he must represent the country abroad, but we

had understood he would be here today and it is a common courtesy that we would be notified in advance of Leaders' Questions when he is not taking them.

On the Minister's response, we absolutely support retrofitting. In fact, what we in the Labour Party have been critical of is the delay in the roll-out of affordable retrofitting. Around the country, people are frustrated at the delay on retrofitting, missed targets on retrofitting and a lack of affordability, just as people are frustrated about the delay in the roll-out of renewables. We want to see renewable capacity ramped up at great scale. All of us are frustrated at the delays. The Maritime Area Regulatory Authority, MARA, was established some time ago. We supported that in opposition, but we are still seeing such delay in offshore development.

In the meantime, this is about fairness. It is about reshaping priorities so that those who have profited most from the crisis will pay their share rather than seeing the burden of energy costs pushed back on working people and on families and households. The Labour Party has put forward a series of supports and is simply asking the Government to adopt them.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We will obviously ensure the measures we have brought forward are implemented. On retrofitting alone, we have retrofitted nearly 230,000 homes across the country. That is scaling up every single year. As I said, we will do about 64,500 this year. They are permanent changes for households to ensure they can bring down their energy costs.

There is the issue of the energy markets and the cost on the wholesale markets and the fact that our retail prices struck at the wholesale gas price even though we are accelerating renewables. That is a matter I have raised at every European Council meeting I have attended. At COP just last week, we introduced into the discussion the affordability piece for households because it is a real issue for households. We will continue to target measures at those who need them most as we are expanding our renewables.

On the work in relation to the affordability task force, we published our interim report and implemented measures like the 9% VAT rate and the expansion of the fuel allowance straight away. There will be further measures coming through in 2026.

Deputy Holly Cairns: These are the words of a remarkably strong words of a teenager from west Cork after her rapist was jailed yesterday for six years:

I could see my house just before he dragged me down the shortcut and started doing unimaginable things to me ... It made me feel so defeated - if it can happen so close to home it can happen anywhere.

Aged just 17 when she was attacked as she walked a short distance home, she told the court yesterday that she thought she was going to die. She spoke out because she wanted other victims of sexual violence to know that they are not alone. I want to commend on her incredible bravery.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Holly Cairns: This case highlights yet again why women rarely feel safe when they are out at night and why we do not jog or run when it gets dark, why we tightly grip keys when we walk, why we rarely wear headphones so we can be alert to sounds around us and why we

are hyper vigilant about men walking behind us when we are alone. It is because nowhere is safe.

Violence against women is an epidemic in our society. Every day in court and crime reports we read of horrific cases involving women who have been beaten, sexually assaulted, raped or murdered. We know some of their names, the hugely courageous women who have spoken out like Bláthnaid Raleigh and Natasha O'Brien. Too often, in the absence of high-profile cases, there is a lack of political focus on this issue. The grim reality is the 52% of women in Ireland have experienced sexual violence. That is more than 1 million people. That is probably an under-reporting. What is being done about it?

It seems like pervasive levels of violence against women are something we are somehow just supposed to accept and tolerate as the price of being a woman. The Government has done some work in this area and I welcome the new agency Cuan that has been set up to tackle gender-based violence but why has progress on the basics been so slow? How are there still nine counties in Ireland without a women's refuge? How are women's counselling notes still at risk of being used in trials for rape and sexual assault? How is there still uncertainty about whether offences like stalking and coercive control can be included in a planned domestic violence register? How is toxic and abusive content aimed at demeaning, threatening and humiliating women allowed to proliferate online? I could go on and on but I am running out of time.

We need an emergency response. We need this to be treated like the epidemic that it is. Today is international day for the elimination of violence against women. Will the Government ban the use of counselling notes from courtrooms? When will refuge spaces be provided in every county?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank Deputy Cairns for raising this very serious and important matter. I read the transcripts of the court case and it is absolutely horrific. I want to commend the bravery of that young lady. I have a 17-year-old daughter. I cannot imagine what she and her family are going through. There should be no tolerance of violence against women, and there is no tolerance of it. That is why the Government's strategy of zero tolerance is so critical. The Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, has been advancing some very specific measures in that regard. Jennie's law and Valerie's law are advancing, too. The establishment of Cuan by the previous Government was absolutely critical. As a former housing Minister, I was involved in the third national strategy. We need to make sure the supports are there for people.

Fundamentally, and I agree with the Deputy on this, the fact that many women, and young ladies as well, do not feel safe at night and have to change their behaviour and habits insofar as where they go, where they run and whether they use head phones, is not what we want our country to be. Unfortunately, this is not unique to Ireland. We have a responsibility, as a collective here in the Oireachtas, to work together on this very serious issue, and to work societally as well. Significant education is required. The Deputy mentioned online content and she is right. The normalisation of pornography among young men, in particular, is a really worrying trend. This is something that can be addressed through our education system and schools and through our families as well. Parents and guardians have to be very open about having these discussions at a very young age. I speak in this regard from experience of being a dad. We need to have those types of discussions.

It is important that the Government underpins the measures we have with funding. We have increased funding to almost €80 million in budget 2026. That is to support Cuan and the services working to tackle domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. The establishment of a specific agency to deal with this was critically important. The Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, is also looking to introduce legislative change, including, under the proposed guardianship of infants (amendment) Bill, to allow for the removal of guardianship rights from persons convicted of killing their intimate partner. The Minister also secured Government approval on 22 October to progress the criminal law (sexual offences, domestic violence and international instruments) Bill 2025, which includes measures to allow perpetrators of domestic violence to be included on a new register to be run by the courts and to strengthen the law around sexual consent. Convictions will be published online by the Courts Service under a specific heading of "domestic violence registered judgments".

I am acutely aware, as is the Government, that we need to continue the focus on this area and that there must be a zero-tolerance approach to violence against women.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I acknowledged that some work has been done in this area. However, when the Minister says the Government will continue its approach of zero tolerance, it is important to highlight that it needs to get real on this issue. He is talking about zero tolerance. Let us compare that with the fact nine counties are without a refuge space. The reality for women in violent homes in those counties is they have nowhere to go and are forced to stay in unsafe homes. There is nothing about this that speaks zero tolerance. We are talking about situations where women's counselling notes are allowed to be used against them in court in cases of rape and sexual assault. Nothing about that spells zero tolerance to people watching today.

As I said, we welcome some of the moves that have been made on this issue by this Government and the previous one, but it is time to get real and get to grips with the reality of gender-based violence in this country. I asked the Minister two questions and I will ask them again. When will the Government ban the use of counselling notes in court and when will those nine counties have a domestic violence refuge space?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: On the counselling notes, the Minister will bring forward amending legislation towards the end of this year or very early next year. That will be brought forward. I outlined in my first answer to the Deputy the other measures we are taking by way of legislation. As she raised, it is critically important that there be safe places for victims to go. The Government and I agree with her that more needs to be done there. However, the plan is for 52 new family refuge units, 45 new safe homes and 50 new units to be under construction, all by the end of next year. I have visited the new refuge in Wexford, which is excellent. Work is advancing on projects in the nine counties she mentioned, one of them in north County Dublin. I am very aware of what is happening there in relation to new refuge spaces. This is something we have to continue to work on. I just want to assure the Deputy it is an absolute priority for both the Minister for justice and the Government.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: On 12 November, the Taoiseach told this House that legal advice states a Minister cannot read protected disclosures. That claim has caused real alarm throughout the country because if a Minister cannot read protected disclosures, the Minister

cannot verify whether the Minister is being misled. It is an extraordinary position for this Government to have in a system that has repeatedly accused, attacked and retaliated against whistleblowers. A recent case shows that danger exactly. For decades, a cash-based duty exchange system has operated in the Irish Prison Service, not secretly but quite openly. A Workplace Relations Commission ruling has confirmed it, RTÉ "Prime Time Investigates" has exposed it, a senior retired governor called it universal and it is on the record of this House from 1996, meaning we have known about it here for over 30 years. Yet, when the matter reached the State legal apparatus of the Chief State Solicitor's office, that office told a statutory tribunal that the system did not exist and argued the point relentlessly that if it did exist, it would be fraudulent. We are left with only two possibilities, either the State participated and believes in a fraudulent case or the Chief State Solicitor's office misled a statutory body and perverted accountability. Both scenarios undermine our rule of law and raise the same question, namely, who is the State legal system protecting? Is it protecting the people's interest, the public's interest or is it saving the Government and State from embarrassment?

Part of a wider pattern is that whistleblowers who raised the issue, and others, have been sidelined and dismissed. Legal advice presented to Ministers appears to contain disclosures rather than deal with the ongoing wrongdoings. The Committee of Public Accounts has already confirmed that the system is obstructed. On page 10 of a report from January 2022, the committee states that the terms of reference for the protected disclosure investigation were drawn too narrowly and that suspected criminal activity could not even be referred to An Garda Síochána. That is not a flaw in the system; to my mind, it is a design in the system. It was reinforced in writing by the Taoiseach in August 2019 when he was Leader of the Opposition. A Minister told him a whistleblower's disclosure had been handled through legal advice and treated as a normal personnel matter, and he was asked to stand down. As I understand it, and if he was here today he could confirm it, he did stand down. That whistleblower lost his career four months later and has been fighting for justice ever since.

I will put direct questions to the Government. Is the Government satisfied that the legal advice given to the Ministers on protected disclosures is accurate, lawful and compliant with the Act of the EU directive?

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Does the Minister stand over the Taoiseach's statement of 12 November?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We are committed as a Government to protecting whistleblowers. Work is ongoing at EU and national level to further strengthen those reports. The Deputy has a Private Members' motion tomorrow morning, I think, on this matter. We will get an opportunity to debate it in the round. We accept the motion tabled by Independent Deputies is well intentioned and seeks to increase protections for whistleblowers but, from an initial review, it appears to ignore many of the provisions that already exist in legislation to protect those individuals. It also contains a number of proposals which would have to be worked on in more detail and may have some unintended consequences too. We have set some of those concerns out in the countermotion, alongside our ongoing commitment to further review the

legislation at both EU and national level. The role whistleblowers have is critically important and they deserve the protection of the State.

On the Deputy's contention that a Minister should have the opportunity to read protected disclosures, while I understand the intention, it is flawed. The political process needs to be separate from that. There is a clear process in relation to that. Every Minister gets a general report on protected disclosures, which is important too. There has to be an independent verifiable process for whistleblowers to be able to have the allegations or matters they have raised assessed in an independent way, separate from the line Minister, and where the whistleblower can feel it can be raised in safety and assessed with seriousness. The Protected Disclosures Act 2014 is our national whistleblowers protection law. A major amendment to that Act was made in 2022. It was signed into law in July 2022 and commenced operation on 1 January. This is an area that we take seriously.

I look forward to the debate tomorrow morning in relation to the Independent Technical Group's motion, where the Deputy can put forward other matters relating to it. Whistleblowers in general have done this State a great service. They have raised matters that would not have come to the fore if we had not had the structures and processes in place to allow that to happen. A whistleblower should not find, in any way, shape or form, that their own situation is affected in a negative way simply because they have raised a protected disclosure that they feel is of great importance to the operation of their Department or agency or to behaviour within an agency or Department.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Legal ambiguity protects the powerful. Clarity and accountability protect the Republic. I will put the questions to the Minister again because he has not answered them. Is the Government satisfied that the legal advice given to Ministers on protected disclosures is accurate, lawful and compliant with both the EU Act and the Act in the Republic? Does the Minister stand over the statement, made by the Taoiseach on 12 November in this House on receiving protected disclosures under section 8, that Ministers cannot even read them? Will the Government commission an independent review of legal advice provided to Ministers in cases involving corruption, criminal conduct and the misuse of public funds? Will the Minister confirm whether the conduct of the Chief State Solicitor's office, in presenting a position that has now been proved false, will be thoroughly and fully investigated?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy asked whether we are satisfied that we received that the Taoiseach read in this House. Of course we are. The Deputy has an opportunity tomorrow morning to raise specific points around his motion. As I said to him in my initial answer, this whole area is something that remains under review both at EU and national level. We want to make sure the process is fair and transparent and that protection is given to whistleblowers, which, in the main, it is. That is important. The Department of Finance will be taking this debate tomorrow. We look forward to the arguments that will be put forward in that regard. We are always open to looking at matters, whereby if there are improvements required that are legal, and we will do so. We look forward to the debate tomorrow morning.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

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

Tuesday's business shall be:

- Motion re Sixth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection (without debate)
- Motion re Referral to Committee of Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Planning and Development Act 2024 (Modifications) (Regulations) 2025 (without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately)
- Financial Motions by the Minister for Finance [2025] (Financial Resolutions No. 1 and No. 2) (two separate motions to be debated together and brought to a conclusion within 60 mins, with separate questions put on each motion and any divisions claimed to be taken immediately)
- Supplementary Estimates for Public Services 2025 [Votes 2 and 6] (to be moved together and brought to a conclusion within 60 minutes; to be decided by one question and any division claimed to be taken immediately)
- Health Insurance (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Second Stage) (to conclude within 3 hours and 34 minutes and any division claimed deferred to immediately before Committee Stage on Wednesday)

Tuesday's private members' business shall be the Second Stage of the Victims of Sexual Violence Civil Protection Orders Bill 2025, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund Regulations 2025 (to conclude within 60 minutes)
- Motion re Extension of Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2021 (to conclude within 60 minutes)
- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann to Authorise negotiations for an agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Korea on the transfer of Passenger Name Record data (to conclude within 60 minutes)
- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the Union support for asylum, migration and integration for the period from 2028 to 2034*
- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the Union support for internal security for the period from 2028 to 2034*
- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the Justice programme for the period 2028-2034 and repealing Regulation (EU) 2021/693*

* To be debated together and brought to a conclusion within 60 minutes, with questions to be put on each motion separately

- Motion for a Financial Resolution for the Health Insurance (Amendment) Bill 2025 (without debate) (to be taken no earlier than 5 p.m. and any division claimed to be taken immediately)
- Health Insurance (Amendment) Bill 2025 (Committee and remaining Stages) (to conclude within 90 minutes)
- Finance Bill 2025 (Report and Final Stages) (if not previously concluded, to conclude either at 12.28 a.m. or after 4 hours, whichever is the later)

Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Motion *re* Strengthening Whistleblower Protections, Enforcement, and Accountability in Public Administration, selected by the Independent Technical Group.

Thursday's business shall be:

- Statements on Sudan (not to exceed 3 hours and 32 minutes)

Thursday evening business shall be the Second Stage of the Wind Turbine Regulation Bill 2025, sponsored by Deputy Brian Stanley.

Proposed Arrangements for this week's business:

In relation to Tuesday's business, it is proposed that:

1. the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders shall be modified to the following extent:

(a) the time allotted for Government Business shall be extended in accordance with the arrangements for that business, and the Dáil may sit later than 10.48 p.m.;

(b) Parliamentary Questions to the Taoiseach pursuant to Standing Order 47(1) shall not be taken, and Government business shall commence at the time when Parliamentary Questions to the Taoiseach would normally be taken; and

(c) private members' business may be taken later than 6.12 p.m. and shall in any event be taken on the conclusion of the Second Stage of the Health Insurance (Amendment) Bill 2025, with consequential effect on the commencement time for Parliamentary Questions to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and topical issues;

2. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Sixth Report of the Committee of Selection shall be taken without debate;

3. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Referral to Committee of Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Planning and Development Act 2024 (Modifications) (Regulations) 2025 shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;

4. notwithstanding anything in Standing Order 217, in relation to the Financial Motions by the Minister for Finance [2025] (Financial Resolutions Nos. 1 and 2), the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) the proceedings on the motions shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes;

(b) the two motions shall be debated together, with separate questions put from the Chair on each motion: Provided that the question on each motion shall also dispose of any amendments tabled to that motion;

(c) the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:-

opening speech by a Minister or Minister of State – 10 minutes;

speeches by representatives of Sinn Féin, the Labour Party, Social Democrats, Independent and Parties Technical Group, and Independent Technical Group – 7.5 minutes per party or group;

speeches by Other Members – 7.5 minutes; and

a speech in response by the Minister – 5 minutes;

(d) members may share time; and

(e) any divisions demanded shall be taken immediately;

5. notwithstanding anything in Standing Order 217, in relation to the Motions for Supplementary Estimates for Public Services 2025 [Votes 2 and 6], the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) the proceedings on the motions shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes;

(b) the two motions shall be moved and debated together and brought to a conclusion by one question which shall be put from the Chair;

(c) the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:-

opening speech by a Minister or Minister of State – 10 minutes;

speeches by representatives of Sinn Féin, the Labour Party, Social Democrats, Independent and Parties Technical Group, and Independent Technical Group – 7.5 minutes per party or group;

speeches by Other Members – 7.5 minutes; and

a speech in response by the Minister – 5 minutes;

(d) members may share time; and

(e) any division demanded shall be taken immediately;

6. the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Health Insurance (Amendment) Bill 2025 shall be brought to a conclusion after 3 hours and 34 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) the arrangements for the first speaking round shall be in accordance with those contained in the table immediately below (to be read across, not down);

(b) on the conclusion of the first speaking round or where speeches conclude before the 3 hours and 24 minutes have elapsed and no other member is offering, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a speech in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes,

whereupon proceedings shall be brought to a conclusion; Provided that any division claimed on the Second Stage proceedings shall be taken immediately prior to Committee Stage on Wednesday; and

(c) members may share time; and

Mins	20	20	20	12	4
Mins	20	12	4	20	12
Mins	4	20	12	4	20

7. notwithstanding anything in Standing Order 177(2), the proceedings on Second Stage of the Victims of Sexual Violence Civil Protection Orders Bill 2025 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 2 hours.

In relation to Wednesday's business, it is proposed that:

1. the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders shall be modified to the following extent:

(a) the time allotted for Government Business shall be extended in accordance with the arrangements for that business, with consequential effect on the commencement time for the weekly division time, which may be taken later than 8.45 p.m. and which shall in any event be taken on the conclusion of proceedings on the Finance Bill 2025, and the Dáil may sit later than 9.30 p.m.;

(b) the SOS pursuant to Standing Order 25(1) shall be taken immediately following Taoiseach's Oral Parliamentary Questions pursuant to Standing Order 47(1), which shall be taken at the time when the SOS would normally be taken; and

(c) in the event the Motions on Proposals for Regulations of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing Union support for asylum, migration and integration, for internal security and the Justice programme, for the period 2028-2034 conclude before 5 p.m., the sitting shall stand suspended until 5 p.m. when the order of business shall resume with the Motion for a Financial Resolution for the Health Insurance (Amendment) Bill 2025;

2. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund Regulations 2025 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

(a) the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:-

opening speech by a Minister or Minister of State – 10 minutes;

speeches by representatives of Sinn Féin, the Labour Party, Social Democrats, Independent and Parties Technical Group, and Independent Technical Group – 7.5 minutes per party or group;

speeches by non-party/group members – 7.5 minutes in total; and

a speech in response by the Minister – 5 minutes; and

(b) members may share time;

3. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Extension of Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2021 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

(a) the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:-

opening speech by a Minister or Minister of State – 10 minutes;

speeches by representatives of Sinn Féin, the Labour Party, Social Democrats, Independent and Parties Technical Group, and Independent Technical Group – 7.5 minutes per party or group;

speeches by non-party/group members – 7.5 minutes in total; and

a speech in response by the Minister – 5 minutes; and

(b) members may share time;

4. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann to Authorise negotiations for an agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Korea on the transfer of Passenger Name Record data shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

(a) the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:-

opening speech by a Minister or Minister of State – 10 minutes;

speeches by representatives of Sinn Féin, the Labour Party, Social Democrats, Independent and Parties Technical Group, and Independent Technical Group – 7.5 minutes per party or group;

speeches by non-party/group members – 7.5 minutes in total; and

a speech in response by the Minister – 5 minutes; and

(b) members may share time;

5. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the Union support for asylum, migration and integration for the period from 2028 to 2034, the Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the Union support for internal security for the period from 2028 to 2034, and the Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the Justice programme for the period 2028-2034 and repealing Regulation (EU) 2021/693 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

(a) the three motions shall be debated together, with separate questions put on all proceedings thereon;

(b) the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:-

opening speech by a Minister or Minister of State – 10 minutes;

speeches by representatives of Sinn Féin, the Labour Party, Social Democrats, Independent and Parties Technical Group, and Independent Technical Group – 7.5 minutes per party or group;

speeches by Other Members – 7.5 minutes in total; and

a speech in response by the Minister – 5 minutes; and

(c) members may share time;

6. the proceedings on the Motion for a Financial Resolution for the Health Insurance (Amendment) Bill 2025 shall be taken either at 5 p.m. or on the conclusion of the Motions on Proposals for Regulations of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing Union support for asylum, migration and integration, for internal security and the Justice programme, for the period 2028-2034, whichever is the later, without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;

7. the proceedings on Committee and remaining Stages of the Health Insurance (Amendment) Bill 2025 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 90 minutes by one question which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Health; and

8. the proceedings on Report and Final Stages of the Finance Bill 2025 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion either at 12.28 a.m. or after 4 hours, whichever is the later, by one question, which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Finance.

In relation to Thursday's business, it is proposed that:

1. the ordinary routine of business as contained in Schedule 3 to Standing Orders shall be modified to the extent that topical issues shall be taken earlier than 7.24 p.m., with consequential effect on the commencement times for the Second Stage of the Wind Turbine Regulation Bill 2025 and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil; and

2. the Statements on Sudan shall not exceed 3 hours and 32 minutes and the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:

(a) the arrangements for the statements, not including the Ministerial response, shall be in accordance with the arrangements contained in the table immediately below (to be read across, not down);

(b) following the statements, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and

(c) members may share time.

Mins	35	25	15	15	5

Mins	15	15	5	12	15
Mins	5	12	15	5	8

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the proposed arrangements for the week's business agreed?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Not agreed.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy McDonald.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Under Standing Order 35(3), I propose an amendment to the Order of Business to strike from the business of the day Supplementary Estimates for Public Services 2025 - Votes 2 and 6. These Estimates have not been scrutinised by the relevant committee, that being the finance committee. The Taoiseach has repeatedly refused to attend that committee. Let me say that again. The Taoiseach has refused repeatedly to attend the committee to allow for the proper and lawful scrutiny of these Estimates.

An Ceann Comhairle: The amendment is noted. Thank you, Deputy. I call Deputy Duncan Smith.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: They should not be taken in this House until the Taoiseach presents himself and the appropriate scrutiny is applied.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Hear, hear.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Four weeks ago, the previous Minister for foreign affairs gave an indication that the occupied territories Bill would be brought back to this House before the end of November. The November schedule will be agreed without that being included. Can the Chief Whip now give an assurance that the Bill will be brought before the House before Christmas and the end of December?

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The situation in Gaza remains dire. The attacks on Palestinians in the West Bank have been relentless. A year ago, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael promised to pass the occupied territories Bill. The Tánaiste, Deputy Simon Harris, promised it would be brought to the Dáil by the end of November. It is the end of November and there is no sign of the Bill. When is it going to be brought to the Dáil?

Deputy Paul Murphy: I agree with the points made by the previous two speakers. I also raise the fact that it has been two weeks since the new housing plan was published. The main innovation is the removal of annual targets to prevent accountability for the failure of this

Government to deliver affordable housing, while allowing a small few to get extraordinarily rich. Since the plan has been published, we have been calling for a debate on it but it has still not been granted. Why is the Government scared of debating its own housing plan? Is this going to turn into what we had with the Housing Commission report where week in, week out, we will be demanding debates and the Government will say it is happy to debate it but for six months, we did not get a debate? When will we get a debate on the Government's housing plan?

Deputy Michael Collins: In the past number of weeks at the Business Committee, I have sought to raise the issues of Uisce Éireann, which is getting a budget of €12.2 billion from the State and is not accountable for much of that money that has been spent, and Mercosur. The IFA and the *Irish Farmers' Journal* did an investigation last week that showed that basically rotten meat - contaminated meat - from South America could end up on Irish tables. We also need a discussion on issuing the writ in Galway West and Dublin Central.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Under Standing Order 35(3), I wish to move an amendment to the Order of Business for Thursday's afternoon session, that we have statements on the changes to immigration brought forward by the Minister for Justice, Migration and Home Affairs, which are quite significant. When we respond, as we should, we are often told we are shutting down debate. We would like to have a debate this week on the Minister's changes to the immigration system so that we can get-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Does the Deputy have the amendment?

Deputy Gary Gannon: Yes. I propose an amendment to amend the arrangements for Thursday's afternoon's business in order to provide for statements in relation to the Minister's changes to immigration procedures.

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach Deputy Mary Butler: In relation to the issue raised by Deputy Mary Lou McDonald under Standing Order 35(3), my preference was to attend committee to set out the case for the Supplementary Estimates for Votes 2 and 6 and I had set aside time to do so last Thursday. I regret that this did not prove possible, in particular because there was a precedent for the Government Chief Whip presenting previous requirements for Supplementary Estimates for Votes in the Vote group of the Department of the Taoiseach. That would have happened back as far as 2004 when the then Chief Whip Mary Hanafin attended, in 2022 when the then Chief Whip Deputy Jack Chambers attended and in 2023 when the then Chief Whip Deputy Hildegard Naughton attended. This is a time-sensitive issue that we will vote on on 3 December 2025.

In relation to the issues raised on the occupied territories Bill, the housing plan, Uisce Éireann and the second amendment raised under Standing Order 35(3), relating to the changes to immigration, these can be discussed at Thursday's meeting of the Business Committee. I will also discuss the matter with the Minister, who I have no doubt will come to the Dáil to discuss any changes that are being made. The Order of Business stands.

Question put: "That the amendments proposed to the arrangements on the Order of Business are hereby negatived and the proposed arrangements for the week's business are hereby agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 83; Níl, 63; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Browne, James.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Burke, Colm.	Cairns, Holly.	
Burke, Peter.	Carthy, Matt.	
Butler, Mary.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butterly, Paula.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cronin, Réada.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cullinane, David.	
Cahill, Michael.	Daly, Pa.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Chambers, Jack.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Clendennen, John.	Gannon, Gary.	
Collins, Niall.	Graves, Ann.	
Connolly, John.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Cooney, Joe.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Healy, Seamus.	
Currie, Emer.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Daly, Martin.	Kenny, Martin.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Lawless, Paul.	
Dolan, Albert.	Lawlor, George.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Feighan, Frankie.	McDonald, Mary Lou.	
Fleming, Sean.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Foley, Norma.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Geoghegan, James.	Murphy, Paul.	
Grealish, Noel.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Harkin, Marian.	Nash, Ged.	
Harris, Simon.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Healy-Rae, Danny.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Heneghan, Barry.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Heydon, Martin.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
Higgins, Emer.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	

Lahart, John.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Lawless, James.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Maxwell, David.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McCarthy, Noel.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
McCormack, Tony.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
McEntee, Helen.	Quaide, Liam.	
McGrath, Mattie.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Rice, Pádraig.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Sherlock, Marie.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Smith, Duncan.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Stanley, Brian.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Wall, Mark.	
Murphy, Michael.	Ward, Charles.	
Neville, Joe.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.		
O'Connor, James.		
O'Dea, Willie.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Donovan, Patrick.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Feargháil, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Michael Collins.

Question declared carried.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are moving on to Questions on Policy or Legislation.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: When he gets to his feet, the Minister might clarify the precise whereabouts of the Taoiseach. Tonight, our justice spokesperson, Deputy Carthy, brings forward a very important piece of legislation - a Bill that would allow courts to impose a restraining order on someone convicted of a sexual assault, preventing them from approaching the victim when released from prison. Not alone would this increase protection for victims but also play a really important role in women regaining the sense of safety so violently robbed from them, and provide them with the security they need to rebuild their lives. This legislation has been called for by victims and it has been shaped by them and their traumatic experiences and insights.

3 o'clock

It is supported by front-line organisations, including the Rape Crisis Centre. I ask that the Government not block this vital legislation and that it support its passage to Committee Stage and urgently into law because victims cannot wait any longer.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: To deal with the important matter that the Deputy raised, I know Sinn Féin has legislation in that regard. I outlined earlier on some of the measures that the Government was taking on this important and critical issue. I will certainly discuss Sinn Féin's Private Members' Bill with the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, and will revert directly to the Deputy in relation to how the Government proposes to approach that. In fairness, everyone in this House is trying to work on this important issue in a unified way. It is critical that we do that. I assure the Deputy that we are minded of the voices of victims and survivors.

Moving on to the Deputy's first point, I thank her again for her concern as to the Taoiseach's travel. I will make an important point. The Taoiseach is representing the Government. I said that earlier on. It is not unusual for a Head of Government to attend international fora.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister's time is up. I call Deputy Bacik.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: He is travelling back as we speak.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Is he still away now, though?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I will let him know the Deputy was asking for him.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Today, we mark International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. We need to commend the bravery of all those women who have come forward and who have made changes and advocated for change, from Lavinia Kerwick to Natasha O'Brien and so many more. I acknowledge the progress that has been made on the introduction of Coco's law, the offence of coercive control and Cuan, the new agency, but I also recognise how much more there is to do in terms of lack of refuges and more legislative change.

I want to speak about something that came out at the weekend. We are all conscious that we cannot have zero tolerance of violence against women while we are normalising attitudes that facilitate or tolerate sexist abuse. We saw the Shein website advertising childlike sex dolls online. In France today, the French Government is moving in court to suspend the Shein

website - this online shopping platform's website - because of the sale and advertisement of these awful objects that are perpetuating this sexist attitude towards women and perpetuating a culture where we cannot have the zero tolerance we all want to achieve.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I agree with the Deputy. I mentioned in my opening remarks earlier on during Leaders' Questions that all us share responsibility in this House but also outside the House, and that includes corporate bodies and our education system. Our teachers and our other educators are doing a lot of work in this regard from a very young age, particularly in relation to boys' and young men's attitudes towards sex, pornography and the normalisation of pornography. Certainly, the ability of companies such as Shein to sell these types of product is of concern. I know it is of concern to the Minister as well. I have noted that other countries have taken steps to ban this, too.

It has to be a zero-tolerance approach. Now it is about continuing on that path of the progress that has been made. I listened to Deputy Mary Lou McDonald. We must make sure that the voices of the survivors and the victims are the most critical in this regard. Given their horrific experiences and the bravery that they have shown, it behoves us to do everything we can.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: The Tánaiste, Simon Harris, promised voters an action plan on childcare within 100 days and here we are 400 days later with nothing to show for that but more empty words. The Minister does not need me to tell him that this sector is at breaking point for service providers, staff and, fundamentally, young families. The Social Democrats have called for a time-limited special Oireachtas committee to develop a pathway for the future vision of childcare and early years education in Ireland. That has fallen on deaf ears. We have asked for this many times previously. There is still no word, still no action plan and still no future vision for childcare. Now that the Tánaiste is the self-appointed Minister for Finance, there are no more excuses. Is the Government going to put its money where its mouth is and follow through on its commitment to €200 a month childcare and, most importantly right now, an action plan for the future of childcare and early years education in Ireland?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: With the young population that we have, it is important we support childcare services. I was in this House when a previous Government, in 2009 to 2010, brought in the early childhood care and education programme, ECCE. We see the advancement of that in terms of childcare right the way across the country since then. While it is fair to make constructive criticisms, it is also fair, by way of balance, to see where we have come from and where we are now. If you look at budget 2026, €1.48 billion was allocated for early learning and childcare. That is an increase of 9% on the previous year. Capital funding is rising as well, with 2,300 additional childcare places. The national childcare scheme supports 286,000 children. If we look at the early childhood care and education, ECCE, scheme nearly 98% of children are now participating in a scheme that did not exist 14 or 15 years ago.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: What of the action plan?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Hold on-----

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: The Minister needs to answer the question on the action plan.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I think I have answered the question so if the Deputy wants to keep interrupting-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up Deputy. I call Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Minister-----

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I asked a question and the Minister has not answered it.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I was in the middle of answering it.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Minister-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Farrelly you are in other Members' time now. I call Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am glad the Minister for Transport is here. He was not here when I raised, on behalf of the taxi drivers of this country, the issue of Uber and its attempt to undermine the regulated taxi industry and the livelihoods of nearly 20,000 taxi drivers. On Saturday, along with thousands of taxi drivers, I participated in a protest at Merrion Square. They are asking that the Government enforce its own regulations or, if necessary, amend the legislation to protect their livelihoods given the efforts of Uber to undermine the regulated fare structure. What they are asking for, which is a win-win for everybody, is that there would be a not-for-profit, publicly-run, National Transport Authority-run app, which all of them would sign up for. This would mean money for Revenue and money for the Exchequer. It would mean the protection of the regulated taxi industry and the protection of the livelihoods of taxi drivers-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. The Minister to respond.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: -----and it would prevent surge pricing, which is what Uber-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister to respond.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: -----and companies will bring in if they get the chance.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I am very pleased Deputy Boyd Barrett-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: They will be protesting on Thursday as well.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I know that too. I have a lot of friends who are taxi drivers who work in the industry and I am a big supporter of our taxi drivers and the sector-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Did you tell them you will meet the NTA on Thursday?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, do you want the answer? Please. We do not have time for this.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: In fairness, Richard is just back, and it is good-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We do not have time for this. Minister, we do not have time. There is 40 seconds.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: -----to see him back. I have written to the NTA on this very specific issue - I mention friends, constituents of mine and, indeed, people across the country - in my role as Minister for Transport so I want to get to the bottom of this. I have asked the NTA to look at it. I attend the taxi forum. I attended just four or five months ago and I will be attending again this week. I do not have an answer back from the NTA yet. I wrote to it on 19 November. I was at COP30 last week but I will be chasing it up this week. I will be engaged with the taxi representative bodies on this matter. I want to see what the regulatory framework is for this. It is a concern to many taxi drivers, unquestionably, and I will be working on it----
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An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Ken O'Flynn.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Will the Minister please inform the House when the Government first received reports indicating that the anti-malaria drug Lariam, mefloquine, was associated with adverse side effects? When did the Department of Defence become aware of that? Can the Minister also confirm whether Lariam was issued to all personnel of all ranks, and not just the privates or the NCOs?

I also note that the Taoiseach has travelled 20 times in the last ten months-----

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: This is a joke.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy O'Flynn, it is one question.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: This is all related.

An Ceann Comhairle: Right.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: On any of the occasions Government Ministers have left the country, have they been in receipt of Lariam, or was a different drug prescribed for them?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The first question in relation to Lariam is probably more appropriate for a parliamentary question but I will raise the matter and seek a response for the Deputy. I do not have the details or the answer to hand on that. Each Minister travels and a Head of Government has to attend international events-----

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I have no problem with that. I am only asking if they had Lariam.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy-----

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: In relation to what medication different Ministers use, I have no idea. That is a matter for those particular Ministers as well.

An Ceann Comhairle: Continued interruptions mean we may not get three Members in today. I call Deputy John Connolly.

Deputy John Connolly: It is opportune that the Minister is in the seat. Successive Governments have committed to building the Galway city ring road. In October 2023, which is over two years ago now, the Galway roads project office resubmitted the planning application to An Bord Pleanála. That followed a three-and-a-half year assessment process by An Bord Pleanála, which unfortunately failed in the judicial review process. There has been over six years of an assessment process for a piece of infrastructure that is badly needed while in Galway there is traffic chaos on a daily basis. I know the Minister is aware of it but the concern is that there is no certainty over when we might get a decision on this. I was in the Chamber earlier in the summer when the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, gave a response to Deputy McAuliffe with a date that An Coimisiún Pleanála had prescribed for the Luas extension to Finglas. The people of Galway deserve similar certainty. We deserve to know when this decision will be made. There is another impact because the NTA will not devise our new transport strategy until we get the decision. I know we cannot engage in planning decisions, but can we get certainty on when the decision will be made?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I will. I know how critical this project is for Galway and Galway city. It is a matter of regret that it has taken so long. It has taken so long for many reasons. We have had serial and continuous objectors to this critical piece of infrastructure. The Government wants to see this road built. It is critical for the city of Galway and the surrounding areas. Following the Deputy's intervention today, I will seek an update as to when we can expect a final decision on it. The Government supports the development of this critical piece of infrastructure for Galway.

Deputy Brian Brennan: I wish to raise the recent summer works scheme allocations. In my constituency, only five schools were successful in their applications. I am delighted for these schools and their allocations are well deserved, but the scheme has not gone far enough to meet the needs of many schools. The scheme is themed around climate action summer works, including roof works, electrical and mechanical works, and essential maintenance. However, Our Lady's Girls National School in Rathdrum, County Wicklow, would have met these criteria as its heating system is not fit for purpose. In Coolgreany National School, the principal has

to go round with a bucket every rainy day because there are so many leaks. I was in the school in Ballycanew in the past couple of weeks. It is absolutely freezing. It is not fair on the kids or the teachers. It is the complete opposite of energy efficiency. I compliment the scheme, but I question why so many schools in genuine need of works are being totally excluded.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The summer works scheme is important for schools and there will unfortunately be some that fall outside the boundaries of it. I noted the announcement last week by the Department of education relating to moneys allocated through the climate action fund to allow energy upgrades for schools. Specifically on Our Lady's Girls National School, I will raise that matter directly with the Minister, Deputy Naughton, on Deputy Brennan's behalf and seek a written and direct response to him.

Deputy John Brady: This morning and every morning, thousands of Wicklow residents are stuck in lengthy and lengthening queues along the N11 and M11, which is having a serious and detrimental impact on people's quality of life. People are late for work and school. It is having a detrimental impact on the economy in Wicklow and a serious impact on the environment. In 2022, after going through a lengthy process, getting to phase 1 and with several million euro spent on the upgrade of the N11, funding was pulled from that scheme, which was part of the national development plan. This was much to the annoyance, bewilderment and amusement of people who were stuck in lengthy traffic jams. A review of the national development plan has been completed. I am conscious that the sectoral plans are due out. Will the Minister give a timeframe for when the Department of Transport's review or sectoral plan will be published and, more importantly, will the funding for the N11-M11 upgrade be reinstated in the national development plan?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: In the review of the national development plan, we secured that €1 in every €4 invested between now and 2030 would be in transport and transport measures. That is just short of €25 billion, which is the largest investment ever made in public transport and transport infrastructure. I intend to publish the sectoral NDP tomorrow. Details of projects of €200 million or more will be published tomorrow. Separate road allocations will be done in December and January. We will publish the sectoral NDP tomorrow afternoon.

Deputy John Brady: Will that include the N11?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy must wait until it is published.

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: Is the Government concerned about a developer's ability, under current insolvency and receivership law, to convert themselves into a secured creditor during the collapse of their own residential project? This is the shocking scenario that homeowners have faced in my constituency in Ringfort, Rathmolyon, County Meath. The developer now ranks ahead of Revenue and the contracted home buyers, which may leave the State at some loss but, more importantly, these five families at a huge loss. Will the Government review the legal framework that enables this practice to happen? Ringfort is a development of 16 houses that these families and others put deposits on in good faith, paid for extras and signed valid, binding contracts on more than five years ago. The developer does not wish to honour the said

contracts, as he can see he would make so much more today selling the houses. He should not be allowed to do this. He is shattering the dreams and futures of these families.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: This is an awful situation, which the Deputy has also discussed with me directly. I am familiar with it. I will raise this matter directly with the line Minister. I think this will cross over between the Departments of justice and Finance. It is an horrendous situation that these prospective home buyers find themselves in. It is something I will discuss directly with the Tánaiste and the Minister for justice. I thank the Deputy for raising this. Where we can help, we will, but I need to ensure that we have direct engagement with the relevant line Ministers on it. I will ask them to revert directly to the Deputy.

Deputy John Clendennen: Sport has a unique ability to lift the nation. In recent weeks, we have seen that first hand with what the boys in green achieved, reaching the next stages of qualification. That is replicated in golf, rugby and GAA. I acknowledge the Government investment in pathways, participation and high performance. Sport is a proven formula to provide success and joy right across society. However, a young man in my constituency, Alex Dunne, is on the cusp of greatness in Formula 1. He has several podium finishes. He is on the cusp of a bright career and his viewership is in the hundreds of millions weekly when he takes to the circuit. He is a generational talent, but because he is a generational talent, he falls between the frameworks that Sport Ireland and Motorsport Ireland provide. At this stage, he is simply ignored by our sporting organisations in this country, with absolutely zero financial support in a sport that is demanding. His is a generational talent. He needs generational support. Will the Government please commit to supporting him?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Sport has the ability to lift the nation. The Deputy mentioned the boys in green. The girls in green came through against Belgium. We have seen some great sporting events recently. We will not talk about the rugby at the weekend, but I blame that on the referee and a poor refereeing performance.

Alex Dunne, who is driving Formula 2 at McLaren, is unquestionably an incredible talent. I am a fan myself. I am not aware of the structures that Sport Ireland and Motorsport Ireland have to ensure he is supported. I can raise that matter with the Minister for sport and the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue. Alex Dunne is a great talent. He has reached levels we have not seen of an Irish person since Eddie Irvine. Where he can be supported, I will ask both the Minister and the Minister of State to respond directly to the Deputy.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I raise with the Minister the urgent need for an immediate intervention to avoid an imminent serious disruption to Caredoc services over the Christmas and new year periods, particularly in Wexford and the south-east region. Up to as recently as 2022, Caradoc's doctors were paid as public servants. However, since then, Caredoc nurses have missed out on 14 pay rises between public sector and sector 39 pay rises. For example, a Caredoc nurse covering night shift gets 25% less pay than nurses in district hospitals, community hospitals or general hospitals. I ask the Government, through the HSE, to address this pay disparity issue, as was done for the section 39 sector in recent agreements.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Caredoc across the country is critically important, particularly at weekends and out of hours. I will raise that matter directly with the Minister for Health on the Deputy's behalf. I will ask the Minister to respond directly to him about the situation he has articulated here as it pertains to Wexford.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: We have seen that the N4 and N7 are like car parks at the moment. I believe part of that is due to service unreliability of some of the routes, particularly the C4 and W6 routes, after huge investment in BusConnects. On the C4 route, we see persistent cancellations, ghost buses and severe overcrowding. With the W6, we see the removal of the post-4 p.m. service, which is impacting students and commuters. There are then repeated delays and cancellations. I have two proposed solutions. One is timetable staggering. At present, the W6 and C4 run in convoy. These should be staggered. The second is increasing the frequency of the C4 by moving from 30 minutes to 20 minutes, particularly in areas where we have huge population growth and huge populations.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It is an area that is growing greatly. Lots of young families are moving in there. I have had the pleasure of being in the Deputy's constituency on a number of occasions recently. You can see the development happening there. A great frustration for me is unreliability of public transport. This ghost bus phenomenon on certain routes is not acceptable. From time to time, things happen. Drivers can be sick, and people understand if this happens now and again. However, the increased prevalence on certain routes is a matter of grave concern. I will speak to the NTA directly and TII on the Deputy's behalf about this and put forward his suggestions with regard to the C4 and the W6 services. I myself will come directly back to him on that.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I want to raise the issue of nitrous oxide, or laughing gas, with the Minister. Because it is used in medical, industrial and commercial applications, nitrous oxide is cheap and accessible, but it is also extremely harmful. I am sure the Minister has seen the discarded containers, small silver bullets and big industrial containers. You see them in parks, car parks and playgrounds across the city. It is a big disposal issue and a nightmare for Dublin City Council and other local authorities. I went to a waste-to-energy plant recently and saw first-hand the damage they can cause because they explode in the combustion chamber, causing shutdown and a potential risk to staff. A recent Department of Health report states that services are needed 24-7 to meet the needs of all those who use these substances, as well as highlighting a need to tackle nitrous oxide use at source among children and young people. We need an urgent and comprehensive cross-government response to what is a clear danger to young people, in particular, in our society today.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I agree with the Deputy. It is a clear danger. I chaired the north Dublin regional drugs and alcohol task force for about ten years and we saw the increased prevalence of nitrous oxide or laughing gas, the small canisters which are being used for recreational purposes by a lot of our young people. It is a matter that the Department of Health and the Minister of State with responsibility for the drugs strategy are aware of. It is a legal product when used correctly, so there are complications in that regard, but I will again refer directly to both the Minister and the Minister of State on this and let them know that the Deputy has raised this matter here and to seek an update on the progress and work on this issue.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I want to raise the village of Inistioge in County Kilkenny. I am not sure if the Minister is familiar with it. It is the most picturesque village in Kilkenny, if not in the country. It is home to the great Eddie Keher, one of the greatest hurlers of all time, it is home to the fantastic Woodstock gardens and arboretum, a national treasure and a gem in the south east, and it has hosted numerous films down through the years, such as "Circle of Friends", to name just one. However, that village is being strangled at the moment because there is a lack of infrastructure there, and there is a huge issue regarding the wastewater treatment plant, which absolutely needs to be upgraded. It has been on the Irish Water and Kilkenny County Council list for the past number of years. It has been ranked second but demoted to fourth and to fifth. In order for this village to grow and in order to help the schools, the GAA clubs, the pubs and the shops, we need this wastewater treatment upgraded. I implore the Minister to do everything he can to get this treatment plant upgraded as soon as possible and as a massive priority for this Government.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I know Inistioge well. I was with the Deputy all the way through until he got to "Circle of Friends" in the end. As regards this wastewater treatment plant, the Minister, Deputy Browne, has brought forward new measures to allow us to accelerate delivery of wastewater treatment plants above and beyond what the capital programme might set out through Uisce Éireann. I will speak to the Minister directly about Inistioge. I know Deputy Cleere has been advocating for this himself. It is critical to allow that town to expand and for people in the area to be able to live there. I will speak to the Minister directly and get him to respond to the Deputy.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: I want to raise with the Minister the urgent case of Roxanne. She is suffering with a range of complex medical issues, including the onset of scoliosis. Over 2024 and 2025, Roxanne has undergone three operations at a cost of nearly €200,000, all of which has been paid for by family-run fundraisers. I ask that the Taoiseach and the Minister for Health urgently review Roxanne's case and assist this beautiful little girl in accessing the life-changing surgery she desperately deserves. We have sent on the details of the case to the Minister. Her family cannot be expected to keep fundraising for this to cover the cost.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank the Deputy for raising the case of Roxanne and the situation she is in. I will raise it directly with the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. The Deputy has said she has corresponded with the Minister. I thank Deputy Newsome Drennan for raising it here. I will speak to the Minister directly post this and make sure that she responds directly to the Deputy and to the family.

Seán Lemass Dublin International Airport Bill 2025: First Stage

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide for the renaming of Dublin Airport as Seán Lemass Dublin International Airport and to provide for related matters.

I thank you, a Cheann Comhairle, for allowing me the time to move this Bill. It provides for the formal renaming of Dublin Airport as the Seán Lemass Dublin international airport. This is not simply a question of changing a sign; it is about recognising a leader whose vision transformed Ireland and whose policies opened the gateway through which millions now pass. Seán Lemass was the architect of modern Ireland. Having fought in the Easter Rising and helped in the building of our fledgling State, when Taoiseach he charted a new course, one of openness, ambition and progress, and he understood that isolation was not an option for a small nation. Under his leadership, Ireland embraced free trade, a concept that is under much attack globally now. He encouraged foreign investment and he began the journey towards our successful membership of what was then the European Economic Community. Crucially, he also saw the need for partnership among different traditions on this island and was not afraid to reach out the hand of friendship. These decisions laid the foundations for the Ireland we know today: outward looking, dynamic and globally connected. Lemass saw aviation as a lifeline for Ireland, a bridge to a wider world. As Minister for Industry and Commerce and later as Taoiseach, he championed the development of Aer Lingus, the expansion of air services and the construction of international airports. He understood that connectivity was key, not just for tourism but also for trade, diplomacy and Ireland's place in global affairs.

Dublin Airport, which opened in 1940, when Lemass was Minister for Industry and Commerce, owes much to his policies and foresight. He was instrumental in ensuring that Ireland had the infrastructure to move from the periphery of Europe to its heart. Indeed, it was in 1963, as Taoiseach, that Lemass welcomed President John F. Kennedy to Dublin Airport, a moment that symbolised Ireland's new confidence on the global stage. I am very much conscious that there are bigger issues that need to be addressed by Dublin Airport Authority internally as well as externally. These will include the lifting of the cap at the airport, expansion in the number of flights and working toward making the airport more environmentally sustainable. However, this, I believe, is a small and positive step.

When I raised this issue previously in the Seanad, I was told by DAA that the naming was an issue for the Minister for Transport. When I asked a parliamentary question about this recently, the Department of Transport informed me that this was a matter for DAA. This confusion would not have happened in Seán Lemass's time. On matters concerning national infrastructure, he simply ensured that decisions were made and action was taken. In any event, I hope this legislation will address the matter.

Dublin Airport social media accounts recently mooted the idea of renaming the airport after Troy Parrott, an interesting proposition. I suggest, however, given his inspirational performance, that we might consider naming the metro line out to the airport after him, given that they both have been involved in long campaigns and, just as hope was fading, we had delivery right at the end - or so we hope.

It is quite common for major airports across the world to bear the names of leaders who shaped their nations: Charles de Gaulle in Paris, Adolfo Suárez in Madrid, John F. Kennedy in New York, Ronald Reagan in Washington, DC, Pierre Trudeau in Montreal, Lester B. Pearson in Toronto, Indira Gandhi in New Delhi, Mustafa Atatürk in Istanbul. Ireland should be no different. Renaming Dublin Airport after Seán Lemass would be a fitting tribute to a man who stood for progress, ambition and opportunity. It would reflect our pride across these Houses in his legacy and our confidence in Ireland's future. This is not just about honouring history; it is

about inspiring the next generation. Every time a traveller lands at Seán Lemass Dublin international airport, they will be reminded of a leader who believed that Ireland could take our place among the nations of the world and, more importantly, he made it happen.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): No, and well done to the Deputy.

Question put and agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: Since this is a Private Members' Bill, Second Stage must, under Standing Orders, be taken in Private Members' time.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Standing Committee of Selection: Motion

Deputy Paul Murphy: I move:

That Dáil Éireann, pursuant to Standing Order 33, and with effect from 26th November, 2025, approves the Sixth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 20th November, 2025, and appoints a member to a Committee accordingly.

Question put and agreed to.

Planning and Development Act 2024 (Modifications) Regulations 2025: Motion

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

That the proposal that Dáil Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Planning and Development Act 2024 (Modification) Regulations 2025,

a copy of which has been laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 18th November, 2025, be referred to the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage, in accordance with Standing Order 103(5), which, not later than 3rd December, 2025, shall send a message to the Dáil in the manner prescribed in Standing Order 110, and Standing Order 109(2) shall accordingly apply.

Question put.

Deputy An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 87, as the required number of tellers have not been appointed for the Níl side, I declare the question carried.

Question declared carried.

Financial Resolutions 2025

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I call the Minister to open the debate, I remind Members that there are two separate motions being debated, namely, Financial Resolutions Nos. 1 and 2. They will be moved separately but will be debated together and decided by separate questions. I call the Tánaiste to move the first motion and open the debate.

Financial Resolution No. 1: Value Added Tax

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Simon Harris): I move:

(1) THAT the Value-Added Tax Consolidation Act 2010 (No. 31 of 2010), be amended—

(a) in section 46(1) –

(i) in paragraph (a), by the insertion of "(cac)," after "(cab),",

(ii) in paragraph (c), by the insertion of ", (cac)" after "(cab)",

(iii) in paragraph (cab), by the substitution of "25 November 2025" for "31 December 2030", and

(iv) by the insertion of the following paragraph after paragraph (cab):

"(cac) during the period from 26 November 2025 to 31 December 2030, 9 per cent in relation to—

(i) goods of a kind specified in subparagraph (2) of paragraph 9B of Schedule 3, and

(ii) services of a kind specified in subparagraph (3) of paragraph 9B of Schedule 3,

on which tax would, but for this paragraph, be chargeable in accordance with paragraph (c);",

and

(b) in Schedule 3 –

(i) in Part 2 –

(I) in paragraph 9(1), by the insertion of "(not being services referred to in paragraph 9B(3))" after "Services", and

(II) by the insertion of the following paragraph after paragraph 9A:

"Supply and construction of housing as part of a social policy.

9B.(1) In this paragraph-

'apartment block' means a multi-storey building that comprises, or will comprise, not less than 3 apartments with grouped or common access;

'completed' has the same meaning as it has in section 94.

(2) The supply of immovable goods, as part of a social policy, which are or, when completed, will be—

(a) one or more than one apartment, used or to be used for residential purposes, in an apartment block,

or

(b) an apartment block, used or to be used for residential purposes, but excluding any part of the apartment block that is not used or to be used for residential purposes.

(3) Services consisting of the development, until completed, of immovable goods to which subparagraph (2) applies."

(ii) in Part 3, by the substitution of the following paragraph for paragraph 14:

"Housing.

14. The supply of immovable goods used or to be used for residential purposes, other than immovable goods to which paragraph 9A or 9B(2), as the case may be, applies."

and

(iii) in Part 4, in paragraph 15(2), by the insertion of "or 9B(3)" after "paragraph 9(1)".

(2) THAT this Resolution shall have effect on and from 26 November 2025.

(3) IT is hereby declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution shall have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1927 (No. 7 of 1927).

The first financial resolution provides for a reduction in the VAT rate applied to the supply of new apartments to 9% from 26 November 2025. This measure will apply until 31 December 2030, at an estimated cost of €250 million in 2026, with increasing costs in the following year as more apartments are built. As Deputies will recall, the temporary 9% rate of VAT on the supply of apartments came into effect on budget night. This financial resolution extends the budget night measure to cover the construction of apartments and the supply and construction of apartment blocks, including student accommodation, from tomorrow, 26 November 2025. The 9% rate will apply until 31 December 2030.

The VAT treatment of goods and services is subject to EU VAT law, with which Irish VAT law is required to comply. In general, the EU VAT directive provides that all goods and all services are liable to VAT at the standard rate, which in Ireland is currently 23%, unless they come within the provisions which permit the application of a lower rate. Under the EU VAT directive, member states may apply a reduced rate to the supply and construction of housing as part of a social policy. As colleagues know, Ireland has two reduced rates, 13.5% and 9%. The

Government has committed to the delivery of 305,000 new homes, of which apartments will comprise a considerable share. It is recognised that a viability gap exists when constructing apartments in Ireland. As has been outlined in discussions of this measure in earlier stages and in discussions around the Finance Bill, the purpose of this measure is to reduce that viability gap and achieve wider policy goals, as outlined by the revised national planning framework.

Increasing density, recognising demographic and societal changes and fostering greater social cohesion can more sustainably be realised by the delivery of more apartments. As developers are incentivised to build more apartments and to commence work on the projects which have planning permission but which are not currently deemed viable, the overall housing supply will increase. The measure is set to be in place for five years. This will allow it to cover the life cycle of a building project, which can stretch over a number of years.

The legislation around VAT on property is complex. As such, this financial resolution makes changes to the text that was previously passed on budget night. These changes are to ensure that the text is in line with VAT legislation and that it achieves the original policy intention of the measure, as outlined by the former Minister, Paschal Donohoe. The measure now covers both aspects of an apartment sale sold under dual contract, that is, the sale of a site and the sale of building services to build an apartment. The revised text also includes the word "development" rather than the word "construction", which is in line with existing VAT legislation and case law.

Affordability and the chance to own a home must be at the heart of all that we do and is at the heart of our housing policy. The Government has introduced a comprehensive implementation strategy, which is in place to support the various affordable housing schemes now being delivered by a range of partners. However, to meet the housing needs of our people there has to be private sector involvement. This is what this VAT measure does - reducing the viability gap that developers face when considering whether to advance the projects across the country that have planning permission but where the sale of apartments may not lead to a profit.

I am also moving a financial resolution, as the Ceann Comhairle alluded to, in relation to the help-to-buy scheme. As a consequence of the VAT rate reduction for an apartment, it is necessary to amend the definition of "qualifying residence" in section 477C of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997, which provides for the help-to-buy scheme, to reflect this second rate of VAT. This will ensure that new build apartments will continue to be included in the scope of the help-to-buy scheme. An amendment to section 477C has accordingly been proposed. To avoid a period between 26 November 2025 and the enactment of the Finance Bill, where such apartments would not qualify for help-to-buy during that period, the change to the definition of "qualifying residence" in the proposed amendment to the scheme will need to take effect from 26 November 2025 also.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I move amendment No. 1:

To insert the following new paragraph after paragraph (3):

"(4) The Minister shall, within one month of the passing of this Act, prepare and lay before Dáil Éireann, a report on the very high level of deadweight associated with reducing the VAT rate to 9 per cent for apartments, making specific reference to the

amount of public money that will be directed towards property developers profit margins for apartments, that would have been built had the VAT level remained at 13.5 per cent."

Today, the Government is asking us, as we heard, to sign up to two financial resolutions, both of which highlight the chaotic and ineffective way this Government handles housing policy. The first resolution relates to the 9% VAT rate on apartments. This is to fix the fact that the Government's budget night resolution did not actually cover large parts of the apartment market, such as dual contracts, construction services or apartments built for rent. The second resolution is no better because the Government failed to anticipate the knock-on effects of its VAT rate changes. We now need an emergency fix to the help-to-buy scheme just to ensure that apartments taxed at 9% still qualify for a scheme that has been proven to increase property prices.

Sinn Féin will be voting against these resolutions and oppose this policy. What we have before us is nothing short of shambolic in terms of public policy. The Government's latest idea to fiddle around with the VAT rates on apartments is being sold to us as some kind of bold intervention to stimulate supply. Nothing could be further from the truth because when we cut through the technical language and look at what is actually happening, this is a massive giveaway to developers. It is a handout dressed up as housing policy. It will do absolutely nothing for ordinary workers and families, who are being crushed by a cost-of-living crisis.

The Government is proposing a temporary 9% VAT rate for the supply and construction of apartments. We are told this is to stimulate development and that it is being done on social policy grounds. We are told this is necessary because the budget night financial resolution did not actually cover large parts of the market, such as dual contracts, construction services and apartments built for rent. Here we are again fixing a mistake of the Government's making. Let us be honest. This is not a targeted measure or a strategic intervention, and it is definitely not social policy. This is a tax cut worth hundreds of millions of euro, which will flow directly into the pockets of large developers and investment funds, the same players who already enjoy huge profit margins even in the middle of a housing emergency. Some housing developers are registering over 20% gross profits and the Government's answer is to give them more money. Developers in this State are not struggling, as we can see from some of their published accounts. They are not operating on tight margins and they are not pleading for survival. They are seeing record profits because the Government has created a market where supply is controlled by a small number of dominant players who build where and what they want and who name their price. Now the Government wants to give them even more. It wants to cut their VAT rates from 13.5% to 9%, a move designed to use the second reduced rate permitted under EU rules for housing as part of a so-called social policy. Who exactly is the social policy for? It is certainly not for the families who cannot get a mortgage. It is not for workers who cannot rent a place 50 km from their job. It is definitely not for young people forced to emigrate because the Government has made building a home in Ireland impossible.

The Government is taking a reduced VAT rate that should be used to support genuine social housing and affordability and handing it to developers, many of whom have already benefited from every conceivable initiative, incentive, break and exemption the Government has thrown at them over the over the past number of years. From the croí cónaithe initiative to the first home scheme, help to buy, tax breaks for rental investors and now a reduced VAT rate for

developers, every single time the Government reaches into the pockets to help the people who need it least.

Let us be clear. The measure is not even about reducing prices. The Government does not even claim that. It is not about making apartments more affordable. In a market dominated by a handful of large players and developers where housing is priced according to what the market will bear rather than the cost of construction, the VAT rate will be absorbed entirely into their profits. Developers and the Government know that.

In my time as finance spokesperson, which is well over a decade, I have never seen so much deadweight in a measure. The Minister for Finance brought forward a measure that will cost €250 million next year. Every single penny of that is deadweight. Every single apartment that it will go to is already under construction. There will be €250 million of deadweight and it does not end there. The following year, the measure will cost €390 million. Everybody in the House, including the Minister, knows that an apartment cannot be built in a year. It takes nearly two years to build apartments. Therefore, that money will also be deadweight. We are talking about nearly €640 million, the vast majority of which will be complete deadweight over the next two years.

Money will go directly to pad the already fat profit margins of developers. While the Government bends over backwards to deliver for developers, what is it doing for workers? It is doing absolutely nothing. Workers are being hammered by a cost-of-living crisis. There are skyrocketing rents, soaring childcare costs, record grocery bills and mortgage rates that have gone through the roof under this Government. People are struggling just to get by.

The message from the Government today is very clear, namely, it has no tax cuts for anyone but developers because Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil have reduced housing policy to permanent, recurring and escalating transfers of public money to private developers. Even the financial resolution before us today is simply cleaning up Government errors. It is policymaking on the hoof, as it always has been, and is designed to benefit those who do not need help.

Sinn Féin believes in supporting supply, including affordable supply, not subsidising developers' profits. We believe in using public money to build homes that workers can actually afford, not concocting another round of tax breaks that disappear into the margin of the largest players in the market. This VAT measure is not the solution. It is, plainly and simply, a massive handout. It is an abomination of public spending and a reflection of a Government that has completely lost touch with the reality that ordinary people are facing.

Sinn Féin will not support this measure that pours money into the pockets of developers while workers are left behind to fend for themselves. What people need is affordability. What people do not need is more tax breaks for those who already make fortunes as a result of this Government's housing crisis.

Deputy Ged Nash: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this resolution for a number of reasons. The Labour Party's position on the resolution brought forward on budget night in respect of the proposal to cut VAT for apartment developers was well rehearsed on that night and on Committee Stage of the Finance Bill a couple of short weeks ago. We sought to make the point on budget night and introduced amendments that were, unfortunately, ruled out of order that we are required to comply with the VAT directive. There was an attempt to describe

this particular measure as some way in which the Government proposes to address social concerns bedded in an attempt to address social policy issues.

It is a very big stretch to interpret a handout to developers as social policy. How this will contribute to making apartments more plentiful and cheaper for hard-pressed first-time buyers is arguable. There is no evidence whatsoever to suggest that this is going to work in the way in which the Minister and his colleagues have claimed in recent weeks. We drew attention a number of weeks ago to the fact that the way in which the initial resolution was crafted essentially excluded approved housing bodies from benefiting from the measure.

Notwithstanding our opposition, in the context of the debate and discourse that occurred over the past two weeks, it is of course important, if this is a measure the Government wishes to pursue, that it has the widest possible effect. In my constituency, in particular around the Drogheda area, an area with which the Minister will be very familiar, no apartment complex has been built in recent years that has not ended up being purchased at one point or another towards the end of its journey by an approved housing body or local authority. They are mostly purchased by approved housing bodies. They tend to start their journey as private operators for the market and, for a variety of reasons, these projects end up being acquired by approved housing bodies in their entirety. There are reasons for that.

The point has been made by some that there is no market for apartments. I do not accept that. It seems to me to be simply a matter of good business for developers to sell blocks of apartments en masse to approved housing bodies. It makes sense for them to do that rather than engage with individual purchasers unit by unit. The jury is open on why that is the case.

Many of us on this side of the House, as well as commentators since the Finance Bill was published, drew attention on Committee Stage to the fact that approved housing bodies and those who involved themselves in forward funding arrangements were not captured by this proposition. Apparently that is what this new resolution seeks to deal with but it is something of an emergency fix which should have been anticipated.

Moving to the points made by Deputy Doherty on the deadweight effect, there are a number of different problems with this particular resolution and policy. Among those is the deadweight effect that it will inevitably have. As I said, there is no evidence we can rely on at this stage, outside of the say-so of developers, that this will improve supply and, in improving supply, will address affordability issues for purchasers. The deadweight effect of this is something of which we need to be conscious. I support the amendment proposed by Deputy Doherty that there be a report generated by the Department.

We look forward to the advice becoming available. However, when former Minister, Paschal Donohoe, who was developing this proposition, and the Government saw it through, I imagine the advice from the Department was to at the very least tread cautiously on this because of the lack of availability of any evidence whatsoever that this would have the desired effect the Minister said it would have on supply and affordability.

There is no doubt whatsoever that this support will be absorbed by developers. This has been the case time and again. We are dealing with two amendments in this debate. Help to buy is a case in point. From the original Mazars report commissioned by the Department a number of years ago and the advice issued to the then Minister when the scheme was in its infancy, it was very clear that there was a deadweight effect in terms of help to buy.

4 o'clock

Those of us on this side of the House said time and again that developers would pocket the difference. That has had an inflationary impact. It is not the only reason house price inflation is such an issue but the help-to-buy scheme has contributed to inflation since its inception. The deadweight effect is very clear. All the evidence shows that the vast majority of people who are accessing this support already had the deposit to obtain their homes. It probably is not responsible for the building of a single home that would not have been built in any case. We expect the same will apply in terms of the impact of the VAT reduction on the development of apartments.

The help-to-buy scheme will continue to cost several hundred million euro between now and the end of 2030. It has been described as giving certainty to first-time buyers and developers. In fact, it gives certainty only to developers that they will absolutely coin it in. It will contribute to house price inflation at a time when we should be doing everything we can to increase supply and ensure the supply that is there is affordable. We would be better served using all the resources we have to introduce genuine affordable housing schemes and backing cost rental, for which there is huge demand, to a degree we are not currently doing. We will oppose these resolutions.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: These resolutions are to fix the serious flaws in the financial resolutions brought forward on budget night. Those mistakes the Government made just a few weeks ago were highlighted to it on budget night but it ploughed ahead regardless with its flawed financial resolutions. The effect of the resolutions before us today will be to put more money into the pockets of developers. This is another example of the policy capture of the Government by developers and their lobbyists.

People are struggling to keep food on the table. Disabled people are €1,400 worse off as a result of the budget, according to the Disability Federation of Ireland. A recent report by Barnardos found four in ten parents are either skipping meals or eating less to enable their children to eat. As we speak, there are people in cold homes afraid to turn on their heating. With these resolutions, the Government is giving more money to developers at a time when their profits are already booming. Profits at Glenveagh Properties, for example, more than doubled last year. Rinne an tAire na roghanna míchearta. The CEO of Glenveagh had his salary increased by 80% in 2024 to a whopping €2.7 million a year. That is not a struggling developer in need of taxpayer subsidies.

Just over 5,000 children are homeless in this country and there is an entire generation locked out of home ownership. Yet, the Government is intent on prioritising boosting the profits of developers. That is what is happening. When we brought this up in committee, the former Minister for Finance, Paschal Donohoe, admitted it would have the effect of increasing profits further. We put it to him that profits of developers are already extremely high. The profits of the publicly listed companies are approximately 21%. How much higher does the Government think developers' profits need to go? They are at an extremely high level as it is. According to the former Minister, these subsidies will make them higher again. He said in February this year: "What I am not going to do is reintroduce or propose the very tax reliefs that did such harm to our economy...".

In the battle that went on during the year, those within the Government pushing for these reliefs clearly won. VAT for developers is being slashed, at a full-year cost in future years of €390 million. That is without any affordability conditions, no price caps and no guarantee that a single home will be more affordable as a result. This is an unheard of kind of measure in a European context. In other European countries where significant investment goes into housing, whether through tax expenditure or more direct investment, which is, of course, better value for money, it is always done with the aim of securing affordability. Here, we see subsidy after subsidy that boost the profits of developers and do not make housing more affordable.

There is a key problem with this in terms of productivity in the housing construction sector. Tax incentives are not addressing the capacity constraints in the sector, the infrastructure challenges or the workforce shortages. We have had warnings previously from the ESRI that these kinds of tax expenditures are dead weight and should not be pursued by the Government. It is not just the ESRI saying that. A spending review by the Department of public expenditure stated that any reductions in development costs through tax breaks are "priced into what developers will bid for land, thereby increasing bidding rates, and dissipating any savings in costs achieved elsewhere". That is what the Government's economic evaluation service has warned the Tánaiste about and he is not heeding its advice. It is saying clearly that cutting VAT on apartments will simply increase the price a developer will pay for land. It does not make apartments more affordable but it does make land speculators richer. That is the advice coming from within the Government.

There have been a number of Government subsidies and initiatives in recent years but they are not having the effect we should be seeing on affordability. Instead, land prices are increasing. Figures published recently by the CSO show the price of residential zoned land increased by 42% since 2018. As the Tánaiste knows well, any Government subsidies should be well designed and well targeted. This is not happening in the housing sector. The range of subsidies are masking over inefficiencies and a lack of productivity in the sector. That is what happens when poorly designed subsidies like these are introduced.

Looking at productivity in housing, the Central Bank quarterly bulletin No. 2 of 2025 states that the relatively poor productivity performance in the construction sector in Ireland is also evident in a cross-country setting. In 2024, Ireland was the second lowest across comparable European countries in terms of productivity. Is the Government addressing that productivity problem? No, it is bringing in more subsidies that will act as an incentive against those underlying issues in the construction sector being tackled. According to analysis by the Central Bank, investment in capital stock in the sector, that is, machinery, equipment and technology, has been declining every single year for the past decade. Profits are going up and Government subsidies are going up but the investment in capital stock needed to make the sector more productive is declining each and every year by 2.5%. It is going in the wrong direction. That is what the Government's policy of subsidies to increase profits for developers is doing. Are those developers investing the extra money in making the sector more productive? No, they are pocketing it by way of increased profits. That is exactly what is happening and it is the wrong approach. Profits and subsidies are up and productivity is down, with the hard-earned money from Irish taxpayers going into the pockets of developers. That is why we will oppose these measures.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: A headline from RTÉ earlier this year stated, "Half-year profits and revenues at Glenveagh Properties soar". The company's revenues were up in the first six months of this year by 125% from the previous year, more than doubling from €152 million to €341 million. Gross profit in half a year was €66.8 million. Profits at Cairn Homes were €63 million in the first half of 2025. Yet, the Tánaiste wants to give them more. It is not enough that Glenveagh's profits go up by 125% and that Cairn, the other big builder - just to name the two largest and most profitable - is making eye-watering profits, with shareholders enjoying bonanzas year after year and executives enjoying absolutely obscene salaries. The Government wants to give them €340 million more.

I was just flicking through the prices they are charging for the houses they build. A one-bedroom house by Glenveagh in Donabate is €345,000, a two-bed is €440,000, a three-bed is €480,000 and a four-bed is €700,000, with a similar picture in the rest of them. These are completely unaffordable for the vast majority of working people who go out and work hard but would be absolutely incapable with their own income to afford those kinds of prices. We are giving them a subsidy on already massive profits to deliver housing that no working people can afford. Does the Government honestly think that is justified and is a strategy to deal with the housing crisis? It begs the question as to whether Government is serious at all or whether this just reveals the truth that it is there to represent the interests of the property developers and the profits they want to make because that is the consistent story and, in my opinion, it is the dirty secret of the housing crisis that has persisted now for more than a decade. The only thing that explains Government's failure to deal with the housing crisis is that all along, its only interest was to ensure the profits of the speculators and the property developers. The vulture funds and hedge funds that got all the NAMA lands at discount prices, made massive profits, controlled the supply of housing and then sold it on to these gangs or gave them land - that should be the public land bank - which should be in public control and where we drive, in the public interest, the construction of housing.

In the area around Helsinki in Finland, one of the few places where they have improved the situation of the housing crisis, the land bank is completely controlled publicly. It does not mean there is no private building but it does mean the only housing that happens is housing which is actually going to contribute to addressing the housing crisis and the housing needs of the people and, therefore, it has seen homelessness go down. Whereas, we have seen homelessness go through the roof, every year worse than the last, with the vast majority of working people priced out of the market while the developers, hedge funds and landlords are making eye-watering profits.

Either it is incompetence on a scale that is simply staggering on the part of the Government or the truth is that what it is actually doing is very deliberately benefiting the profiteers at the expense of the people who are suffering. Under no circumstances can the Government justify saying companies making that level of profits need more profits to stimulate the situation and to be convinced to build. Government should not be in a situation where they have the State over a barrel because that is what they are doing. They say, "Do this for us" and Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael jump to the tune. It is absolutely shocking.

If we controlled the land bank, stopped all the speculation and developed a State construction company and started to build on a not-for-profit basis, we could stop and solve the housing crisis. How do we know that? When this country had nothing in the thirties, forties and fifties,

when it was an impoverished virtual third world country, we were able to build housing at affordable levels for working people in this country. How can we not do it now with record budget surplus? We can but the Government is having its policies dictated to it by the people who are profiteering from the housing misery. It is as simple as that.

It has got to stop. The fact the Government's Department of Finance, which the Tánaiste has entered into, has said in a report that on a no policy change basis, we are facing another 15 years of a housing crisis. It is unbelievable and yet Government is not proposing to change policy. It is proposing to continue with the policies and the priorities that have failed to address the housing crisis for 15 years and have caused the housing crisis. The Tánaiste's Department is now telling him the crisis is going to go on for another 15 years. It is unbelievable or it is totally believable if you understand the Government is simply doing what the speculators and profiteers want and has no interest whatsoever in the people rotting in emergency accommodation or in the lives, hopes and aspirations of young people and working people in this country who have been completely locked out of any hope of being able to afford the house prices these guys who are making obscene profits are charging when they control and manipulate the entire housing sector. It has got to stop. The young people and working people of this country cannot continue with this stuff.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: This Government has been an absolute disaster when it comes to building homes. It is by far the biggest failure of this Government over the past while and it is hitting families massively and especially young people hard.

House prices are now eight times the average earnings and the average house price sold last year was €426,000, an amazing figure. The average rent currently for a two-bedroom home is €2,000 and the availability of homes has crashed since pre-Covid levels. Incredibly, we have 16,600 people languishing in homes in this country, with 5,200 of those citizens being children. Some 402 people have died in homelessness just in Dublin in a five-year period. The figure is far higher throughout the country but that figure is not even measured in any other local authority outside of Dublin.

There is a great character in Meath who I knew for years. In his words, "This Government is improving worse." The Government is in reverse in terms of its projections. A total of 30,000 homes were built last year, down from the year before and far lower than the targets. Planning permissions are falling and we predict worsening figures. There are several key reasons for this. The first is this Government's bureaucracy and red tape. Planning, permits, licensing, tenders and judicial reviews are all way too slow and are all delaying homes. I was talking to a builder in Meath just yesterday who has been waiting 20 months for his application that is still stuck in An Coimisiún Pleanála. That is 20 months he has been waiting for that application to come back. The State is slowing the building of homes.

The second biggest issue is missing infrastructure. Uisce Éireann was in with the committee a while ago. I asked when all the gaps in the water infrastructure that are stopping the building of homes would be complete and it said 2050. That is an incredible statistic. The third issue is available zoned land. Builders are not able to find the available zoned land that is serviced to be able to build their homes but there is a big issue of viability here. In the vast majority of counties across the country, many builders are simply not working. They are not building

homes and if they are building homes, they are building extensions and a few one-off houses. They currently cannot make money building homes in this country.

Construction companies are sending their workers abroad for contracts at present. Some 30 of the top 50 companies are sending their workers abroad to work because they cannot make projects viable here. We need €20 billion to build 50,000 homes. There is €9 billion going in for social housing, which is great and Aontú wants to see significantly more, but there is still a gap of €10 billion in the building of homes.

For years, this Government has only had the idea that the private sector should build homes but the truth is the critiques on this side have only had the proposal of building public sector homes. This bird needs two wings to fly. It needs public construction but it also needs private construction. The only way we can do that is to make it viable. Currently, I cannot understand parties holding back in tools and levers, which would make the building of homes more viable.

I used to work on a construction site 25 years ago as a labourer and I remember we had a Donegal builder at the time. Many people used to come in and tell him "This is wrong, that is wrong, this cannot work" but his attitude was "Just build it up." Sometimes I think of this Dáil like a busy place where everybody can think of why things should not be done but let us just get building it. Let us get ambitious and let us release the levers in terms of making sure it is viable.

Deputy Michael Collins: I welcome the decision to cut the VAT on apartments from 13.5% to 9%. It is a practical step and one that will help reduce costs and encourage the construction of homes we so desperately need. Let us be clear: cutting VAT alone will not solve this crisis. I hear speaker after speaker condemning the landlord. Lord God almighty, where do they think we are going to get houses from? It does not appear like that. They are putting down landlords who own one house or two houses. I was speaking to a man in west Cork this morning who said if he could get out of it, he would be gone long ago. He said all the pity is for the tenant and there are new regulations coming in regarding six years and all that. There is nothing for him. They could wreck his apartment and they would not have to pay him. It could take 18 months to get them out. He said there is no protection for the likes of them and that he wishes to get out of there. Why?

There are also other issues in relation to isolation in terms of infrastructure needs. Today we learned that Uisce Éireann missed its leakage targets by a mile. A total of 176 million litres were promised. Only 90 million litres were delivered. Now it faces a €20 million penalty, while €13.6 billion is being sanctioned for water investment over five years. This is reality. We cannot keep pouring billions of euro into utilities without accountability. While families wait for homes, cutting VAT is welcome, but it is not enough. We need joined-up thinking. Housing and infrastructure must go hand in hand. If we fail to connect the dots, we fail the people who are counting on us. I know that.

I meant to bring this issue up last week but unfortunately my question did not get picked. In relation to the people of Adrigole, I was at a public meeting the other day. Fine Gael Senator Noel O'Donovan was there. Fianna Fáil Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan, was there. The three of us knew three weeks in advance that a meeting was coming up. We asked Uisce Éireann to simply give us an honest deadline. There were 14 breakages in the water supply at Adrigole. The crèche and school had to be closed. The businesses had to close down.

People who were doing the Airbnb had to hand money back to customers in the morning because they had no water to shower. Filthy water was coming through the taps. There have been 14 breakages since July and we could get nothing but a generic scandalous answer, the same as I got again this morning after I went back in there. We asked for a meeting with the organisation - three or four people - to find out what the plan is and what it intends to do. Fourteen breakages in any community would not be acceptable anywhere else, but it seems to be acceptable because it is Adrigole. It is a rural community in west Cork. They are the same people as anywhere else and they deserve their water. It is scandalous to think that they are facing a winter of breakages and worse and they are getting a generic answer stating it was a very dry summer in some places and a wet summer in other places. That is nonsensical. It is time for Uisce Éireann to put its hands up in the air and say something is wrong.

The Government has to take responsibility. It cannot be handing a €13 billion budget over to Uisce Éireann with no accountability for it. That is what I am angered by. I ask the Tánaiste to intervene on our behalf and at least meet with the local community in Adrigole and give us the right because we are facing that meeting again in Adrigole in a couple of weeks' time. I will give them the same answer that I gave them the last day - that there is no accountability and I cannot do anything for them. It is just a scandalous situation that we find ourselves in as public representatives.

It is the same situation with Shannon Vale, Dunmanway, Rosscarbery, Ballydehob and Goleen. Uisce Éireann's wastewater treatment plants are pouring raw sewage into the water. My God, every farmer in the country is held accountable for any drip that goes out of his farm. Mother of God, Uisce Éireann and the EPA. The EPA turns a blind eye. It spends every day drawing up reports about agriculture and farmers, but it forgets about the very people it is responsible for. It is failing to address these issues in all these communities and to have a proper wastewater treatment structure in order that we can go back and say to the people that something is going to happen and that they can build more houses, not a token response but a real response.

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Simon Harris): I thank colleagues for their contributions and interventions. First, on the issue raised by Deputy Collins, I will certainly make contact with Irish Water. I have a clear view that State agencies should meet public representatives. There is a thing called democracy. It is important that State agencies engage respectfully, regardless of where people are on the political spectrum, and respect the mandate of people in this House and at local level. Uisce Éireann should meet with the Deputy and the other representatives in relation to that issue. I thank the Deputy for highlighting it.

On this issue, it comes down to whether we accept or do not accept that there is a viability gap when it comes to construction, particularly of apartments, in this country. I heard many references to what my Department estimates or predicts, but here is something else my Department predicts and estimates. It estimates that there are approximately 98,000 properties in this country that have planning permission in place but remain uncommenced. Around 42,000 of them are apartments in Dublin. We have a situation today where there are apartments that could be built but have not been built because they have been deemed unviable. This Government and I refuse to be prisoners to ideology. It is about adopting measures that reduce the viability gap. Contributors and colleagues are right. Deputy Collins is right. This measure

in and of itself is just a measure. It needs to be seen alongside a range of measures that we are taking regarding housing.

Deputy Boyd Barrett had to head off, but he made the point around if there was no policy change. There has been a policy change. It is called the Government's new housing plan. It is called the revised national development plan. It is called the national planning framework. It is called the infrastructure delivery proposals that the Minister, Deputy Chambers, will bring to Cabinet shortly. It is called the budget that was just delivered and the Finance Bill that is working its way through this House. I accept that standing still and hoping that everything is going to work out all right on the night is not going to get us to where we need to get. That is why we are taking decisions that may not be popular with everyone in this House, but I genuinely believe they will result in more apartments being built for our young people, the very people that all of us want to see with a roof over their head and an ability to buy a home again. I say to the young people who watch these debates and hear these debates, this measure is for you. It is not for any developer; it is to make sure that more apartments are built so that you have an opportunity when you go onto websites and search to buy somewhere. When I meet young people across this country, that is what they want. If you want to see a reduction in price, you need to see an increase in supply.

I reject that this is about any sort of correction. This is actually about clarifying and expanding further the provisions the then Minister, Paschal Donohoe, announced. I accept the point that there are different views in relation to these measures, but I also accept the point that colleagues in opposition engage constructively, saying if we are going to go down this road we must make sure that approved housing bodies are included. This is an effort to ensure that happens. There has been much reference to developers, developers, developers. First, developers are not bad people. They are the people who build things, and we need to build things, by the way. None of us in this place build things. Good luck trying to build a house without a developer. It is not just about developers, however. Social housing will benefit from this because approved housing bodies will qualify. Affordable housing will benefit from this because approved housing bodies will qualify. Students will benefit from this because student accommodation will qualify.

I note that there have been lots of suggestions made in relation to when this is commenced and the likes, but ultimately VAT is a consumption tax. It is placed on a product whenever value is added at each stage of the supply chain, from production to the point of sale. If legislation was introduced that sought to apply different rates of VAT to the sale of identical goods at the same point in time on the circumstances or timing of when work on those goods began, we believe it would likely breach the principle of fiscal neutrality. I am advised by my officials and by Revenue that they are satisfied that the principle of fiscal neutrality would not allow for VAT to be applied in the manner that some Deputies might have suggested earlier on and that Deputy Doherty's amendment suggests as well.

There has been a lot of reference to first-time buyers and help to buy. This is a scheme to make sure that those who avail of help to buy can avail of the apartments that are produced as a benefit of the reduced VAT rate. There is a lot of talk about help to buy and what help to buy has done regarding the price of new houses. The Mazars review in 2022 found that there was no definitive evidence that help to buy pushed up the price of new homes. It actually also found that the prices paid for new homes by people who received help to buy relief were

slightly lower than new house prices in the economy and generally, likely because of the price cap. We all know there are many factors that contribute to the rise in home prices, ultimately the lack of supply being the most compelling one. When talking about first-time buyers, I should also say that while we have a long way to go and we are living through a housing emergency, we have this year thankfully seen the highest number of first-time buyers since 2007.

I agree with those, including Deputy Tóibín, who say that there are other serious blockages here, including the infrastructure delivery, the judicial reviews and the planning system. They can expect the Government, through the work of the accelerating infrastructure task force, to come forward with proposals on how to accelerate the delivery of infrastructure, including enabling infrastructure for housing, in the coming weeks. I commend these two resolutions.

Question put: "That amendment No. 1 set down to the motion for Financial Resolution No. 1 is hereby negatived and that the motion for Financial Resolution No. 1 is hereby agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 79; Níl, 56; 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.	
Browne, James.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Colm.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Burke, Peter.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Butler, Mary.	Cronin, Réada.	
Butterly, Paula.	Cullinane, David.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cummins, Jen.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Daly, Pa.	
Cahill, Michael.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Canney, Seán.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Gannon, Gary.	
Chambers, Jack.	Graves, Ann.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Clendennen, John.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Collins, Michael.	Healy, Seamus.	
Connolly, John.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Cooney, Joe.	Kenny, Martin.	
Currie, Emer.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Daly, Martin.	Lawlor, George.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Devlin, Cormac.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Dolan, Albert.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Murphy, Paul.	

Fleming, Sean.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Nash, Ged.	
Grealish, Noel.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Harkin, Marian.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Harris, Simon.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Heneghan, Barry.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Heydon, Martin.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Higgins, Emer.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Lawless, James.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Lawless, Paul.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Maxwell, David.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McCarthy, Noel.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
McCormack, Tony.	Quaide, Liam.	
McEntee, Helen.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Rice, Pádraig.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Sherlock, Marie.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Smith, Duncan.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Stanley, Brian.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ward, Charles.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Ward, Mark.	
Murphy, Michael.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
Neville, Joe.		
O'Brien, Darragh.		
O'Callaghan, Jim.		
O'Connor, James.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Donoghue, Richard.		
O'Donovan, Patrick.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Feargháil, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Tóibín, Peadar.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Cian O'Callaghan.

Question declared carried.

Financial Resolution No. 2: Value Added Tax

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Simon Harris): I move:

(1) THAT section 477C of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (No. 39 of 1997) is amended, in subparagraph (ii) of the definition in subsection (1) of "qualifying residence", by the substitution of "paragraph (c) or (cac), as the case may be, of section 46(1)," for "section 46(1)(c)".

(2) THAT this Resolution shall have effect on and from 26 November 2025.

(3) IT is hereby declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution shall have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1927 (No. 7 of 1927).

Question put: "That the motion on Financial Resolution No. 2 be agreed to".

The Dáil divided: Tá, 79; Níl, 56; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Browne, James.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Burke, Colm.	Carthy, Matt.	
Butler, Mary.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butterly, Paula.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cronin, Réada.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cullinane, David.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Cummins, Jen.	
Cahill, Michael.	Daly, Pa.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Canney, Seán.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Chambers, Jack.	Gannon, Gary.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Graves, Ann.	
Clendennen, John.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Collins, Michael.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Connolly, John.	Healy, Seamus.	
Cooney, Joe.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Currie, Emer.	Kenny, Martin.	

Daly, Martin.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Lawlor, George.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Dolan, Albert.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Feighan, Frankie.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Fleming, Sean.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Foley, Norma.	Murphy, Paul.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Grealish, Noel.	Nash, Ged.	
Harkin, Marian.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Harris, Simon.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Heneghan, Barry.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Heydon, Martin.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Higgins, Emer.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Lahart, John.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Lawless, James.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Lawless, Paul.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Maxwell, David.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McCarthy, Noel.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
McCormack, Tony.	Quaide, Liam.	
McEntee, Helen.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Rice, Pádraig.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Sherlock, Marie.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Smith, Duncan.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Stanley, Brian.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ward, Charles.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Ward, Mark.	
Murphy, Michael.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
Neville, Joe.		
O'Brien, Darragh.		
O'Callaghan, Jim.		
O'Connor, James.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Donoghue, Richard.		
O'Donovan, Patrick.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Feargháil, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		

Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Tóibín, Peadar.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Duncan Smith.

Question declared carried.

Estimates for Public Services 2025: Messages from Select Committees

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Defence and National Security has completed its consideration of the following Supplementary Estimate for Public Services for the service of the year ending on 31 December 2025: Vote 36 - Defence.

The Select Committee on Fisheries and Maritime Affairs has completed its consideration of the following Further Revised Estimate for Public Services for the service of the year ending on 31 December 2025: Vote 29 - Environment, Climate and Communications.

Estimates for Public Services 2025

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I move the following Supplementary Estimates:

Vote 2 — Department of the Taoiseach (Supplementary Estimate)

That a supplementary sum not exceeding €3,389,000 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 Department of the Taoiseach, including certain services administered by the Department and for payment of grants.

Vote 6 — Office of the Chief State Solicitor (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 the salaries and expenses of the Office of the Chief State Solicitor.

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): I welcome the opportunity to present the requirement for Further Revised Estimates 2025 for the Department of the Taoiseach and the Office of the Chief State Solicitor, following on from the Taoiseach attending the Joint and Select Committees on Finance, Public Expenditure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, and Taoiseach on the 2025 Revised Estimates for the Vote group on 9 July this year.

The key function of the Department of the Taoiseach is to support the Taoiseach and the Government, including in implementing the programme for Government, through principled leadership and joined-up governance by: providing impartial high-quality policy advice in the national interest; co-ordinating Government activity to ensure effective, inclusive and timely decision-making; upholding democratic integrity, Civil Service values and public trust at the centre of government; and promoting a strategic and sustainable long-term perspective that safeguards Ireland's future prosperity, cohesion and resilience.

The 2025 gross Revised Estimate for the Department of the Taoiseach is €38.2 million. A total of 67%, or €25.42 million, of the allocation relates to salaries, wages and allowances.

Administration costs for the Department account for 16%. The remaining 17% provides non-pay funding for the National Economic and Social Development Office, the Covid-19 evaluation, citizens' assemblies and independent tribunals of inquiry and commissions of investigation.

A Supplementary Estimate of €3.389 million is requested for Vote 2 - Department of the Taoiseach. The need for the Supplementary Estimate relates to reimbursement to the National Treasury Management Agency, NTMA, in respect of third-party costs relating to the Moriarty tribunal of inquiry and the National Asset Management Agency, NAMA, commission of investigation. Funding provision for tribunals of inquiry and commissions of investigation was discussed with the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation as part of the 2025 Estimates process. Given that substantial allocations that had been made under these subheads in previous years went unspent, the 2025 allocation for tribunals of inquiry and commissions of investigation was agreed on the basis that any additional third-party costs falling due would be funded by way of a Supplementary Estimate.

The resolution to establish the Moriarty tribunal of inquiry was passed by the Oireachtas on 26 September 1997. The tribunal cost falls within the remit of Department of the Taoiseach. However, the tribunal is fully independent of the Department. The Department has no control over the amount or timing of third-party costs. Following completion and publication of the Moriarty tribunal's final report in 2011, a number of significant legal challenges resulted in considerable delays to the completion of the process regarding applications for third-party costs. The legal costs unit of the State Claims Agency has delegated sanction under the National Treasury Management Agency (Amendment) Act 2000 to assess bills of costs when received. Settlements are processed and paid by the legal costs unit and reimbursement is then sought by the NTMA from the Department of the Taoiseach. A total Revised Estimate of €3.31 million was provided for tribunals of inquiry in 2025.

5 o'clock

It is estimated that reimbursement to the NTMA in respect of third-party costs relating to the Moriarty tribunal of inquiry will amount to approximately €6.785 million in 2025, resulting in a funding requirement of €3.475 million.

The NAMA commission of investigation was established in June 2017, following extensive consultation with Oireachtas Members, to investigate the sale by NAMA of its Northern Ireland portfolio, known as Project Eagle. The Taoiseach was the specified Minister under the Commissions of Investigation Act 2004. The commission submitted its final report in April 2025, which dealt with the legal costs payable to the witnesses who appeared before it.

All commissions of investigation over the years covered by this subhead were independent and the Department of the Taoiseach had no control over their investigations or the third-party costs the commission would direct the Taoiseach to pay. The 2025 Revised Estimate allocation under subhead A5, commissions of investigation, is €2 million. It is estimated that reimbursements to the NTMA in respect of third-party costs related to the NAMA commission will amount to €2.764 million in 2025, giving rise to a Supplementary Estimate requirement of €764,000 in subhead A5.

The total additional funding requirement in respect of third-party costs related to the Moriarty tribunal and the NAMA commission of investigation is €4.239 million. However, the Department has identified savings of €850,000 to offset this additional funding requirement. Therefore, a Supplementary Estimate of €3.389 million is required for Vote 2 - Department of the Taoiseach. This will bring the 2025 gross Further Revised Estimate for the Department of the Taoiseach for the full year to €41.569 million.

I will turn now to the request for a technical Supplementary Estimate for the Office of the Chief State Solicitor, CSSO. While the Taoiseach and other officeholders in the Department of the Taoiseach have certain responsibilities to the Oireachtas for administrative matters in the CSSO, the office operates independently of the Department of the Taoiseach. The CSSO is seeking to reallocate funding so that savings on budget lines can be used to offset increased expenditure under a number of subheads. The CSSO is a constituent part of the Attorney General's office and acts as solicitor to Ireland, the Attorney General and Departments and offices. The CSSO's mission is to provide the highest standard of professional legal services to the Government, Departments and offices as economically and efficiently as possible and to support adherence to the rule of law.

The overall level of counsel fees is entirely demand-led and they are only paid following a robust, multilayered process which assesses each fee note individually to ascertain the correct fee payable for the work involved. The overall level of case fee notes is entirely demand-led and depends not only on the number of cases but also on the complexity of such cases in a given year. The technical Supplementary Estimate is requested to allocate funding of €1.264 million to cover additional expenditure under four subheads in the CSSO Vote: subhead A2, administration non-pay; subhead A3, external legal services; subhead A4, fees to counsel; and subhead A5, general law expenses.

Subhead A2, administration non-pay, was allocated a provision of €4.464 million in the 2025 Revised Estimates. An additional €232,000 is sought under this subhead. Inflationary increases, combined with delayed receipt of certain invoices at the end of 2024 now falling due in 2025, gave rise to the increased expenditure under this subhead.

An additional allocation of €62,000 is required to cover projected total spend of €312,000 on external legal services in 2025. This subhead provides for costs associated with engaging local State solicitors to act on behalf of the CSSO in the Circuit Courts and occasionally in the District Courts outside of Dublin. This increased expenditure arose due to an increase in the level of case activity in the work handled by local State solicitors, which varies from time to time.

An allocation of €17 million was made under subhead A4 in respect of fees for counsel in 2025. However, the current position shows that after the fees requested by counsel undergo a

value-for-money assessment, it is estimated total fees to counsel in 2025 will be €17.801 million, leaving a shortfall of €801,000 in this subhead. These are primarily fees payable to external counsel following the delivery of the relevant legal service, where they represent Departments and offices in litigation before the Irish courts, other tribunals and the Court of Justice of the European Union. The overall level of these fees is, to a large extent, demand-led and dependent on the level of activity in the courts at any time and on the complexity of the given cases. It is therefore difficult to forecast the level of fees each year.

A provision of €630,000 was made in the 2025 CSSO Revised Estimates for general law expenses, which are demand-led and depend on the types of cases being taken by and against the State. It is estimated that expenditure on general law expenses will be approximately €800,000 in 2025, which gives rise to a requirement for an additional allocation of €170,000 under this subhead.

The CSSO has identified savings under subhead A1, administration pay and excess appropriations-in-aid, which will offset the total estimated €1.264 million expenditure shortfall in Vote 6. To allow the Oireachtas to vote on the technical Supplementary Estimate, an additional €1,000 must be requested on the CSSO's 2025 Revised Estimate, bringing the 2025 gross Further Revised Estimate for the CSSO to €54.55 million. I commend the motion to the House.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is unique that we are here in the Dáil dealing with Estimates for the Department of the Taoiseach when the Taoiseach is a missing person in this debate. These Estimates always come before the committee that oversees and holds the Department of An Taoiseach accountable, which is the committee on finance, public expenditure and the Taoiseach. The Taoiseach only presents himself before the committee on rare occasions. It has to be noted that the Taoiseach has refused on a number of occasions to come before the committee. The Minister of State said she offered to attend in his stead, but the committee made it clear that it wanted the Taoiseach in to discuss the Estimates of his Department, for which he is accountable. On numerous occasions, the committee offered to be flexible in relation to the Taoiseach's diary. This is one of the functions of the Taoiseach in relation to his Department.

It is understandable, given what the Minister of State has outlined, because these Estimates only contain one significant change, and it relates to the gift that keeps on giving - the Moriarty tribunal. Since the last time we dealt with the Estimates, we now have, pulling the strings of Government, the star of the show of the Moriarty tribunal, the one and only Deputy Lowry, who, as we know, has been found by that same tribunal to be involved in corrupt practices in relation to his time as a Minister.

The Estimates do not relate to a small amount of money but to millions of euro in additional costs that have to be paid out as a result of that tribunal. When we boil it all down, it is as a result of the actions of Deputy Lowry, who is now the glue that keeps the Government in place. He is the person who ensured that the Taoiseach was appointed to the position he is in. I am sure the Taoiseach did not want to sit across from members of the finance committee having to answer questions, which he has now evaded and avoided by not coming before the committee to tease out the ongoing issues in relation to the Moriarty tribunal and its ongoing costs, and to find out where this ends. We know from some public discourse, for example, that the legal

case has been settled in relation to Deputy Lowry and his costs, who claimed in the region of €2.8 million. I do not know if that is the final line under the amount. We understand from media reports that Denis O'Brien has also received his costs of €5.8 million. I am not sure if there are further costs or if there is anything in dispute.

The Taoiseach has gone into hiding on this matter. It is little wonder that even his own backbenchers are biting at his heels due to his non-attendance at meetings when he is neglecting one of the key functions of his duties, that is, to present Estimates. Here, he is seeking millions of euro extra from the Houses of the Oireachtas to continue to pay out for a tribunal that had to investigate the king-maker of his own Government. He is in dereliction of his duties in this regard. In his absence, I ask what the running bill is because this is probably not even the final bill at this stage. Where are we now in relation to the costs of the Moriarty tribunal? How much has Deputy Lowry saddled the State with? *The Irish Times* reported, maybe earlier this year, that the cost was €83 million. Now we are looking at Estimates here of an extra €3.4 million. There is some - €3 million - already budgeted. Are we now up at €90 million? Are we in the ballpark of the original figure, speculated 15 years ago, that this could even run as far as €100 million? These are the questions the Taoiseach should be answering, if he was not running scared of these issues. He should be before the finance committee tomorrow, the next day or the day after that. We have offered flexibility in relation to him presenting.

I am a passionate advocate for the committee system and I believe the committees should flex their muscles more. It is not appropriate, regardless of any precedent going back 15 years, for a Chief Whip to step in for the Taoiseach. The Taoiseach should present himself before the committee. Ministers should present themselves before the committee. Junior Ministers who have no responsibility for the Estimates that are before a committee should not be standing in for the Taoiseach or, indeed, any other Minister. I have had the privilege in the past of dealing with Estimates with the former taoisigh, Enda Kenny and Leo Varadkar, and others. The Taoiseach should have been here to deal with these issues, despite the fact that he might be a wee bit red in the face given that core issue here, in terms of the millions of euro extra that is required, is a result of the actions of the person who put him on the Taoiseach's seat in the first instance.

Deputy Ged Nash: I intend to focus my contribution on asking some questions about the statement the Minister of State made outlining this proposition and, in general terms, what the Supplementary Estimates are designed to support.

A total Revised Estimate of €3.31 million was provided for tribunals of inquiry in 2025. We are talking about third-party costs for the Moriarty tribunal. The updated Estimate is €6.785 million in 2025 for third-party costs involving the Moriarty tribunal. That is a funding requirement now that is being requested of this House, a Supplementary Estimate of €3.475 million.

There is a relatively limited amount of information contained in the Minister of State's proposal. Given that we talking about essentially doubling the amount of money required to support third-party costs arising from the Moriarty tribunal of inquiry this year alone, it would be useful if she could place on the record, in terms of the information that she has available, precisely who will this be paid to. We are required to drill down into the facts here, given the relative quantum of the moneys that the Minister of State is asking the House to sanction.

Constitutionally, it is our role, as the Legislature, to sanction expenditure based on the proposals brought to us by the Executive. I the Minister of State to put on the record of the House as much detail as she possibly can, and provide at least a breakdown, not in global terms but in the most precise terms she can with the information she has available. If it is the case that the Minister of State is not in a position to do that today, she could inform us, the Opposition finance spokespersons, and members of the relevant line committee of those details when she has them available to her, if she does not have them today.

The Minister of State then spoke about the Project Eagle element of the NAMA commission of investigation. She articulate that "the Department has identified savings of €850,000 to offset this additional funding requirement", that is, the additional Supplementary Estimate to support the NAMA commission of investigation. I ask her to elaborate on where those savings are derived from.

I move on to Vote 6 - Office of the Chief State Solicitor. It is unusual, to say the least. I draw the Minister of State's attention to subhead A4, fees to counsel. In her contribution, the Minister of State referred to value-for-money assessments and stated that "the current position shows that after the fees requested by counsel undergo a value-for-money assessment, it is estimated total fees to counsel in 2025 will be €17.801 million, leaving a shortfall of €801,000 in this subhead." It is quite extraordinary that after a value-for-money assessment, which usually leads to cost savings in the normal run of events, we are, in fact, saddled with a larger bill and a requirement to approve a Supplementary Estimate. I ask the Minister of State to go into some detail on how, after a value-for-money assessment, we find ourselves having to pay out more. Usually, it is the case that savings are identified when a value-for-money assessment takes place.

I accept as fact the Minister of State's point that these are demand-led situations. We absolutely understand that. The Minister of State stated, with regard to subhead A5, that the Chief State Solicitor's office had identified savings under subhead A1, administration pay and excess appropriations-in-aid, which will offset the total estimated €1.264 million expenditure shortfall in Vote 6. I ask her to elaborate on where those savings have accrued.

Returning to the points related to the Moriarty tribunal of inquiry, it is incredible, almost 30 years since that tribunal first sat and almost 15 years since it reported, that we are still seeing rolling costs being accrued at the expense of the taxpayer. Thirty years on, the cumulative total now is climbing close to €100 million. Thirty years on, and a year on from the formation of this Government and many years on from the commitment to revise, review, renew and update ethics legislation, we still do not have it. There is no updated ethics legislation whatsoever. We cannot be surprised at that given that Michael Lowry has been at the heart of the formation of this Government. That is a stain on the reputation of this Government in many respects. One way the Government could rescue its reputation would be to make a commitment that the laws that were introduced a number of years ago need to be modernised. We all accept that they need to be modernised and updated and that many of the lessons learned from the Moriarty tribunal need to be incorporated into the new legislative suite of proposals. We have not seen those proposals yet. They have not been published by successive Ministers for public expenditure and reform. One way this Government can recommit to accountability and transparency in public life would be to publish that legislation, have it debated on the floor of this Chamber and have it enacted as soon as possible.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: This is quite extraordinary. A tribunal was set up in 1997 and millions of euro of public money is going in to paying expenses related to that tribunal in this Revised Estimate this year. The person responsible for answering questions to the Oireachtas about this, the Taoiseach, refused to come to the finance committee to answer questions. He did refuse, because we wrote to him and we said we would accommodate him at any time or date that suits him. The Taoiseach has not come to our committee. He has declined to come. With a few hours' notice, these Estimates have come in here without being discussed at the committee and without us having the opportunity to ask questions, as we should have been able to do and as we wanted to because we want to do our job in scrutinising them. These Estimates should be getting discussed at the committee with the Taoiseach, so that when we ask for the detailed breakdown as to what is happening here, he should be able to answer in a back-and-forth exchange. That is the normal process on Estimates and Revised Estimates, and which is done with all the other Revised Estimates but is not being done here. That is completely wrong. The Taoiseach should come to the committee to answer our questions on this. The Taoiseach's absence today, his not coming to committee today and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, bringing them forward today with a few hours' notice without the Taoiseach answering questions is utterly unacceptable. It is all the more unacceptable when we look at what is going on here with millions of euro still going to pay for the expenses of the Moriarty tribunal almost 30 years after it was set up. That is extraordinary and it is extraordinary that the Taoiseach is evading accountability on it. This is exactly what is happening. He is evading accountability. We wanted him at our committee to answer questions on this. We asked him to come. We said we would accommodate him at any time or date that suited him. I know he is a busy man but surely he should be able to schedule a time and date to come into the committee to answer questions on this. He has declined to do so. It is utterly unacceptable and all the more so when this Government is being propped up by Deputy Michael Lowry and, of course, there would not be a Moriarty tribunal were it not for the findings that were made against him. Evading accountability on that is utterly unacceptable.

There is a fundamental question here. Where are the millions of euro of additional funding for the Moriarty tribunal going? We should not be in the Dáil Chamber without this having been trashed out properly with proper information at the committee and with the Taoiseach present. Where is the detailed breakdown of that? Why has it not been provided to the committee? Why has the Taoiseach not come in to answer questions? Will that detailed breakdown be provided at this stage? Why were we only given a few hours' notice of this? Why was it just sprung today? If this is the Government's way of doing business, and if it thinks this is an acceptable way of doing business, why did the Government not give us notice last week at the Business Committee? Why was it just sprung at the very last minute? The Government is trying to pull a fast one here by evading accountability. That is what the Government is doing. There is a much better way of doing this. There is an established way of doing the Estimates, which all the other Revised Estimates go through, which is that the line Minister - in this case, the Taoiseach - comes to the committee. That is not happening on this occasion. It is not acceptable. It is pulling a fast one and we are calling the Government out on it.

Deputy Mary Butler: Does the Deputy want to discuss the Estimates?

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Yes, and the Taoiseach should have come to the committee to do that. I have asked the Minister of State my questions on it and I want answers on it.

Deputy Michael Collins: Today we are once again discussing the legacy of the Moriarty tribunal, a process that began in 1997 and officially concluded in 2011, yet continues to cost the taxpayer millions. The latest revelation is an additional €3.5 million payment to settle outstanding legal costs. This comes on top of over €71 million already spent with previous settlements, such as €5.8 million earlier this year. This is not just about historical inquiries; it is about accountability and efficiency in how public money is managed. When a tribunal has ended over a decade ago but its financial impact still grows we must ask, "Where is the oversight and where is the transparency?". That is why Independent Ireland is calling for the creation of a Department of efficiency and transparency, something very few in this House have supported. I would like to know why. It would be a dedicated body to monitor public spending, ensure timely resolution of legal disputes and prevent runaway costs in future inquiries. Such a Department would set clear timelines, enforce cost controls, and publish real-time updates for the public.

Today we learned Uisce Éireann, another Government body, has missed its leakage targets by a mile. A target of 176 million litres was promised but only 20 million litres was delivered. Now Uisce Éireann faces a €20 million penalty while €13.6 billion is being sanctioned for water investment over five years. This is another example of oversight matters. It is not acceptable in this island that this carry on is happening when others are suffering and we are trying to deliver services and infrastructure.

To put it in perspective, the €71 million already spent on the Moriarty tribunal could have funded over 350 new social housing units, given that the average cost of building a social home is approximately €200,000 per unit. Imagine the impact that would have on struggling families with housing insecurity. Our citizens deserve confidence that every euro is spent wisely. Endless delays, missed targets and ballooning costs undermine trust in this Government.

We keep asking for an oversight body on expenditure. To me it is a no-brainer but for some reason the Government does not seem to want to support a Department of efficiency and transparency. This is an opportunity for the Government to stand up and say, "Okay, this might deliver and it might deliver savings to the State and savings to the taxpayer, the hard working people". At the end of the day, all these bills and overruns happen but somebody must pay and that is the hard working taxpayer who gets up in the morning, the man or the woman who is trying to go to work at 5 a.m., 6 a.m., or 7 a.m. This is where their money is being wasted. It is no longer acceptable. We are not talking about €50,000; we are talking about hundreds of millions of euro.

Deputy Paul Lawless: We have serious issues in relation to cost overruns in this country. Inquiries, commissions of investigation and tribunals have cost the taxpayer millions of euro. The fact the Taoiseach is not here this evening is reflective of that. He is the line Minister in relation to this and he should be here to answer questions. Millions of euro are pumped into this system and yet so many of these inquiries fail to deliver justice. The Moriarty tribunal was established in the late 1990s, the final report was published in 2011 and the cost is in the region of €100 million but what is the outcome? It is zero accountability and zero convictions. Almost 30 years later, and despite the final report being published over a decade ago, the Irish taxpayer

is still paying for it. What is going on? That is why the Taoiseach should be here, namely, to answer questions in relation to it. Sending in junior Ministers without responsibility in here is simply not good enough.

This money could be spent on so many better things, such as housing, health, infrastructure, Irish Water and so on. It could be spent on special needs. I know a family in Mayo struggling to find a school for their child because the schools are oversubscribed at the moment. There are so many issues in the country and it seems this Government just does not want to address value for money for the taxpayer. That is hugely regrettable. Instead, the Government appears to be happy to continue to pump millions into a black hole.

This inquiry needs to be wound up. We need to get to the end of this inquiry and €100 million on one inquiry is simply unacceptable. We want to see real accountability in relation to this and reform of tribunals and commissions of inquiry. The first step would be the Taoiseach coming in here to answer questions in relation to it.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I thank An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, Deputy Quaide, for his forbearance and allowing me to speak. I am very disappointed the Taoiseach is not here because this is a huge Vote and a huge amount of funding. There are many different aspects to it, in particular it deals with NAMA and Project Eagle, as was mentioned. There is also funding for the Moriarty tribunal, for which we are paying 30 years later. Some €850 million were supposed to be saved in one area with NAMA and yet we fail to see where those savings were teased out. There are extra costs in other sections. There is no rhyme nor reason to them. I am very disappointed, in that the Taoiseach was purportedly asked to come to the committee on finance to discuss this. After all, it is his Estimate, his Vote and his money. It should be dealt with.

On a number of occasions in this House, I have asked questions about NAMA as did former Deputy, Michael McGrath, in his time as finance spokesperson for the Minister of State's party. On two previous occasions in this House, I raised serious matters relating to the unauthorised use of Mr. John Fraher's personal tax number by NAMA and the Poppyfield Consortium partnership - VAT No. 9540943A - since the dissolution of the partnership on 3 December 2013. That is a most serious thing to happen. This man has been trading in Clonmel for decades. He got into financial difficulties. He went into bankruptcy and moved to England. His tax number continued to be used. I put on the record that Mr. George Maloney, trustee in bankruptcy, appointed at the express request of NAMA, fraudulently used Mr. John Fraher's tax number in a dissolved partnership over a protracted number of years, related to Clonmel Park Hotel. Things are going on in NAMA and have gone on in NAMA, and history will not be kind to it. However, it will be too late for the taxpayers who are being bled dry here. It is shocking. This is supported by annual Revenue returns submitted by the dissolved partnership and knowingly false returns by NAMA in 2015. It is clearly shocking stuff. The former chairman, Frank Daly, chief executive, Brendan McDonagh, and head of legal, Alan Stewart, are all aware of the above and all are or were NAMA employees. What is going here, that this could go on? It was questioned by the finance spokesman of the Minister of State's party when he was in opposition. He is now a Commissioner. George Maloney now sits on the regulatory decisions unit of the Central Bank. His profile on the Central Bank website includes that he is included on the current insolvency and enforcement panels for NAMA and is a member of the Revenue Commissioners panel for expert witness and complex bank insolvency arrangements. I

question it, my goodness. This is a white-collar crime, and I am calling for all disclosure on every transaction relating to Clonmel Park Hotel and the dissolved partnership after 13 December 2013. They are all fraudulent.

How can we have a debate here this evening? The presence of the Taoiseach is vital. Okay, maybe he has to be wherever he is. I have said in the past that he wants to be anywhere bar this Dáil, whether it is Ukraine, the WEF, the World Bank or the COP. He needs to cop on and know that his responsibility is to this House and to the people of Ireland. I met a person at a function in Buswells Hotel earlier who said that he was doing great duties all over the world. His profound and solemn duty under the Constitution is to be here. This has to be rooted out here. The corporate and white-collar crime is disgusting. It is John Fraher, a Clonmel businessman. His tax number could be used for several years when he was out of the country and had ceased trading. NAMA knows this. The Revenue knows this. The Department of Finance knows this. Who is going to deal with it? I do not expect the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, to deal with it. I do not expect that if the Taoiseach were here today, he would deal with it. It is going on for too long. Questions were asked by the former finance spokesman for Fianna Fáil, now Commissioner, when he questioned this on behalf of Mr. Fraher. How is that a businessman from Ireland was abroad and bankrupt and trying to trade abroad and his tax number was being used here? Millions of euro were shovelled through his tax number and tax returns, falsely. How can that stand up in any kangaroo or banana republic if we let that go on? We vote all this money for NAMA here. We vote all this money for all the different overspends and underspends that pass through with glib reference to what we should be doing. It is totally unacceptable. I thank the Chair for allowing me the time this evening.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I have raised it a couple of times in the past couple of weeks. How do we think as a Government we can keep paying €1.2 billion for asylum seekers or refugees or whatever they are in this country? We are under savage pressure for services in every regard. I am asking that question. How long can the country stand up to this? There are taxpayers out in the morning and late at night working and trying to survive and they are taxed to the hilt. That is the question I am asking. I hope someone will address it for me. It is a serious problem. We need to come to grips with it because we must see after our own people too.

Deputy Shay Brennan: I appreciate the opportunity to speak on the Supplementary Estimates before the House today for the Department of Taoiseach and the Office of the Chief State Solicitor. I understand that these proposals are not about allocating new funds for fresh initiatives or discretionary spending. Instead, they represent essential expenditures that arise from legal obligations. These obligations come from decisions taken by independent bodies that operate beyond the direct control or influence of the Government. Specifically, the Supplementary Estimate for Vote 2 amounts to just shy of €3.4 million and is required to reimburse the National Treasury Management Agency for third party costs arising from tribunals of inquiry and the NAMA commission of investigation. These sums reflect assessments made independently and the Government must meet these costs in full. Additionally, a technical adjustment of €1,000 is sought for Vote 6, the Office of the Chief State Solicitor. I am satisfied that this technical provision allows that office to work with its budget lines to effectively manage surpluses and deficits.

The Department of the Taoiseach plays a critical role in supporting the Taoiseach and the Government. It ensures co-ordinated Government activity, delivers impartial policy advice and oversees tribunals and commissions of investigation. It provides transparency and accountability, which are vital to maintaining public trust. Equally important is that these tribunals and commissions function independently of Government, to preserve their integrity and their credibility. Independence, however, means the Department cannot predict or control when needed costs will arise, or indeed their magnitude. These are statutory obligations that must be honoured. They are laid out under the Commissions of Investigation Act and backed by resolutions of this House. Failure to fund these costs would undermine our system of inquiries. I believe supporting these Supplementary Estimates is essential to uphold the integrity of our investigative process, ensure the State meets its legal commitments and to maintaining public confidence and the administration of justice.

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank the Deputies for their contributions on the Supplementary Estimates for Votes 2 and 6, and for setting aside the time for this motion, given the time-sensitive nature of the Supplementary Estimates process. I will just clear up a few points. Last Thursday afternoon, in my diary, I was to attend the finance committee on behalf of the Taoiseach in relation to these Supplementary Estimates. At approximately 12 noon on Thursday, after our Business Committee meeting, I was informed that I was no longer required to attend by the committee. Those are the facts.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: No, those are not facts.

Deputy Mary Butler: Excuse me, this is not questions and answers.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister of State cannot invent her own facts.

Deputy Mary Butler: Excuse me, this is not questions and answers.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The committee never agreed to a substitute to appear on behalf of the Taoiseach.

Deputy Mary Butler: A Chathaoirligh, please chair the meeting.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: That is exactly correct.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is important because the Minister of State is not on the committee.

Deputy Mary Butler: Please chair the meeting.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: No matter what arrangement she and the Taoiseach had, that is not the fact.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Déanfaidh sé sin cúis.

Deputy Mary Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. The arrangement was made with my private secretary and the clerk of the committee. I am only speaking the facts.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: It was never made by the committee.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: No, it was never made by the committee.

Deputy Mary Butler: I was told-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is wrong to draw a civil servant into this argument.

Deputy Mary Butler: The Deputy might get away with shouting at people all of his life, but I am here to answer.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister of State is drawing a staff member of this House into this issue

Deputy Mary Butler: No, I am not.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Is this a point of order?

Deputy Pearse Doherty: On a point of order, will the Minister of State clarify whether there was ever an agreement with the finance committee to have her in before it?

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: There was never any decision.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: On two occasions the committee unanimously said-----

Deputy Mary Butler: This is not a point of order, a Chathaoirligh.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----that it would facilitate the Taoiseach at whatever time he wanted with regard to his attendance.

Deputy Mary Butler: A Chathaoirligh, please chair the meeting. This is not a point of order. I know the rules of this House.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Is the Minister of State going to give clarity or are we just moving on?

Deputy Mary Butler: If they want me to answer I will answer, or they can talk down the clock, whichever they require.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Let the Minister of State answer.

Deputy Mary Butler: I have heard what Deputy Doherty has said. He can try to undermine me all he likes, saying that he does not want a junior Minister standing opposite him. I am the Government Chief Whip at the Department of the Taoiseach. I am also Minister of State at the Department of Health with responsibility for mental health and I attend Cabinet. I am well qualified to stand here. Deputy Doherty might not recognise that sitting in opposition but I am proud of what I am and who I have become as Chief Whip of this Government. That is the first point.

The second point, which none of the Deputies opposite wants to acknowledge, is that this is time sensitive and this Vote has to happen by 3 December, next week. It is my job to make sure the Votes are taken.

It is too easy to comment that the Taoiseach will not come and present here. He simply did not have the time to come before the committee.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: In three weeks.

Deputy Mary Butler: There is precedent for this, as I said today on the Order of Business. I have been ten years in this House and for ten years, I have done Estimates, including four years as Chair of the Oireachtas Committee on Business, Enterprise and Innovation from 2016 to 2020. I have done Supplementary Estimates for the past six years, including last Wednesday in relation to health. I know what Estimates are and I know how they work. I also know there is precedent for the Chief Whip to take Estimates. It has happened before. I repeat that in 2004 the Minister of State, Mary Hanafin, attended select committee; Deputy Jack Chambers, who was Minister of State at the time, took Director of Public Prosecutions Supplementary Estimates on 30 November 2022; and on Thursday, 23 November 2023, the Chief Whip, Deputy Naughton, took the DPP Supplementary Estimates and a technical Supplementary Estimate for the Department because the Taoiseach was not available. The whole purpose of the meeting here today-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Three occasions in 21 years.

Deputy Mary Butler: No, those are just three examples I came with. I can find more if the Deputy likes. I have no problem looking back on things. The most important thing we should be here discussing are the Estimates, and many of the Deputies opposite chose not to discuss them.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: We asked how much the tribunal would cost.

Deputy Mary Butler: The situation is very clear. The Supplementary Estimate for Vote 6 is purely technical in nature. The CSSO does not require additional funding in 2025; it just needs the permission of the House to move funding within its Vote.

The Supplementary Estimate for Vote 2 is substantive but unavoidable. It arises solely due to the payment of additional third party costs related to the Moriarty tribunal of inquiry and the

National Asset Management Agency commission of investigation. I must stress again - it does not matter how many times I say it - that the Moriarty tribunal of inquiry and the NAMA commission of investigation are fully independent of the Department of the Taoiseach, and the Department has no role in determining the amount or timing of any third party costs.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: But the Department can tell us the running cost. Please.

Deputy Mary Butler: I must also stress that when finalising the 2025 Revised Estimate for the Department of the Taoiseach, the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation agreed that any additional third party cost falling due in 2025 would be funded by way of a Supplementary Estimate. It is important to note that the Department of the Taoiseach is otherwise within budget for 2025 and has managed to identify savings of €850,000 within its Vote to offset some of the additional third party costs that have arisen in 2025. My preference was to attend at committee, not to be here on the floor of the Dáil, to set out the case for the Supplementary Estimates for Votes 2 and 6, and I had set time aside last Thursday.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Is the Minister of State going to answer any questions?

Deputy Mary Butler: I regret that this did not prove possible. In particular, as I said, there is precedent for the Chief Whip-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: What is the total cost of the tribunal? I think three people have asked the Minister of State that question.

Deputy Mary Butler: -----presenting requirements for Supplementary Estimates for Votes in the Vote group of the Department of the Taoiseach.

Deputy Ged Nash: Whom is the money going to?

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: What is the detailed breakdown?

Deputy Pearse Doherty: What is the total cost of the-----

Deputy Mary Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: On a point of order, three Members have asked what the total running cost of the tribunal is now. The Minister of State is here to take Estimates. It is not just about the money that is there; it is also about the actions and the objectives that are met. Can she please tell us, what is the total cost of the Moriarty tribunal now to date, given the Estimates she is asking the House to agree? That is a fair question, and I imagine she would accept that.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: It is a fair question. We asked for a detailed breakdown.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): The problem is that we do not have a Q and A.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: It is a fair question. I asked for a detailed breakdown. This is millions in public money. Deputy Nash and I asked a fair question. Where is the detailed breakdown?

Deputy Mary Butler: Shall I respond?

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Chair?

Deputy Mary Butler: Shall I respond?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Okay.

Deputy Mary Butler: As regards the Moriarty tribunal, established in 1997, the spend to date is €77.948 million. I would have been quite happy to answer any questions if I was afforded the time to do so but the Deputies opposite chose not to do so. They chose to attack me and the Taoiseach.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The Minister of State has failed to answer the question again.

Deputy Ged Nash: I acknowledge that the Minister of State may not have the information available, or maybe she was not prepared to put it on the record today. If, however, it is the case that she has that information, which she will have, or at least the NTMA will, can the Minister of State forward the information in writing to each finance spokesperson and members of the committee to let them know, to inform us, as to precisely what the breakdown of the additional Supplementary Estimate will go towards?

Deputy Mary Butler: I am sure all the paperwork has been circulated.

Deputy Ged Nash: It has not, no.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: No, it has not.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: No.

Deputy Ged Nash: We were told this morning that this Supplementary Estimate would be brought in. This is no way to run a railroad anyway.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Will it be possible-----

Deputy Ged Nash: It is bloody ridiculous.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): -----to get that information to the relevant spokespeople and the committee?

Deputy Mary Butler: I was not aware that they had not got the briefs. I would have assumed-----

Deputy Ged Nash: No, it is not the briefs. We were informed only this morning, in fact, that this Supplementary Estimate, this resolution, would be introduced.

Deputy Mary Butler: Yes, because it is time sensitive. I was prepared to go in last Thursday afternoon and I was informed-----

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: So the Minister of State knew on Thursday and could have told us on Thursday.

Deputy Mary Butler: No, I did not. I was prepared to go in last Thursday afternoon and I was told around lunchtime on Thursday that the meeting was no longer going ahead and that the committee did not wish the Chief Whip to attend.

Deputy Ged Nash: Do not-----

Deputy Mary Butler: That is what I was told.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Who told us on Thursday that-----

Deputy Mary Butler: I was not aware of that during the committee.

Deputy Ged Nash: Notwithstanding-----

Deputy Mary Butler: A Chathaoirligh, the debate has concluded.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Bomaite amháin.

Deputy Ged Nash: Notwithstanding that that is the Minister of State's position-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Yes, but a promise has been-----

Deputy Ged Nash: -----can she communicate the details that we require in writing through the NTMA to us?

Deputy Mary Butler: The debate has concluded.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): I understand the debate has concluded, Minister, but you had already said earlier that the information will be sent.

Deputy Mary Butler: The information that goes to any committee in relation to Estimates will be circulated.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Okay.

Deputy Ged Nash: But, based on the fact and the nature and the way in which this information has been presented is unsatisfactory-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): We are not going to be able to get an answer beyond that which has been given.

Deputy Ged Nash: -----I would imagine that if the Minister of State were prepared to meet us halfway, acknowledging that this was rushed and-----

Deputy Mary Butler: It was not rushed; it was debated on the floor of the Dáil.

Deputy Ged Nash: I understand the Minister of State's defence of her own position. That is fine.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Deputy Nash, the problem is that we are not in a select committee. We do not have the power to deal with this here. There is obviously a complaint and-----

Deputy Ged Nash: I would imagine, as a courtesy, that the Minister of State would ask the NTMA to write to us to provide us with the information we require.

Deputy Mary Butler: This is the third time this has been dealt with this way this year - three committees.

Deputy Ged Nash: It is basic, and it is the job of this House to hold the Executive to account. It is our job, fundamentally, constitutionally, to approve expenditure.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): I understand. We have no facility-----

Deputy Ged Nash: It is as simple as that.

Deputy Mary Butler: A Chathaoirligh-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Could everybody be quiet for one minute? We have no facility to deal with this particular issue here.

Deputy Mary Butler: Correct.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): The Deputies asked the Minister of State a question; the Minister of State has given her answer. If there are issues and grievances in relation to that, they will have to be brought up at another date and in the correct setting.

Deputy Ged Nash: It is contemptuous.

Votes put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 5.50 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 5.55 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 5.50 p.m. and resumed at 5.55 p.m.

Health Insurance (Amendment) Bill 2025: Second Stage

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am pleased to have this opportunity to speak on the Second Stage of the Health Insurance (Amendment) Bill 2025, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill. This is an annual, technical Bill with eight sections, focused on the specific area of health insurance. It also seeks to make a change to the term of appointment of the chairperson of the Health Insurance Authority.

Today, 46% of the population, 2.54 million people, hold private health insurance. This represents an annual premium income of about €3.8 billion. Health insurance in Ireland is built on four key principles, and I will briefly outline each of them. The first is open enrolment. This means that anyone can buy a health insurance policy at any time, regardless of age, health status or medical history. Insurers cannot refuse cover because someone is older or has an illness. The second is lifetime cover. Once people have health insurance, they can keep it for life provided they pay their premiums. Insurers cannot cancel a policy because the person becomes sick or make claims. The third is minimum benefit. Every policy must include a basic level of cover set by law. This ensures that all customers receive a minimum standard of benefits. The final principle is community rating. Everyone pays the same price for the same plan, regardless of age or health. Insurers cannot charge more because someone is older or has a medical condition. These principles are the foundation of fairness in our health insurance system.

What is the risk equalisation scheme? The risk equalisation scheme is the key mechanism that keeps our health insurance market fair and sustainable. In a community-rated market, everyone pays the same price for the same policy, regardless of age or health. However, older and sicker people cost more to insure. Without the support of the risk equalisation scheme, insurers with more high-risk customers would face higher costs and premiums could rise. The risk equalisation scheme helps to resolve this. It works by redistributing funds between insurers. Insurers which cover older and sicker members receive credits to offset their higher

costs. These credits are funded by stamp duty paid by the insurer for each health insurance policy it issues. The Revenue Commissioners collect the stamp duty and transfer it to the risk equalisation fund, which is managed by the Health Insurance Authority.

What are risk equalisation credits? There are three types of credits in the risk equalisation scheme. The first is age-related credits. These are payments to insurers to help cover the higher cost of insuring older customers. Older people generally use more healthcare services, so their claims cost more. Without these credits, insurers with more members who are older would face higher costs and would likely pass these on to their members in higher premiums. The second is hospital utilisation credits. These credits compensate insurers when their members use hospital services, either for overnight stays or day cases. They help spread the cost of hospital care across the market. The third is high-cost claims credits. These credits are for very expensive claims. If a claim goes above €50,000 in a year, part of that cost is covered by the risk equalisation fund. This protects insurers from the impact of extremely high claims and keeps premiums stable. The Bill makes changes to all three risk equalisation credits. The proportion of age-related credits will decrease slightly while health-related credits will increase by the same amount. Age is not always an indicator of bad health, so this change better aligns credits with actual health status.

In terms of stamp duty rates, health insurance policies fall into two categories: advanced and non-advanced. Non-advanced contracts mainly cover treatment in public hospitals. They provide a more basic level of cover and are generally less expensive. Advanced contracts, on the other hand, offer a higher level of cover, including access to private hospitals and additional benefits. These plans cost more because they provide greater choice and flexibility for customers.

There are four different rates of stamp duty depending on whether the policy is advanced or non-advanced and whether the customer is an adult or a child.

6 o'clock

The rates for non-advanced policies and children are lower, reflecting lower levels of claims. Stamp duty is a ring-fenced contribution to the risk equalisation fund and supports the credits to enable fairness and sustainability in the private health insurance market.

Each year, credits and stamp duties are updated to reflect changes in claims and costs. Medical inflation and private hospital costs are driving claims higher. Medical inflation simply means the cost of healthcare is rising every year. Hospitals charge more for procedures. New treatments and technologies are more expensive and wages and operating costs continue to increase. Even if the number of claims stays the same, the cost of those claims goes up. This is one of the main reasons risk equalisation credits and stamp duties need to increase. The annual changes help to keep the system fair and sustainable. If the Government does not adjust the stamp duty rates every year, the scheme could run out of money. This could mean even higher increases to stamp duty later on or the Government having to step in to fund the scheme directly.

In terms of public support, there is strong public support for community rating in private health insurance. The Health Insurance Authority carried out a survey this year that showed that 64% of those surveyed agreed that health insurance prices should not depend on an

individual's health condition and 72% agreed older people should not pay more for their health insurance.

I will now briefly outline the sections of the Bill. Section 1 confirms that the principal Act is the Health Insurance Act 1994.

Section 2 sets the 1 April 2026 as the date when the new credits from the risk equalisation fund will take effect.

Section 3 updates the term of appointment for the chairperson of the Health Insurance Authority, bringing it in line with the code of practice for the governance of State bodies.

Section 4 increases the hospital utilisation credit. From April 2026, overnight stays will rise from €163 to €165 and day cases will rise from €81 to €100.

Section 5 revises the age-related credits. These credits depend on age, sex and level of cover. They will increase for all advanced products and most non-advanced products to reflect higher number and cost of claims.

Section 6 strengthens the high-cost claims pool credit, which helps insurers to cover very expensive claims. The share of costs covered will rise from 45% to 50% for claims over €50,000 in a 12-month period.

Section 7 sets new stamp duty rates to fund these credits. From 1 April 2026, adult advanced plan stamp duty is going up by €48 to €517, child advanced plan stamp duty is going up by €16 to €172, adult non-advanced plan stamp duty is going up by €9 to €103, and child non-advanced stamp duty is going up by €3 to €34. These increases are calculated to keep the scheme Exchequer neutral. An €8 million surplus in the fund will be used to reduce the level of stamp duty that would otherwise apply.

Section 8 deals with the Short Title, commencement and construction of the Bill.

This Bill ensures the continued fairness of our community-rated health insurance market. It strengthens the risk equalisation scheme and supports affordable premiums for older and sicker people, principles that are backed by the public. These amendments achieve our objectives in three ways. First, they support the sustainability of the private health insurance market by ensuring that credits and stamp duties reflect the real cost of claims. This keeps the risk equalisation fund balanced and avoids sudden shocks to premiums. Second, they prevent overcompensation to insurers. The changes to age-related and health-related credits are carefully calibrated so that insurers receive fair support from the fund. Third, they maintain fair and open competition in line with EU state aid rules. By aligning credits more closely with health status rather than age, we improve the efficiency of the scheme.

I commend the Bill to the House.

Deputy David Cullinane: This is an annual Bill that renews the risk equalisation mechanism, which supports the community-based health insurance market. Obviously, I recognise the fact that many people rely on health insurance, so for that reason, we will be supporting the Bill. However, as in previous years, I will be critiquing what I see as a two-tier system and an insurance market system that I fundamentally do not agree with.

Many people take out private health insurance because they feel they must. There are some people who will take out private health insurance for other reasons, but the vast majority of people I represent have private health insurance because they cannot depend on the public system and they are waiting too long on waiting lists for things like a diagnostic scan, sometimes for elective procedures, planned procedures especially and maybe for some key issues like cancer or cardiac where they can be seen in private hospitals. Most complex work is actually done in our public hospitals. It is the planned elective procedures where there is an advantage if one is a private patient.

I accept that risk equalisation is important from the point of view of protecting certain cohorts of customers, which is why I am supporting the Bill, but we as a Parliament and as a people accepted when we signed up to Sláintecare that we wanted to move away from a two-tier system and embrace a single-tier health system, which exists in many countries in the world. They may not be perfect systems - no system is ever perfect - but I believe that universal healthcare systems are better than having a two-tier system.

We are finally getting to the point where I can see, even in recent weeks, private healthcare is being removed from public hospitals. That is a positive step. I have always believed that public hospitals must be for public patients, where people are treated on the basis of equality and where we do not have, in our public hospitals funded by taxpayers, any form of two-tier entry or two-tier access. We are somewhat moving in the right direction in that area.

There has been some progress made in recent years in relation to reducing the cost of healthcare. I would have proposed many of the measures that were brought in by the Government, and I supported them, but we are still a long way from where we need to be. For example, we do not have free primary care. Many people still pay for many primary care services, including GP access. I note that even the GP visit card, which was extended by the previous Minister, is not being taken up. Part of the reason is because it is very complex for people to understand who qualifies. Even I, with my so-called wisdom, had a look at it and was still not able to figure out whether some families were entitled to the GP-only card. That needs to be simplified and better explained because it is far too complex for people to understand.

The biggest reform we need to bring into the health service, if we are really interested in reform and dealing with waiting lists, is to build the elective public-only hospitals. That would be the biggest game-changer. It would be reform with a big R for a number of reasons. The primary advantage for anybody with private health insurance is that they can get a hip done, a hernia operation done, a cataract surgery done and all those day case procedures, which are the low-lying fruit for the private health insurance market if we are being honest. That is where private health insurers step in by covering lots of those procedures and making lots of money on them. The logic of the elective-only hospitals is that we would have four of those, two based in Dublin, one in Cork and one in Galway. They would do these procedures on scale and rapidly, so people would be seen within a couple of weeks as opposed to waiting years.

I am dealing with an elderly gentleman in my constituency of Waterford who needs two cataracts done. He has already been waiting eight months. I contacted hospital management and they said he could be waiting 15 more months. He cannot see out of either of his eyes, so his quality of life is affected. His options are to go to Belfast, get it done there and recoup the money or he can get it done elsewhere through the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF,

which the hospital has now kindly agreed to. Why are people waiting so long for procedures like that? A new cataract unit was put into the hospital in Waterford, yet we still have people waiting. I have people almost every day asking how long more they are going to have to wait for their hip or hernia operations to be done. These are simple procedures where people should not have to wait for years. I submitted a parliamentary question last week asking about the number of patients waiting for a diagnostic scan. The reply said 300,000 people were waiting for a scan - a CT scan, an ultrasound scan, very basic stuff. If somebody has private health insurance, they can go into a private clinic and get a scan or a scope done in a couple of weeks. If they are a public patient, they are waiting months and sometimes up to a year for a simple diagnostic scan. In fact, there are over 40,000 patients waiting over 18 months for a diagnostic scan. That is a shameful situation for us to be in. I told the Minister for Health in the Oireachtas health committee last week that, while I support the roll-out of the surgical hubs, we also need a roll-out of diagnostic hubs, which would be a similar system. It is a similar system where diagnostic hubs on site or close to public hospitals carry out diagnostic tests which are important in terms of patients' healthcare journeys and provide results much more rapidly.

Another benefit of elective hospitals is that we separate scheduled from unscheduled care. That will be a huge game changer. Every time we have a surge in our emergency departments, which we know happens almost every day in some hospitals and almost every other day in almost every hospital, one of the first casualties is elective procedures. That is the only option open to a hospital manager because they need to use all of the capacity in a hospital to deal with the surge of patients on trolleys. Separating scheduled from unscheduled care makes perfect sense.

The surgical hubs which are being rolled out will help somewhat in that regard but the biggest game changer will be elective hospitals. I have raised with the Minister, head of the HSE and Secretary General of the Department of Health the fact that €9.5 billion in capital funding was given to health up to 2031. I met all of the officials, including those responsible for capital investment in the Department of Health, before the last election. They told me that what was needed was €13.5 billion. They have to finish the national children's hospital and the new national maternity hospital. There is digitisation and the roll out of measures which could cost up to €1 billion or more, and money has to be ring-fenced for that. There are climate action measures. There are regulatory requirements, which comes under the remit of the Minister of State. HIQA costs money. The former Minister, Stephen Donnelly, promised 3,000 beds, half of which have not been funded. That was another mirage by a Minister who made loads of announcements but never followed through on most of what he announced and left a mess, including the roll out of free HRT.

I referenced GP only cards and hospital beds, most of which have not been and will not be funded. There are other elements of the health service which require capital funding, including every acute hospital and mental health and disability services. The money does not go.

At a meeting of the health committee, we were told the best we can do for elective hospitals is get them to planning by 2031. For me, that is a massive failure and lack of ambition from the Government. It also tells me that this is a Government that is happy to see people continue to pay private health insurance. I have no doubt that if people had rapid access to elective procedures like those I mentioned, namely, day case procedures, that would negate the need for many low and middle-income families to take out private health insurance. It would be the

fastest way to eliminate that for many families and reduce the sphere of influence of private insurance companies.

We talk about efficiencies in health care and the fact that we are spending record amounts of money on health, which we are because health inflation is high and we have to spend between €1 billion and €1.5 billion every year just to stand still. This is the reality of the health service at the moment. It is very difficult to get new money for new measures. While that is happening and families are paying for private health insurance because they cannot depend on the public system, this year €800 million will be spent on agencies.

My partner is a nurse who left her job in Castlebar to move to Waterford about three months ago and is on a waiting list to get a job in a public hospital. There is still no offer of a contract. She is one of many people due to the strict embargo and bureaucracy that has been put in place in respect of staff recruitment. Workers like her were told to work for an agency and get a few shifts here and there. A premium of 30% is being paid. It is not ideal for the worker, taxpayer or anybody but that is what we are dealing with. We are going to hit a spend of €800 million on agency staff, yet nurses and other healthcare professionals who want to work in the public system cannot be hired, which makes no sense.

Insourcing is going through the roof. It has now been stopped because of potential conflicts of interest but hundreds of millions of euro are being spent. The same is happening with outsourcing through the NTPF. We are not building elective hospitals and will not fund 3,000 beds. Elective hospitals, which are a big game changer, will not happen. Agency spend is up. Inefficiency is everywhere in the health service, yet patients are waiting for basic procedures. It does not make sense. It is wrong. They are the key issues that need to be sorted.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: We are fortunate in Ireland to have the most highly qualified and dedicated healthcare professionals in the world. Generally, aside from the notable exceptions, when people receive care they give a sterling endorsement of the care they receive. The problem is that access to healthcare across the State is plagued by waiting lists, vacancies in key roles and the State even breaking the law by its failure to provide assessments of need.

Despite cross-party reports, Sláintecare commitments or general election manifestoes, unfortunately insurance remains an important aspect of many people's healthcare planning. Even insurance does not work for people in many cases. This is why I welcome the amendment to the Bill from my party colleague and Sinn Féin spokesperson on health, Deputy Cullinane, mandating a review of the current rate of profit of healthcare providers and an analysis of the potential impact of the removal of private practice from public hospitals on a cost of health insurance.

People are being ripped off when it comes to healthcare in the State. They are ripped off by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, who in government have failed to adequately utilise our taxes to deliver a public healthcare system that works. They are ripped off again by private insurers, if they can afford that.

One area I want to touch on is dental care. Last year, no child in the 2024-2025 academic year in County Monaghan received their annual dental checkup. The HSE informed me that is due to maternity leave and retirements. That implies it is due to the HSE's poor workforce planning. If the situation is so dire, and no workforce planning could surmount the challenge

of delivering school dental checkups in Monaghan this year, then it is the fault of the Government and previous Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil Governments for failing to train enough dental professionals. Families in Monaghan are being ripped off by the Government. They are paying their taxes and the Government is failing to provide their children with the most basic foundational level of dental care. In the years to come, if these children take up health insurance, most ordinary plans will not include dental care.

Dundalk services Monaghan for orthodontic care - it is a disgrace that children in Monaghan have to go to Dundalk. There was a vacancy for a consultant post and two specialist orthodontists post. With the current staff comprising two dental nurses, a part-time dental hygienist and a part-time clerical officer, it seems there was no consultant to serve the entire region, including Monaghan. This is utterly scandalous and is happening on the watch of the Minister.

We know early intervention delivers better and more cost-effective care. We know developing good habits in terms of oral hygiene at an early age likewise leads to better outcomes and is the most effective for ordinary people and the taxpayer. However, the situation the Minister is currently standing over in Monaghan does not deliver that. The county has been utterly abandoned by this Government in terms of dental and ortho dental care. The Government has ripped them off. People pay their taxes and the Government is not delivering a substandard service; it is delivering no service at all. It is leaving people to go private or get private insurance where, again, they are being ripped off.

Sinn Féin has outlined our plans to train enough dental professionals to deliver the services people pay for and are entitled to through their taxes. I ask the Minister to reflect on this because the *status quo* in Monaghan is entirely unacceptable. I appeal to the Minister to accept Deputy Cullinane's amendment to the Bill, so that we can address and end the rip-off insurance that many people across this country are burdened with, arising from the Government's poor stewardship of our health services.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I join Deputy Bennett in calling on the Minister of State to look at Deputy Cullinane's straightforward amendment. We all are aware of the issue with rising insurance costs. It is no shock that this arises not only with public liability and motor insurance but also health insurance. A lot of people feel they have no choice but to take out insurance because of deficiencies in the health system. We need to see that amendment passed. We need a report and to see the ins and outs of what can only be called gouging and profiteering off the backs of people who see that they have absolutely no choice but to take out insurance. I call on the Government to come to a moment of clarity on this issue and to take the necessary action.

We will support the legislation because we accept the reality that people are forced to take out private health insurance. It tells us all we need to know about what is wrong with the two-tier system. As Deputy Cullinane said, we welcome the removal of private healthcare from public hospitals, the need for which we have pointed to for a long time. We need to see that done and we must ensure the public system gets the maximum capacity. Deputy Cullinane spoke about the huge issue of the 300,000 people in the public system waiting for scans and procedures, with more than 40,000 waiting over 18 months.

I have raised the need for a clinical specialist sonographer in Louth County Hospital. I have had some answers and promises from the HSE regarding the filling of that position and the delivery of the service into the future but I am not absolutely sure there is definitive surety around it. Having spoken to some people within the hospital setting, the situation is that the only person who had been working full time on ultrasounds is no longer there. We can all imagine how that impacts on capacity. Luckily enough, and with thanks to the Ceann Comhairle's office, I have been approved to raise this as a Topical Issue tomorrow, when I will follow up on it. I hope finally to get a definitive answer rather than an answer that looks definitive but anybody who knows anything will say is far from it.

Unfortunately, this is all the one particular issue. We are talking about delivering a decent public health system, no longer having a two-tier system and bringing public capacity up to the absolute maximum. It will come as a shock to nobody here that I deal with a considerable number of people in my constituency office who are facing issues that should be dealt with, in a proper system, in elective hospitals. This could be anything from cataracts to knee and hip replacements. If not for the cross-border health directive, we would be in a really critical situation. The system is just not good enough. We need a system that provides not bang for buck for private hospitals, no matter where they are situated, but bang for buck for the Irish taxpayer and, beyond that, for the citizens who require healthcare.

I cannot let the opportunity pass to refer to Michael Shine and the dreadful crimes he committed against a huge number of people over a long period. It is a cause for hope that there has been engagement, as we urged for many years, with Dignity4Patients, which is currently briefing its members. It is absolutely frightening that we are looking at numbers upwards of 390 to 400. It should not be a big shock when we consider that Michael Shine operated in a position of power for more than 30 years. Many questions will have to be answered. The scoping exercise must identify the best way to find out the detail and knowledge that are out there and to ensure this leads to a full statutory inquiry that can provide answers for the people who have been through an absolute nightmare at the hands of a paedophile. The issues were brought to the attention of the powers that be for far too long without being dealt with.

Deputy Duncan Smith: We will support the Bill, as we do with related legislation every year, but that endorsement is not an endorsement of the two-tier system that exists in our health service. Why do 46% of the population, or 2.5 million people, feel they must have private health insurance? It is because our public health system is buckling at the seams. As of 31 October 2025, there were 626,000 people on outpatient waiting lists. So far this year, 103,545 people spent time on trolleys awaiting beds. Many of us in this House have had family members waiting on trolleys this year. There are 6,858 vacant posts in the public health service at this time. A total of 400,000 people entitled to medical cards and GP visit cards are not availing of them.

The public system is struggling in many respects. Health insurance providers step into that breach, with health insurance being a tax on people's fear that if they get sick, they will not get the help they deserve and that should be their right through the public system. Sláintecare is moving at a glacial pace, with a reduction in funding for its implementation from last year to this year. The question is whether the Government is as committed to Sláintecare as was the whole Oireachtas two Dáil terms ago when the cross-party group on the future of healthcare made its recommendations.

We also need to discuss health insurance in the context of the cost-of-living crisis. We talked in this Chamber today about the big energy providers in regard to profit making and price gouging. The same arguments can be made about health insurance providers. Irish Life Health recorded post-tax profits of €24.1 million in 2023, with dividends of €11 million paid last year. VHI reported a net surplus of €36 million for 2024. Laya recorded pre-tax profits of €19.02 million in 2024, which was a doubling of its profits from 2023. People are struggling with mortgages and rent, high energy costs and food prices. They have little left of their wages. With 46% of people availing of private health insurance, the average policy increased from €1,683 in July of last year to €1,839 in July this year. The average price rise between 2023 and 2024 was more than 12%, which is a lot higher than the rate of inflation. Health insurance is not a luxury item or elective product; it is for basic healthcare. This is the Ireland of today and the health system that currently exists.

We need to see a real drive towards the implementation of Sláintecare. It must happen not only in our acute hospital settings but also, as Deputy Cullinane outlined, in the delivery of elective hospitals, the pace of which has been glacial. We also need to look at the community level. Mental healthcare in the community is underresourced and does not have enough staff. People are falling through the gaps. I have huge concerns about the number of people with acute mental health illnesses, unquantified to this point, who are not in receipt of a service at the moment because they have been discharged for missing appointments. That is a huge concern and one the HSE must take seriously. Children are timing out awaiting assessments of need in the public waiting system, which dictate what services, if any, they will get and assist with securing an adequate school placement. Those families are having to resort to claiming from their private insurance to access private assessments or, if the insurer does not cover that, paying out of pocket on top of their insurance. Even then, there are waiting lists in the private system. That is how broken the system is in terms of assessments of need for neurodiverse children. It is utterly broken. This Bill is a technical one. It is a risk equalisation Bill and a complicated one in many ways but it supports an insurance system that is being presided over by companies making huge profits off the top of bills and premiums that are going up and up while the service is diminishing.

We need Sláintecare. We need it to be delivered as soon as possible. There is a creeping sense within the health system, the public and the political class that this Government is not truly committed to the delivery of Sláintecare. It feels as far away now as it did when it was first decided and agreed upon not seven years ago.

Deputy John McGuinness: While this Bill comes every year and so on, it relates to the implementation of the scheme already there and the costs involved and reflects the current cost of insurance. However, I want to raise the issue of the cost of private healthcare and ask the Minister of State to reflect on the increases that have taken place over the years in that cost.

We need to ensure that the private health insurers are diligent in how they pay out and investigate the payments being sought. We need to ensure they are paying hospitals on time for what was done, not for any extras that may have been inadvertently put into the invoice. I believe that is an issue that needs to be addressed because any type of increase in the cost of the care of a person in a hospital that does not fully reflect the type or extent of care they receive will simply increase further the cost of premiums to cover the profitability, if you like, of the private health insurers offering that cover.

It is significant money that people are paying. There is also a significant number of people who believe they have to pay that money. That should cause us to reflect on the system we have. Many speakers before me have highlighted the failures of the system itself. We are not criticising - or I am not - the staff who administer that system or, indeed, those at the coal face of the delivery of health services because they are pushed from pillar to post to deliver that service in a working environment that is not necessarily supportive of the task they are being asked to complete.

One of the issues this and previous Governments have had to deal with is the lack of value for money in our healthcare system and the amount of money going into healthcare that is being wasted. That is something we need to get a handle on because that figure is increasing every year. We just have to look at the 100 years of the PAC, which is being celebrated today, to see the amount of inquiries relative to healthcare is increasing by the year. The amount of moneys the courts are settling cases for is increasing every year. We are looking at millions of euro being paid out because of negligence of one kind or another in the hospital system. There is no business that could tolerate the payments being asked by the courts except for government because it can reach into the taxpayer's pocket and provide the payment the courts decide on. We should be looking beyond that and wondering why these things happen. What are the failings in our own systems - in the systems of public administration - that have caused the person to go to court?

I have a lady in Kilkenny whose father was cared for in hospital and who later died. The HSE has recognised the lapses of care in that hospital, yet it still continues to fight with the family in respect of a promise of apology. The HSE acknowledged its wrongs and said it would apologise but that has not been a fulsome apology. I find that shocking. If you have a customer in business and something goes wrong, own up to it. Take ownership of it and deal with it without having to spend a fortune going to the courts. In that game, it is only the legal profession and others who will win. The State Claims Agency and the HSE need to look at best practice. They are wrong in what they are doing. The individuals who go to court are not wrong because, obviously, they have a case and they went to court. The HSE or the Department of children is now standing over the payment of a hotel room, going back over the past 12 weeks or more, for a child who is kept there because it cannot get a proper, bespoke place for that child. The HSE and the Department are in the business of health and children long enough to know where they can get that care without squandering a fortune on a private hotel bedroom and without putting pressure on the parents to do a roster over the 24 hours to visit and look after that child. What in the name of God have we come to in Ireland that this would happen, given the billions of euro currently being pushed into the health services?

I look at the delivery of health for older people and what I see in our public hospitals is people who are going in for one health issue or another, experiencing lack of care, falling in the hospital ward and ending up being in even more difficulty coming out of the hospital than they were going in. The families are then promised home care hours and support, only in the attempt to have the patient removed from hospital and taken home. Once home, the hours are often not delivered at all and the family is pushed to a point where some have to give up work, the person is often left alone but should not be left alone, and the health of the individual then takes a nosedive. That is not acceptable in a country that is spending the type of money that we are on healthcare. It is not acceptable that the hours would be allocated and then, when they are not sufficient, they would not be topped up by the HSE.

I see it every day of the week. The Minister of State should look at the parliamentary questions being asked and ask himself why they are being asked. Why are so many questions about delivery of services turning up on the Question Paper every single day? The answer is the administration is wrong, it is not efficient, it is not delivering in the way that it should and it is not getting value for money. Families often then turn to private healthcare. What I am encountering now is a wait for hip operations, knee operations and so on even within private healthcare. Something is wrong with the output for the money being spent.

There is a new hospital in Thomastown in County Kilkenny, which is state of the art and a wonderful location. However, I have yet to determine when that hospital will be fully staffed and open so that the patients on waiting lists and in the hospital can be put into a better facility. I ask that someone at least explore that question, find out and let us know. There is a wonderful hospital in Castlecomer, County Kilkenny. People use it for respite and it is used for the care of older people. That is a hospital model that should be developed. The community hospitals, those that are in the community supporting the care of older people, are not being funded in the way they should be. They are providing a brilliant service. It is an incredible service. For some reason or other, there is a high number of those hospitals in Carlow-Kilkenny. Every single year, they are being pushed by HIQA, or for some other reason, to spend money that they do not have. When they appeal to the Government, they receive a snail's pace response. When we have something that works, we should fund and develop it and, if possible, roll it out to the rest of the country.

In the past, in healthcare, religious orders sometimes looked after the hospitals and they set up new hospitals and community hospitals. They are still going and they are a proven model. Why are we in trouble with our healthcare given the billions available now that were not available previously? I support the hospitals in Castlecomer, Thomastown, Kilmoganny and all the others getting money to continue their development because they are doing a community service. They are not just hospitals. I ask that the care of our elderly in our public hospitals be looked at. There are times when they are admitted to hospitals where it is not the right place for them. Some are ending up on beds in accident and emergency departments and not being properly cared for.

I have respect for people in their senior years who are looking for the types of operations that would give them more years in life. I can never understand why the same ethos is not in place in hospitals to ensure that a hip or knee is replaced or cataracts are done. What have we come to?

I listened to other speakers. I ask the Minister of State to listen carefully to what is being said. Everyone has a contribution to make in terms of their own locality. They are not talking out of the top of their hat. They are giving facts about projects that are working. They should be supported.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I am glad to speak on the Health Insurance (Amendment) Bill 2025. As we know, many people in the country, almost 50% of the population, have health insurance. This is high when we consider that almost 77% of the cost of healthcare is provided by the State. You would wonder why the imbalance is there. Many people feel they have no option other than to have health insurance, particularly as they get on in life. There is always the fear of ending up on a waiting list, particularly for a diagnosis. I know many people who are waiting

to get scans, scopes or other services. They go to their GP, who writes a letter to the hospital and says they will get an appointment at some stage. They wait months and months. It turns into years. Then they get very ill and end up having to go to accident and emergency.

In my constituency, Sligo University Hospital was recently described as one of the most overcrowded hospitals in the country. In fact, I was recently informed that the ambulance service at one stage got a notification not to bring patients to the hospital, such was the overcrowding in the accident and emergency department. It is the same all over the country. In one cases I had recently, a woman waited outside Sligo hospital in an ambulance for six hours because there was no space to bring her into the hospital. That ambulance came from south Leitrim. During the time the ambulance was waiting, there was no ambulance cover in the region. That is happening everywhere all over the place. It is small wonder, therefore, that people feel the service is so poor in the public system that they need to get insurance to be able to have a service provided. Yet, when they have that insurance, the level of service they get is often not up to the standard they would expect in those circumstances.

We have a two-tier health service and unfortunately it does not work for anyone. What we find is that people pay taxes all their lives in order to have a health service and then when they get ill, they have to take out their chequebook to pay for it. That should not be the case. There is a huge amount of work to be done to be able to provide the kind of service that people require. We recognise that the private system is withdrawing from the public system. That should happen as soon as possible. It has been my experience that the private system only wants to provide the easy parts. It wants to do the parts that are easily done, the clean-cut bits, such as the cataract that needs to be taken off, the hip or knee replacement and the stuff that is clean and easy. The harder part, the more complex cases, are put back into the public system again and the pressure is always on the public system to provide for it.

We have a health system which is run by professional and competent people. My daughter is a nurse who works in the health service. I know the level of commitment the staff have. She experiences it among the people she works with. We find, however, that the system is somehow or other under strain and stress, mainly because there are not enough people to provide the service. Many health workers will talk about the experience of working abroad being good. In general, when they go to other countries, they find that where there is meant to be three or four nurses and a number of care assistants in a ward, there is half that number in the Irish ward looking after patients. That creates huge strain because if a couple of people happen to need urgent care or are sick at the same time in those circumstances, they do not have the ability to look after them. They feel under pressure, stressed and unappreciated in the system, and the system fails. That is the experience of so many.

Having health insurance does not solve the problem for a lot of people. In fact, all it does is make them pay more and still get an inadequate service. There needs to be a full review of how our system works. I know Sláintecare was supposed to do that, but it has not delivered. There needs to be a re-examination of what we are going to do to get a proper health system in place that provides adequate services for all of our citizens.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: As in previous years, the Social Democrats will be supporting the Health Insurance (Amendment) Bill. Risk equalisation is necessary to ensure that older and sicker people do not face huge premiums because of their perceived risk. This modest measure

also helps mitigate cherry-picking low-risk groups, such as younger and generally healthier people. In the context of our two-tier health service, where approximately 46% of the population have health insurance, the risk equalisation scheme is essential. Eight years on from the publication of Sláintecare, it is concerning that the private health insurance market continues to grow. That should give the Minister of State pause for thought, because it is hardly a ringing endorsement of his predecessor's track records on reform.

A total of 2.5 million people in Ireland have health insurance. That is almost half the country. Last year, total premium income stood at €3.6 billion, up from €3.2 billion in 2023. According to the Health Insurance Authority, the average individual plan increased by 12% in 2024. As of June, the average premium stood at €1,830, an increase of €147 in 12 months. This is a huge expense for households, and it is way beyond the reach of many workers.

Even though almost half the country has health insurance, only 12% of overall health expenditure is paid for by private health insurance. In fact, despite some reform, there has not been much change in the last decade. In 2014, private health insurance accounted for 13% of health spending. However, we should, hopefully, see a more considerable drop in the figure in the years to come, as the process of disentangling public and private healthcare progresses. Ultimately, we cannot continue to stand over a system where the taxpayer is subsidising private healthcare. It is totally unjust and unfair that taxes pay for 77% of health expenditure, yet people with private health insurance have quicker access to healthcare compared to their fellow taxpayers without insurance.

Equally, those who have private health insurance should not feel the need to have it. They should not feel pressured into it, out of fear for themselves or their families failing ill. They should not feel obliged to dig even deeper every year to pay health insurance premiums, but the reality is that they do. This is not a European norm. Ireland is an outlier.

Sláintecare recognised this dysfunction in our health system. In fact, it was the motivating force behind the setting up of the Committee on the Future of Healthcare. Sláintecare had and has cross-party support and remains official Government policy but momentum has undoubtedly stalled. Implementation has always been patchy but now more than ever, it seems as though the reform programme is being slow walked. I do not think that has been done consciously but I believe that a lack of political will has converged with a lack of institutional knowledge. On the latter point, I, like so many others, was not in the House in 2017 when Sláintecare was agreed. The membership of both Houses of the Oireachtas has changed considerably in the years since and just five of the 14 TDs who sat on the Committee on the Future of Healthcare are still in the Dáil. Of those five, not one is in the Department of Health, nor indeed is their party's health spokesperson. I do not say this to suggest there is not an understanding of Sláintecare in this House, but we are, as Professor Steve Thomas has warned, in "danger of mission creep". To be clear, Professor Thomas is not just some commentator. He led the Trinity College team that supported the Committee on the Future of Healthcare in developing Sláintecare. He, like the Social Democrats, remains entirely committed to Sláintecare but I am not sure if the same can be said of all parties, particularly those in the Government. Everyone is still signed up to Sláintecare in principle but are they still committed to its vision or are they just paying lip service to the reform programme?

As Professor Thomas pointed out at a recent health policy conference, Sláintecare can mean almost whatever we want it to mean; therefore, it risks losing coherence. To emphasise his

point, Professor Thomas pointed to the bizarre fact that eligibility and entitlement is still being debated. This is something I am particularly concerned about. Why, eight years into Sláintecare, is a review of the eligibility framework being carried out? Sláintecare was clear that an entitlement to universal healthcare should be provided to all, underpinned by legislation. In 2025, however, there are still virtually no universal entitlements to healthcare, only "eligibility" for some services. This point, while overlooked, is crucial - the distinction between "entitlements" and "eligibility". "Entitlement" means that a person has a right to something, while "eligibility" is defined as having the necessary qualities or satisfying the necessary conditions to qualify for a scheme. That is a very important distinction.

I accept that a review of the long-term illness scheme was needed and should have already taken place but this so-called strategic review of the wider eligibility framework concerns me. First, if it is anything like the long-delayed strategic review of general practice, it strikes me as a delay tactic, a way of doing nothing on eligibility under the guise of awaiting its findings. Second, there is no need for a review. What exactly is there to review? Yes, in the absence of clear entitlements, a complex system of eligibility has developed. There is no denying that but reviewing it is not the answer; undoing it is.

In a reply to a parliamentary question I submitted earlier this month, the Minister said that in order to achieve the goal of universal healthcare in line with the commitments made in Sláintecare, we must first review existing eligibility arrangements. This far into a ten-year plan to achieve universal healthcare, the Government wants to look at the existing arrangements now. This does not fill me with confidence. The focus is entirely misplaced.

The 2017 plan recommended legislating for a legal entitlement to healthcare. The proposed Bill would provide for a universal entitlement to a broad package of health and social care services. This universal entitlement for everyone living in Ireland was to be phased in over a five-year period and completed in 2023. I accept that Covid interrupted that timeline but that is not the real reason it has not progressed. Unfortunately, this Government has no interest in conferring any right to services on people. As usual, it is treating Sláintecare recommendations like a menu rather than a manual. That is not to say that every single word in the 2017 report must be accepted and that we cannot adapt to changing circumstances, but one cannot pick and choose from recommendations that are fundamental to delivering an integrated, universal, single-tier public health service delivered on medical need and not ability to pay.

Regrettably, I do not think there is an appreciation of the fact that the key recommendations in Sláintecare are interrelated and interdependent. Take for example one of the central elements of the reform programme, namely, integration. The recommendations related to delivering integrated care are particularly important. Why is this the case? It is because even if this Government were to make good on commitments related to entitlement to care, this would not ensure access. The integration section of Sláintecare is about improving access through a recalibration of our health system away from hospitals and towards the community, but integration also includes fundamental reform of HSE governance structures. It should be acknowledged that we are seeing some critical changes to the governance structures, most notably the phased implementation of health regions. However, I have concerns about the accountability mechanisms in place. It is deeply regrettable that the Minister has no intention of putting national and local accountability structures on a statutory footing.

I am also concerned about other key Sláintecare reforms, such as salaried GPs and a statutory right to home care. The latter is a long-standing commitment dating back to the Tánaiste's time in the Department of Health. Since then, every target for the introduction of the statutory scheme has been missed. All the while, home care waiting lists have grown. This year alone, they have increased by 12% since January.

Looking at this year's health budget, one would struggle to be optimistic. It is short on reform and even shorter on detail. Rarely has there been a more underwhelming budget for health. The Minister has shown limited ambition and limited commitment to change. It looks like Sláintecare has been put on ice for 2026. Why the standstill? In recent years, there have been some belated but encouraging signs of progress, such as the take-up of the consultant contact, the reduction in some out-of-pocket expenses and better access to community diagnostics, to name a few. However, since this new Government entered office, Sláintecare has been sidelined. I accept that a new action plan was published last May but that was two years overdue, and in those two years, the Department was unable to even come up with costings or provide a figure of implementation. The new plan lacks any substance. It is little more than a box-ticking exercise. Ultimately, the Social Democrats will always support genuine efforts to implement Sláintecare but I am afraid that those instances have been few and far between. That needs to change. Otherwise, people will continue to feel obliged to fork out almost €2,000 a year for private health insurance and that is not acceptable.

Deputy Ann Graves: In this State, we have a two-tier health system and it is clearly highlighted in the Bill. The lack of a universal healthcare system free at the point of delivery has created a private market for healthcare. Removing private healthcare from public hospitals is an important and necessary development. It will reduce the dependency on private healthcare but it demands that the Department step up to the challenge and increase the public capacity. It is unacceptable that access to healthcare depends on the ability to pay. Many households see health insurance as a necessity because they can no longer rely on a broken system propped up by broken promises. Waiting lists are too long. There are 300,000 people waiting on scans and more than 40,000 have been waiting over 18 months.

My office in Swords is inundated with constituents looking for assistance for the most basic medical needs. A woman contacted me looking for help. She is distraught. Her son is on a waiting list for occupational therapy. The waiting list for her son is 55 months. This is a disgrace. The blame for this waiting list lies with the Government. A man from Malahide in his late 80s has been in hospital for over a year. He needs to be at home with appropriate care. A hospital is totally inappropriate for his needs. Unfortunately, the respite centre wants to send him home with an inadequate care package. He was offered additional hours and subsequently told that this was a mistake. This man has worked his entire life, helped build this country and paid his taxes and the least he can expect is to be given care in his time of need. In a case involving another family, the son has a disability and is waiting for an operation. The wait for the operation has been so long and his health has deteriorated so badly that he has since had to give up employment. These are just a few examples of the struggles families have to deal with to access healthcare in one of the wealthiest economies in the world.

Consecutive governments have implemented policies that have made the situation worse for people. Health policy has been driven by a system that views healthcare as a commodity that can be bought and sold in the free market. Government should be aiming to develop a public

health care system that removes the need for any citizen to spend their hard-earned income on private insurance.

7 o'clock

The facts are a damning indictment, in that 2.53 million people, which is almost half the population, are covered by private health insurance. They are paying out a massive €2.5 billion every year in premiums and now they are facing increased costs. The healthcare model being pursued by the Government is designed to facilitate a two-tier healthcare system, which allows those who can afford to pay to speedily access high-quality treatment and care, while those who cannot afford to pay continue to languish in queues waiting for scans, appointments, therapies and operations.

The good news is this does not have to be this way. Sinn Féin has a plan to tackle the waiting lists and deliver a national health service for Ireland. We would bring an urgency to fixing healthcare and deliver better services for everyone across the island. We would use the current fiscal surplus of €9 billion to catch up on lost decades of underinvestment. The public deserve better than what is currently on offer. We need a comprehensive multi-annual plan that addresses capacity, workforce planning and adequate funding to deliver a world-class healthcare system free at the point of delivery. We need a single-tier system and we need Sláintecare.

Deputy Michael Collins: This Health Insurance (Amendment) Bill may sound technical but its impact is very real. From April onwards, the stamp duty levy on advanced health insurance plans will rise by €48, bringing it to €517 per adult. For families, this will mean an extra €128 a year on top of already soaring premiums, which now average nearly €1,900. These increases will hit households hard at a time when every euro counts. While the levy funds fairness in the system, we cannot ignore the pressure this places on ordinary people. Government must ensure transparency and affordability so fairness does not come at the cost of financial strain. I recently raised in the House the deeply unfair case of a constituent paying €1,470 a year for health insurance who was guaranteed 100% cancer care and was denied access to a life-saving cancer treatment drug when he needed it. Patients should never suffer because of cost-cutting by insurers. After intense media and public pressure, the insurance company agreed to cover the cost but it should never take a public outcry for a patient to get essential treatment. The bottom line is if people pay health insurance and the company tells them they are 100% covered – comprehensively covered is what we call it with car insurance – then when they get something like a serious cancer, they should not be told by the company that they are not covered and it forgot to tell them that. Health insurance companies are looking for extra money but they are not delivering the way they should be.

There are a lot of issues related to health that we need to talk about. I have been fighting for Deerpark Nursing Home for a long time. We have a massive crisis where people cannot get home help, cannot get into a community hospital and cannot get into a nursing home. Sometimes I run into a brick wall because there might not be a bed available or the hospital is full, as it was last week. It was the local community hospital. The local newspaper and I were running with the story but the hospital is full. They cannot put people up in the attic. They have to have a room for them. Deerpark Nursing Home has rooms and I would appreciate the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, getting personally involved in this. He was talking to me

recently and I appreciated that. I would just like to get answers. I think there are 12 to 14 rooms available there and they fully meet all the standards. There is an issue because someone went bankrupt or whatever nonsense went on, but it is there for the taking. Beds are desperately needed in west Cork and we cannot understand what the problem is.

There is the same situation in County Galway. Councillor Noel Thomas has told me about the issue in his constituency. Councillor Michael Leainde is a councillor down there for us as well. Some two years ago the people of Galway were promised Áras Mhic Dara nursing home in Carraroe would be fully staffed and all beds open by winter 2024. That promise is not being kept as nine rooms remain empty. This is the problem we have. This is happening in Bantry and in Galway. The respite services are gone and the day care facility has been abandoned. Meanwhile, 12 people are on a waiting list for care they urgently need. Families are being forced to travel long distances for respite and Irish-speaking residents are left without support. This is unacceptable. We need immediate action from the Minister of State, the HSE and the senior Minister to honour commitments and ensure the facility serves the community as intended. Councillor Thomas, after making representations, was told it is hoped to reopen the beds once staffing has been recruited at the start of the new year. The winter of 2024 is gone and we are into the winter of 2025 with no answers. We need the Minister of State to get cracking on this. There are people crying out for this to be done.

We have to have a very serious sit-down discussion about community hospitals and nursing homes too. The problem is the elderly population has risen throughout the country. I am only talking about my own community hospital in Skull, which is probably one of the best in Ireland. There was investment in it by a previous Government, which was top class and I am not going to take anything away from that. There is Beara community hospital, St. Joseph's unit in Bantry General Hospital and the facilities in Dunmanway, Clonakilty, Kinsale, Bandon and Skibbereen. When has an extra bed been put into any of those hospitals? The one in Skull has 21 beds, and I am pretty sure it had 21 beds 20 years ago. We have a rising elderly population and we still do not have an extra bed, so where do people go? A home help service could keep them at home but that has gone too. I do not know why because home help people tell me they are willing to do the hours. Home help supervisors are saying they cannot get the people so there is a con job going on there and nobody seems to want to stand up and say somebody is mocking someone. It is the elderly person on the ground who is suffering. We need to invest in our community hospitals. A lot of investment was given. The former Minister, James Reilly, was the man who gave it to Skull hospital. I was there. That investment was superbly spent and brought the hospital up to a standard that is second to none. I wish the management and staff the very best because they are delivering, along with the staff of all the other community hospitals. However, the bottom line is no extra beds are available.

That community probably has the highest elderly population in Ireland and we have not looked after that population. It is the same up in Donegal. No matter where, community hospitals are not resourced. There are a few like Deerpark Nursing Home and the one in Galway I mentioned that have been built and which we desperately need, but the situation is left to drag on and on.

Another issue is the endoscopy unit was open in Bantry General Hospital. It is a fantastic service and we are absolutely delighted. I praise the Department of Health. It took me years of shouting and roaring here in the Dáil but it worked. We need an MRI unit in Bantry General

Hospital and now we have to focus there. That is where the money needs to go next. The stroke unit is being worked on but the MRI unit is of huge importance. Is there a budget available? We have to look at Bantry General Hospital serving parts of Kerry, the Beara Peninsula, the Mizen Peninsula, the Sheep's Head Peninsula and all the way out to Kinsale. I was out canvassing in Kinsale and people asked me what I was doing for Bantry General Hospital. If it is serving a community from Kinsale to Kerry, it is doing something right and it needs to get as many services as possible.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I will start with a headline from the *Irish Examiner* that ran "HSE warns it cannot fill vacancies even with agencies as staff shortage crisis deepens". We are talking about health insurance and the rising cost of it. Why do we have such a shortage in the HSE? Why are private hospitals being built and providing a service efficiently, with efficient staffing? We see the 96-bed unit open in Limerick, which I welcomed. Then we see we had a strategic policy to look at options. Option A was another 96-bed unit, option B was expanding the emergency department and option C was a hospital on another site that could have a step-down facility. We came up with a consensus at meetings of all parties in the mid-west. We are united on it and are meeting the Minister tomorrow to say we want options A, B and C. We had a private hospital built in Limerick in 16 months, from the time the sod was turned until it was finished. It was built on budget and on time. Our children's hospital has gone €1.2 billion over budget. Why is it that every project a Department takes on goes over budget even though Departments do not need to make a profit? They go over budget by 50%, 60% or 70%. Regardless of the sector, every business in this country, including those who are self-employed, that is accountable for its own funding, its employees, its profits and its taxes can deliver projects on budget and on time.

A company has come to me and to other Deputies in the House to say it will build the hospital for the mid-west. This company does not mind if it is in Limerick, Clare or Tipperary; it will build the hospital. It will work a contract out with the State like you would do for a mortgage for a house. It says that it will build the hospital that is needed for the mid-west on budget and deliver it within two years. It is needed for the protection of the people in the mid-west, that is, our elderly, our vulnerable and everyone else. This company can deliver that project in two years. If the Department says it does not have the money for it, the company has said it can be worked out over 35 years and that the State can buy the building back for €1 at that time. It is the same as a mortgage. If the Government cannot deliver the projects, let someone else do it. The Government can fund it with it and enter into a contract. The company will then deliver it on budget and on time. The Government can facilitate that. The hospital will then look after the vulnerable people of Ireland.

This is why I have come up with a model. Where a Department intends to build hospitals, schools and all the rest of it, there should be a brochure that opens up. The Department can say it wants a classroom to suit 50 people or an operating theatre with specific facilities. It would be standard and the Department would just have to open the brochure. It can be done for houses. There was a housing system before where you could open a brochure and say you wanted this house or that house. It allows you to buy a certain number of doors or a certain number of windows. It can be built affordably and on budget and you can look at the stock you need to deliver. I am asking the HSE and the Minister to look at a model for one-bed, two-bed, three-bed, four-bed and up to 100-bed hospitals or whatever they want to do. That is the

model. You would go to a contractor and say you want 50 or 100 rooms and what you want in it. There would be standardised electrics, plumbing, fit-outs and everything else across the board. That cuts out the preliminaries for which all the architects and engineers charge millions before we start at all. It also stops any changes mid-way through the projects. You get your hospital delivered but that same hospital can be dropped into Limerick, Cork or Kildare. These companies are providing the lands and a solution to deliver these projects. We would then see our health insurance premiums coming down because the Government would be providing hospitals and care for people along with a strategic plan for the health of everyone in this country going forward.

Why do I talk like this? I have been in business all my life. I have been self-employed all my life. What did I do for my headspace in my downtime last week? I laid a few blocks. Why? I am a blocklayer by trade. I know what I am talking about. I am also a businessman.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: How many blocks did you lay?

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I have employees. If I was in any other county, including Donegal, I would get paid an awful lot more for doing what I was doing than I am paid for doing what I do here. The reason I am here is to protect people. It is not about money. It is about protection and putting in place procedures using the experience I have as a taxpayer and an employer who has had employees all his life. We are here to protect people and to give the Government our experience and the tools to stop Departments wasting money. It helps Government to deliver. I do not care if the Government gets all the praise. I will praise it myself if it takes up a business model. That is what I am here to do. I do not need to score points with anyone. The day I cannot make a contribution to this Dáil is the day I do not want to be here. To be quite honest, I do not want to be here if I cannot make a contribution. I want the Government to listen to people who are in business, who pay taxes and who make a profit. If I do not make a profit, the employees and subcontractors who work with me have no other work to go to. I am providing a service but they are also providing a most vital service, building for the future. I ask both Minister of States and all other Deputies and Ministers in this House to listen to people who have track record of being in business and who can deliver projects. Let me give the Government a simplified model. Let me cut the waste of money involved in going out to different Departments with different funding schemes. Let me give the Government that brochure to help it. It is about a standard procedure. It is called common sense. If I could bucket it and give it to the Government, I would. I need it to listen to common sense. What I want here is accountability. I want to give the Government value for its money.

I want to ensure we can provide a service like that the private hospitals in his country are providing. I was in a private hospital recently myself because I needed to be dealt with. I had to go to a private hospital. I have a machine on me at the moment to measure my heart rate. Do the Ministers of State think that, if I had to go through the emergency department and all of the rest of it, I would be here today? I presume my heart rate is reading fairly high at the moment.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: It is high at the moment.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I should not say your time is up then.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: You should not because I had seven minutes as well. I will have to teach the Chair how to read the clock.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I can only imagine what the Deputy's heart rate was like when he was laying the blocks.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Exactly but that is what I do. I am sorry. Seven and seven is 14. I think that leaves me about two minutes.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You have just reached eight minutes so that thing is not working.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I will conclude on this. I am offering the Government assistance. I am offering to simplify and to allow the Government to spend money with accountability to deliver services so that it can help the vulnerable people in this country.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. The cost of private health insurance puts a huge burden on people. In particular, it puts a huge burden on pensioners, who feel they have no choice. People feel compelled to take up private health insurance because of the delays and inefficiencies in our public system. Some progress has been made in some areas. Some of the screening projects being run are very effective. However, we must do a lot better. It is another tax on people. That is the reality of it. I have dealt with pensioners who are on €280 a week who are paying €40 to €60 for private health insurance. We are seeing several hikes in the one year. There is not one increase but a number of them. Some of them are double-digit increases. We have a market model. While we are stuck with having to use private health insurance, the Government needs to address the charges put on public facilities by private companies such as VHI and Laya. There are flaws in this approach to private health insurance. It is based on profit rather than medical need. It is a two-tier system.

Every week, I see examples of people who urgently need medical care or surgery. I am sure it is the same for the Ministers of State. This surgery could be a hip replacement. The scandal of the two-tier system is that in spite of what the proclamation read out in 1916 said about treating everyone equally, these people are being told that, if they pay, they can be brought in next week but, if they cannot pay, they will have to sit there for two or three years. I have seen several examples of that. That is what we need to change.

There are those who profess that the private sector will sort everything. If somebody wants to operate a private hospital, that is all well and good. Good for them. It is okay if they want to do that but it needs to be separated out. I welcome the 80%-20% consulting model. That is a step in the right direction but we need to go the whole way on that. Mary Harney famously said that we could go with either the Boston model or the Berlin model. What she meant was that we would go with the American model. Previous speakers have said that we should go with the Thatcherite private model. That is the system in America. How has that worked out? You have to be a millionaire to get treatment. Are we seriously being told we should go down the route of the American model where you have to be a millionaire, or very close to it, before

you can get your appendix taken out or something else done? That is not where we need to go. We need to look after people.

Let us look at the figures in this country. Some 2.53 million people have private health insurance. A total of 1.57 million have medical card cover. This is based on figures from the start of the year, and they are probably still fairly accurate. However, we have 1.3 million who have neither - that is 1.3 million people without proper healthcare of any kind. Some of them may have a GP-only card, which I acknowledge is a help, but it is still a long way off. A small number of people have that card.

Let us look at this category of people for a moment. These are the same people who cannot get on a local authority housing waiting list. Many workers and their families cannot get on a local authority waiting list. They cannot get a mortgage - and if they do get a mortgage, they are crucified trying to pay it out of their wages. Most likely, they are paying for a car to travel to work. If they are in private rented accommodation, they are really at the mercy of a wild west system. Let us just think about these people for a minute. They are trapped in a very difficult place. On top of all of that, they do not have medical cover. I have met those people, as has the Minister of State. They ask me why they are being left out the whole time. They pay taxes. They get up every morning and drive their car to Dublin to work on a building site all day or they drive wherever elsewhere to work a ten-hour shift. They are doing the best they can and they do not even have basic health cover. That is what we need to change.

We are stuck with the current system. I accept that we have to do this every year and the risk equalisation fund is the only way it can be done. We are where we are. While we are here, we have to do this to spread out the burden. If we were to charge those who most need healthcare on the basis of their age and their health needs, they would not be able to do it. We would have people falling through the cracks. I recognise that the system has to be supported. That is recognising the real-world situation we are in now, but what I am saying is that we need to change the current model. The fact is that a lot of people do not have the option. Risk equalisation is based on having an annual adjustment. It is a logical approach, which spreads that burden.

I want to address value for money in the health system. We had the 100th anniversary of the Committee of Public Accounts today. As a former Cathaoirleach of the committee, I attended the celebration. There is no doubt that people in the health system are doing great work, but its finances are shrouded in fog. We put in a lot of money as a percentage of GDP. We are behind some other countries, but we have a high GDP, which is good. In terms of hard cash, we compare very well with other countries. We exceed the amount put in by most of them. I have no argument with that given where I come from on the left of the political spectrum. However, I question the value for money that we get and the gap between the money actually going over to Miesian Plaza - the headquarters of the Department of Health - and the actual services on the ground. It is a long and winding road. The one thing I would implore of the Ministers is that they would make sure that they can track where that is going. The Comptroller and Auditor General's office would have had difficulty at times trying to follow that route. In the five-year period I was there, I and the members of the Committee of Public Accounts had difficulty. We tried very hard at times and we made some progress, but it is a difficult route to follow. That route must be shortened. Money, budget and action need to be a straight line so

that people can see exactly who is accountable along the way, that the route is the shortest possible one, and that there are not too many diversions. We must do that.

As I recall, the implementation programme for Sláintecare is a ten-year one. We do not have that much time left in it. I accept that Covid slowed it down. I also accept that that is the real world. I am not going to shout at the Government about that. That is something that we all had to deal with. We might have dealt with it differently if it came up now, but everybody did their best at the time and they did what they thought was right. We have to get Sláintecare up and running. We are an outlier in Europe. We do not have a national health system comparable to other north European countries. Per head of population we are counted as one of the richest countries. It is not a panacea for all. They have an NHS in the North, but that is not perfect. There are big long waiting lists. My niece works in it and I know all about it. It is a difficult system. If you put in the system and you do not put in the necessary checks, balances and procedures, you wind up with that result. We do need to move to a single-tier system to ensure the people I referred to at the outset do not feel compelled to pay €40 to €60 a week. We can work it out. The charges amount to €2,000 or €3,000 a year. If you are on a pension of €280 or €285 a week, and you have to pay €40 to €60 a week, that is the first thing that goes out of it. That is a huge pile of money, and a huge take out of the income of a pensioner. Even if they have an occupational pension of typically €80 to €120 a week, it is a huge pull on it every week. We must do better than that. We must try to move to Sláintecare.

I asked the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, before the budget if in the short term we could do something to help the 1.3 million citizens who do not have medical card cover. They are mainly workers and their families. It is unfair. The income threshold for the medical card has not changed for as long as I am here, and even before that. I am open to correction on this, but as I recall it is more than 20 years since the income threshold was increased. It is €186 for a single person. The lowest rate of social welfare for a single person is over €230. I know people automatically get a medical card if they are on social welfare, but they are not automatically entitled to it if they are working in a part-time job and that is their only income. That is an absolute scandal that we are ignoring that group of people. They are the people who cannot get a house. They cannot get a mortgage. They are paying taxes. They have to get to work. They have to make payments on cars and everything else, yet they and their children have no health cover.

I was challenged by a man while I was canvassing at this time last year for the general election. I know him and his wife, as she comes from the same area as me. He said to me that the people beside him have a medical card. He said he does not begrudge them it, but he does not have one. They had it by virtue of their status in this country. I do not like saying that. I do not want it to be taken off them either. The point I make is that the children in that family had been sick but they could not go to the doctor in the month of November. The Minister of State might recall how cold the weather was when she was canvassing last November. I remember the man saying that to me at the door one freezing cold night. It is not good enough that we do that. We must help those people. We must help the workers and their families in this country. We have had a lot of time to do it and we have made a lot of progress, but the one thing that has not moved, that is frozen in time, is the income thresholds for medical cards.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill. Health insurance reports show that the average premium rates rose by over 12% in 2024. Some plans even

jumped by 25%, a quarter, for some individuals. The average adult premium in the country now is €1,800 - an incredible figure. The Health Insurance Authority is preparing to raise the levies again further by another 10% on insurance premiums. This is an enormous cost for individuals who are above the very low threshold for a medical card and find themselves grappling with this enormous fee every single year.

I would like to offer some positive suggestions. The Minister and the Government should take more proactive steps. The Government has a policy when it comes to smoking that it is going to tax cigarettes to the point where people will give up. I believe we are at that limit at the moment. What about the inverse? What about proactive policies, for example, tax credits for gym membership? It would be good for one's health. It would be good for society, good for the Exchequer and good for the health system if the Government took a more proactive view of gym membership and supported gym membership across the country. Gyms are struggling with the cost of doing business, insurance costs and all of the other costs associated with it. I believe the Minister of State could introduce a tax relief for gym membership and also, potentially, tax deductions for gym equipment at home. These are proactive measures the Minister of State could take that would be a net benefit for society but also from the Exchequer perspective.

I want to raise as well the issues in relation to the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF. The funding for the NTPF in 2017 was €17 million and this year it is expected to be €240 million. It is an incredible rise. While I believe the motives behind the NTPF are good and indeed many of my constituents have availed of it, there are significant issues in relation to the potential for a conflict of interest because of the issue of insourcing and, indeed, outsourcing. Insourcing is where the HSE and the hospital transfer patients from the public list onto the private list within the hospital, and sometimes with the same consultant. A question, therefore, arises. Are we incentivising a lack of productivity in relation to this? Also, who is managing this? Who is ensuring that we have good governance in relation to it? I was struck at the public accounts committee, PAC, recently when the hospital official was asked who is managing this and she said that the hospital operates on a basis of trust. It is extraordinary. There is €240 million of taxpayers' money gone into the NTPF and we operate on the basis of trust. I believe there is an enormous amount of work the Government must do to ensure that the taxpayer is getting value for money, particularly when it comes to insourcing and outsourcing. We have to ensure that we are incentivising productivity in the health system. There are huge questions in relation to this particular issue of transferring patients from the public list onto the private list and in some cases, the consultants themselves are over this particular issue. I ask the Minister of State to carry out an analysis of the productivity per hour of these arrangements on both the public side and the private side. It is important the Minister of State does that to ensure there is value for money here.

Deputy Thomas Gould: First, I want to make a comment personally in relation to everyone who works in the health service, the unbelievable staff, whether it is doctors and nurses, healthcare workers, or cleaners, canteen staff and maintenance staff. I myself was in a hospital yesterday for another appointment. I am regularly there because I have had a number of health issues over the years. It is inspiring to look at the people at the coalface providing the care. We can never underestimate and we should always mention the unbelievable work that they are doing.

When it comes to private healthcare, for far too many families in this State health insurance is no longer an option. It is a must because of the long waiting lists, the disastrous care that can happen if you have to wait years for treatment and the growing concerns that the public have that there is a lack of trust because of these waiting lists.

Many families want to be treated in the public health sector because that is the type of systems that should be delivered, but for many of them there is a lack of trust. It is not even a lack of trust; it is a fact that they will not be seen in time. The burden of having to pay private health insurance for many families is crippling because they know what will happen if they lose it. I know people who had to take a break from paying their health insurance because they could not afford it and to get back in a couple of years later, no illnesses in a five-year period can be put in. How is the Minister of State allowing that? Why is the Government not tackling the insurance company? If a person cannot pay and has to take a break for three, six or 12 months, they should be able. I have called to people who paid it for years and then they are starting all over again. That is not fair.

The Tánaiste, the Minister for Finance now as well, signed the contract for the children's hospital. I have a daughter aged 16. She will never see the children's hospital. It is not only my daughter, but all the other people out there who have children who have been waiting for this hospital for years. It is a scandal. Children who have suffered all their lives with illnesses will be aged out because this hospital that should have been delivered years ago, has not been.

This month, almost 800 people waited on trolleys in Cork's CUH and the Mercy hospital. Thirty thousand people are on waiting lists in both those hospitals. Three thousand people are waiting more than a year. Where is the elective hospital that was promised for Cork? If that elective hospital was there, those 3,000 people would be in and out of it within the year, and those 30,000 people could be treated. This Government is fooling no one when it comes to health. There is a cost-of-living crisis and at the same time, if you do not have private health insurance, your family will not get the treatment on time.

Last week, I was in this Chamber and a woman contacted me from a hospital in Cork because her elderly mother, who had issues with Covid and with her health overall, was in a room in an accident and emergency department and she needed to be in an isolation ward. The family was desperate. They were crying out for help. The nurses and doctors were doing everything they could but there was not the capacity there.

I will give the Minister of State a couple of facts. A study by the Geary Institute for Public Policy this year found Ireland's two-tier health system means those who cannot pay are pushed further down the list. This echoes the findings of the OECD in 2022 which ranked Ireland among the worst countries to access healthcare and for waiting times and found that we were the only western European state that does not offer universal coverage of primary care. We have no primary care centre in Glanmire. We have no primary care centre in Mayfield. We have no primary care centre in Blarney. All these need to be delivered.

We support this Bill today but this Government should be providing Sláintecare so that everyone has access to free health care. That is what the Proclamation said, that all people, all children of the nation, would be treated equally.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am delighted to speak on this Bill.

Indeed, I was in the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach's chair when the Minister of State was speaking. I always listen to the Minister of State's speeches and learn from them and take them for she is succinct and to the point and not afraid to call a spade a spade.

There are many aspects to this Bill but the thrust of it, I suppose, is that we are enabling and putting funds out of stamp duty and other areas towards the insurance companies for them to mitigate the charges to the people paying for the insurance premiums. They might be doing that in some small way but they are milking - high and dry - the insurance customers. We have regulators here for everything and anything. We have the CRU and God knows what else. Why can someone not stop the insurance companies from the gouging? Then it continues in the private hospitals.

I have no hang-ups for private hospitals. I have been sick recently and I have been in a public hospital mainly, in South Tipperary General, and indeed, in St. Vincent's public. I was there again last week. I had occasion to go to Whitfield last week and Deputy Cullinane was in the Chair when I was speaking. The Deputy spoke earlier giving out about private. Whitfield was packed. What kind of problems would we have if we did not have the private hospitals? We have to have a bit of both. We have to have no ideological hang-ups, as Sinn Féin has, that you cannot have private anything. They are reading from Stalin's little red book, the communist book. They are against everything and want nothing private. The Whitfield was so efficient that morning, last Monday morning week, and so busy. I know I paid a very princely sum of €320 for a consultation and €80 for an X-ray, on top of my insurance. One wonders why people have insurance, but I have no ideological hang-up one way or another.

In his speech the Leas-Cheann Comhairle mentioned that people in Kilkenny are so privileged to have a number of district hospitals. He referred to the one in Thomastown, which is a lovely district hospital. He is lucky. I have no doubt that he and the late Bobby Aylward and others fought to retain those. We also had them in Tipperary. We still have an excellent hospital in St. Theresa's in Clogheen. I could not say enough about it. Fuair my own máthair bás ansin 15 bliana ó shin. My own mother died there. My cousins were treated there with palliative care. HIQA was bedevilling the hospital but we got extra money by fighting. I must mention the late Councillor Con Donovan, a Fianna Fáil councillor who taught me a lot about politics. He fought so hard for that hospital. He was on the health committee with the late Jackie Healy-Rae and told many a funny story about the travails around the south eastern health board and the south western health board. It is an excellent hospital. Sr. Áine was there for years and we had Ann Hally as matron, and now we have Anne Walsh as matron and her team. I could not say enough about the role of matron. They do not call them matrons anymore. They have a fancy title now because the word "matron" is taboo. I would say to bring back the matrons and the hospitals would be clean. I say this always. With this lady, Anne Walsh, and her team, one could not ask for better than the care that elderly people, and the not-so-elderly, get there. There are also two palliative care rooms now, which have been supported greatly by the community, with lots of fundraising. By God, do they give it back in spades with the care and dignity their patients receive.

We also had St. Vincent's in Tipperary town, which closed a long time ago under a Fianna Fáil Government. We had Our Lady's in Cashel, which went as a hospital. Then there is St. Brigid's. I have to go back to St. Brigid's Hospital in Carrick-on-Suir. It was a wonderful hospital. I could be wrong on the number of beds - I think there were 18 of them. It had three

palliative care rooms. It was funded and supported by the people. That funding has not been replaced yet either. During Covid, the former Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly, decided to second the hospital for Covid care. When they no longer wanted it for Covid care, they said it was not fit for patients. I can never get an answer from the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, or from anyone else, as to how it was fit to treat patients during Covid but it was not fit for patients afterwards. It was down to spacing and separation, according to HIQA. The people of Carrick-on-Suir and east Waterford, and indeed south Kilkenny, used that hospital for palliative care. I know that there are extra palliative care beds in Waterford city, but that is no good for people from all over that area who have to go to Clogheen or to Cluain Árann in Tipperary town where there are two hospital beds as well. Is mór an trua é sin. It is an awful travesty that our hospital was closed. Consider the funding the families gave and the fundraising with all kinds of walks, hunts and bucket collections so that people who were dying could have some dignity, with palliative care and the wonderful nurses there. The head nurse there was Ms Lonergan, since retired. Her husband, Seán Lonergan, was a senior officer in housing. They were two great public officials. They collected money in buckets outside many a funeral. When I went to funerals I saw them raising money for St. Brigid's hospice care in Carrick-on-Suir. That funding has not been appropriated back. We had more meetings than anything else.

The Minister at the time promised there would be a state-of-the-art diabetic centre clinic in the big white elephant there beside it, which is a monstrosity. St. Brigid's Hospital in Carrick-on-Suir will be there for centuries to come. It is a solid building. They talk about flooding but that hospital was never flooded in its life. Then they built a cardboard box beside it. That is all it is. You could put your fist through it if you had to. Hey presto, they built it two or three storeys high but it has no lift. If you were building a house for someone in a wheelchair you would have to put in a ramp to make sure it got planning, but they built this with no lift, so we had to put a lift onto it. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, promised us there would be a state-of-the-art diabetic centre, but that is no longer the case. The Minister for Health has stated in replies to parliamentary questions that it is no longer the case. There are no diabetic services now. There is nothing there. We have oceans of officials there and I do not know what else goes on inside in that cardboard box - that is what it is. A little better but not much better. The hospital is empty. Folamh. Dúnta. Tá an doras locked. It is sad. It saddens me. I have had my argument with the Minister of State over it and I do not want to continue on about it but it is a travesty and an injustice. That hospital should be there for the people of Carrick-on-Suir and the communities of south Kilkenny, east Waterford and parts of Tipperary. Is mór an trua an rud sin.

I will move on to the home helps. We have people in hospitals and there are blockages and they cannot go home because they cannot get home helps. We have noticed of late, in the past 18 months, that people have no bother getting approved for home help care but there is no one to do it. They throw them out of the hospital because it looks like they have help. I want to praise the home helps who are there from the highest heaven. They are angels of mercy in the work they do, flying around in their cars on bad roads and for little payment. They do great work and have such empathy for and engagement with their patients. That has all been cut out now, however. The HSE does not even want them to boil the kettle. This is all HSE policy now. They are not carers any more; they just go in and out. I do not know what they are supposed to do but they do it, in spite of ye. The home help hours are approved but then there

is no one to do them and people have to go back into hospitals and clog up the accident and emergency departments.

I firmly believe that something must happen with accident and emergency departments. I was in an emergency department one evening lately at a special memorial service for people who have lost babies. I met this gentleman at the door. He was out of his head and abusing everyone and shouting at everyone. There should be a separate place for people who have taken drink or drugs - though not those who are suffering a psychotic attack - and need to attend an emergency department. At the moment they are inside in the emergency departments with a security guard trying to mind them and they upset everyone up and down the corridors. These people should not be brought into accident and emergency departments. They should be brought someplace else and detoxed or hosed down. I will be accused now of being a Methodist. They should not be in accident and emergency departments. They are causing untold grief to other patients. I sat one night in St. Vincent's public hospital accident and emergency department. My God, it was horrendous for the nurses, the other staff and the elderly patients who were there. They were afraid for their lives. In that case, it was a female patient doing it. Patients who are in psychosis are a different matter but those who are there for drug- or drink-related reasons should not be in there. There should be a special place built for them where they can sleep it off with some limited supervision and be dealt with in some other way. They are making life hell for the nurses, doctors, paramedics and security staff. I do not know how many security staff are needed now in St. Joseph's hospital in Clonmel. When my babies were born there 20 nó 30 bliain ó shin there was no security and everyone was grand. Now some people want to go in there and misbehave and mistreat the receptionists, the security, the other staff and anyone else, even the poor priest administering the last rites. His name will come to me. Something has to be done to tackle that because it is going on in every hospital, especially at the weekends. It was a Friday night when I was there. It should not be happening. I will hand over to my colleague.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to talk on health insurance and few other things because we have a lot of issues. Everyone who can possibly afford it should have health insurance. I welcome any moves by the Department of Health and the Government to put money into private health insurance to help bring down the premiums or the policies, if that is what will follow. I worry whether the insurance companies will take advantage and increase the premiums again because that seems to be what happens following interventions by the Government, in that those kinds of people take advantage.

There is a lot of concern among people who have private health insurance when they need attention. I know a man who is suffering with his back, who will not be able to sleep and who will be up all night. He will not be seen until the end of February even though he has private health insurance. He has to go through Christmas in that kind of pain but it is the case with several others. A lot of the time it does not seem to matter that you have private health insurance and it does not seem to benefit the sick person in the way it should.

We are short of regular staff in many areas, including in our hospitals, home helps and in all health services. I know a few nurses who have retired. There is a new community hospital due to open in Killarney and they have said they would be available to work a number of hours during the week. Do you know what they got back? It was a letter threatening them that their pensions could be stopped if they did not answer this question about pension abatement. A

number of nurses gave their lives to nursing in Kerry - very capable men and women. They are terrified now because they mentioned the fact that they would work a few hours. The end of the letter they got back suggested that their pensions might be cut off completely. I want that to be dealt with because it has happened to a number of people in and around Killarney and Tralee who would like to go back to work. I am asking for that to be dealt with.

I mention the new community hospital-nursing home in Killarney. The building is finished but there is no date for the transfer. I do not know if it can happen in the depths of winter but it needs to happen. Are the staff in place? Are they organised? When will it be fully open? A lot of people, including elected representatives, sick people and elderly people, are asking about this. So many other things depend on that. We were promised a minor injuries clinic, which is to be opened in St. Columbanus, in the nursing home and long-term bed part of the community hospital in Killarney. A primary care clinic is to be opened in St. Finan's. Is that going to happen? Some respite beds were to be opened. It is not happening at all in Kerry to the extent that it should. People are entitled to four weeks' respite. I raised it in September. People tried to get a few days but some of them did not get them. I know one lady who has not left her mother's side for the past five years and she wanted to go away for a week. She could not get anyone to mind her mother and she could not get respite in Kenmare, Killarney or anywhere. That is the other thing. We have a lot of beds in the likes of Kenmare and Dingle community hospitals that are not open. The beds are there but we do not have the staff, or that is what we are being told. We have been told that now for ten or 12 years. We need to sort that out. It is important.

The other thing that happens is that elderly people who are sick go into UHK. When they are better, because they are well looked after there, they are sent to Kenmare, Killarney community hospital, which I mentioned, Listowel or elsewhere to recuperate for a week or two. Invariably the families say their father, mother or aunt needs another week or two there but it is not available. They are under pressure. It is the same all over our network in Kerry. When people leave UHK, they are promised they will get a home care package. Even after the two or three weeks in the community hospital, there is no home care package. It does not arrive. The people go home, and even though they have been approved for so many hours of home help, it is not provided because the staff or the home helps are not there to come out at the times they are supposed to. If an elderly person is living with them, they are responsible for minding their companion, their partner or their husband but that is not right even though it does the person good to walk around, to get out of bed, to go to the toilet or to go to the kitchen for a cup of tea or something. We could save the nation a fortune if people could be looked after at home with proper home help, with two or three visits each day seven days a week and on bank holidays. If you are elderly and sick, you do not just get better at weekends or on bank holidays. You will not be well enough to go out and have a good time, or anything like that. People need the help but, invariably, it is hard to get it. More often than not they do not have the staff to go out on bank holidays or Sundays. We need to deal with that issue. I am not fighting with the Minister of State. I am only asking on behalf of the people who need this.

I believe we have the best palliative care unit in the country. It is a template for how people should be looked after in their final weeks and days. It is a massive unit and I compliment all the nurses and staff who work there. Their heart goes into the people going in there to finish up. It is tough. I have been there a number of times. Invariably, the patients will thank the

staff for doing what they do. We are proud of that unit. When the Minister of State is in Kerry again, she must look at it because it is a template for the rest of the country.

The HSE wants to sell the lands and the buildings at St. Finan's. It does not seem to want to make any use of it. I have never felt that it should sell it because going back in time, Kerry County Council transferred those lands and buildings to the HSE when it took over the health service. There is valuable land there for housing but the HSE wants to sell the whole lot together. The Land Development Agency says it only wants the land. The Minister of State should not to let that happen and not let the Land Development Agency get it like that. We have a lot of young fellas and young girls who want to build their own homes. When you are above €36,000 or €37,000, you will not even get on the housing list. There are people above that, middle income earners, and those sites should be made at least affordable for people in that category, so they could build their own houses. It is impossible to get planning permission in or around Killarney. I ask that it be organised in some way. Get the local authority involved. These sites should be made available to people who want to build their own houses. There are a lot of people waiting on the social housing list. There are lot of houses being built there but the people who have been totally left behind are the working man and woman who want to build their own house. It is failing completely in Kerry. It is not happening there and I ask the Minister of State to deal with that too.

Deputy Martin Daly: I want to reflect on the Bill, which I fully support it. It is vital that we maintain community rating through a risk equalisation scheme and the stamp duty paid. I also want to ask and reflect on why 46% of people feel they must insure in this country. As a practising GP who has been involved in medical politics for many years, it is my view that one third of people cannot afford insurance and are covered fully by the public system. One third of people may always insure, no matter what public system we have in place, and I think that experience is borne out in other countries. One third of people feel that if they had a choice and the capacity was there in the public health service, they would not insure and they are certainly hard pressed to insure themselves.

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They do so because they do not have confidence in the public health system to deliver healthcare for them when and where they need it. That is what we need to reflect on.

We also need to reflect on Sláintecare. I am a publicly funded doctor. I have worked mainly in public practice with the medical card system. I believe in a public health service but I believe we need to reflect on Sláintecare. The capacity is not there. It is difficult to see how we will create a capacity for the 46% of the population who feel they must insure themselves. Many sons and daughters fund private health insurance for their elderly parents because their parents cannot afford it and want access.

I am also concerned about private health insurance companies. There are in or around 336 plans and, to me, that represents a lack of transparency. I have had multiple patients come in to me to find out at critical times of illness that they do not have insurance cover for particular procedures in private hospitals and it was not that clear to them when their policies were being sold. I have sent them to the Health Insurance Authority and advised them to seek help there. However, that there are 336 plans means to me that people are being confused by what they are being offered and it does not serve the consumer well.

On the public side, productivity remains an issue, and one of the issues around productivity is that we can keep throwing money at an archaic structural organisation like the HSE but unless we achieve digitalisation and really improve productivity in our hospitals and our clinics, we will not get value for money. In fairness to the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and as the Minister of State has said, there has been a significant increase in public funding, but without the commensurate increase in productivity.

I want to reflect briefly, because I am running out of time, and I do appreciate this time, that the major health insurance companies are now investing fortunes in advertising and in these big centres in urban areas offering all sorts of services. That is fine, but there is no risk equalisation for the rural person who is living in a county like Roscommon or east Galway, where there is no access to private beds. Are they subsidising access for people who are living in urban areas to these super-duper 365-day centres run by various health insurers?

Finally, people say private health insurers are so efficient. The public health service provides the bulk of healthcare in this country. Let us get that straight. If you have a stroke in this country in the morning, there is no private facility that will admit you to hospital, and the same applies for hospice care. People need to remember that. They need to remember that our public hospital service underpins everything that happens in this State and it is exceedingly good value for money for what we get.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank Deputy Daly. I hope he will stay because otherwise I will be speaking to an empty Chamber and I will-

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am always here to listen.

Deputy Mary Butler: I know you are. I was just saying that.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Listen and learn.

Deputy Mary Butler: We also have the Minister, Jim O'Callaghan, coming in, so there is someone in the Chamber to hear me.

It was great to finish on words of wisdom and lived experience from Deputy Daly. He is always there to give us all advice in relation to healthcare, and it is great to hear somebody speaking to the Bill.

I have been six years in the Department of Health. This is possibly my fifth or sixth time speaking on this Bill. I look forward to a stage when we will not have to speak on it, that we will get the legislation that means we will not have to come in every year and speak to it. However, it is important legislation, as we know. It is a technical Bill with eight sections focused on the specific area of health insurance.

A couple of points are worth mentioning. We know for a fact that a large proportion of people in Ireland have private health insurance, but it is important to put on the record of the House that 1.57 million people in Ireland have a medical card and over 700,000 people have a doctor-only card. I was struck by the point that some of the Deputies made, namely, that there was a

cohort of people who could not afford private health insurance and who did not qualify for the medical card, but a lot of people qualify for doctor-only cards and have not applied for them. That is really important to say.

I also want to say, as somebody who has been in the Department of Health for six years now and having completed six budgets, that it is important to note what has been achieved to reduce the cost of healthcare for families over recent years, for example, free contraception up to the age of 35 and no more inpatient bed charges in our hospitals. You used to be charged up to ten days a year, and people found that quite hard. There is also the reduction in the drugs payment scheme for families, which is capped at €80 a month. All that has to be factored in as well. It is important to put such things on the record of the Dáil.

I thank all those who work in our health services all over the country, whether they are public, private or voluntary. They do a huge amount of work. I fervently believe that every person who goes to work in healthcare every day goes to do the best job they possibly can. However, I agree with our last speaker about the challenges we have in relation to productivity and, in some instances, culture. Those are areas where we have to see change.

As regards the Bill, I find every year that people do not always understand what we are trying to achieve. I refer to the risk equalisation scheme. To explain it in simple language, a community-rated market means that everyone pays the same price for the same policy regardless of age or health. That is really important. However, it costs more to insure older and sicker people, and without the support of the risk equalisation scheme, insurers with more high-risk customers would face higher costs and premiums could rise. This is why we have the risk equalisation scheme. It helps to resolve this.

I always see the glass as half full. I am very proud of the fact that we have one of the highest life expectancies in Europe. I am also very proud of the work that has been done over previous years on home care, day care and meals on wheels, that triangle of support that keeps people at home for as long as possible. The number of people who were under fair deal in a nursing home in 2019 is almost equal to the number of people in a nursing home in 2025 because people are living longer at home with the correct wraparound supports. I am not saying everything is perfect - far from it - but we have done a huge amount of work to support older people to remain in their communities. You only have to look at the number of home care hours that will be delivered this year. Yes, there are challenges in rural areas and at the weekend, but the fact that we have an ageing population who are living so much longer is something that should be cherished and that we should all acknowledge. That is because a lot of really good people are delivering really good services every day of the week.

I will leave it there. I believe we will have the Bill for Committee, Report and Final Stages tomorrow evening.

Question put and agreed to.

Victims of Sexual Violence Civil Protection Orders Bill 2025: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Matt Carthy: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

This is simple legislation. It is a small step to support victims and survivors of sexual violence. It comes directly from the experience of victims and survivors. This is their Bill. It is a testament to their courage, persistence and strength to deliver change for others. In particular, I thank Sonya Stokes, Leona O'Callaghan and Shaneda Daly, who worked with me on this Bill. I welcome them and others who will be joining us in the Public Gallery for this debate this evening. I also thank all those who have expressed their support for this Bill, including Rape Crisis Ireland and Women's Aid.

This Bill simply provides that at the same time as someone is convicted of a crime of sexual violence, a court can impose an order restraining that person who is convicted of the offence from approaching the victim in the case. The provision currently exists in harassment legislation in section 28 of the Criminal Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2023 but it is not currently available to victims of sexual violence.

We know that only a small percentage of those who experience sexual violence get justice; that has to change. For that small percentage who get to court, it is often a difficult and traumatic process. Court cases take too long. There are insufficient resources to support every victim or ensure that they have equal access to accompaniment at court. Many feel that is they rather than their attacker who is on trial. We know that the disclosure of counselling notes adds hugely to the trauma of the judicial experience. The justice committee has called for the full ban on the disclosure of counselling notes and I hope that the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, will listen to survivors and to the committee and ensure that is reflected in the legislation being brought forward by him.

Where there is a conviction, that is not the end for victims and survivors. In fact, that is where the long and often difficult journey to rebuild their lives starts. Victims of rape, sexual assault and childhood sexual abuse have spoken to me about the anxiety, stress and fear they feel as their assailants come to the end of their sentences. They fear contact from their perpetrators and they fear encountering that perpetrator as they go about their day-to-day lives. They have told me about the impact this has on their lives, how they feel they are on a countdown clock to the release of that person. Victims and survivors have said very clearly to me that they want to know the perpetrator in their case will not be able to speak to them, will not be able to approach them and will not be able to harass them.

I will give the example of just one survivor to show why this Bill matters. It is one of the many emails I received this week. In this case, after enduring the process of giving statements and completing a rape kit, her attacker was actually released on bail and then went on the run. It took six years for the case to come to court. Her attacker was sentenced to four years and served just two. This is what she said happened after his release:

After his release he later attempted to follow me on social media. I was shocked. I immediately contacted my Garda liaison and local station to report it, but I was told that there wasn't enough evidence to be raised in any appeals or hearings he might have. Instead, I was told that I would need to apply for a barring order myself. This enraged me. How could I, the victim of rape, not only endure six years of waiting, a minimal sentence and even a quicker release, but also be told that I needed to apply for a barring order, that there wasn't enough evidence of him attempting to contact me. It was disgraceful and still is.

It is the experiences of this woman and many others who have approached TDs from all political parties this week that we must listen to. I ask all TDs to listen to the testimonies of victims and survivors, listen to their experiences and above all listen to their demands and ensure that we pass Second Stage of this Bill tonight and make it law.

Deputy Mark Ward: I thank Deputy Carthy and Senator Maria McCormack for the work they have put into this legislation. Most of all, I thank the women who have shared their horrific experiences of sexual violence. I welcome many of them into the viewing Gallery today.

The women I met today have unselfishly acknowledged that, in some cases, this legislation comes too late for them, but they are thinking of women who will come after them. As night follows day, there will be more such women. This Bill provides that when someone is convicted of a crime of sexual assault, a court could impose an order restraining the person convicted of the offence from approaching the victim. I do not think that is too much to ask. This is not just common sense; it is simply the right thing to do. Victims and survivors have made it clear that having such a provision in law would make a significant difference in their lives.

I was contacted by a woman in my constituency who asked that I share her story but also that she remain anonymous. She was sexually assaulted and the perpetrator was out of jail awaiting sentence. He was required to sign on every day in the Garda station close to her home. She would see him regularly. Three days after he pleaded guilty to aggravated sexual assault, he walked into the local shop. She froze and wanted to scream but moved herself to a safe space before she ran all the way home. Just before sentencing, she was out walking and almost bumped into him. She nearly walked out into oncoming traffic in her bid to protect herself, knowing that the last time he was that close to her, he was attacking her. While the judge recommended he does not come back to the area on his release, she is already dreading this day. It took her months to feel safe walking in her area again. She hopes to never have to feel fear like this again.

As a victim of such an horrendous crime, she was strong that night. She persevered through our justice system, not only to get justice for herself but to protect others. She deserves to feel safe again. She and other victims and survivors feel that without the protection this Bill offers, they will continue to live in fear while their attackers are free.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: I commend my colleagues Matt Carthy and Maria McCormack on enabling this vital Bill to be brought here this evening. Their work and the work of the brave campaigners made this happen. I salute the very brave women who made the powerful and difficult step of speaking out. For them, this Bill will come too late but in an unselfish act, they want this Bill to be brought in to protect others so they do not have to go through what they went through.

Imagine being a young child, happily playing games dreaming of what you want to be when you grow up, feeling safe and loved when suddenly that world is shattered. The person you believed loved you and protected you is doing something you do not understand. You do not like it. It hurts. Maybe you have been threatened by someone saying, "This is our secret. You cannot tell anyone". This is the reality for some young children. They grow up with this, knowing it feels wrong but they do not know why. When they finally understand, they are

faced with impossible questions: "What do I do? Who do I tell? Will anyone believe me? Will this tear my family apart? Will this be all my fault?"

For those who make it to court, who face their abuser, who answer very harrowing questions despite the fact that it brings them right back to that vulnerable child and the traumatic detail, there is another betrayal - their counselling notes laid bare before the court. It is another trust broken and another reason for others to stay silent. When the sentence is finally handed down, we would hope that it brings relief and that it marks the beginning of healing, but that is not the case because for many survivors, it becomes in the words of one woman the ticking clock, counting down to the release date. The abuser who may never see themselves as the problem may walk straight back out of prison with nothing in place to stop them returning to their victim - no safeguards, no protection, nothing.

Right now across Ireland, there are children cowering in their bedrooms, children being abused, victims of domestic violence being beaten and coerced. Someone somewhere is about to disclose for the first time what is happening to them and we must ensure they are protected, safe and believed. We need to see more domestic violence shelters in Clare and right across the State, and we need real investment in the protective service units. We need legislation to be robust, survivor-centred legislation that puts their safety first.

To the women in the Gallery and all survivors, their courage, their voice, their determination to protect others is helping to shape a safer future and we will not stop until all survivors know they are believed, they are protected and they are safe.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I commend my colleagues Matt Carthy and Maria McCormack on bringing this critical Bill forward. Above all, I welcome the women in the Gallery and thank them from the bottom of my heart for all that they have done and all that they continue to do. I want them to know that it really matters and that it will bring about the change that we need to make when we stand together.

I believe the Minister knows that we have confidence and faith in him that he will make the changes that are needed here so that we are not coming back year after year doing the same thing over and over again. He will know that domestic and sexual violence is not treated as a crime and there is not zero tolerance because if there were, we would not be standing here again. He also knows that women and children have a right to feel safe. The bottom line is that they have a right to feel safe. This Bill will obviously help that in the situation where the perpetrators more often than not are not obliged to fulfil even the lenient sentences that they get.

The Minister will know that we operate in systems that condone domestic and sexual violence. I see it all the time in courts. I see decisions made where it is quite obvious that those who are making the decisions do not understand the dynamics of domestic violence and they do not understand the minds of the abusers who are in front of them. I have seen so many letters come before court that say: "he was a member of the GAA club" or "he is an outstanding citizen", and all of these excuses that are made. When domestic violence and sexual violence crimes are committed, they are committed by the perpetrator knowing what they are doing. They make that choice. They choose to do this, and they will continue to do it until the sanctions reflect the gravity of what they do. The destruction of the lives of women and children has to stop, and it has to stop now. The cost of gender-based violence to individual

lives, to families and to communities is just too high and it continues decade after decade and year after year. It is time to shout "stop". Obviously, we need more services. We need resources. We need all of that desperately. There are too many counties that do not even have a refuge within them. We need the perpetrators to stop, and they will only stop if we make them stop. It is within the will of the justice system here to make them stop if the sanctions are severe enough. We have to create communities that are free of the crime of domestic and sexual violence and of gender-based violence.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I welcome the ladies in the Visitors Gallery and I thank them for having their voices heard. Three years on from the Government launching its zero-tolerance strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence much remains to be done. We still do not have a domestic violence refuge in every county. Though I welcome the Government recommitting to the provision of refuge services in both counties Cavan and Monaghan, we need to see action. We need to accept the recommendations of the Oireachtas justice committee in relation to the ban on the use of counselling notes in trials. We need to see greater investment in the protective service unit of An Garda Síochána and so much more. When speaking with survivors of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, one of the most harrowing aspects is the number of instances whereby a person is effectively forced to relive their trauma if they report it to An Garda Síochána, during trial, after trial, after sentencing and when that person is released. If the person who abused them chooses to force them to relive their trauma there and then, in their own community, in their local shop or anywhere at all, they have no recourse available to them. I commend my party and constituency colleague, Sinn Féin spokesperson on justice, Deputy Matt Carthy, and I also commend Senator Maria McCormack for bringing this legislation forward which seeks to address this injustice. The mechanism of the civil protection order is not contentious, given it is already utilised in harassment legislation and, crucially, by allowing for its imposition at sentencing it can alleviate the fear, anxiety or stress that survivors might feel looking ahead to a day when a person who abused them is released back into society. I welcome that the Government is not opposing this Bill. It will not be a solution for the large number of challenges facing us in tackling domestic, sexual and gender-based violence but it can be one important component in providing some level of relief to survivors. We now need to see it passed through the Houses as quickly as possible.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I welcome all the women who are here with us today and thank them for all the work they have done in ensuring this Bill comes forward and hopefully it will be passed. I also thank my colleagues, Deputy Matt Carthy and Senator Maria McCormack, for introducing this Bill to the Dáil.

As the Minister is aware, today is International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, but as he is equally aware, too often that day passes simply with condemnation but no action. Here tonight we have the ability to act. We need to make sure today is different and that these women's voices are heard and are acted upon because we need to recognise the fact that there are so many institutional barriers placed in front of women, victims and survivors. They are unnecessary barriers which can and should be changed by this Chamber and we must change them. This Bill is a first step, and it is incredibly crucial because survivors have been clear in their ask. We have heard them. We need to listen to them, and we need to act upon that. Victims and survivors have spoken of the dread and fear that surrounds the date of release of the perpetrator; a day that is etched in their mind. They fear for themselves, for their family

and for their children. We must do all in our power to support these survivors. The impact of this was particularly powerfully put in an email I received today. It said:

that is a day that I already fear. People say I need to live for now and enjoy my time while he is away. It sounds a bit like a waiting game for me to live my life until that dreadful day when my world becomes turned upside down yet again.

These are harrowing words which highlight the urgency of this Bill. The system should never add to the concern for the victim around their attacker's release date. Victims and survivors should be given the freedom to move on from that horrible experience, both physically and mentally. This is an important first step and we need to ensure we build on it. Every time I deal with survivors of gender-based violence, I come across institutional barriers that have been put in their way. One of the cruellest impacts of the housing crisis is the restraint it can place on women who are fleeing gender-based violence. That is too often forgotten in that debate and something we also need to work on.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: I welcome everyone in the Visitors Gallery and say to them that their voice matters. I strongly welcome this motion and opportunity to speak on this critical issue. I thank my colleagues Deputy Matt Carthy and Senator Maria McCormack for all the work they have done on this Bill. The Victims of Sexual Violence Civil Protection Orders Bill 2025 is a small but profoundly important step. Across Carlow and Kilkenny, organisations providing a lifeline to victims are being stretched to their limits. As calls for help rise, the system is failing those it is meant to protect. The journey to seek justice is itself a form of retraumatisation. Victims face years of long waits for a court date. They are then confronted with the appalling practice of their private counselling notes being disclosed and even shared with their perpetrator. Many victims state that this is why they avoid seeking counselling at all. Let me be clear: this Irish justice system is failing women. After the traumatic court process, the sentences handed down are shamefully lenient. We consistently see violent, horrific crimes met with light sentence for the flimsiest of reasons. I recently watched a summary of sexual assault cases over a single week compiled by Aoife Dunne. It was chilling in its sheer volume. I send my solidarity to Aoife after enduring a horrific backlash for simply shining a light on the sheer volume of these horrible crimes. This underscores the need for this Bill. Victims live in constant anxiety about their attacker's release. While other legal avenues may exist, they are not the right fit. Victims must not be forced back into court to fight again for basic safety. This Bill is about providing that sense of safety proactively. By allowing a restraining order at the point of conviction we give survivors the security to rebuild their lives. There is no justifiable reason to deny it to victims of sexual violence. We must do more than process victims through a broken system. I urge the Minister to support this Bill and ensure our justice system delivers true justice.

Minister for Justice (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I welcome to the Visitors Gallery the women who have campaigned very vigorously to stop violence against women and girls. It is also very appropriate that this House is discussing the issue of violence against women and girls today, which, as Deputy Farrell says, is International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. That is a day that is not just recognised in Ireland but is recognised internationally. One of the things I have come to appreciate more since I became Minister for justice is that the scourge of violence against women and girls is not just an issue that faces us

in Ireland. Regrettably, it is an international issue that needs to be tackled, not just on a national basis but also an international basis. It is important to state that the Government's approach to combating violence against women and girls is that there should be a zero tolerance approach to gender-based violence and the attitudes that underpin it.

On the Bill being debated in the House, I thank and commend Deputy Carthy for introducing the Private Members' Bill. Before I deal with the specifics of the Bill, which, I am pleased to say, I will not oppose, I want to say something that is probably recognised by the mover of the Bill and every Member of the House. The solution and campaign to stop violence against women and girls is in part to be found in our legislative system. It is in part to be found in enacting legislation that will, we hope, change and punish certain human behaviour. However, it must also go beyond that because it is a societal issue that requires us to spread the message of the unacceptability of violence in domestic relationships or gender-based violence. That requires education and instruction being given to boys and young men about the inappropriateness of using violence, not just in general society but, in particular, in relationships.

As Deputy Carthy has outlined, the Bill he introduced seeks to introduce protections for the victims of sexual violence. It provides that when someone is convicted and sentenced for a crime of sexual violence, at sentencing the judge could impose an order restraining the person convicted of the offence from communicating with or approaching the victim. The legislation appears to me to be modelled on amendments made to the offence of harassment by my predecessor, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, when she was Minister for justice. I want the House to be aware that this week, I brought a memorandum to Government seeking approval not to oppose the Bill on Second Stage. I can confirm that this was endorsed by the Government today.

The Bill is well intentioned and aligns with the Government's zero tolerance approach to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. However, I have some concerns about the added value of the Bill. I know Deputy Carthy will listen to my concerns. They derive from the fact that we already have a range of existing statutory measures designed to protect victims. As has been indicated by Deputy Carthy when he referred to some statutory provisions, I too want to refer to the laws in place at present and how they can be used for the purpose of trying to give effect to the legislative purpose behind the Deputy's Bill.

I would like to refer to harassment orders, pursuant to the Sexual Offences Act 2017. The House will be aware that section 46 of that Act, which introduced harassment orders for the victims of sexual violence, deals with the particular circumstances that can arise. Under that legislation, a court can impose an order prohibiting a convicted sex offender from contacting or approaching his or her victim for a specified period, exactly the same type of behaviour Deputy Carthy's Bill seeks to address. The order can be imposed at the time of sentence or at any time prior to the offender's release. Such orders may be imposed where the court is satisfied that the offender has behaved in such a way as to give rise to a well-founded fear that the victim may be subject to harassment or unwanted contact by the offender, such as would cause fear, distress or alarm or amount to intimidation. Appropriate balancing of rights is contained in the section and the standard of proof is specifically set out to be a civil standard on the balance of probabilities. The order can be applied for by a garda, probation officer or victim and can extend for a period of up to 12 months post release. Breach of a harassment order is an offence punishable summarily or on indictment, with a jail term of up to five years. The offence is,

accordingly, an arrestable offence under the Criminal Law Act 1997, for which a person may be arrested without a warrant.

I also want to consider other legislation available, in particular what is referred to as the sex offender register. More broadly, there is a comprehensive framework in place for the management and monitoring of sex offenders in this jurisdiction, which also comprises specific protective mechanisms. The Sex Offenders (Amendment) Act 2023 strengthened our already robust system for monitoring sex offenders. A person convicted of an offence set out in the Schedule to the Sex Offenders Act must notify An Garda Síochána of their movements, including any changes to their name or address and any travel to, from or within the State within three days. The Garda National Protective Services Bureau has a dedicated unit, the sex offender management and intelligence unit, which has oversight and monitoring responsibility at national level for the management of registered sex offenders who are subject to notification requirements.

In addition, the sex offender risk assessment and management system operates to support enhanced levels of co-operation and co-ordination between key statutory organisations involved in managing the risk posed to a community by convicted sex offenders. Where An Garda Síochána believes a convicted sex offender poses a serious and imminent risk to the public, an application can be made to the courts for a sex offender order under section 16 of the 2001 Act. This is a civil order applied for in the Circuit Court. A sex offender order prohibits the offender from doing anything the court considers necessary to protect the public. A prohibition may, for example, forbid an offender from going to a specified place. The order is expressed to last for a period of five years or such longer period as the court may specify. Breach of an order is an offence prosecutable summarily or on indictment, with a jail term of up to five years. The offence is, therefore, an arrestable offence.

I also want to refer to other provisions in place. Under Part 5 of the Criminal Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2023, a new system of civil orders was introduced, which is designed to protect victims. Part 5 civil orders provide the preventative stand-alone civil remedy available in respect of relevant conduct such as stalking, harassment or intimidation and, notably, does not require any criminal prosecution or conviction. Part 5 also provides for the making of orders on an *ex parte* basis, where the court is satisfied that there is an immediate risk to the safety and welfare of the applicant. In addition, the court may grant an interim order, pending the final determination of the application, where the court deems it necessary and proportionate for the safety and welfare of the applicant.

I have to point out that there are also orders which are available pursuant to domestic violence legislation. Deputies will be familiar with such legislation. Barring, safety and protection orders are available in the civil courts.

I would like to assure the House that the Government continues to work with determination to strengthen the response of the State of violence against women and girls. The zero tolerance strategy is very effective. Obviously, we need to do more to ensure the scourge of violence against women and girls is treated with the contempt it deserves and individuals know they will be severely punished if they engage in such types of violence. I will also introduce other legislation, which will be of benefit, to ensure that people are not subjected to domestic violence, such as Jennie's law which will provide a register of court judgments so that people

will be able to get information about individuals who previously committed serious assaults within an intimate relationship.

I ask Deputy Carthy to consider the points I mentioned. As I said, the Government will not oppose the Bill. I cannot give him a guarantee that when it gets to Committee Stage I will be able to accept it as it is, but if we take on board some of the proposals and messages I have given, there could be some progress in respect of the Bill.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Cuirim fáilte roimh na mná sa Gallery. This is a specific and important Bill. The crime of sexual violence and the scar it leaves on its victims are severe and devastating. It scars the person and impacts severely on their family and friends as well. I listened to the Minister's speech. People scarred by a perpetrator should not be expected to haul themselves back through the courts to obtain a restraining order or barring order. The Bill would empower the courts to impose such measures instead of placing the burden on the victim to do so. A couple of days ago, a judge in our courts placed that requirement on a person found guilty of such a crime.

Molaim mo chomrádaithe an Teachta Carthy agus an Seanadóir McCormack as an mBille seo a chur os comhair na Dála. Today is International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. I take this opportunity to talk about Teach Tearmainn, which is the only refuge centre in Kildare for women and children experiencing domestic violence and abuse. Unfortunately, the demand for its services has increased dramatically over the past number of years. In 2024, more than 32,000 women contacted Women's Aid. In Kildare, we currently only have four refuge units for women and children fleeing domestic abuse. That is not just for north Kildare but for the entire county. Their incredibly dedicated and hard-working case workers offer outreach services but they need more support and more spaces.

It is vital that the disclosure of counselling notes in court is banned. I spoke in favour of an Teachta Coppinger's Bill a few months ago in this regard. It is essential to protecting victims and ensuring their right to privacy between their counsellor and themselves. It was indicated in the House this morning that the Minister is looking to introduce legislation that would finally end this practice. I very much welcome that. I urge him to ensure it is airtight and leaves no grey areas. Níl aon saoirse ann gan saoirse na mban.

Deputy David Cullinane: Respectfully, the Minister seems to have missed the point of the Bill. He has argued that victims who have reason to fear for their safety following the release of a convicted perpetrator have several legal avenues available to them to seek protection. The problem is that for many victims, those legal protections, as the Minister called them, are simply not fit for purpose because they force the victim to go back to court, retraumatise that person and put the onus and responsibility back on the victim, which is wrong. We need to ensure victims feel safe and can get on with their life rather than having to look over their shoulder, worried about whether they must go back to court to get a restraining order. The Bill makes sense and complements everything else in terms of existing supports.

I have spoken to many women who told of their sense of fear, not feeling safe and the worry when they hear the perpetrator is going to be released. Women must speak up, obviously, but so too must men. We have to call out the perpetrators of sexual violence and, of course, say it is wrong. We also must ensure perpetrators of sexual violence are properly held to account. It

makes sense that the Bill be supported. At the core of most, if not all, sexual offences against women is control. We must take any amount of control we can away from the perpetrator, and this is one way of doing that. It makes perfect sense.

I commend Deputy Carthy on bringing the Bill before the Dáil and giving us an opportunity to discuss it. I welcome Senator McCormack and all the women in the Public Gallery. They want action. They are telling us the essence of the Bill makes sense. We must listen to victims, make sure the laws of the State, particularly when it comes to sexual offences, are geared around the rights and needs of victims and, as I said, take away any power the perpetrators have. I fully support the Bill and commend it to the House. I again thank Deputy Carthy for proposing it.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I welcome the Bill as a common-sense measure to help protect victims of sexual violence. I thank my colleague Deputy Carthy for bringing it forward and my colleague Senator McCormack for her involvement. Deputy Carthy and his team worked on it as a direct response to the engagement they had with victims and advocates. One of those women spoke really honestly about her fear and dread knowing that the man who raped her as a child will be released in the coming years. There is nothing that can prevent him from approaching her in a shop or on the street while she goes about her life. She said, "There is nothing you can do that will make me feel safe the day he walks outside those prison gates".

Unfortunately, she is right. The Bill is not retrospective. It will help to ensure no other victims must endure the same fear and worry when the person who attacked them is released. It must be passed. I acknowledge the Minister is not opposing it but let us work together to support the victims. Every day there is a delay in enacting the Bill means other women and men will not be able to avail of its protections. We have a problem with delays in enacting legislation in this area. For example, we do not have a ban on the use of victims' counselling notes in courts. That has made victims reluctant to go to counselling for fear that what they say will be used in a courtroom.

There are many actions we need to take in the broader area of tackling sexual violence and abuse, not least addressing the lack of domestic violence shelters, expanding the capacity of specialist sexual violence centres and investing in the protective service of the Garda. Survivors' voices must be at the heart of shaping policies in this area. We need to listen to survivors. The Bill proposes a very clear change in the law whereby victims will feel they have a real impact on their own lives. We must ensure we work together to implement it as soon as possible.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Táim sásta labhairt ar son an Bhille thábhachtaigh atá os ár gcomhair anocht. Céim chun cinn atá inti a chuirfidh le cumhachtú agus cosaint na n-íospartach foréigean gnéasach. The psychological and physical safety of victim survivors must be the first aim of our justice system. That is the fundamental principle the Bill addresses. While we have made progress in managing sex offenders, there are still clear and glaring gaps that need closing and it is our duty as legislators to fill those gaps.

For every person who suffers at the hands of an abuser, the offender's release date is a day that looms large. The victims feel anxiety, stress and paralysing terror at the thought of unwanted contact with their assailant as they go about their daily lives. Can we even imagine

the terror of knowing they might cross paths with the person who inflicted unspeakable violence upon them? More often than not, the offender is known to the victim or is from the victim's community. This creates a real risk of being harmed again or, at the very least, being retraumatised. Victims and survivors who have already endured so much should not have to live in this perpetual state of fear.

The Bill is a direct response to the powerful calls of those affected by sex crimes. It provides that a civil protection order may be granted at the time of sentencing. Victims do not want to be dragged back to the courts for a long adversarial ordeal. They want to focus on healing and rebuilding their lives. The Bill provides a mechanism for their peace of mind. It offers them a fundamental sense of safety by ensuring the perpetrator cannot approach them, thereby restoring some control lost during the abuse.

Sexual and gender-based violence is on the rise. Thousands of attacks are recorded every year and we know this type of violence is severely underreported. When victims come forward, they are being courageous. They are not only asserting their dignity but protecting the rest of society from future violence. They have done enough. Impím ar na Teachtaí ar fad vótáil i bhfabhar an Bhille seo. We owe it to the brave women who have stepped up and spoken out, some of whom are here tonight, and who should not have to live in fear. Caithfidh sábháilteacht na n-íospartach a bheith mar chéad fheidhm an chórais. This provision currently exists in harassment legislation. There is absolutely no reason it should not be a mandatory tool in cases of sexual violence.

Deputy George Lawlor: I welcome all the people in the Public Gallery and thank them for all they have done in campaigning for victims of sexual violence and change.

I am pleased to speak in strong support of this Bill and thank Sinn Féin for bringing it forward to the floor of the House. My colleagues in the Labour Party will also be supporting it. This legislation is not just a legal reform; it is a lifeline for survivors. It is about ensuring justice does not end at conviction but continues to protect those who have endured unimaginable harm.

Sexual violence is one of the most devastating crimes in our society. It is not only an assault on the body; it is an assault on dignity, trust and the very sense of safety every person deserves. The scale of this problem in Ireland is staggering. Some 40% of adults have experienced sexual violence at some point in their lives. For women, that figure is a staggering 52% and for men, it is 28%, while 26% of adults have experienced sexual violence as adults. Most harrowing of all is that 18% of women and 3% of men report non-consensual sexual intercourse as adults. These are not just numbers; they represent lives, shattered lives, futures altered and trust broken. Yet, despite this prevalence, reporting remains low and delayed. One in five survivors waits more than ten years to disclose abuse. Nearly half of those abused as children under 13 take more than a decade to report to gardaí.

Even when cases are reported, justice is far from guaranteed. In 2024, only 8% of sexual offences reported to gardaí were detected. Meanwhile, demand for support services is surging. Rape crisis centres recorded 13,098 helpline contacts and 14,778 counselling appointments last year. That is a 48% increase. These figures tell us one thing clearly, namely, that survivors need more than words. They need action and protection that lasts beyond the courtroom.

This Bill introduces civil protection orders for victims of serious sexual offences. These orders will prohibit contact and proximity. Offenders will be barred from contacting victims or approaching their homes, workplaces or schools and breaches are made a criminal offence. That is vital. Violating these orders will carry penalties, including fines and imprisonment. It is time to treat breaches also as aggregating factors. Repeat violations will weigh heavily in sentencing.

Imagine a young woman trying to return to college after a trial - as a father of three daughters, I would find this harrowing so I can only imagine how a victim would feel - or woman walking her child to school or a man rebuilding his life, always wondering if the person who violated them might appear on the street alongside them or around the next corner. This is the reality for many survivors today. Without civil protection, justice ends at sentencing but the fear continues. This Bill gives survivors a legal shield, a sense of safety and the freedom to move forward. These orders are issued only after conviction for serious sexual offences. They are time-bound and subject to judicial oversight. The rights of the offenders are of course respected, but they do not and must not override the right of victims to live without fear.

This Bill builds on decades of progress, from the Criminal Law (Rape) Act 1981 to the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017, but none of these measures provided a comprehensive civil remedy for victims post-conviction. Tonight is an effort to change that. Internationally, similar laws have proven effective. They reduce harassment, increase victim confidence and demonstrate justice systems can be survivor-centred. Ireland should be no different. These statistics demand urgency. As a proud member of the voluntary board of Wexford Women's Refuge and as someone who works closely with Wexford Rape Crisis Centre, I can tell the House that the number of people availing of these services is staggering. Both services are beyond capacity, with amazing staff put to the pin of their collars to work and deal with the victims. This is despite both services moving into fabulous new-build facilities over the past few years. In that move, Wexford Women's Refuge tripled its capacity and already needs more beds to service the demand in the Wexford area. The Rape Crisis Centre is itself in crisis, trying to meet the demands on its services, with one new case coming into their services every day in Wexford alone. The need is beyond great.

Passing this Bill is not just a legislative act; it is a moral imperative. It says to the survivors, "We hear you, we believe you and we will protect you." This Bill is more than law. It is about humanity and ensuring justice does not end at the courtroom door. It is about giving survivors the peace they deserve and reaffirming our commitment to a society in which violence is met with accountability and compassion. It is essential that all of us in this House support this Bill and that we stand together for justice, safety and the dignity of every person who has suffered the unimaginable. Passing this legislation will not erase the pain of the past but it will help build a future where victims are protected, perpetrators are held accountable and our communities are stronger and safer.

We should lead from the front on this, as public representatives and as parties. We should have a zero tolerance - as public representatives of parties - for perpetrators of domestic violence, sexual violence and all violence against any gender. When filling in my ethics form at the end of the year or my returns, I have to put down if I have an acre of land or a house, but if I have a barring order, protection order or safety order against me, I do not have to mention

it. It is ludicrous to think that in the context of ethics, we are not leading from the front. I urge the Minister to consider this also in the context of this legislation.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Ar dtús báire, gabhaim buíochas le Sinn Féin as ucht an Bille seo a chur faoi bhráid na Dála anocht.

Today is International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. While I acknowledge things are changing slowly and that we have had the establishment of Cuan and the zero tolerance strategy, the fact of the matter is that when it comes to violence against women, far too often we are reactive and not proactive. Violence against women is at a crisis level in this country. I know from my clinics the number of women who come to me in genuine fear. They are petrified, have no place to go and are often the ones who are forced to leave the family home in which abuse has been perpetrated against them.

Victims and survivors of sexual violence in this country have a real and genuine fear of the release of their perpetrator. Along with several others, I attended a briefing some weeks ago organised by Deputy Carthy and Senator McCormack, and I was genuinely shocked by what we heard. We heard from Leona O'Callaghan, Sonya Stokes and Shaneda Daly. Leona, whom I know personally from Limerick, is a survivor of sexual violence who came forward against her abuser. He was sentenced in 2018 and received a 17-year sentence. The man who abused her is not particularly old. He is a strong, violent man and he was supposed to be released in 2027. That has been pushed out nearer to 2030. When he is released, there is nothing to stop him being in a SuperValu store near Leona, using the same gym as her, going to the same church as her or whatever else. While nothing can be done retrospectively in this legislation, we have the power to change things going forward. We can introduce a provision in law whereby a person against whom an offence of sexual violence is found to have been committed may be granted a civil protection order. While every survivor may not want that, the option would be available and would give peace of mind to those who need it. This would ensure that perpetrators of sexual violence would not be able to approach their victim, stand behind them in a queue or be in close proximity to the victim.

9 o'clock

The victims of sexual violence often feel ignored, retraumatised and dismissed because the legal system is designed, by virtue of its adversarial nature, almost to break them. Their counselling notes can still be used against them in a rape trial. I acknowledge the work that Deputy Coppinger has done in this regard. There are nine counties in Ireland that have no refuge space. That is shameful.

Today is International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. What better way of signalling our support for this important day than by actually doing something, by doing what we can to move this Bill to the next stage? This is a practical legislative step. Together we can make a change. We must stand with all victims of sexual violence. We must have zero tolerance within our own organisations. When victims come forward, they must be listened to and believed. I was struck when I met this particular group of survivors about the real, genuine and palpable fear that each of these women have of the person who abused them appearing before them. One of the things that stuck with me was the description these survivors gave of the eyes, of looking into the eyes of the individual who perpetrated such violence against them, and the fact that they are terrified that the eyes of these people in some cases are coming

between them and their night's sleep. We have an opportunity here to do something tangible and practical.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I begin by acknowledging the presence of all those in the Visitors Gallery. They are all very welcome. I thank Deputy Carthy and Sinn Féin for bringing Victims of Sexual Violence Civil Protection Orders Bill 2025. It is fitting that we are discussing it on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. I also acknowledge every woman who has survived domestic, sexual or gender-based violence who has ever had to walk into these halls and ask the State to care. They should not have had to do that, and it is unfortunate that so many still do. That in itself tells a story about the country we are for survivors of abuse.

There continues to be something deeply wrong in how we respond to violence against women in Ireland. I do not mean just in the policies or the funding gaps, but in the national numbness that has settled around us. A numbness that lets us accept the unacceptable, every single day. I decided to do a quick skim through the headlines of today's newspapers - not any real research, just a glance. Straight away, three cases of the most extraordinary, sickening violence perpetrated against women were in the headlines. One woman was set alight after being doused in petrol in a morning attack at a Dublin house. A woman in Leixlip was seriously injured after being assaulted by her ex-partner, who then set fire to her home before taking his own life. A 55-year-old man was found guilty of murdering his 75-year-old mother by strangling her in her own home. These are headlines in our newspapers in the last 24 hours.

I say this with no exaggeration - the courts are absolutely heaving with cases like this. You can sit in any courtroom any day of the week and you will find men before the courts for acts of violence that should stop a country in its tracks, but they do not anymore. We have become so used to reading these stories that we simply absorb them and move on as if we just expect stories like this to come on after weather reports and as if this level of violence is the natural order of things. It is not normal. It should never be seen as acceptable.

What is also not acceptable is how hard this country makes it for women to escape abuse. The walls are closing in on them tighter and tighter. Only recently, I raised with the Minister the experience of a group of extraordinary survivors who came to the audiovisual room to tell us about their time in domestic violence refuges. These women had been terrorised, controlled, beaten and isolated - women who survived because they had been given the time and space to heal. Why were they here two weeks ago? They are fighting cuts to refuge accommodation. Women are now being told they get 12 weeks - 12 weeks - to rebuild their life. I found it genuinely horrifying, and I know colleagues here did as well, that women who have already survived more than most of us could ever imagine are forced to come into our Parliament to plead for the bare minimum for those who will come after them. They do not have the luxury of moving on and enjoying the rest of their lives; instead they are fighting to make sure the next woman - and they know there will be a next woman - escaping her home is not abandoned after three months. That is a State-created desperation. Women who have had to survive so much are trying to endure just that little bit more so that women who come after them do not have to.

That is where the Bill before us today meets the reality outside these walls, not just for women who have experienced sexual violence, but all kinds of violence. The truth is that the justice

system is not working for survivors. It is not working in the courts, in the timelines, in the accommodations or in the culture that we have created in our country. Right now, even where a court finds that an offence of sexual violence has been committed, the person who has lived through that abuse can still be left to navigate separate legal processes to secure ongoing protection. This Bill recognises that gap and seeks to close it. It creates a legal route for the courts, once they have found that an offence of sexual violence has been committed under our sexual offences and trafficking laws, or the common law offence of rape, to grant a civil protection order for the complainant. It says that when the courts recognise the harm, they should also be empowered, there and then, to put a protective barrier in place for the person who has been harmed.

A report by the National Women's Council last year, a report funded by the Department of Justice itself, laid out a brutal truth. Survivors of domestic and sexual violence in Ireland must navigate three separate legal systems - criminal, family, and child protection. These systems do not speak to each other. They do not acknowledge each other's decisions. They place the entire burden of communication on the victim. Imagine giving evidence in a criminal trial against the man who hurt you, who attempted to destroy you, and the very same day trying to negotiate access arrangements in a civil court where none of that evidence is automatically recognised. Imagine being expected to be your own case manager for the State, carrying trauma between jurisdictions because the system does not seem bothered to connect itself.

Ellen O'Malley-Dunlop, one of the report's authors, put it even more clearly. The system needs to be rebuilt around victims, not around bureaucracy, tradition or the convenience of the State. It requested mandatory training for everyone - judges, gardaí, solicitors and court staff. It recommended a wraparound support system through every stage of a case. It also included changes to the *in camera* rule so victims can speak to the people who actually support them. This is a justice system that acts like it actually wants survivors to survive. These are not radical demands; these are the basics of a functioning, humane State. This Bill is one practical step towards that kind of system - making sure that when a court has recognised sexual violence, it can also provide real, enforceable civil protection, without sending the survivor back into another maze of separate proceedings or putting their life in danger.

That is why I will be supporting this Bill, and any other proposal that forces us to move - really move - towards meaningful action for women who have endured extraordinary violence at the hands of their abusers. The truth is, and I will continue to say it on this floor, that women in Ireland are being terrorised in their homes and the State meets that terror with paperwork. Women are escaping with their children and we meet their bravery with a 12-week deadline. Women are walking into multiple courtrooms at once and we hand them the burden of stitching together a system we designed to be separate. We owe those women safety. We owe them time. We owe them a justice system that does not retraumatise. We owe them a country that refuses to become numb to their suffering.

If we are serious about believing survivors, then we must change the systems that continue to fail them. Not in speeches and photocalls, but in funding, in refuge spaces, in courtrooms and in every decision we take in this House, with a full recognition that the absolute antithesis of justice is the retraumatising of victims that happens in court rooms every single day. I am proud to support this Bill. I urge every Member in the House to do so, because if we cannot protect women in their homes, then no part of this Republic can honestly call itself safe.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I thank Deputy Carthy for bringing forward this Bill today. I do not think we can speak enough in this Chamber about domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. Some progress has been made in recent years, such as the establishment of Cuan, the third national strategy and the introduction of domestic violence leave, but the figures speak for themselves. Women's Aid reports that last year over 41,000 disclosures were made to it about the abuse of a woman and over 5,000 disclosures related to the abuse of a child. An Garda Síochána reports that over 65,000 domestic abuse incidents occurred last year and the Courts Service reports that there were over 25,000 applications to the District Court for a domestic violence remedy last year.

In that context, we must constantly seek ways to make the situation better for victims. I urge the Minister to consider the Bill brought forward by Deputy Carthy and move to introduce protection orders that can further enhance victims' safety. Protection orders are a necessity and I urge the Minister to take on board proposals from my party colleague Senator Noonan and his Seanad colleagues in Labour and the Social Democrats, whose joint Bill looks to create indictable offences where the breach of a court order is serious, persistent or violent in nature and to empower the justice system to respond more effectively to patterns of coercive control. That Bill was not opposed on Second Stage in the Seanad and I urge the Minister to take the proposals in that Bill and the Bill before us, tabled by Deputy Carthy, and undertake the badly needed reforms to legislation in this country to protect victims of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence.

Deputy Charles Ward: As we know, today is International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. It is unbelievable that worldwide a woman is killed every ten minutes by an intimate partner or family member. Although we may think Ireland is a progressive country, femicide continues to take the lives of many women and girls across our country with no sign of any real progress. A total of 35% of women in Ireland have experienced abuse from an intimate partner. That is more than one in three, which is well above the EU average of 31.8%. The North of Ireland is one of the most dangerous places in Europe to be a woman, which is shocking. Research from Ulster University has shown that 98% of women in the North have experienced at least one form of violence or abuse in their lifetime, with half experiencing this before the age of 11. There needs to be an all-island approach to address this.

Passing this Bill would mean that the court would impose a restraining order against those convicted of a crime involving sexual violence and the victims would be protected. This is a very important step in ensuring that victims of sexual violence feel safe after experiencing such traumatic events.

We need to go much further in addressing the root of this. The root of this is men. Men need to do better. They have a part to play in this and they need to take collective responsibility for addressing misogyny. The Government needs to take responsibility and hold social media companies to account for the rise in misogynistic and super-masculine content on social media. This is negatively influencing young men and boys. We need to support women in a way that makes them feel special and looked after in their daily lives.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I welcome and support this Bill and I do so as a long-standing director of the south Tipperary domestic violence service. This is a quality support and refuge

service operated by the amazing staff at Cuan Saor in Clonmel for over 30 years. It operates across the country.

The area of gender-based violence is an appalling vista - really worrying and deeply depressing. It is of epidemic proportions. We need urgent and immediate action by Government. The legal and court system is of particular difficulty. It re-traumatises victims and feeds into a situation where only 5% of sexual violence is reported to An Garda Síochána and only 14% of that makes it to trial.

Access to counselling notes is of particular concern. The accused and their legal teams have the ability to access counselling notes. Victims and survivors have said that this is extremely invasive and traumatic. As far back as 2021, the citizens' assembly called for the exclusion of these notes from evidence. Other jurisdictions have done so. I know the Minister is bringing forward legislation in this area but it needs to be absolute privilege - not ifs or buts and no grey areas.

The difficulty for victims and survivors does not end with the end of a court case even where there is a conviction and a term of imprisonment. As assailants' prison sentences end, many victims of rape, sexual assault and childhood sexual abuse are stressed, anxious and fearful. They fear meeting the perpetrators as they go about their daily lives. Civil protection orders are a common-sense and reasonable provision to protect victims and survivors and prevent assailants from communicating with or about complainants or approaching their place of residence, education or employment on their release from prison. I urge the Minister to bring forward this legislation urgently.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: In the time between this debate beginning and ending, six women will have been murdered by family members. That is a shocking statistic from the UN. I support this Bill. I support anything that will help survivors of sexual assault to have peace in their lives. It is the very minimum that is needed, though.

In a previous Dáil, I introduced a Bill to provide for no-contact orders. Anybody should be able to prevent anyone who is harassing them from having any contact with them. They should not have to go to jail. We should be allowing people to prevent harassment in any way.

Today is International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women and, globally, there have been marches everywhere. There was a shutdown in South Africa while in Dublin, we marched to the Minister's office a short while ago. Some of the survivors and allies are here, as are therapists. We want action on the global pandemic but we also want to raise two things with the Minister. The DPP's threshold for prosecuting a case is a serious problem. Rebecca Clarke was one of those women and the Minister knows the case of Nikita Hand.

The other key issue is the ban on access to counselling notes, which has become a significant issue. We now have a situation where the Minister proposes to let a judge make the decision. That is not acceptable because it still creates the scenario of trial or therapy. The person who has been sexually assaulted or a victim of violence has to make that decision knowing that their notes could be accessed. We now have a situation where a full and complete ban is supported by survivors, therapists and all the professional bodies such as the Psychological Society of Ireland and the National Women's Council. The Dublin Rape Crisis Centre said the Minister's

Bill must be withdrawn. The Oireachtas Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration is an all-party committee. I have seen videos of Government TDs calling for a complete ban.

The Minister has legal acumen and plenty of expertise to access. He can decide that counselling and therapy notes are not evidence. He can outline in a Bill all the reasons they are not evidence. They are third party. They are similar to hearsay. They are not the words of the person themselves. I do not know how this scenario has existed for so long. We have had previous rulings on this and I have no doubt that the Minister will be told that we cannot do this but I am telling him to find a way to do it because this has become a key issue for so many survivors and those who work with them and counsel them. The Minister should find a way to do it and find it now.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I thank Deputy Carthy and Sinn Féin for bringing forward this Bill. On behalf of People Before Profit, we are very happy to support it. It is simply obvious that the victims of domestic, sexual or gender-based violence should not have to live in fear of their assailants. The Minister should take very seriously the intent of this Bill and the concerns of victims of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. I also wish to use this opportunity to highlight a case that shows it is not just about this kind of legal protection. A woman I will just call Ruth came to my office in April. She has been the victim of really horrendous violence by her ex-partner such that she required very serious medical treatment. He is issuing on a fairly regular basis death threats over the phone to her. My office has heard the messages. Gardaí have said she is in a very high-risk category. Since she came to our office her ex-partner burst through the door of her apartment with a fire extinguisher and has been caught by the Garda on this. He is facing trial for all this. He admitted guilt on that particular one but is not facing trial until January and is still free. She is living in very close proximity to her assailant and ex-partner and is pleading with the council to, as a priority, get her out of where she is to somewhere safe so he will not know where she is and therefore will be unable to threaten or attack her again. What is the response of the local council? Nothing. A response to letters, including from the Garda, my office and so on says she is number 296 on the list, end of story. There is not even a comment on the threats she is facing or that she is in a high-risk category. There is, by the way, no domestic violence officer in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown. There should be one in every single local authority. This woman is living in fear. Gardaí are appealing to the local authority saying she has to be got out of this place as a matter of priority and the council is essentially washing its hands of the case. I am asking Deputy O'Callaghan, as the Minister for justice, to contact our council about this case but also because all councils should take very seriously their obligation to get women out of situations like that so they are not forced to live in close proximity to their assailants.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I welcome the Victims of Sexual Violence Civil Protection Orders Bill 2025, which as others have said, aims to ensure a person subjected to sexual violence can be granted a civil protection order where an offence has been found to have been committed under criminal or common law. It is one step, as Deputy Carthy said, but it is an important step in adding to the legal protections available. It is separate to the existing civil restraining orders or section 28 orders we have and ties in with measures to stop someone convicted from harassing, threatening, or violent behaviour against another person rather than the burden of proof being placed on the person assaulted, including, as was mentioned earlier, the woman Deputy Carthy referred to who was recommended to seek a barring order.

It is really pathetic the way the justice system stands right now, whether it is before or after the often-inadequate sentencing. This Bill is complementary to the Minister's equally welcome criminal law (sexual offences, domestic violence and international instruments) Bill which, when finally enacted, will incorporate Jennie's law, which is something I and others have called for over a period of time. It will create the new publicly-accessible domestic violence register of judgments managed by the Courts Service, strengthen the law on sexual consent and replace the term "child pornography" with the more apt "child sexual abuse material", and include other measures for those convicted of domestic violence against their partner or former partner being publicly named on this register. I suggest the Bill before the House granting a civil protection order will act as a further deterrent, so I hope the Government adopts this Bill. I note the Minister said he was not opposing its passage to the next Stage but suggested it was in some way superfluous, so at the very least I hope it is integrated into planned legislation.

This obviously raises questions about when precisely this unopposed Bill or the Bill the Minister put forward earlier in the year will be enacted and how they are going to be resourced because it is not the first time we have had discussions about the societal problem of violence, and in particular sexual violence, against women. I wish this would be the last debate but we all know there is a body of work to do, from the legal barriers to the lack of resources for supports and ingrained misogyny that goes all the way down from fully-grown men to what I have previously described – and I hate giving that piece of excrement any publicity – as the Andrew Tate-ification of our boys as early as primary school. The damage on social media is all-pervading, it is breeding the next generation of violent offenders and we need to do something about it. I hope the Minister will look at proposals I and others have made on mirroring the Australian model of a ban on social media for under-16s.

Just tonight I had a constituent who is a former school principal contact me. He said violence against women is out of control. He said that if that many women suffered due to a faulty kettle or faulty TV there would be a major recall investigation. He said the injuries and threats of violence are nuts. He said if women carried out that many attacks the country would close down and we would be in a lockdown. He asked if there is a rage now in society and whether it is okay now that it has been normalised. He asked me to please share with the Minister that we need to sort this and said there should be no blaming anything other than men.

This ties in with the Cuan Corporate Plan 2025–2027 which points out 40% of adults have experienced sexual violence at least once in their lifetime, with 52% of these being women, who are disproportionately affected by sexual violence compared with 28% of men. Furthermore, 68% of younger women aged 18 to 24 have reported experiencing sexual violence in their lifetime, which is absolutely shocking. The Minister said it is an international problem and it is, but we are legislators in Ireland and it is an embarrassment to us as a country. The development of the corporate plan is welcome too but let us see what the outcomes are because the initial report says it is being guided by a legislative framework. I am sick of hearing about "the four key pillars set out in the Zero Tolerance strategy which are grounded in the Istanbul Convention: Prevention, Protection, Prosecution and Policy Coordination". We have heard it a lot. If I had €10 for every time I heard about the Istanbul Convention I would be a millionaire. They are all laudable and worthy but they have been talked about to death.

In an Irish context we need to look holistically at proper collaboration between Government Departments, statutory bodies and agencies and obviously society as a whole because we have

been poor at bringing things together. We have heard this about the housing crisis, public transport, energy self-sufficiency and also this hugely important issue. Can we bring the protections we are talking about together? Can we train the professionals properly? Where is the evidence each area will be followed up so lives will be saved and people protected? We need more than prosecution after the event. We need more than refuges even though we need a lot more refuges. There is only a short time left for action until we get to the next strategy. All we know is we have promised legislation and also legislation not promised, such as on the issue of therapy or counselling notes, as Deputy Coppinger referenced, and a commitment to have "a review of the current strategy's implementation to inform the development of the fourth national domestic sexual and gender based violence policy strategy 2027 to 2030." We have the third one right now so is it not time we focused less on strategy and review and more on actual implementation? As I said, this Bill, like others, is welcome and needed but I hope we can ensure legislation has teeth. All victims and survivors of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence deserve this, especially women and girls, including the campaigners here in the Gallery who have all been let down far too much and for far too long.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Cuirim fáilte roimh an mBille seo agus beidh Aontú ag tabhairt tacaíochta dó. I very much welcome this Bill. It makes sense that according to the courts a victim of sexual violence should be able to get the protection order automatically upon the conclusion of the court proceedings.

It is appropriate we are having this debate on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. I wish to reference the annual report produced by Women's Aid earlier this year. Its contents have stayed with me since I read it and it is obvious the problem we have is getting worse by the year. That report stated more women contacted Women's Aid last year than ever before in its history, which is a 50-year period. The report found some women experienced abuse so severe it resulted in them having miscarriages. Some said they were threatened with weapons, subjected to surveillance and had the lives of their children threatened. Women spoke about experiencing homelessness and hypervigilance as a result of the domestic abuse they had been victims of. A third of the women had been subject to abuse by their ex-partners and according to research from a reply to a parliamentary question I received recently there has been a 45% increase in the number of domestic abuse reports made to the Garda in four years. That is startling information. It shows the deeply problematic situation that is unfolding in our country right now. Between 1996 and 2024, 269 women died violently in this country. Some of these cases have not been solved but 87% of those were killed by men. That is another startling fact and atrocious figure. Behind each one of these individual figures, there is a real person, a citizen who has had her life ripped away from her.

Aontú wants to see gardaí trained to make sure they can deal with domestic violence properly. One of the findings of this report is that 44% of women said that gardaí were not able to help them. That is unacceptable. If we are to be honest with the victims and survivors of this crime, we need to make sure there are more gardaí. There are 53 Garda stations around the country that currently have no assigned garda. In some cases, women feel trapped and unable to disclose their abuse to officials. It takes courage for these individuals to escape the abuse they are suffering. We need enough gardaí and gardaí who are trained properly to deal with anybody who has mustered up the courage to speak out.

If a partner abuses a woman to the point that she miscarries, threatens her life or the lives of her children, or seeks to prevent her from disclosing that abuse, that individual deserves more than the current maximum prison sentence of three years. This Dáil should look at minimum sentencing legislation to deal with grievous abuse. Sentencing for sexual assault in this country has been far too lenient. Many perpetrators do not receive any custodial sentence whatsoever. How many times have we read in the newspapers or heard on the news about an individual who has been found guilty of a grievous assault getting a fully suspended sentence? It is an incredible situation. We have a responsibility here. We cannot just say that judges are not making the right decisions. The truth is known. Prisons are significantly overcrowded. I have no doubt that is having an effect on how judgments are being made.

I recently held a public meeting on crime and antisocial behaviour in Meath. Two women who work in a local shop found two boys involved in shoplifting. When they approached them, those two boys threatened to rape those women if they went to the gardaí. These women now get a lift to the door of their workplace and back every day. It is incredible that citizens would have to live with such a level of fear in their lives that they cannot go about a normal provincial town feeling safe and secure.

According to the Rape Crisis Centre, 40% of people in Ireland will experience sexual violence in their lifetime. Some 30% of people experience childhood sexual violence. There is growing evidence of a link between children consuming violent hardcore pornography and the increase in sexual violence. The Garda Commissioner has stated there is a growing link. It is incredible that we have been talking about that link for years but are doing nothing about it. The Government is banning the advertisement of junk food because it sees the link between these images being shown to children and increasing obesity and yet it cannot join the dots as regards young boys consuming violent hardcore pornography and the growth of misogyny and sexual violence. Other countries are grappling with this and making changes.

The number of children under the age of 18 who have abused children of the same age or younger has increased by 18% in the past year according to Rape Crisis Network Ireland. Children at Risk in Ireland, a specialist professional therapy service for children, found that there had been a 44% increase in sexual abuse and sexually harmful behaviour against children by children within a two-year period. It is absolutely startling. I still think of the haunting and shocking case of Ana Kriégel, whose life was taken from her when she was so young by two boys who were 13 years old. They had 12,000 violent hardcore pornographic images on their phones but this country has done nothing. Back in 2020, I introduced a Bill to prevent these really profitable companies selling this material to young children and yet we see tumbleweeds on the matter.

There is a major issue in terms of refuges in this country. There are still nine counties without refuges. I think of the work Senator Sarah O'Reilly and campaigners have done in relation to this in Cavan. It has been talked about but it has not been delivered. We have heard many fine words here today but we are still not seeing the action that is needed in relation to this crisis.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the chance to talk on this very important motion. I thank Sinn Féin for bringing it forward. I welcome the ladies in the Gallery who are here to campaign for justice. Like all of the other women out there who are being abused, they are depending on Dáil Éireann to see after them and to uphold their right to live and carry on where

they have always been, in their own local areas. It was said that there is an urgent need for robust enforcement of protection orders. We should develop a strategy to ensure that. Deputy Boyd Barrett said that the councils should play their part in moving the woman from her house. I think the man she is afraid of should be moved out of the area rather than the woman having to move. She did nothing wrong. These enforcement or protection orders are not symbolic. They should be enforced. We should ensure that, whatever way this is done, the women will have freedom to live where they have lived or where they want to live. If they want to move, that is fine, but they should not have to move so as not to see or be intimidated by an abuser. They should be seen after.

We have heard all the stories and we know all the dreadful and horrible things that happened to women in our country over a number of years. So many have been murdered, maimed, badly injured and hurt. It is severely difficult for us to believe that such things could happen in our country. We must seek to close the gap and put a stop to this for once and for all. The Minister is bringing forward his own Bill. If there is any way we could strengthen it using anything from this Bill, we should do so to ensure the best possible outcome for girls and women of all ages and to ensure they are properly catered for and seen after.

These constant abusers get the facility of legal aid. That should only happen once or twice at the very most. These abusers are horrible people and repeatedly get the facility of legal aid. It should be cut to two rounds of legal aid at most. After that, lock them up. They should not get fair play after that.

We must ensure the appropriate safeguarding of all victims and all those who are vulnerable. I think especially of young disabled children and non-verbal children. We must seek to protect them at all costs. They depend entirely on the system and our laws to protect them. If enforcement is weak and they are left exposed to harm, that is a failure of our justice system.

I think Deputy Mattie McGrath was to speak. I will just say that this is a very important matter for all of us to deal with. Women are physically weaker than men. Men should not be left to abuse, hurt or kill them, as has been happening. We must make it ever harder for them. In a minority of cases, men get abused. We cannot allow that either. That has happened from time to time but it happens far less often. It is the other way 99% of the time. We are depending on the Ministers to expedite the Bill and to bring it forward, and also to ensure that in the next 12 months it is sorted out once and for all. It is going on for long enough.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney): On behalf of the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, who is here beside me, I again thank Deputy Carthy for raising this important issue today on International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women.

I also extend my appreciation to all of the other speakers who have contributed to the debate this evening. I reiterate the Government's commitment to a zero-tolerance approach to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. At its core, zero tolerance ensures that every victim and survivor who comes forward to report an incident is met with protection, respect, and effective support.

Substantial legislative reforms have taken place in recent years, including in respect of assault and harassment offences, as well as the introduction of the new stand-alone offences of stalking

and non-fatal strangulation. In addition, Coco's Law - the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act - criminalises not only the distribution of, but also the threat to distribute, intimate images without consent, which is another heinous way we know abusers control victims. The Sex Offenders (Amendment) Act 2023, which was commenced last year, strengthens our already robust system for monitoring sex offenders. It reduces the notification requirements for sex offenders to three days. The Act also strengthens the management and monitoring of sex offenders in the community. The Minister intends to progress further reforms in this area as a priority.

As Deputies know, in October the Minister secured Cabinet approval for the drafting of the criminal law (sexual offences, domestic violence and international instruments) Bill 2025. This piece of legislation contains a number of key measures in respect of sexual offences, including a publicly accessible domestic violence register of judgments. This will allow for any person who was convicted on indictment of specified offences, including murder, manslaughter or serious assault against an intimate partner or former intimate partner, to be named in a court judgment outlining the sentence imposed. The judgment will be published under a domestic violence register of judgments on the Courts Service website.

I am sure that all Members of the House are agreed on the importance of combating domestic, sexual and gender-based violence and protecting victims. It is for precisely that reason that the Oireachtas has legislated for the range of protective measures I previously outlined, including harassment orders under the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017, barring, protection and safety orders under the Domestic Violence Act 2018, sex offender orders under the Sex Offenders Act 2001, and civil orders against relevant conduct under the Criminal Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2023. The power of the court to impose conditions on convicted sex offenders by means of post-release supervision orders is also an important tool in this regard.

I am sure Deputy Carthy understands that we do not want to enact legislation that is not necessary, or which rehashes existing provisions on the Statute Book. The Minister is particularly mindful of this, and the resource constraints inherent in progressing legislation, and we must prioritise accordingly. As such, I reiterate that we cannot guarantee support for the Bill on Committee Stage in the absence of clear and convincing arguments on its added value.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I wish to reference something the Minister of State said, which the Minister previously said, that is a bit of a red flag for me in regard to the protection orders for victims outlined in the Bill. It was that "we cannot guarantee support for the Bill on Committee Stage in the absence of clear and convincing arguments on its added value". If the Minister needs additional proof to be convinced, the people in the Gallery will convince him. They are the people we need to listen to.

While I am talking about listening, I was contacted by one of the visitors in the Gallery who was concerned by what the Minister said. One person who was really upset and angry left. Other people were angry that the Minister was scrolling too long on his phone and not listening to what was being said. They were really upset.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I was reading section 46 of the sexual offences Act.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: I am just telling the Minister what the visitors told me. In fairness, I do listen to women when they contact me.

I attended a conference in Limerick on Saturday on domestic and gender-based violence. The event was hosted by my colleague, Kathleen Funchion, MEP. It brought together experts - solicitors, gardaí, rape crisis representatives and, most importantly, many survivors of abuse. It was compelling to hear their stories, and to hear positive ideas and suggestions to make the system better, and on how we can educate young people so that the new generation will neither inflict nor suffer the pain. Those who spoke were clear that individuals within the system in many cases are compassionate, but the system itself is not.

Domestic and gender-based violence is an all-of-society issue that impacts every socioeconomic group. It is not just about physical violence but the loss of financial independence and other forms of coercive control. Gender violence is as prevalent now as it ever was, only some of the weapons have changed. The figures from 2024 demonstrate this. One in five young women are or have been subjected to intimate relationship abuse. In 2024, gardaí responded to an average of 1,250 domestic abuse incidents per week. These are incredible figures that should really shame all of us.

For me, the most compelling contribution on Saturday came not from the expert panellists but a contributor from the floor who is here in the Gallery. She has survived sexual violence, which she endured as a teenager. She gathered the courage to approach the Garda and, thankfully, following a lengthy court process her abuser was jailed. She also spoke about her tension and fear about her abuser's eventual release. She is from Limerick, which is a small enough city, where urban estates are only a short distance from each other. She is from such an estate, as was the criminal. She told of the abuse and of the anxiety faced by survivors during the court process they have to go through. She spoke of the knots in her stomach, the long trips to the court in Dublin to speak as a witness, and having to compose herself, only to have the sitting postponed a couple of times. She spoke about having to sit in the same room as the man who had abused her, having to recount the details of her life in front of a room of strangers and of the mental toll this took on her. She told us how she now has sleepless nights as his release date approaches. If the legislation we propose had existed, once her abuser was convicted of his crime of sexual violence, a court could have imposed an order restraining him from approaching her on release. The introduction of civil protection orders is a sensible step for survivors. I urge all to support them. This is just one piece of the puzzle we need to address.

Deputy Ann Graves: On the day that we mark the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, we all need to stop and reflect on how we can work together to reduce and eliminate all violence against women. Last year, the annual report for the Courts Service showed an increase of 13.6% in sexual violence against women. That is just not good enough. We need to overhaul the courts system to ensure it is supportive and safe for victims of sexual violence. This Bill is practical, solution focused and a step in the right direction. It provides that if someone is convicted of a crime of sexual violence, at the same time, a court could impose an order restraining the convicted person from approaching the victim.

The Bill, however, is not a panacea for all sexual violence. One of the major issues for women fleeing violence is the need for safe, secure and accessible housing. This was brought home to me by a woman who owns her own home. She had to move out because of the terrible level

of domestic and sexual violence she experienced. She was left struggling to find somewhere safe to stay while the perpetrator was left living in the family home. Another woman had to flee her own home after her ex-partner, who had subjected her to such levels of violence that she is now prevented from being able to return to work because of her injuries, moved in three doors away from where she lived. She was in so much fear of further violence that she and her son had to move out. They are currently living in their car. Another woman, whose partner attacked her with a screwdriver, had to move out of a council property while her partner and abuser remains in the home. She was unable to find emergency accommodation and is now living in a garden shed with no heat or water. These cases are only the tip of the iceberg that is violence against women in modern day Ireland. Our local authorities must be adequately supported in providing appropriate emergency accommodation to women and children fleeing domestic and sexual violence, and councils must ensure the perpetrators are not allowed to remain the tenant in a council home while the victims are forced out onto the street.

I acknowledge the work that my colleagues, Deputy Matt Carthy and Senator Maria McCormack, have done in bringing forward this legislation. Mostly, I thank the women in the Gallery for their bravery and for coming forward. Their voices will be heard through this legislation.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I thank every TD who has contributed to this debate this evening and the many TDs who contacted me in the course of the day to indicate their support for this Bill.

I also thank the Minister and Government for allowing this Bill to pass on Second Stage. There are issues more important than political games. It would have been possible for Government parties to play political games and table a delaying amendment, and I acknowledge that they did not.

I also acknowledge that the Minister stayed for the entirety of this debate. Most senior Ministers run off as soon as their contribution in a debate such as this is over. I want to ensure, and ask, that that spirit continues. I want us all to make a resolution for 2026 that this Bill will be law by this time next year.

Of course, I accept that the purpose of the next Stages of the Bill is that amendments can be brought forward that would improve the Bill. It is transposing something from the harassment legislation into the sexual violence sphere.

I hope we can explore on Committee Stage whether we can find a mechanism that would ensure that a civil protection order against a perpetrator could be imposed by a judge for a lifetime period, and my appeal to the Minister and to Government is to be constructive as we tease out all of these issues.

Something Ministers have said repeatedly tonight is that there needs to be added value. The added value is that by passing this Bill we can say clearly to victims and survivors, "We hear you, we see you and when you point out failings in the system to us, we will act."

I thank again all of those organisations that have indicated support of this Bill. I thank Sinn Féin for allowing me to utilise our Private Members' time to progress it. I thank Caoilfhionn Ní Dhonnabáin in my own office for working so hard on bringing forward this important proposal. I thank my party colleagues, particularly Deputy Máire Devine, our junior spokesperson on domestic and gender-based violence issues and Senator Maria McCormack,

who is a determined and fierce advocate for vulnerable people in her constituency and, indeed, everywhere.

I thank Maria, especially, for introducing me to three of the most powerful people I have ever met. Sonya Stokes, Leona O'Callaghan and Shaneda Daly are forces of nature. They set out to me in stark terms why this legislation is required. By telling their stories, they brought their perpetrators to justice. In doing that, they did the State - all of us - a great service.

That should be all we have to ask of them but I was struck by the words of Leona O'Callaghan. I ask the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach to indulge me while I recite those words verbatim:

You know, we've done enough when we've done that. But what I've also done ... is ... put myself in the firing line when he gets out, because he's going to want revenge on the very people that took his freedom for so long. And I worry that he spends most days thinking about what he will do to the people who put him where he is. And I would love the protection of a protection order. If I was protected against him as a child, I'd have had a very different life. Everything would have been so different. And society couldn't protect me from that because these monsters exist and they're clever and we don't see them for what they are before they do it.

But now we know who he is and we know what he does. We know how violent he is. And what I'm asking is not for me, because it's too late for me. It can't be retrospective, but for the little Leonas that come after me, that are brave enough to look these people in the eye, relive what they went through, and put them behind jail, and, you know, at that stage, they should have the protection of knowing this man is not allowed to come anywhere near me. He's not allowed to talk to me, he's not allowed to try and communicate with me, ideally, he's not allowed in the very same building as me.

That is added value that this Oireachtas can bring to all of these women.

My final appeal, in thanking Government for allowing this to move to the next Stage, is let us listen to Leona, Sonya and Shaneda and to all those countless victims and survivors who have told their stories. Let us pass this Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Housing Schemes

1. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the targets for the delivery of cost rental and affordable purchase homes by local authorities, approved housing bodies and the Land Development Agency under the Government's new housing plan from 2025 to 2030. [66119/25]

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: There were many omissions in the Minister's ill-fated housing plan launched only a matter of weeks ago but one that was particularly astonishing is the removal of targets, either across the life cycle of the plan or, indeed, on an annual basis, for cost-rental and affordable purchase homes delivered by local authorities, approved housing bodies, AHBs,

and the Land Development Agency, LDA. Can the Minister explain why these targets that were in his predecessor's plan were removed and does that mean he has abandoned targets or he is simply not willing to share them with us?

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne): I thank the Deputy for this important question around targets for the delivery of cost-rental and affordable purchase homes by local authorities, approved housing bodies and the LDA under the Government's new housing plan.

Affordability and the chance to own a home is at the heart of Government's housing policy, as embodied within the new housing plan, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030*. Government is investing an unprecedented level of funding to support new housing delivery, which will underpin the new starter homes programme, delivering an average of 15,000 affordable housing supports annually to 2030.

To further drive the delivery of affordable housing under the plan, local authorities will shortly commence the preparation of new housing delivery action plans. It is intended that the plans will set out how the starter homes programme will be implemented in each area, including the full suite of affordable housing supports to be provided and taking account of local and national affordability needs. They should be responsive to the housing system landscape in each area, as it is evident that starter homes supports needs and requirements vary by location.

The preparation of housing delivery action plans for starter homes will be undertaken by local authorities, in close collaboration with their delivery partners, including the LDA, and approved housing bodies. Each local authority's starter homes programme, as outlined in its housing delivery action plan, will be informed by the housing needs and demand assessment framework, which will assist in identifying and quantifying new housing need with affordability constraint within their administrative area. Quarterly housing delivery reports will continue to be published on the Department's website, tracking the progress of affordable delivery output in each local authority area. The delivery of 300,000 homes and 15,000 starter homes supports, over the lifetime of the plan, is ambitious but it is achievable.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I would like the House to note that the Minister, of course, completely avoided the question and instead gave what can only be described as an Orwellian response to a simple question.

There is no new starter home programme. What the Government has done is it has taken a bunch of schemes that existed under the previous Government's plan and, indeed, its predecessor, it has bundled them all up and it has added them into a global figure.

The reason it is important, in particular, that there are targets for the delivery of cost rental and affordable purchase is the Minister funds them. He sets the targets for local authorities, AHBs and the LDA, directly and indirectly, to deliver those homes. Of course, as we know, last year the cost-rental targets were missed by a factor of 15% and the Minister's affordable purchase target was missed by a staggering 61%.

On top of that, of course, increasingly these homes are not affordable. Right across Dublin, for example, the full price of a so-called "affordable home" delivered under the Minister's

affordable purchase scheme, if you want to own the home outright, is up to €500,000. In nobody's calculations is that affordable.

10 o'clock

Similarly, we are now seeing cost rents coming in as high as €19,000 a month for a three-bedroom house, and €17,000 a month for a two-bedroom unit. A growing number of people who are not eligible for social housing are excluded from the Minister's schemes. Can I ask again why he has not included a specific target for cost rental and affordable purchase? Has he ditched the target or is he just hiding it from us?

Deputy James Browne: We have targets of 300,000 new homes overall, including 15,000 affordable homes annually, and each local authority is now working on their housing delivery action plans. They are looking at and working with their partners as well to ensure they can meet the Government's target of delivering homes. That is what we are doing and that is how we will deliver the homes.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: If that is the case, why would the Minister not say he has a target for new-build social homes? Again, this is a scheme that he funds and a scheme that local authorities and approved housing bodies deliver, some in conjunction with the Land Development Agency. It makes no sense to say that we do not need targets for cost rental and affordable purchase but we do for social housing. Again, it is a very simple question. There were clear targets for next year, some of which the Minister shared with us in the committee only a matter of months ago. My question, which the Minister has not answered, is very simple. Why is there no target for cost rental over the six years? Why is there no target for affordable purchase over the six years? Why is the Minister not accepting that in addition to not producing enough of these homes, increasingly they are unaffordable? Targets are important. They are particularly important for Government schemes funded by the Minister's Department. It allows him to plan, to programme and to be held to account. It sounds like the Minister has effectively abandoned the very meagre targets for cost rental and affordable purchase schemes that his predecessor had in his plan because this Minister knows that cannot be met, and rather than be embarrassed by his failure, he is simply ditching the targets altogether. Frankly, that is not good enough.

Deputy James Browne: We have not abandoned it. We have our key target of 300,000 new homes and 15,000 affordable homes. What we have learned over the last number of years is that we need to be flexible in figuring out exactly how we are going to manage to deliver the affordable homes that people need across this country. We do have a plan, which is clearly set out and was launched only very recently, with the methods and the means by which we are going to deliver social homes and affordable homes and increase the activity of private homes that also need to be delivered. Without the private investment to deliver private homes, we are never going to solve the housing crisis because we are never going to be able to deliver enough homes. The supply of homes is what is crucial here. We have our target of 15,000 affordable homes annually. This is what we are working towards as we go through each local authority and as we look at the national landscape, for how we can best and most quickly deliver that. Rather than getting obsessed about the minutiae of small targets, we look at how we can unleash

the deliverability of homes. My purpose and my aim is to ensure that people can get access to a home.

Derelict Sites

2. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if outstanding derelict site levies will be collected by Revenue; and whether additional funding will be provided to local authorities for collecting the register. [66120/25]

Deputy Thomas Gould: Will the Minister update the Dáil on whether outstanding derelict sites levies will be collected by Revenue and whether additional funding will be provided to local authorities for the collection of the register?

Deputy James Browne: I thank the Deputy for his question on derelict site levies. The introduction of a derelict property tax was announced in budget 2026 and it is intended to introduce legislation providing for the tax in the Finance Act in 2026. The tax will, when it comes into effect, replace the derelict site levy and be collected by the Revenue Commissioners. Action 4.1 of Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030 addresses the new tax measure.

Local authorities will, however, continue to have a role in the process, as updating and maintaining their derelict sites registers will continue to remain the responsibility of local authorities. Derelict site levies that remain outstanding when the new tax is introduced will remain as a charge on the properties concerned and remain the responsibility of each local authority to collect.

My Department is working on a number of measures to increase staffing levels in the local government planning sector. In this regard, my Department is collaborating with the Local Government Management Agency on the delivery of programme supports to planning authorities. These supports include the provision of staffing resources and expertise to enable planning authorities to perform their functions effectively and efficiently. Resources to ensure a focus on tackling dereliction within the local authorities have also been provided through the funding of dedicated vacant homes officers and town regeneration officers, who are working in relevant dereliction and regeneration teams to ensure a planned and a proactive approach is taken.

My Department has also made funding for staff resources available to local authorities as part of call 3 of the urban regeneration and development fund to support their work tackling vacancy and dereliction, while a total of €150 million has been provided as a revolving fund for local authorities to acquire long-term derelict properties where necessary. Since 2023, the compulsory purchase order, CPO, activation programme has also provided support to local authorities in identifying derelict properties and engaging with owners to bring those properties back into use. It includes the use of compulsory purchase powers under the Derelict Sites Act when engagement with property owners is unsuccessful, and is supported directly by my Department and the Housing Agency.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I can safely say that the Minister has just given a big spiel there, the same as the previous Minister did last year and the year before that. Nothing the Minister has outlined today will tackle dereliction. He talks about CPO activations. Local authorities will not take out CPOs because they are too complicated. They do not have the staffing, the resources or the money. I have looked at the Minister's 105- or 107-page plan. There is a paragraph on CPOs to tackle dereliction, but no funding and no resources. It is the same old, same old from the Minister.

He talks about local government, the local authorities and the planning authorities getting more staff. Why are the local authorities not tackling dereliction? I will tell you why. It is because the Minister is not giving them the staff or the money. The buck stops with him.

I will ask the Minister once more, as I asked his predecessor. I will walk the streets of Dublin with him tonight to look at the dereliction and the blight on the communities. It is not just Dublin but also Cork and towns and villages. The dereliction is everywhere. There is nothing in the Minister's housing plan to tackle it.

Deputy James Browne: I am very familiar with the streets of Dublin and the streets of Cork. The Deputy might have noticed while walking the streets of Cork himself the extraordinary amount of money and regeneration going on in Cork city as a result of Government investment into it.

If it was the case that compulsory purchase orders were that difficult, we would see a consistent problem with them across the State. However, some local authorities are using them to very effective use, while others are not. That tells me that local authorities have different priorities. Some are using their priorities to target compulsory purchase orders to tackle dereliction and some are not. We have decided to now bring in the Revenue Commissioners to target dereliction. As far as I am concerned, dereliction is antisocial behaviour. Anyone who has a derelict property and is not doing anything with it is little more than a rent seeker. I do not care whether you are left wing or right wing; nobody can justify that kind of rent seeking because those properties are going up in value as the State invests money and as people invest money around it. I am determined to tackle dereliction and those who hold onto properties that are derelict. Giving power to the Revenue Commissioners is crucial to that.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Minister has said he is giving power to the Revenue Commissioners, but when will they start collecting levies? He said he is going to keep local authorities involved. The local authorities have been keeping derelict site registers since 1990. That is 35 years. Why are we not putting a levy on today? Why are we letting land hoarders and speculators get away with destroying communities and towns by leaving spots derelict?

I had a meeting tonight with Sinn Féin members in Tipperary. They outlined to me the blight of dereliction in their communities. They have said to me that we are all talk up here and that we are not seeing it on the ground. That is what I was told today in Tipperary. I see that in Cork and I see it all around the State, and we are told we are all talk up here on the war on dereliction. Does the Minister have any grasp on reality? He says that he knows Cork and that he knows Dublin. He should hang his head in shame to walk the streets of Cork, Dublin or Limerick, or any town, and look at all the dereliction. His party has been in government for over a decade. They are the problem.

Deputy James Browne: I thank the Deputy. I think he needs to work on his maths. Fianna Fáil has only been back in government since 2020, so they are-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: No, it was 2016.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Yes, since 2016. Confidence and supply.

Deputy James Browne: Name me a Fianna Fáil Minister from that period. The Deputy cannot.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Minister can rub it in but-----

Deputy James Browne: The Deputy can have his spin and his guff - that is fine - but the reality is that we are taking very real action to challenge derelict sites across this country. They are a blight and they are antisocial behaviour. There is no more powerful statement to say we are tackling it than bringing in the Revenue Commissioners to ensure that anybody with a derelict property is going to face very real and serious charges. We have the 7% but the problem is that it is not being applied to derelict sites by local authorities across the country. I accept there are local authorities that are under pressure for staffing. That is not a criticism of local authorities although you can see the significant variation between different local authorities and they are making their own priorities in terms of what they are doing. From my perspective this is a serious statement.

Rental Sector

3. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the reason no analysis was conducted by his Department on the impact of his proposed changes to rent pressure zones on rents in the private rental sector. [66121/25]

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The Minister has published legislation that is going to make the most profound changes to the regulation of rents in the private rental sector in over a decade. From March of next year, tens of thousands of renters, progressively, quarter on quarter, are going to lose the meagre protections of the rent pressure zones and over time see their rents reset to market rents. Astonishingly, the Minister's Department conducted no analysis of the impacts of these changes on the rents that renters actually pay. Why did he not conduct that analysis and how can he stand over a Bill when even he does not know the full impact it will have on hard-pressed renters paying rip-off rents?

Deputy James Browne: Following on from a review of the private rental sector published by my Department in July 2024, the Housing Agency was commissioned to undertake a comprehensive review of the current system of rent controls using RPZs. The key focus of the review was to assess the operation of RPZs since their introduction and consider their impact on the market and relevant stakeholders, including the retention of landlords and new investment. It considered whether RPZs should continue without change or be removed,

modified or replaced. The review, which was extensive and detailed, also included options and recommendations in relation to potential amendments to rent control.

On 10 June 2025, the Government approved policy measures including modifications to rent controls to come into effect on 1 March 2026 in order to boost investment in the supply of homes available for rent and keep existing landlords in the market. The modifications to rent controls have been informed by the findings of the Housing Agency review. The policy measures announced by the Government also include significant improvements in security of tenure for renters. The Government has provided additional resources to the Residential Tenancies Board to support the efficient regulation of the rental market. Multiple expert reports, including those from the Housing Agency, the Department of Finance, the ESRI, the OECD and the IMF agree that the current RPZ system is a major obstacle to increasing rental supply. These changes are being introduced in order to attract increased investment in the rental market and thereby increase the supply of properties available for renters. My Department has consulted extensively with the Office of the Attorney General in relation to the proposed legislation. On 14 October 2025, the Government approved the general scheme of the residential tenancies (amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2025. This legislation is now subject to priority legal drafting and pre-legislative scrutiny is currently under way.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The House should note for the second time tonight that the Minister has studiously avoided the question. What do we know about tenancies? The Residential Tenancies Board tells us that the average length of a tenancy is three and a half years long. In the past 12 months, 70,000 fresh first-time tenancies were created. That is 28% of the total number of private rental tenancies. If those trends continue - trends that have been in train for a number of years - then within four years, the overwhelming majority of renters will be captured by this legislation. Many tens of thousands of them will have their rents reset to market rent at the start and all of them will have the market rent reset at the end of six years. I accept there is a viability problem. I accept there is a lack of investment, particularly in social, cost-rental and affordable for purchase homes. However, renters should not be the ones to pay the bill. What the Minister is proposing, in addition to inadequate and possibly illegal apartment design standards for smaller and darker apartments and huge VAT reductions for developers who are building apartments that are already viable, is to essentially allow landlords to reset the rent to almost double what it is for many tenants. He has not even done an analysis. Why not and why is he making renters pay for viability challenges the Minister and his failing housing policy created in the first place?

Deputy James Browne: When the Deputy was quoting the statistics from the RTB he left out the fact that in the situation that prevailed in the country at the time around rent pressure zones, it was temporary and partial around the country. We have now created a national rent pressure zone with a view to a national rental control situation. Also, the reason I am bringing in these changes is to bring in, for the first time in this State, security of tenure for tenants. That does not exist in this State. Theoretically, there are tenancies with no end of duration but it is too easy to end those tenancies. We are severely restricting how tenancies can be ended by landlords. That is to ensure there is that security of tenure. I believe that you will see far less frequent notices to quit as a result of this security of tenure being brought in for tenants. That is going to be the crucial difference here.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: With the greatest of respect, security of tenure is no use if you simply cannot afford the rent. The family homelessness crisis started in 2014, not because landlords were selling but because landlords were hitting tenants with double digit rent increases. Over the space of three to four years, the number of children in homelessness went from 800 to over 3,000. As for the so-called security of tenure measures, the Minister is going to create three different types of security of tenure; for existing tenants in existing tenancies, for new tenancies in existing properties of small landlords and new tenancies in properties of large landlords. That is a level of complexity that will be impossible to understand and virtually impossible to enforce. The only reason he has done this is to try to hide behind that while he guts the rent pressure zones and forces renters to pay levels of rent that are simply unacceptable. The Minister has no idea if notices of termination will increase or decrease. Neither he nor his Department have done any analysis on the impact on rents or security of tenure. Landlords are unhappy. Tenants are unhappy. This will not work and who is going to pay the price? Renters. Because Fianna Fáil does not give a damn about them.

Deputy James Browne: What is crucial is that those who are currently renting and those who are living at home who need somewhere to rent have somewhere to rent. That means increasing supply. That is what-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Cost-rental supply, social supply, affordable purchase supply.

Deputy James Browne: An increased supply of all tenures, including social, affordable and private houses and apartments.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: It is not apartments costing €3,000 per month. Get your head out of the sand.

Deputy James Browne: We have to drive supply. That will in turn bring about the end of homelessness, so we have the properties that people will live in. It will also drive down rents by increasing supply.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Utter nonsense.

Deputy James Browne: We have seen that in the past when the supply increases.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: How will apartments for €3,000 per month lower homelessness and lower prices?

Deputy James Browne: That is what is crucial from my perspective, delivering the homes that are needed. While the Deputy has endless criticisms of everything that is being done across here-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Affordable homes are needed and the Minister is not delivering them.

Deputy James Browne: You have to have solutions as well, Deputy. This is the usual from Sinn Féin. When you are saying something-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Sit down, you are embarrassing yourself at this stage, really.

Deputy James Browne: The Deputy is the only person embarrassing himself.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Homelessness will increase month on month as a result of these failed policies.

Deputy James Browne: It is the usual tactic from Sinn Féin in the lifetime of this Government. When somebody is saying something and you do not want it heard-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I do not want to hear it, but I would like an answer to the question that you will not answer, repeatedly, over and over.

Deputy James Browne: -----you talk them down and shout over them. You shout over them because you do not want anybody to hear. It is a really underhanded tactic.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan): Minister, time is up.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: People can see your housing policy failures writ large.

Deputy James Browne: You should respect people's democratic right to speak in this Chamber. I am elected the same as you.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Homeless figures are out on Friday. Are they going to be down? No, they will not.

Deputy James Browne: I am elected the same as you and I have a right to speak.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan): Deputy Ó Broin, through the Chair please. Minister, time is up.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I apologise.

Deputy James Browne: You have to respect people's right. You do not have to like what I have to say but you should allow me to say it.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I do not like homelessness rising and that is your responsibility.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan): We are moving on. Deputy Ó Broin, we are not going to have a conversation across the floor.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I do not like rents and house prices rising and that is your responsibility. That is what I do not like, Minister, not your refusal to answer questions.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan): Respect the Chair, please.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I apologise.

Housing Schemes

4. **Deputy Séamus McGrath** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the key measures he will be taking to support first-time buyers under Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030; if he will be reviewing the terms and qualifying criteria of existing schemes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [66122/25]

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I ask the Minister to outline the key measures he will be undertaking to support first-time buyers under the delivering homes, delivering communities plan. In particular, does the Minister intend to review the terms and qualifying criteria of existing schemes and will he make a statement on the matter? I hope he appreciates -I know he does - that many first-time buyers find themselves falling outside the criteria at present. This certainly needs to be reviewed so I welcome his answer.

Deputy James Browne: I thank Deputy McGrath for raising this important question about the key measures I and the Government will be taking to support first-time buyers under Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030. I thank the Deputy for his regular engagement on this important issue for his constituents. The Government's new housing plan, Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030 sets out a broad range of measures which will activate and accelerate new homes delivery and provide affordable housing supports. The new plan, which has a strong focus on deliverability, removes structural barriers to homebuilding, unlocking land, reforming planning, delivering infrastructure and creating conditions for investment. The Government is investing an unprecedented level of funding to support housing supply, which will underpin, *inter alia*, the new starter homes programme, delivering an average of 15,000 affordable housing supports annually to 2030. We are making homes accessible and affordable, increasing social and affordable housing output and improving rental security. The plan supports homeownership while revitalising villages, towns and cities. In addition to a keen focus on tackling vacancy and dereliction, the plan provides for an expanded remit for the Land Development Agency, working to extend the first home and help to buy schemes to 2030, an increase in affordable cost-rental tenancies, an expanded local authority delivered starter homes for purchase programme that will see an increase in affordable homes for purchase nationwide and a new support for those creating living over the shop homes.

The Government has introduced several schemes to help first-time home seekers to buy or rent homes. Since 2021, close to 16,900 affordable housing supports have been provided via these measures nationwide. These supports will be retained, streamlined and expanded under the umbrella of a new starter homes programme to further tackle the issues of supply and

affordability and ensure that first-time buyers and renters all over the country in need of assistance are supported by the Government.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I appreciate the Minister's answer and the measures in the housing plan that will be there to support first-time buyers, in particular the 15,000 starter homes per annum, which will include affordable purchase, first home scheme properties, help to buy and the vacant refurbishment grant. They are all very welcome. The point I really want to drive home - I know the Minister is aware of this and is looking at it - is that the qualifying criteria at the moment mean that many first-time buyers are falling outside of them. Under the help-to-buy scheme, which I appreciate is a Department of Finance scheme, the price ceiling for a property is €500,000. In many areas of the country now, first-time buyers find themselves not able to secure a new property for €500,000, so the help-to-buy scheme is no longer available to them. Equally, the price ceiling in relation to the first home scheme is actually less. In Cork, for example, in Cork city it is €475,000 and in Cork county it is €450,000. Again, many first-time buyers find themselves outside this. It needs to be looked at, and I would appreciate if the Minister could look at this as a matter of urgency.

Deputy James Browne: Scheme criteria and support levels for affordable purchase schemes are kept under regular review, taking account of developments in the housing market. It is a complex and dynamic situation to ensure that we can provide the necessary affordable supports for people to be able to purchase their homes without affecting the market and driving up the cost of delivery and affordability on people. I hear the Deputy's concerns and will continue to engage with him to keep these affordability measures under review.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I appreciate this is a complex matter, and I know the last thing the Government wants to do is have schemes in place that will only lead to further price inflation. That is obviously a huge concern, and the Minister has to balance those concerns. For me, the reality is, as I said, that many first-time buyers are no longer able to avail of these schemes simply because of those qualifying criteria, particularly around the house value and the ceiling that is in place in relation to affordable purchase. I know this is on the Minister's radar. That needs to be reviewed as well in terms of the income qualification criteria. It is quite complicated and it needs to be simplified. Again, I know he is aware of that. The overall starter home package in the new plan is very welcome, but we have to refine some of the schemes to ensure they allow the vast majority of first-time buyers to qualify because that is, I know, the intention of the Government.

Deputy James Browne: Again, I thank Deputy Séamus McGrath for raising the concerns around affordability, in particular around Cork city and Cork county. As I said, these schemes will continue to be kept under review to ensure that there are those affordability mechanisms in place and that people in Cork can afford to access the starter homes programme on an equal and equitable level with the rest of the country.

Deputy Thomas Gould: It is hard lines when you will not give us an answer, but not to give your own man an answer? Jesus. I know less now than before you started to talk.

Deputy James Browne: You do not want to listen to the answer.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Approved Housing Bodies

5. **Deputy Conor Sheehan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the timeframe for the implementation of the recommendations of the approved housing bodies strategic forum report; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [65673/25]

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Will the Minister outline a timeline for the implementation of the recommendations of the AHB strategic forum report? I ask him this in particular in relation to the gearing issue that is there and in relation to moving the AHB sector towards a sustainable delivery model. There is a real lack of clarity in the Minister's new housing plan on exactly how the Government will deliver its targets. How many direct-build social homes will be delivered under the new housing plan?

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): The Report of the Approved Housing Body Strategic Forum presents an ambitious and transformative vision for the AHB sector and sets out a detailed roadmap of policy development reforms to enable the realisation of that vision over the years ahead. The forum, which was established in December 2023, undertook a comprehensive review of the AHB sector and concluded its structured engagements and analysis at the end of 2024. These included a series of national workshops involving over 150 participants, broad stakeholder consultations and targeted research into not-for-profit housing association models in four peer European jurisdictions. The work also drew on the relevant recommendations of the Housing Commission and the priorities outlined in the programme for Government relevant to the AHB sector. This report represents the most detailed examination of the AHB sector ever conducted by the State.

While the vision sets out the reform of the sector over the next decade, officials in my Department have been continually progressing policies to strengthen the sector since I came into office. Work is already under way on several policy development reforms outlined within the Report of the Approved Housing Body Strategic Forum, as committed to in the national housing plan, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030*. Furthermore, my Department will shortly establish a sectoral reform working group, involving key stakeholders, which will be tasked with progressing work on the more transformational policy development recommendations throughout the period of the national housing plan. Upon the conclusion of this intensive scoping and investigation phase, I will present regular policy development reports to the Government for consideration, outlining the feasibility, impacts and proposed implementation plan for the key structural recommendations. I am committed to advancing a sectoral reform programme that will enhance the positive impact of AHBs, address immediate sectoral challenges and support the transformation towards a more resilient, effective and efficient sector.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: We know that AHBs are crucial if we are to have any hope of meeting our housing targets, particularly in terms of social housing delivery, but we also know they are approaching the limit of their borrowing capacity. A workable solution has been proposed by replacing the CALF loan element of AHB social housing with a Government-backed CALF equity grant support. It is the same level of funding as a grant equity but not as a loan. When will this be done by the Department? When the Minister appeared at the housing committee a number of weeks ago, he said that his Department had subsequently engaged with the Department of public expenditure and reform on the sanction request and that that Department would like to consider the sanction request in light of the report of the strategic forum. The report has now been finalised and published, so when will this be carried out?

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: The Minister was in before the committee, but, more specifically, as the report has now been published, the Minister has established a special working sectoral group in this area. There were eight interlinked policy developments. The Deputy has referred to some of them. We want to get the AHBs to go more towards direct delivery to examine the reformed income model for the AHB social housing revolving fund, establishing an AHB sector restructuring sustainable fund and then capital funding to support more sustainability for larger AHBs. That is the area the Deputy is talking about - gearing, direct delivery and reclassification. The big issue here is that the Minister has done a body of work and wants to work with the sectoral group and, specifically, to look at the particular issue in terms of that gearing aspect. As the Deputy is probably aware, in terms of some of the larger AHBs, there is a body of work under way with the UCD Geary Institute and the Housing Alliance. They have allowed potential pathways in terms of the reclassification of some larger AHBs.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I thank the Minister of State for that response. We really need to see action on this from the Government. The gearing and debt levels within some larger AHBs need to be addressed because they are basically putting our capacity to deliver housing at risk.

Specifically, in relation to the recommendation of moving the AHB sector away from turnkey and towards direct delivery, there is a distinct lack of clarity on how the Government will deliver its 72,000 target, which is too low anyway because it does not take in the inbuilt deficit from the Housing Commission. How many out of the 72,000 will be direct-build social homes?

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: More specifically on the issue the Deputy has raised about turnkey developments, there is a process being initiated at the moment towards a call for proposals. Through the Department but particularly the local authorities, the State will define the location, the typology and tenure of housing needed as well as specifications and value parameters for any of the scheme proposals. The AHB proposals are aligned with our local authority housing delivery actions. This is about the AHBs getting more into direct build in that space. The other impact of that is that the issue, which has arisen with some people, of competing first-time buyers will be reduced. More particularly, we want to deliver 72,000 units over that period of time. Included in that is that we want the local authorities themselves to get into that self-build area more. If they exceed targets, there will be further funding coming to local authorities for other purposes.

Housing Provision

6. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the key measures to increase social housing availability under Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [65487/25]

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan): Tá Ceist Uimh. 6, in ainm an Teachta Willie O'Dea á thogáil ag an Teachta Séamus McGrath.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: Will the Minister for housing to outline the key measures to increase social housing availability under the delivering homes, building communities plan?

Deputy James Browne: I thank Deputy Séamus McGrath for taking this question on the increase in social housing availability on behalf of Deputy Willie O'Dea.

Since the beginning of 2022, Government has supported the delivery of 35,163 new social homes across thousands of individual projects funded through build, acquisition and leasing programmes. Building on progress made to date, delivering homes, building communities includes a wide range of measures to accelerate new-build social housing delivery to an average of 12,000 new-build social homes a year between 2025 and 2030.

To incentivise local authorities to deliver more own-build projects, a new performance fund will be established. Where a local authority exceeds its own-build target, it will receive additional discretionary funding for the delivery of community and placemaking initiatives and projects. In addition, ring-fenced new-build housing delivery teams in each local authority dedicated to own-build new social and affordable housing delivery will be fully funded by my Department through reimbursement to local authorities on a performance-pay basis.

The new single-approval process for all new-build social housing projects up to a value of €200 million will support local authorities to streamline processes and encourage delivery of larger new-build social housing developments. The land acquisition fund will be reformed, streamlined and expanded to ensure it is fit for purpose and can support the level of ambition in the plan. To this end, the fund will also be increased from the current €239 million to at least €500 million. I will establish a revamped contractor-led renewal programme which will afford opportunities for local tradespersons and contractors to work with local authorities and approved housing bodies to tackle vacancy and dereliction and increase social housing supply.

Delivering homes, building communities will further support additional social housing delivery by mandating the use of standard house layouts and specifications as part of the new approval process and facilitate the use of modern methods of construction, MMC, through a standardised design approach. To further promote the delivery of social housing, I will embed the use of a design-and-build-contract approach in all local authorities and the AHB sector in order to expedite the delivery of social homes.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I particularly welcome the overall target in the housing plan of 12,000 social units per annum, building on the progress made on the Housing for All plan, which, it must be acknowledged, made significant progress in the area of social housing. There are new initiatives in this plan to help deliver social housing such as the performance fund for

local authorities, which is critical. Many local authorities do a great job but others not so. It is important that recognition is given to those that do a good job. Having ring-fenced teams is also critically important. The revision of the land acquisition fund is very significant because that is a particular issue across the country in terms of local authorities having a land bank available to them for the development of social housing. Of course, the standardisation of design is critically important to make the delivery of social housing more efficient.

I will be touching modern methods of construction in a further question, but it is welcome to see that also included in the delivery of social housing because we have to embrace that technology.

Deputy James Browne: The absolute priority for me, the Department and the Government is to maximise new builds. That is where we want to be at and, after that, forward-funded schemes to deliver homes where perhaps there is planning permission but which may not otherwise be built. We need to move away from pure turnkey as much and as quickly as possible. A key part of this delivery is the local authority new-build teams. We will ensure they are adequately resourced, fully funded and ring-fenced from other local authority work and dedicated to social and affordable new-build housing projects, which will be absolutely critical in this regard. Accordingly, my Department will support local authorities to establish these new-build teams which will be fully funded by the Department through reimbursement to local authorities on a performance pay basis.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I think the emphasis on new builds is welcome across the House. I particularly welcome the emphasis on local authorities and indeed the approved housing bodies directly building social homes, which is critically important. Of course, to achieve the targets we need a combined approach. There will also need to be continuation of turnkey and, of course, the delivery of social housing through the Part V provision is also important. They all deliver homes for families and individuals across the country. All these measures combined are welcome and it is important that we maintain a sustained focus to ensure that we get delivery and that we achieve the overall ambition within the plan to deliver social housing targets and, of course, ultimately reduce the homelessness that there is in this country at present.

Deputy James Browne: Meeting our social housing targets is absolutely crucial. Meeting them through new builds is best practice and that is where we want to expand as quickly as possible. However, we need local authorities to lead on their own-build programmes as well because that builds resilience into the system no matter what the economic situation may be to ensure that there is not a reliance of delivery through Part V and turnkeys, output under which can be negatively impacted by market conditions or particular conditions in local authorities. We have seen some local authorities really expand on own builds and I give credit to those local authorities. Some local authorities have exceeded past social housing targets but perhaps were overly reliant on a non-own-build properties. We need to see them develop their capacity. Some local authorities are not achieving under either of those. Crucially, we need all our local authorities moving towards own builds.

Housing Provision

7. **Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the key measures to increase usage of modern methods of construction under Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [65637/25]

64. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the plans in the most recent housing plan, to increase the delivery of housing built using modern methods of construction; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [65665/25]

99. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the key measures to increase usage of modern methods of construction under Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [65568/25]

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan): Tá Ceist Uimh. 7, in ainm an Teachta Peter 'Chap' Cleere, á thogáil arís ag an Teachta Séamus McGrath.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: The Deputy is keeping us busy tonight.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: Will the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage outline the key measures to increase the use of modern methods of construction under Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030 and make a statement on the matter?

Deputy James Browne: I again thank Deputy Séamus McGrath for asking this question on behalf of Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere. I propose to take Questions Nos. 7, 64 and 99 together.

The new national housing plan contains a range of actions to increase skills and support modern methods of construction, building on the initiatives already in place. MMC is the term used to describe a range of compliant innovative construction alternatives to traditional construction methods. MMC has the potential to boost productivity, increase efficiency and improve sustainability in the construction sector. It has brought tangible benefits to housing delivery. Reductions in delivery timeframes of up to 40%, greater cost certainty and reduced changes during construction have offered both cost and time savings.

My Department is working closely with the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and other relevant stakeholders in progressing work to increase delivery capacity in the residential construction sector through promoting the adoption of modern methods of construction.

Key actions which are included in delivering homes, building communities to increase adoption of MMC are: the use of MMC in at least 25% of all new social and affordable homes built during the lifetime of the plan; support for the use of three-dimensional modular units through pathfinder projects in Limerick and Wexford; optimising the NSAI agrément certification process; promotion of ISIF funding opportunities for manufacturers to support new and existing factories; the delivery of at least 1,500 MMC dwellings through the local

authority accelerated delivery programme; renewing the action plan to promote careers in construction and launching a new five-year action plan for apprenticeships; and doubling the overall investment of Enterprise Ireland's build to innovate programme to drive adoption of efficient construction practices and the use of MMC.

My Department has also recently published the standardised design approaches study. These standardised design approaches will raise awareness about the benefits and opportunities and promote adoption, of standardised housing design to facilitate MMC.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I welcome the strong recognition for modern methods of construction in the new housing plan. That is critically important. The construction sector is very much up for embracing MMC and the additional measures in the plan to incentivise the construction industry to take up those measures are critically important. The Cathaoirleach Gníomhach will know a development in his constituency, Longview in Ballyvolane, where the developers are very much embracing both on-site and off-site modern methods of construction and really delivering quickly in terms of the turnaround time for new houses. That is important and it was a site the Taoiseach visited recently to see first-hand the progress that has been made there. I totally agree that this has the potential to be a more environmental form of construction and increase sustainability but also provide new employment opportunities for individuals as well in the area of modern methods of construction. Furthermore, it does, of course, help us weatherproof some of the delivery in terms of construction so that it can move apace during the winter months, which is one of the key advantages of MMC.

Deputy James Browne: I thank the Deputy for the important question on MMC. A dissemination programme is currently being developed by my Department and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to promote the use of these approaches in the education and construction sectors. These standardised designs build on my Department's existing design manual for quality housing, for example, for social housing and the LDA's Apartment Typology Booklet, which also include designs to promote the use of MMC for social housing and apartments. In addition, my Department's accelerated delivery programme supports the development of new social homes using MMC. The delivery of at least 1,500 new homes across a total of 36 sites and 13 local authorities has been prioritised and enabled through the use of a streamlined design and build procurement approach that facilitates MMC. Approximately 1,250 homes are being constructed using this procurement approach. The Government is committed to supporting all forms of MMC to encourage greater innovation in construction. The 2D approaches using panelised systems are quite widespread, with 3D volumetric approaches still in a more embryonic phase.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I strongly believe the construction sector is onboard for modern methods of construction. It recognises the advantages, cost savings and that it can deliver with greater efficiency, which is critically important. It is also important the Government is leading in this way in the provision in the plan for 25% of social and affordable units to be delivered through MMC. That message is very important. Indeed, other measures such as build to innovate by the Department of enterprise is also very important to help promote MMC. It is a sector that will continue to grow in this country. It can provide employment opportunities and use more sustainable materials as part of that, which is critically important from an

environmental point of view, as well as delivering homes in a more speedy and efficient manner.

Deputy James Browne: We will support a number of 3D volumetric pathfinder projects to further explore the potential for these innovative systems. Using MMC, Limerick City and County Council and the mayor's office will be supported to advance the initial phase of their SMART modular housing project. In addition, Wexford County Council is being supported to commence a project to develop 22 permanent social homes utilising 3D volumetric systems. We will continue to maximise the use of 2D right across our systems due to its importance.

Housing Schemes

8. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage regarding HAP tenancies where one income earner moves out, to ensure that the remaining tenant is not financially adversely affected; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [65844/25]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: In traditional council housing or social housing if the tenant's income changes or the number of people in the house changes because kids leave or anybody leaves, the tenant does not get thrown out of the house. They do not get threatened with possible homelessness. They do not build up arrears. The rent is adjusted to the tenant's means and to the number of people in the house. That does not happen if the tenant is in the HAP scheme and, by the way, it does not happen if they are in cost rental so tenants can very quickly find themselves in trouble. What is the Minister of State going to do about that?

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: The HAP scheme continues to play a vital role in housing eligible families and individuals. At the end of quarter 2, 2025, over 128,500 HAP tenancies had been set up since the scheme commenced, of which 51,736 households were actively in receipt of HAP support. Under HAP, a tenant sources their own accommodation in the private rental market. This accommodation should be within the prescribed maximum HAP rent limits, which are based on household size and the rental market within the area concerned. Where a tenant's circumstances change, including their household size, they should notify the relevant local authority. The local authority can then review the household circumstances, including in relation to differential rent charged and the relevant HAP rate to apply. Since 11 July 2022, each local authority has had statutory discretion to agree to a HAP payment up to 35% above the prescribed maximum rent limit, or up to 50% in the case of homeless households in the Dublin region. Additional flexibility was also given for local authorities to apply a couple HAP rate to single person households. Recognising that newer tenancies are at a higher cost than existing tenancies, the measure only applied to new tenancies. It is a matter for the local authority to determine if the application of discretion is warranted on a case-by-case basis and the level of discretion applied in each case. Local authorities are encouraged to focus the application of discretion on alleviating financial burden for HAP tenants wherever possible, particularly for those in difficult financial circumstances. I have recently approved a review of existing HAP rent limits to ensure there is sufficient support under the HAP scheme to assist eligible households in accessing accommodation in the private rental sector. My Department

is currently finalising the parameters of this review. The Deputy Boyd Barrett might elaborate on the specific circumstances he was talking about.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Sylvia is in a HAP tenancy for five years. From the beginning she was also paying a top-up to her landlord. She used to live with her eldest son. He has moved out. The landlord has also increased the rent and Sylvia used to get a carers' payment for her father, but her father passed away so she does not get that payment. She has been hit three different ways, with increased rent, lower income and now fewer people in the house. She went to the council, as the Minister of State proposed she do, and the officials said: "Tough luck". The rent is €2,000 to the private landlord, because that is the problem with HAP. Is the council willing to help her out? No, it is not willing to because the Government's rules actually preclude it. Therefore, rent arrears are building up and fairly soon she will be threatened with homelessness unless something is done. By the way, the same thing is happening with cost rental for tenants where people move out and they are faced with the same rent and have less income. What are they supposed to do?

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: It is good to see the Deputy back to his passionate best. The Department and the Minister are very aware of the pressures on existing tenancies and it is existing tenancies the Deputy is talking about. The particular issues around that are currently under active consideration by the Department and it is something we are actively looking at in terms of existing tenancies and affordability. I note the point. I do not know the particular circumstances regarding Sylvia. If the Deputy wants us to follow up with the local authority we will, if we can assist in any way. We recognise the point the Deputy has made.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I appreciate that and I will send the Minister of State Sylvia's details, but, as he can see, there is a more general problem. There is somebody who works in here - I will not give away their identity- who is on a very modest income. They got cost-rental accommodation at €1,200, but their son was living with them who was earning. The son has moved out but they are stuck with a €1,200 rent but with half the income. What are they supposed to do? They have not got the money to pay for their son's rent as well, but cost rental does not work the same way as social housing where the rent is adjusted. Given the Government's new housing plan is proposing essentially to do away with differential rents and social housing in favour of cost rental, this is going to cause a big problem. It is going to be much more general and it is happening under HAP. A lot of people are getting caught with this and we are going to see more and more of it, so there is going to have to be a plan because people will end up homeless from cost-rental and from HAP tenancies. That is what going to happen. The Minister of State has got to address it and the councils have to address it.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: If the Deputy wishes to send us on the details regarding, Sylvia, the lady he referenced he can. As I said earlier, the Minister and the Department are fully aware of the pressures people are under, particularly in terms of the Deputy's question around HAP. A review is under way in that particular regard. We note the point the Deputy is raising in terms of cost rental as well and it is something we will consider.

Childcare Services

9. **Deputy Emer Currie** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to provide an update on his Department's efforts to fulfil the programme for Government commitment to review the 2001 Childcare Facilities Guidelines for Planning Authorities to ensure childcare spaces are provided and put into use; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [65825/25]

Deputy Emer Currie: I seek an update on the Department's efforts to fulfil the commitment in the programme for Government to review the Childcare Facilities Guidelines for Planning Authorities, which date from 2001, to ensure childcare spaces are provided and put into use.

Deputy James Browne: The programme for Government sets out a number of priorities for the Government relating to access to early learning and childcare services, including a commitment to review the 2001 Childcare Facilities Guidelines for Planning Authorities to ensure childcare spaces are provided and put to use. Further to the commencement of Chapter 3 of Part 3 of the Planning and Development Act 2024, on 2 October provisions for national planning statements were introduced to replace the provisions for ministerial guidelines issued under section 28 of the Planning and Development Act 2000. All existing section 28 guidelines will, over time, be revoked and replaced with new national planning statements, including childcare guidelines. The current guidelines will, however, remain in force until revoked or replaced by a corresponding national planning statement.

My Department is working with the Departments of Children, Disability and Equality, and Education and Youth and has established a working group, chaired by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, to create a clear mechanism for sharing information on and discussing current and future policy related to the planning of early learning and childcare services, including examining the role of the existing childcare guidelines for planning authorities. To date, eight meetings of the working group have taken place over the course of 2024 and 2025, with the most recent meeting held in September 2025.

Work to date has included engagement with the planning and land use committee of the County and City Management Association, which supports the interdepartmental working group. The primary focus of this work is to gain a practical overview of the application of the existing guidelines with a view to initiating the drafting of a national planning statement which will complement other work being undertaken by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality to support the provision of childcare facilities.

Deputy Emer Currie: I thank the Minister. A commitment was made in the programme for Government to increase childcare supply by building or acquiring State-led facilities. There are 43,000 children on waiting lists for early learning, childcare and school-aged care places. In our planning system, the only provision to safeguard land for childcare facilities is a basic formula from 2001 which allocates 20 childcare places for every 75 homes. It is rudimentary and littered with loopholes. One-bedroom apartments are not included in the calculation and builders can secure an exemption by pointing to other childcare facilities in an area, even if they have waiting lists. Sometimes facilities are not built.

The guidelines are literal in their application. For example, if there are two adjacent applications for 70 homes there would be no childcare facility. If we are ever to meet the

demand for childcare places in local communities, we need to effectively link the delivery of new housing with the delivery of childcare places, and that is our opportunity to acquire State-led facilities. If the Minister is looking for a practical overview of existing guidelines, I have spoken about them extensively in the Chamber.

Deputy James Browne: I thank the Deputy. I am aware that she has spoken about this on many occasions in the Chamber, including with the Minister, Deputy Foley. She is quite consistent in raising the importance of childcare facilities. I can assure her that the Minister and her Department are actively engaging on this. I will meet the Minister, Deputy Foley, in the next week on this matter to see how we can further the pathway. It is a matter for the Department of children to work out the policy. It holds the pen in that respect. The Department of housing is involved in terms of facilitating the national planning statement and ensuring we can deliver these facilities. As the Deputy said, it is important to have State-led facilities.

Deputy Emer Currie: To assist the Minister with that meeting, I would say it is time our planning authorities were required to scale up their competency in childcare. At present, assessment of childcare needs occupies a low level of priority when it comes to assessing planning applications in large-scale residential developments. That needs to change. There should be mandatory technical guidelines for childcare facilities so that units are suitable and usable as childcare facilities in size, design, regulatory compliance and location. They should not be built at the back of estates, essentially as housing units, for numbers of children that are not viable for childcare providers. We need to end the prevalence of childcare units lying empty in places of overwhelming childcare demand, such as in my constituency of Dublin West where units have lain empty for years. By updating the guidelines, the Minister can create an effective pipeline for State-led childcare facilities that will build the mixed private-public model of childcare that we desperately need.

Deputy James Browne: I again thank Deputy Currie for raising the important matter of childcare facilities. I agree that it is timely and in accordance with the programme for Government that we update the planning guidelines. As I said, we will work with the Department of children. Ultimately, it is the Department of children that will work out the policy on this area. The national planning statements will form an important part of planning for almost every Department across government. As I said, we stand willing and ready to give technical advice on what is necessary for those statements. Those relating to childcare facilities need to be updated. Having empty facilities is totally unacceptable. There is no question that there have been too many instances where developers have technically put a facility in place, but have made it far too difficult or cumbersome for it to be used for its intended purpose. It is something of which I am very much aware.

Renewable Energy Generation

10. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to outline his plans to draw up planning guidelines for solar farms for local authorities; to outline the discussions his Department has held with other Departments; if his Department have considered the EU's RED III directive within its plans; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [65840/25]

92. **Deputy Noel McCarthy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the progress to date in establishing planning guidelines for solar energy developments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [65645/25]

120. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his Department has considered drawing up planning guidelines for solar farms; if he will outline the stages in this process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [65841/25]

Deputy James O'Connor: This is an important question. On behalf of the people of Cork East, I want to ask about the position regarding the publication of solar guidelines. There has been an explosion in the number of solar projects across Cork East as a constituency, as well as in Deputy O'Sullivan's constituency of Cork North-Central and other parts of the country where developments have occurred, often at very large scale from 500 to 600 acres up to 2,000 acres. Could the Minister please give my constituents some clarity on this urgent matter?

Deputy James Browne: I propose to take Questions Nos. 10, 92 and 120 together.

I thank Deputy O'Connor for this important question on planning guidelines for solar farms for local authorities. The section of the programme for Government on securing Ireland's future reaffirms Ireland's ambitious targets of 8 GW of solar capacity connected to the grid by 2030, to assist with meeting the requirement of 80% of electricity demand supplied by renewables. Solar energy is a growing source of electricity, with approximately 2.1 GW of solar power capacity currently installed in Ireland. However, further solar capacity is required for Ireland to meet its domestic and international targets. For this reason, my Department is preparing a new national planning statement on solar energy under the new Planning and Development Act 2024. My Department has begun an initial scoping process to identify the component factors relevant to the preparation of the national planning statement for solar energy development, including any appropriate environmental assessment and public consultation requirements and other relevant European obligations such as the renewable energy directive, RED III, which will determine the timeframe for publication of said guidelines.

The scoping process remains at an early stage, but I am satisfied that the existing and evolving planning system, supported by Government policy more generally, provides a sufficiently robust policy and legislative framework to facilitate the roll-out of solar energy development in a sustainable manner and to assist with meeting our renewable electricity requirements while balancing the perspectives of local communities and their needs and allowing for public and stakeholder engagement. In the interim, there are currently no specific planning guidelines in place in respect of solar energy development. Proposals for individual solar energy developments are subject to the statutory requirements of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, and the Planning and Development Act 2024, as amended, in the same manner as other proposed developments, with planning applications made to the relevant local planning authority or An Coimisiún Pleanála on appeal.

Deputy James O'Connor: I thank the Minister. I acknowledge that he has provided a response. As a TD, I have no issue with the need for renewable energy and the decarbonisation

of our economy but when it comes in the form of using thousands of acres of land in highly commercial agricultural areas - the Cork East constituency has some of the best land in the country - that represents one issue, and the second issue is the scale of these developments. Other countries have pursued very smart strategies such as using the top of commercial and school premises and factories or non-agricultural lands to pursue these developments, but Ireland has a mismatch in terms of policy.

11 o'clock

Development is happening in areas where, ultimately, it is not the best use of that land or ground. Does the Minister see the point I am raising? In the east Cork area and other parts of the country, as other Deputies have raised, this is not happening in a prudent or productive way for the agricultural economy and in terms of the impact it is having on residents, given the size and scale of these developments. As I said, they potentially are upwards of 1,000 acres and in one case I am aware of, up to a maximum of 2,000 acres, which is larger than the Phoenix Park.

Deputy James Browne: I certainly hear the Deputy's concerns. Any proposals forthcoming from the Government will be subject to public consultation and consultation with stakeholders, very much including the agricultural community and rural villages. However, in the absence of national planning statements, it falls back to the first principles of planning law, including the relevant Acts, but also the county development plans as set out by the 31 local authorities. At a local level, the city or county development plan sets out where solar energy development is accessible. The making of the city or county development plan is a reserved function of the local authority members. In terms of the setting out of the county development plan by Cork County Council, it is in the council's remit to assess, decide and set out where solar energy can go. Councillors being able to make that decision, effective at the closest point to local people, is an important power.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: On the Minister's last point, we have approached Cork County Council collectively at a local level and it is saying that without national guidelines, it will not amend its development plan in terms of governing regulations around the erection of solar farms. There is a bit of a chicken-and-egg situation here. The council is saying it will not implement anything about solar development in its development plan. The Minister is saying this evening that it is up to the council to incorporate that into its development plan. The council has already told us locally it is not open to amending it without direction nationally.

I support the point made by Deputy O'Connor. On some of the land he is talking about, with which I share a border, somebody could build a solar farm 100, 200 or 300 acres in size but would struggle to get planning permission for a one-off house or agricultural shed. It is that stark in terms of the development that can and cannot happen there. At this stage, we need to be genuine with people. In the absence of regulation and guidelines, we must stop fooling people. I welcome that there will be a scoping exercise but it sounds like it will take an awfully long time. We need to implement guidelines urgently.

Deputy James O'Connor: It will take more to deter us than a few cheap shots in op-eds in the *Irish Examiner* criticising me and others for having the courage to come in here and raise these matters. Deputy O'Sullivan is right that we need the guidelines. Local authorities need

those guidelines and they need leadership from the Government. A message must go back to the custodians of the *status quo* who have let this matter carry on for so long, despite its being raised at parliamentary party level and ministerial level before the general election and again now, that we need answers. It seems to me we have been left in the lurch, unable to give constituents answers because we do not have those guidelines. There is a game of pass the parcel between the Department and local government when both need to come together to understand that the scale of development happening in areas such as my own in the Cork East constituency, and the rapid nature of those developments, requires urgent attention for reasons ranging from flooding to the large-scale size of the developments. As Deputy O'Sullivan rightly said, if someone wants to build a house on those lands, the planning process is far more tedious than it is when seeking to swallow up hundreds of acres for the development of these facilities.

Deputy James Browne: On the question of smaller extensions, etc., we are working on a very extensive suite of planning exemptions. I very much recognise that people should have more power to deliver and work on their own local property without having to seek planning permission. That is why we are introducing those exemptions. It is very much not a case of passing the parcel. The reality is that county development plans are decided at a local level. We must be very careful how we proceed in terms of any national planning statement. It cannot be one size fits all. Local authorities and local councillors know what is best for their local areas.

I very much believe in local government, which is why I set up the local government task force to give more power back to local councillors. Any national planning statement, when it is announced, cannot and will not take a one-size-fits-all approach. What is good for Cork East would be very different from what is good for north Wicklow and different again from what works for Donegal. No matter what the planning statement says, there will always be a significant amount of power left to the local authority to decide what to do with the land. There is no reason for any local authority to be waiting for a national planning statement. The law, as it is, says it is up to local authorities to decide what to do with their land in their own county areas under their own county development plans. That is their local power.

Question No. 11 taken with Written Answers.

Vacant Properties

12. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his Department has any plans to investigate the rate of home vacancy around the country; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [65819/25]

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I draw the Minister's attention to a number of vacant homes in Ringfort housing estate in Rathmolyon, County Meath. The families concerned did everything right. They paid their deposits, spending tens of thousands of euro, but the builder has refused them their homes. They have been put under massive stress, with some of them putting off starting a family and some having to move back into their parents' home. After all of that, five years later, they are being refused their homes. What can the Minister do to enable these families to move into their homes?

Deputy James Browne: The Deputy's question was about plans to investigate the rate of home vacancy around the country, and that is the question I will answer. Data on vacant properties is available from a number of sources, such as the Central Statistics Office, data from census 2022 and GeoDirectory. My Department has been engaging with the national statistical institute, the Central Statistics Office, which has recently developed a new statistical release on residential vacancy. The release, published in September, provides information on the extent of residential vacancy in 2022 and 2023, using ESB data on residential electricity consumption, with future regular publications planned. In the release, the CSO notes a national vacancy rate of 3.3% at the end of 2023, down from 3.6% at the end of 2022. Local authority and local electoral level breakdowns are also included. Similarly, the latest GeoDirectory Residential Buildings Report, for quarter 2 of 2025, recorded that the average vacancy rate across Ireland had dropped to 3.7%, which is the lowest rate recorded since 2013.

The Government has introduced a range of initiatives and funding mechanisms in recent years and these measures are proving successful in reducing the levels of vacancy and dereliction nationwide. One such measure, the compulsory purchase orders, CPO, activation programme launched in April 2023, requires a proactive and systematic approach by local authorities to identifying vacant and derelict properties and engaging with owners to bring those properties back into use. This includes the active use of compulsory purchase powers by local authorities. As part of this programme, almost all local authorities now have a database of vacant and derelict properties identified within settlements in their administrative area that can be used to engage with property owners. The Government's commitment to addressing vacancy and dereliction, and actions in the new housing plan, Delivering Homes, Building Communities, will continue to play a vital role in bringing these properties into use as new homes across the country.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I accept the question I am asking the Minister is tangential to the one on the questions paper. I urge him to go off script for the next couple of minutes to address it. We have a situation where houses that were built are vacant. At the heart of this particular problem is that there are two separate companies with the same owners and directors. One company has bought the debt of another company, giving it secured creditor status. This means many other creditors will receive nothing, including these families, and the houses will remain vacant for now. The families are waiting to move into their homes, which are vacant. There is nothing they can do to get what they are entitled to. There is no mechanism on the part of the Government to get them into their homes. It frustrates me because Home Building Finance Ireland, HBFI, had the initial loan that was given to the builder. It allowed that loan to be bought out, which enabled the particular builder to become a secured creditor and be in charge of the liquidation process. These families are now left with nothing. Will the Minister address this matter?

Deputy James Browne: I accept that these people are in an extraordinarily difficult situation, which I have no doubt is quite traumatic for them. As the Deputy knows, this matter is now going through a legal process. I cannot comment on individual cases but in any situation, we always have to look at what is happening, take learnings from it and see if there are ways we could strengthen our laws, be it within the Department of housing or a different Department, as the case may be, and see how we can reassure ordinary people who are not expecting to find

themselves dealing with liquidation and these types of scenarios, and they are quite complicated legal scenarios. I am very much aware of what those families are going through and I cannot begin to imagine the stress they are all going through.

As I said, I have to be careful about not commenting too much on a particular situation going through a legal process, but we do have to look at those situations and ensure we take learnings from them.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I appreciate that and I am not going to comment on the insolvency process happening at present, other than to say the State is now on the hook for €700,000 because Revenue is one of those creditors. There are tools the State can use to protect its own interests in this, such as the office of corporate enforcement, which can take a High Court challenge to a liquidator that has been selected. Revenue itself can do the same.

It is really unfortunate we have a situation that could well be replicated over and over again in the future. There are plenty of construction companies dealing with the inflating costs of building that could find themselves in difficulty. We need to make sure individuals who put deposits down have those deposits ring-fenced in some manner, maybe in an escrow for example, to prevent them losing that, but also that the contracts are fulfilled. Here is the key: two separate companies with the same directors and owners are using the corporate veil to separate their assets from their liabilities. We have seen it before in the likes of Clerys, Paris Bakery and other situations. We need a mechanism to ensure people are held responsible for what they owe people with these things.

Deputy James Browne: What has happened with these families in a situation of a liquidation process is that there is a ranking of priority within that and they have found themselves very much on the wrong end of it. What I can undertake, albeit not in this specific case because, as I said, it is going through a current legal process, and with the principles being realised out of this situation, I will speak to the Ministers for Finance and enterprise to see how we can look at the particular situation that has arisen here. The Deputy is right; this situation could happen again in the future, so I will undertake to do that.

Vacant Properties

13. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the funding allocated to local authorities to bring vacant properties back into public use for social housing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [65437/25]

Deputy Thomas Gould: Will the Minister update the Dáil on the funding allocated to local authorities to bring the thousands of vacant properties back into public use for social housing, and will he make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: The management and maintenance of local authority social homes, including pre-letting repairs to vacant properties, implementing a planned maintenance programme and carrying out responsive repairs are matters for each individual local authority under section 58 of the Housing Act 1966. Local authorities are also statutorily required to ensure all their tenanted homes comply with the Housing (Standards for Rented Houses)

Regulations 2019. Notwithstanding these obligations, my Department provides annual funding under the planned maintenance and voids programme to support local authority management and maintenance programmes.

Since 2014 to the end of 2024, over 25,600 vacant social homes were brought back into productive use through an investment of more than €361 million. Some €31 million will be provided in 2025, supporting the refurbishment and re-letting of a minimum of 1,900 social homes, facilitating the quick turnaround of vacant homes and continuing the transition from a reactive voids approach to a planned maintenance approach. Funding will further increase in 2026 and, under a revised voids programme, will focus on the prompt turnaround of casual vacancies and reductions in the level of overall vacancy in the local authority housing stock, while also contributing to stock conditions surveys and supporting works arising from these surveys. This funding should complement local authorities' own resources, and should not be viewed as a substitute for local authority funding or for the requirement for adequate budgeting for housing management and maintenance by local authority officials and elected members as part of their annual budgetary process.

Data on delivery under the 2025 planned maintenance and voids programme, and local authority allocations for 2026, will be available early next year. It is my intention to introduce a new voids programme with a renewed focus on prompt turnaround and re-letting of vacant units by focusing only on those works necessary to ensure compliance with the Housing (Standards for Rented Houses) Regulations 2019.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Can I give the Minister of State a bit of advice and provide him with a solution? I sincerely want the Government to take this on board. He has just said the voids programme will be open in the new year. Why is it not open today? Why is the voids programme not open 365 days a year so that when a house comes back, the local authority can fix it up and allocate it out? Opening it just once or twice a year does not make sense. I am trying to be constructive but the Government always criticises us and says there is nothing coming from the Opposition. This is a simple fix here: keep the void programme open for 365 days a year so that houses are not left to rot.

Can I give the Minister of State one statistic? Data I received earlier this year from local authorities showed that one in four vacant houses is idle longer than 12 months. If we open the voids programme all year long, that will stop. We could get a fix here today. We could agree on this. We are trying to be cross-party constructive and that is something we could do together that would make a real difference to social housing and people on the housing list.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank the Deputy. I can see his passion. The Minister and the Department want to move to a planned maintenance programme, away from legacy. We want to bring all those units and homes up to a state of repair. The focus from now on will be about a model for planned maintenance such that houses can be re-let promptly, but ongoing works are being done to homes in order that when they become vacant, they are then in a reasonably good state and only a modest amount of work has to be done to re-let them. The Deputy will accept that one of the key problems is the length of time it takes local authorities to turn around voids to re-let them.

The model is moving and I think the Deputy and I are on the same page on that. I expect it is something he would support. It is towards a planned maintenance model rather than a model that is just reactive when properties become vacant. We want to move to planned maintenance. The local authorities are doing surveys of all their stock to get to that point and that is a key body of work the local authorities are returning to the Department.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I am not sure if the Minister of State knows this, but he should. If someone is not telling him this, he should get into the Department tomorrow and ask the question. He talks about preventative maintenance. At the current rate of preventative maintenance, it will take 78 years to do the stock survey of all local authority housing. That is the figure the Government provided to me - 78 years - and he comes in here to answer the question saying this is what the Government has planned. There are people who are living in mouldy, damp houses with leaks in the roof and windows and front doors that are unfit. People have heating systems that are not up to standard and the Minister of State comes in here talking about preventative maintenance. The Department cannot even do the audit. If it cannot do the audit and does not have the information, how is it going to do the maintenance?

Does the Minister of State know how much was allocated for preventative maintenance? It was €67 per house for each local authority. Each local authority is to have €67 to calculate what preventative maintenance needs to be done. Does the Minister of State really think that is going to do the job? I am asking him a straight yes-no question. I am telling him it will not.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I have a couple of figures for the Deputy. A sum of €31 million is being given in 2025 towards voids and planned maintenance. It will be €40 million for next year, 2026. Furthermore, the intention is that local authorities will have these stock surveys done over the next four to five years.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I got the figures from the Department.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: We have to be ambitious about getting these surveys completed.

Deputy Thomas Gould: These are the facts.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: Ultimately, the key point is that there are two areas here. Number one, the local authority itself has rental income coming in, which is ring-fenced in terms of maintenance for its housing stock. Furthermore, the Department gives additional funding in that regard as well. But we have to move. Everyone talks about future-proofing and coming up with a model that will work into the future. I think the Deputy would accept that we need to get to a space where we have a plan maintenance rolling model rather than a model on voids alone.

Wind Energy Guidelines

14. **Deputy Albert Dolan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to implement new draft wind energy guidelines; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [65419/25]

39. **Deputy Peter Roche** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the current regulatory framework governing maximum wind turbine height; whether concerns raised by residents in County Galway regarding the increasing scale of turbine proposals, particularly turbines exceeding traditional height thresholds, are being considered as part of the ongoing review of wind energy planning guidelines; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [65792/25]

85. **Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when the current regulation on the installation of wind farms were updated; when the current regulations are due to be updated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [59353/25]

532. **Deputy Albert Dolan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when he plans to implement new draft wind energy guidelines; and if he will make a statement on the matter.; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [60285/25]

533. **Deputy Albert Dolan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when he plans to implement new draft wind energy guidelines; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [60322/25]

Deputy Albert Dolan: The current wind energy guidelines date back to 2006. In 2006, turbines were 80 m high. Today in east Galway, communities are fighting applications against 180 m industrial structures using rules from two decades ago. It is regulatory negligence to apply 2006 rules to 2025 technology. My argument is simple. The guidelines must protect people first, through strictly increased setback distances and noise regulation. Only then can we provide the renewables. We cannot continue to regulate modern monsters with obsolete laws. We need the update and we need it now. When can we anticipate the new energy guidelines?

Deputy James Browne: I propose to take Questions Nos. 14, 39, 85, 532 and 533 together.

My Department is currently undertaking a focused review of the 2006 wind energy development guidelines which will inform a new national planning statement on wind energy under the new Planning and Development Act 2024. The review is addressing a number of key aspects of the guidelines including noise, setback distance, shadow flicker, community obligation, community dividend and grid connections. The key policy area here is with the Department of the Climate, Environment and Energy, which has primary responsibility for environmental noise matters and has been working to advance guidance on the noise aspect of the national planning statement, which is highly technical in nature. This work is now well under way.

In addition to work on the noise aspects of the national planning statement, the evolving policy and technical context including the new Planning and Development Act 2024 and the revision of the national planning framework reinforces the need to ensure that the finalised guidelines, once issued, are fit for purpose. In line with EU directive requirements, a strategic environmental assessment, SEA, is being carried out on the draft national planning statement

as part of the review process. In this regard, my Department intends to undertake a public consultation on updated draft guidelines as part of the SEA process whereby all interested parties will have an opportunity to submit observations on the draft national planning statement. A finalised national planning statement will be prepared following detailed analysis and consideration of the submissions received during the consultation phase.

My Department is working towards concluding the finalisation of the national planning statement having regard to the intended public consultation and the impact of associated reforms and reviews including the revision of the NPF. The current 2006 wind energy development guidelines remain in force, pending the finalisation of that review.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I appreciate the update and that the Department of energy and climate is working on the noise aspect. The speed at which this is dealt with is vital. Right now, there is a gold rush and a race to get planning applications through for these wind farms. I am speaking on behalf of the people of east Galway in Killimordaly, Barnaderg, Shancloon, Laurclavagh and Clonbern. There are 27 proposed wind farms in north Galway alone, with up to 150 turbines. The entire character of north Galway would be transformed if these were permitted.

Beyond the social impact, I need to raise the hard economic fact about the viability of these projects. EnergyCloud was before the committee last week. A total of €2 billion worth of electricity is being curtailed. This cannot be allowed to go on. It is not a sustainable model the way we are operating.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I support Deputy Dolan as well. I spoke about solar guidelines previously. It has to be said again that is taking an extreme amount of time to get these guidelines updated. I am here since 2020. I have spoken about this a dozen times at this stage. We have been led to believe that these guidelines are being updated or imminent. The Minister is giving us an update on the progress in relation to that. As I said, it seems to take an extreme amount of time. They are much anticipated and long awaited. Whether it is solar or wind, the only conclusion I can draw is that we seem to be putting things on the long burner. The only conclusion I can draw is that is being done by design by the Department to allow a number of applications. I am surprised to hear there are that many applications in one part of Galway. I thought that we had a heavy number of applications in my part of the country, but nothing comparable to Deputy Dolan's. We seem to do things very slowly. They seem to take an awful long time. I met the industry a number of weeks ago in relation to this. The industry wants these guidelines updated because it wants people to be aware of what is happening and it wants it done transparently. I echo the calls of Deputy Dolan to get this done urgently.

Deputy James Browne: I thank both Deputies for their input in relation to the matter. In relation to my time in the Department of housing, there has been significant engagement with the Department of the environment in terms of developing the wider issues around the guidelines and in relation to updating them through the national planning statements. These are very technical in nature. They are very complex. There is considerable EU environmental legislation to take into account. Most importantly, there are also local communities to take into account. It is about finding that balance of where we can get to a situation where we can deliver and develop renewable energy while at the same time ensuring that local communities and

individuals are respected within their local communities as well. This is not an easy balance to find. I have little doubt that if it was an easy balance to find it would have been done a considerable time ago. We are working very carefully, as I said, with the Department of the environment, whose policies are around ensuring that we have necessary renewable energy. I will be working with the Deputies as well and with the House to ensure that we can get that balance in place.

Deputy Albert Dolan: Recently I had the privilege of walking one of the proposed sites in Shanclon near Caherlistrane in County Galway, where what was before me was beautiful open landscape. What amazed me was that this windfarm was proposed to be built on a bog. In order to build a turbine on a bog, a significant amount of peat has to be excavated in order to put in the concrete base to allow for the turbine to go up. The problem here is that this goes against everything we are working for environmentally; digging up bogs to put in wind turbines that ultimately have a useful life of maybe 30 to 40 years before they have to be considered to be taken down at that point. I also highlight that the engagement that happens in advance of these developments going to a planning process where a turbine farm is being proposed at 50 MW. That is the potential output of the turbines. As a result, those planning applications can go through directly to An Coimisiún Pleanála. The reality for a lot of these farms that are proposed is that their output will be a lot less than 50 MW and they should be going to the council first based on output, not based on potential capacity. That is something that needs to be hammered quickly because they are acting as if they are going to put out 50 MW when the reality is it will be a lot less.

Deputy James Browne: I thank the Deputies for their concerns. There is a very large number of national planning statements that are now required over the coming years. Providing one under wind energy is a priority for the Department of housing, but as I said, many of the key principles are also within the Department of environment. We are continuing to work with it. It is about finding that balance where we can deliver renewable energy, which is absolutely critical for our environment - we are in a climate emergency - and ensuring that we meet the EU guidelines around the habitats directive, for example, and other directives, while also ensuring that the local communities are protected and respected. That is not an easy balance to deliver and arrive at. It is a difficult one to ensure that we can balance those competing interests. We have to ensure that we get this right, even if it does take a little bit longer than people might have hoped for. To ensure that we do not have a rushed answer is critical.

Defective Building Materials

15. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he plans to expand access to a remediation and compensation scheme for homes built with defective blocks in Skerries; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [65211/25]

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: There was a protest outside today by homeowners affected by defective concrete blocks from Mayo and Donegal, but also from Fingal. The homeowners in Fingal met the Minister's predecessor in 2022 and applied to the Housing Agency in 2023. The Housing Agency's report has been on the Minister's desk since June or July of this year. Can

he tell us when he is going to make a decision because these homeowners desperately need some certainty about whether they are going to be included in what is a very imperfect scheme?

Deputy James Browne: One thing I note is how often somebody tells there is something is on my desk when my desk is empty. It seems to be a term of art that something has arrived at the Department of housing somewhere. I can assure the Deputy that the Housing Agency received test results from the properties sampled in Fingal. I have received the final report from the Housing Agency. It literally was on my desk this week. On the basis of the recommendations made by the agency, I intend to shortly bring the matter to Government seeking approval for the making of an order designating the relevant parts of Fingal County Council as being part of the defective concrete blocks scheme so it will literally be within days.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Will the decision be made before or after Christmas?

Deputy James Browne: I reiterate it will be literally within days.

Is féidir teacht ar Cheisteanna Scríofa ar [\[www.oireachtas.ie\]](http://www.oireachtas.ie).

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): 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:

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

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

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

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

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss the lack of respite beds available 24/7 to families of children/adults with special needs in County Kerry.

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

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty - To discuss funding for Deansrath Family Centre to build an early childhood and family centre.

Deputy Jen Cummins - To discuss public transport in Chapelizod.

Deputy Barry Ward - To discuss overcapacity and reliability issues on the E1 and E2 bus routes operated by Dublin Bus.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss delays in the school building programme.

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

Deputy Pa Daly - To discuss flooding and biodiversity in the tributaries of the Feale river.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly - To discuss overcrowding, capacity and planned capital works at Naas General Hospital.

Deputy Mark Wall - To discuss the lack of school places in Scoil Mhuire, Allenwood, County Kildare.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae - To discuss concerns about the increasing outbreaks of TB in cattle in Kerry.

Deputy Michael Collins - To discuss water supply issues affecting Adrigole.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger - To discuss the impact of car parking charges in Blanchardstown town centre.

Deputies Mairéad Farrell and John Connolly - To discuss the waiting list for Áras Mhic Dara, An Cheathrú Rua.

The matters raised by Deputies Thomas Gould, Marie Sherlock, Mairéad Farrell, John Connolly, Ruth Coppinger and Pádraig O'Sullivan have been selected for discussion

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Bus Services

Deputy Thomas Gould: A lady contacted me today. She finished work in Cork University Hospital last Friday evening and was waiting in town for the 203 bus. She stood there for an hour before the bus turned up. Two buses were on the app. They never turned up. By the time the bus turned up, over 100 people were waiting to get on at the bus stop. She said trying to get on the bus was like a stampede. Imagine what it is like after working a long day in a hospital and having to struggle to get a bus home. She also said that she walks 5 km every morning to work because she cannot depend on the bus because the service is so bad in Cork. Why does she walk 5 km? It is because she knows that if she walks, she will get there on time.

Another person contacted me who uses the bus to commute. They have put in seven complaints in the past ten days and got two generic responses. To let the Minister of State how bad things are, I put a post on Facebook a couple of hours ago and asked people to let me know their stories. I cannot keep up with the number of stories that have come in. A total of 161 people responded to me in a couple of hours outlining their problems. They cannot get to work, school, college or hospital appointments. They are telling that it affects the 202, 203, 205, 206, 207, 208, 212, 214, 215 and 220 routes. That is just from people texting me or sending me messages. I have messages on Facebook and WhatsApp and emails about it. We are not talking

about a couple of minutes. We are talking about people waiting for an hour or longer in the rain and the cold this winter. How is that acceptable? We are talking about providing public transport and at the same time, Bus Éireann is letting the people of Cork down once again.

It was the exact same last year. People were waiting hours for buses. Some people might have a family member who can collect them while others might have the price of a taxi but many people do not. We were promised that more drivers would be hired and that there would be an end to delays and ghost buses.

One person who contacted me told of how they were standing at a bus stop and an empty bus passed them. The bus was empty. It was because that bus driver was told to get back to base or ahead because the NTA fines Bus Éireann every time it is late so instead of picking up passengers who are waiting in the cold and the rain, Bus Éireann management told drivers to drive on and pass them. The drivers are telling us they do not want to do that. They want to pick people up. They are also being told to roll up "out of service" and drive past people. Another person contacted me today. They saw a bus coming down the road after waiting for an hour that diverted down another road to get it back early. That is what is happening. Bus Éireann is completely ignoring the people of Cork. Fining Bus Éireann for being late or skipping a stop means that people are being left behind.

What action will be taken to ensure that the people of Cork are not left stranded by the side of the road? I was talking to my daughter. Her friend was waiting on a bus last weekend. The bus was to be there in seven minutes. The bus did not arrive for over 40 minutes. If I get off the bus at Heuston Station and look up at the bus panel and it says the bus will be there in five minutes, it will be there in five minutes. How can it be done in Dublin when it cannot be done in Cork? Why are the people of Cork looking at the app and the buses never turn up?

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney): I thank Deputy Gould for raising this important topic, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Transport, Deputy O'Brien. From the outset, I would like to clarify that the Minister for Transport has responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport but neither the Minister nor his officials are involved in the day-to-day operation of public transport services.

The statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally rests with the National Transport Authority, NTA. The NTA works with the public transport operators, which deliver the services and have responsibility for day-to-day operational matters.

That said, I would like to reassure the Deputy that the Government is strongly committed to providing all citizens with reliable and realistic sustainable mobility options and public transport plays a key role in the delivery of this goal. As the Deputy will be well aware, bus services in Cork city have, unfortunately, been experiencing significant reliability issues for a combination of reasons, including both driver availability issues and traffic congestion. The NTA and Bus Éireann are working together on the matter and are holding weekly meetings to review plans to rectify these issues.

There has been an increase in recruitment efforts, which have included open days and a number of online campaigns. There are currently a number of candidates in the process of

completing their driver school training and following this, Bus Éireann expects to be in a position to fully operate their existing timetabled services in late November.

However, I understand that additional drivers are required in order for Bus Éireann to introduce the required timetable changes that would help in alleviating some of the issues regarding congestion and reliability issues seen on some routes. It is intended that there will be changes to the timetable along a number of routes on a phased basis as and when these drivers become available. A number of timetable fixes have been implemented on certain routes already.

Bus Éireann has advised that it has the necessary number of applicants within its recruitment pipeline to address the additional driver requirements outlined above. Its assessments factor in applicant attrition rates and mixtures of candidates with and without the D-category licence, as well as other relevant factors such as retirements, resignations and short-term absenteeism.

I can also confirm that as part of the Connecting Ireland rural mobility plan, the TFI Local Link route 255 from Kinsale to Cork west was recently launched in August 2025. This new route 255 operates four daily return services between Charles Fort and the west of Cork city from Monday to Sunday. The new route provides peak-time services connectivity to Forthill, Kinsale College, Kinsale Community Hospital, Halfway, Ballinhassig, Wilton Shopping Centre, Cork University Hospital, Munster TU Campus and regional bus services.

BusConnects is a transformative programme of investment in the bus system providing better bus services across our cities, including in Cork. It is the largest investment in the bus system in the history of the State and is managed by the NTA. Planning for the implementation of the new bus network has commenced and it is expected that the new network will be implemented on a phased basis over the coming years subject to funding and resource availability.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I would advise the Minister of State to go back to the Department now and find out whoever wrote that speech for him because that speech was not worth the paper it was written on. I got all the same excuses and the same promises last year. Here we are now and the Minister of State is being rolled in here to read out the same old claptrap again while the people of Cork cannot get a bus. The Minister of State is talking about a bus to Kinsale. There are 150,000 people living in Cork and he is talking about a bus to Kinsale. There are 25,000 students in UCC and another 15,000 in MTU and he is talking about people from Kinsale going to college, but what about the people of Cork going to college? Some 150,000 people cannot get a bus and the Minister of State is coming in here talking about four buses a day. This is fecking crazy stuff. The Government has a responsibility to deliver a public bus service that delivers for the people. The Minister of State outlined there that the timetables were realistic. I met the company two years ago and told them over in Bus Éireann. I met with them. I sat down in the office and said your timetables are not realistic; they do not add up. I also told them buses should not be going from the north side to the south side because they are getting caught in traffic. They should be turned in the city centre and sent back out the way they came. I was told that could not be done either. We are trying the big solutions here. The Minister of State comes in here and tells me about a recruitment problem. There was a recruitment problem three years ago. What did the company do? Who is responsible? The first line of the Minister of State's speech was that this is a matter for the NTA. He said this is not the Minister's job and not the Government's job-----

Deputy Seán Canney: That is not what I said.

Deputy Thomas Gould: It is your job. It is your job to make sure people can get to work in the morning. I was contacted by a woman. I am asking you now, as Minister of State-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Through the Chair.

Deputy Thomas Gould: -----to go to my Facebook page with the Department of Transport and look at the messages that were left there. A girl was waiting an hour and a half to get a bus home from college on her own.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Is it right that in the pitch black of night girls and women are being left on their own?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Thomas Gould: It is not good enough and that response was shocking.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Thank you, Deputy. The Minister of State to reply.

Deputy Seán Canney: I thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach. First, I accept and I said here that the service is not right. I have also said I and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, are not responsible for the day-to-day running of the service - we are responsible for providing the funding. If there are issues with the service we will get to the bottom of it. I know there have been issues with getting drivers and I appreciate the Deputy's frustration and that of the people in Cork. There is no point in having a public bus service if we are not able to deliver it. We will work to get it right, we will work to get the additional people in place, but there are also new routes that have to be put in to try to avoid the congestion and to put in BusConnects. The timetable and the scheduling is being looked at and as I said to the Deputy, Bus Éireann and the NTA are meeting weekly to try to resolve some of these issues. I would say to the Deputy as well-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: Will you meet with Bus Éireann?

Deputy Seán Canney: Sorry-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: Will you meet with them?

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

Deputy Seán Canney: A Chathaoirligh.

Deputy Thomas Gould: You said they are meeting every week. I am saying will you meet with Bus Éireann?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Deputy, please. Through the Chair.

Deputy Seán Canney: With due respect, Deputy, you had your time and-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: But you are telling me they are meeting. Will you meet with them?

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

Deputy Seán Canney: If you could have the manners to let me talk, please. It is just common courtesy. I gave that to you. What I would say to you is I meet Bus Éireann on a regular basis where issues arise and I can meet it on this, but I will not be goaded into it or bullied into it by you.

Deputy Thomas Gould: No, but it is all right for people to stand in the cold and the rain----

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An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Deputy, let the Minister of State respond.

Deputy Seán Canney: What do you want?

Deputy Thomas Gould: -----because you will not take a lesson from me. Is that it?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Deputy, please let the Minister of State respond.

Deputy Seán Canney: No, I would say he can have the time. Sure he knows it all.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I know the people of Cork have no bus service. That is what I know.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Please, Deputy.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The people of Cork cannot get a bus.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Deputy-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: That is what I know.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Please, Deputy. Is the Minister of State finished?

Deputy Seán Canney: There is no point in talking when he shouts over me.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Okay, I am moving on to the second Topical Issue matter from Deputy Sherlock.

Vehicle Testing

Deputy Marie Sherlock: Go raibh maith agat a Chathaoirligh. I thank the Minister of State for taking this question. We had to postpone to tonight so he could be in the Chamber to take this. My question relates to commercial vehicle roadworthiness testing centre operators and tester regulations. I very much support improvement and adherence to the highest standards regarding commercial vehicle testing. I also very much support the concept of a 15-minute city and keeping services as close as possible to where they are needed. I support initiatives to reduce congestion and we have obviously had a lot of debate about the M7 over the past week and the carpark it has become, and the M50 has of course been incredibly congested for a number of years. The programme for Government states, "This Government will: Support the [logistics and road haulage] sector to ensure the efficiency of the supply chain and to maintain competitiveness" and the Minister of State has special responsibility for this area. There is also a commitment in the programme for Government to try to reduce the emissions from the logistics and road haulage sector. That applies to a lot of the vehicles, especially the commercial light goods vehicles that are in question here with respect to their annual testing and where they are tested.

My frustration is with SI No. 475/2022 which effectively mandates a series of improvements to light goods commercial vehicle testing centres. I support most of these improvements but one relates to the specific need for a drive-through. I did not get a specific answer to the key question I asked of the Department two years ago on the technical and engineering justification for a drive-through in these commercial vehicle roadworthiness testing centres. While we do not know that explanation, we know the regulations that will come into force on 18 March 2027 will result in the closure of at least four testing centres across the country and the loss of associated jobs. Those centres will be lost in Dublin's north inner city, in Coolock, Greenhills, Ballymun and in many other parts of the country where it is not possible to introduce a drive-through.

I will give the Minister of State an example because this has come to my attention through William O'Brien Motors in the north inner city, in my constituency. It was set up in 1993. In 2012 it was asked by Dublin City Council to move to a premises – the only premises that could be found in the north inner city to facilitate such testing - because the council wanted to keep it in the city centre. Bear in mind the council asked William O'Brien to move in 2012 notwithstanding that there was guidance in place since 2004 and there was no intervention or interference then by the Road Safety Authority or the Department of Transport in the move to the current centre. It is 8,500 sq. ft. of which 4,250 sq. ft. is currently allocated to testing. If the Minister of State was to walk into that centre he would see it is capable of a 360 degree turn. It does not have the capacity for a drive-through but it is entirely safe in terms of how it

is laid out. William O'Brien Motors has been fighting and debating with the Department over a number of years now about the need for this drive-through. A person from the Road Safety Authority came out a number of weeks ago and tried to provide helpful suggestions as to how William O'Brien Motors could comply with the regulations. The key issue is it would wipe out William O'Brien's business. If he was to comply with the regulations it would effectively do away with all the other things he would need like a waiting room, toilets and office space. My question to the Minister of State is whether he wants places like this to close down out of the communities in which they are serving.

Deputy Seán Canney: I thank the Deputy for the question. Commercial vehicle roadworthiness testing, CVRT, in Ireland is largely based on the EU roadworthiness directive, which is Directive 2014/45/EU. Although the directive has not set specific standards, it requires the provision of modern, up-to-date testing facilities to ensure all tests are carried out in accordance with the directive. While as Minister of State I have responsibility for the legislation governing commercial vehicle testing, the Road Safety Authority has statutory responsibility for the operation and oversight of the system, including the authorisation of CVRT facilities and operators. The standards required for CVRT premises were set out by the Department of Transport in 2004 but implemented differently by the local authorities. The need for existing CVRT premises to meet these standards has been discussed since 2013. In 2019, the operators were made aware their premises would need to meet the new standards, including drive-through lanes, to renew their authorisations in 2024.

In 2022, new regulations, SI No. 475/2022 - Authorisation of Commercial Vehicle Roadworthiness Test Operators and Testers (Amendment) Regulations 2022, amended SI No. 107 of 2013 to set out new standards for the authorisation of CVRT operators, including the requirement for drive-through lanes. The regulations supported revised requirements in the RSA's premises and equipment guidelines, with which CVRT operators must comply to obtain or renew an authorisation in accordance with the Road Safety Authority (Commercial Vehicle Roadworthiness) Act 2012.

Among other things, the new regulations set out the minimum standards required for currently authorised testing facilities to renew their authorisation for the next ten-year period. They also delayed, for three years, those requirements for CVRT operators whose premises did not meet the new standards on expiry of their previous authorisation in March 2024 until March 2027. This three-year grace period, introduced because of Covid-19, gave authorised operators the opportunity to review the new standards and make informed decisions on whether to make the necessary investment to comply with them as well as sufficient time to carry out any upgrades.

The RSA has informed the Department of Transport that the majority of CVRT operator authorisations issued under section 11 of the 2012 Act will expire in March 2027. The RSA has also advised that the majority of operators whose authorisations expired in 2024 already meet the required standards and will be able to renew their authorisations for ten years to 2034. Others will have to decide whether to upgrade their premises in order to continue as authorised operators after March 2027.

Overall, the changes will mean consistent standards in roadworthiness testing facilities for the Irish commercial fleet.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I hear a very clear admission by the Department that the directive does not set out specific criteria regarding a drive-through lane. The business I am talking about serves Dublin's docklands. Businesses from Tipperary and other parts of the country bring their vans to be tested there because they are up in the docklands early in the morning and can get those vans tested during the day. It does not just affect companies in Dublin; it affects companies right across the country. I did not hear the Minister of State say that he has taken responsibility for this issue. This Government is talking about trying to reduce congestion and improve competitiveness for the logistics and haulage sector but it is going to force commercial vehicles to go out past the M50 to get tested. It makes no sense. The Government is playing into the hands of the big business of commercial vehicle testing centres and will put the small fellas out of business. That is wrong. It is also going to mean a loss of jobs, which is wrong.

Will the Minister of State find out which companies are going to lose out? He has spoken about the majority but not all companies can comply with the new regulations. I have yet to hear why exactly the RSA wants a drive-through lane. No engineering rationale as to why that is necessary has been put forward. The RSA seems to have arbitrarily decided that this should happen. I want the Minister of State to find out which companies are going to have to close because of this. In all good conscience, does he believe that is good enough for companies in Dublin or companies across the country that use Dublin's docklands every day and bring their cars to Dublin for testing? It is a nonsense to say that Dublin's docklands need to be developed and that it is the jewel in the crown with regard to trade in this country if those operating at the docks cannot get their cars tested close to their place of work.

Deputy Seán Canney: There are currently 147 authorised commercial vehicle roadworthiness test operators. I will list the expiry dates for their authorisations. Sixty will expire on or after 18 March 2034 and seven will expire between 18 March 2027 and 18 March 2034. Their premises will also comply. Sixty-nine expire on 18 March 2027 and 11 operators have informed the RSA that they will not continue to operate after that date. Of the 69 companies whose authorisations are expiring, 51 are at different stages of completing their upgrades. Seven have works completed, 19 are in the process of carrying out the works, 13 are seeking quotations and a further six have planning approvals. One more planning approval is with the Department. Plans have been approved in two cases but it is not yet confirmed when works will commence. Plans have been submitted to the RSA and responses have issued to the operators in three further cases.

I take on board the point that some people might face a financial impediment in continuing. I will talk to the officials and see if I can get a reason that those operators must have a drive-through lane. These regulations were introduced in 2022. We are a long way down the road of implementing them. If we were to change them now, it would do a disservice to those who have already undertaken these investments. It is a double-edged sword. I will check that out. From reading these figures, it seems that many of the operators are in compliance with the standards or are in the process of complying with them. Of course, some have said they will not continue. I do not know if all of those decisions were made for financial reasons. Some may be retiring or so on. I will have a look at that.

Hospital Waiting Lists

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Is mór an scannal é i ndáiríre go bhfuil naoi leaba folamh in Áras Mhic Dara cé go bhfuil 12 duine ar an liosta feithimh mar go bhfuil cúram ón áras sin ag teastáil go géar uathu. Bhí geallúintí ón Rialtas air seo cheana. Teastaíonn gníomh anois ón Rialtas agus ón HSE. Agus muid i mbun plé anocht, tá na naoi leaba sin folamh agus, ag an am céanna, tá 73 duine ar thralaithe san ospidéal i nGaillimh. Ní dhéanann sé sin ciall ar bith. Tá tuilleadh brú á chur ar an ospidéal agus brú á chur ar dhaoine atá ag iarraidh a gcúram sláinte a fháil níos gaire don bhaile. Ní scéal nua é seo. Tá feachtas ar siúl ar An gCeathrú Rua ar feadh na mblianta. Anois, tá Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte ag rá linn gur fadhb foirne é agus nach mbeidh na leapacha sin oscailte go dtí an t-earrach ar a thúisce. Teastaíonn gníomh láithreach.

It is an absolute scandal that we have nine beds empty in Áras Mhic Dara in Carraroe tonight while 12 people are on a waiting list waiting to get the healthcare they need from the áras. There had been promises on this from the Government previously. We now need the HSE and the Government to work together to try to resolve this immediately. While we are having this debate here tonight, there are 73 people on trolleys in University Hospital Galway. That is 73 people who are unwell and need care. They are getting that care but they do not have beds. All the while, these nine beds lie empty. It does not make sense at all. I am sure the Minister of State would agree that situation does not make sense. It is also just wrong. There has been a long-standing campaign in Carraroe to see this facility used to provide the capacity that is needed for the community but now we hear from the HSE that these beds will open in spring at the earliest. That is just unacceptable. We need urgent action now. I hope the Minister of State can give us some news today.

Deputy John Connolly: Ar nós mo chomhghleacaí, cuirim fáilte roimh an deis an t-ábhar seo a ardú agus ceist na leapacha in Áras Mhic Dara a phlé anseo anocht. Má fhaigheann sé deis, molaim don Aire Stáit an tuairisc is déanaí ó HIQA ar Áras Mhic Dara a léamh. Taispeánann sé cé chomh hard is atá an caighdeán cúraim san ionad. Is aoibhinn an rud é sin d'éinne a bhfuil duine dá chlann san ionad seo. Táimid ag brath ar an bhfoireann ansin agus ar na daoine ar fad atá ag obair ann.

If the Minister of State gets the opportunity, he should read the most recent HIQA report on Áras Mhic Dara. It highlights the good management and the care the residents are getting there. Anybody who has a loved one in the centre can rest assured that he or she is getting a very high quality of care. However, we have to ponder why there are nine beds empty in the facility on an ongoing basis. Last month, I asked the Department of Health if it could outline the increased number of community nursing beds planned for County Galway. The answer I got was that a business plan was being submitted from older person's services to address the provision of additional beds in a number of community nursing units. This response referred to an additional nine beds for Merlin Park, an additional 12 beds for Clifden District Hospital, an additional five beds for the community nursing unit in Tuam, eight beds for St. Brendan's Community Nursing Unit in Loughrea, six beds for Ballinasloe Community Nursing Unit and an additional nine beds for Áras Mhic Dara.

0 o'clock

However, there is no point in telling us 49 additional beds are coming on stream if we cannot be guaranteed we can recruit the staff to make sure they can be open for the patients who need them. In a general sense, we have to review and look at the recruitment and retention of nursing staff in the country. I understand there is a process in train to staff these beds but it has been difficult to complete.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I thank Deputies Farrell and Connolly for raising this important matter. Áras Mhic Dara community nursing unit provides important and valued services for the people in Carraroe and surrounding areas. I understand the significant role the community nursing unit plays in the community and the depth of feeling associated with the facility. Áras Mhic Dara community nursing unit is registered with HIQA to accommodate a maximum of 38 residents for long-term residential care, which both Deputies have mentioned. The HSE has advised that currently 29 beds are open and nine beds are vacant due to staffing challenges. Both Deputies have referenced this.

Áras Mhic Dara community nursing unit cannot admit any more residents at present as the opening of additional beds is dependent on safe staffing levels. As the Deputies are aware, there are challenges in recruiting staff in community nursing units and community hospitals in more rural locations. Unfortunately, staff shortages can have an impact on bed capacity at times. The number of beds open at any time is dependent on safe staffing levels, and this is monitored on an ongoing basis in line with the recruitment of staff. To ensure the safety of residents and staff, bed capacity is configured around adequate staffing levels, and an appropriate staff skill mix must be in place.

I assure the Deputies that HSE west and north west is committed to filling all vacant posts in Áras Mhic Dara, and in all community hospitals and CNU's in the region, and will continue to explore all available options to fill these posts. It is currently planned that an additional 14 whole-time equivalents will be required to open the additional beds in Áras Mhic Dara community nursing unit in Carraroe. To enable recruitment of approved and funded positions, the HSE has progressed recruitment campaigns for staff nurses and multitask attendants. Both of these campaigns have now closed and shortlisting for these positions has commenced. Interviews will soon be scheduled by the HSE and recruitment will commence in due course. The HSE envisages reopening beds in Áras Mhic Dara community nursing unit once staff are recruited at the start of the new year. I assure the Deputies that I am committed to working alongside the HSE to address all concerns in respect of the residential care of older persons in Áras Mhic Dara now and over the coming years.

I have followed up with the Department and the HSE today and previously. I am arranging to meet the HSE myself directly with officials. I want to see precisely what is happening. We know recruitment is under way for nine very important and beneficial beds for older people in the area. The commitment I give tonight is that in a practical and proactive way, I and officials will meet the HSE to see exactly what is happening, and to see how we can expedite getting the staff in place for the nine beds to have the full complement open as quickly as possible. This is the proactive measure I am putting forward tonight.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. Is maith an rud é sin agus cuirim fáilte roimhe. Sin an cineál gnímh atá ag teastáil ón Rialtas le feiceáil cén bealach gur féidir linn an fhadhb seo a réiteach. Is dócha go bhfuil fadhb níos leithne ann freisin. Aon uair

a dhúntar leapacha i gceantar tuaithe, an chéad rud a deirtear ná nach féidir foireann a earcú. Léiríonn sé sin go bhfuil fadhb ann. Caithfidimid breathnú ar céard iad na fadhbanna atá ann le foireann a earcú faoin tuath agus cén bealach gur féidir linn réiteach a fháil ar an gceist sin. I really welcome the fact the Minister of State has said he will meet the HSE on this. It is a very proactive step. It is a step we could have only hoped for in raising this. The issue here is obviously broader. Any time there is an issue with step-down facilities and hospitals in rural areas, we are continuously told it is an issue with recruitment. If it is an issue with recruitment, we need to look at what we can do to assist recruitment in these rural areas. It has happened in Clifden and it is now happening in Carraroe.

Deputy John Connolly: Aontaím le mo chomhghleacaí. Cuirim fáilte roimh an gealltanais go bhfuil an tAire Stáit chun casadh leis na hoifigigh áitiúla ansin. Tá sé geallta aige go bhfuil sé ag iarraidh an fhadhb a réiteach chomh luath agus is féidir chun na leapacha sin a oscailt. Is dócha go bhfuil ábhar níos leithne anseo. There is a wider issue certainly. One of the things I noted is that in 2024, of the 17,168 critical skills employment permits given out in the country, more than 5,000 of them were for nursing staff. We have to examine something here. We have to examine whether we are training a sufficient number of nurses in our third level sector. Are we giving them the conditions and the work settings that make it possible for them to pursue their careers at home? Anecdotally we might hear that many of our nursing graduates go abroad because conditions are better. We need to examine this carefully, particularly if we have situations where in our own communities, in facilities that are State run and State led, we cannot have the complete suite of beds open. There is a bigger issue here but I thank the Minister of State and I welcome the fact he will meet local officials. I hope that we can see resolution of the issue soon.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I again thank Deputies Farrell and Connolly for raising this important matter in respect of Áras Mhic Dara community nursing unit in Carraroe. As I said previously, I will meet the HSE on the particular issue of the nine beds, which is the principal issue raised this evening in the House. I take account of the wider issues in the region in terms of rural and community nursing homes and it is something else I will discuss. The particular issue of the nine beds in Áras Mhic Dara is critical. As I said, there are 38 beds registered in Áras Mhic Dara and 29 of these are open. They cannot have any more residents at present as the opening of these beds is dependent on safe staffing levels. As I said earlier, HSE west and north west is committed to filling all vacant posts in Áras Mhic Dara community nursing unit and is exploring all available options to fill these posts. These include the current recruitment campaign for staff nurses and multitask attendants.

I assure Deputies Farrell and Connolly that all efforts are being made on a continuous basis to ensure staffing is in place to maximise the residential capacity in the facility. Once the full complement of staff has been recruited to Áras Mhic Dara community nursing unit, the HSE will be in a position to open the remaining nine beds. As I said, the HSE and I are committed to maximising all available services for older people and the Connemara region. The HSE continuously reviews its services in line with population health planning and Sláintecare principles to ensure adequate and appropriate residential care services are available for our older population. In a very practical way, as I stated, I have already put the wheels in motion in terms of meeting the HSE, and I hope to do this relatively quickly to see what is the specific

situation in terms of recruiting staff to open the nine beds and have the full complement of 38 beds in Áras Mhic Dara community nursing home in Carraroe.

Parking Provision

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I want to raise a very important issue for people in the greater Blanchardstown area, and Dublin West in general, which is the application and granting of planning permission for parking charges and barriers in Blanchardstown town centre. This is a proposal to fleece the community in a cost-of-living crisis and to fleece people who work in the centre. It will drive online shopping, job losses and shop closures, and we have already had plenty of them. It will put a barrier, literally, to community facilities in the town centre. These include Fingal County Council's own offices, a library, Draíocht theatre, medical facilities, a post office and a credit union. Obviously, it is a social hub for people in the area.

The owner of this centre is a vulture fund. It just swooped in and bought the centre off another vulture fund. It is no longer in the hands of retail management. This is a regressive charge. Everyone will pay the same no matter what their income level is. It is also Orwellian, because the owners are saying it is about mobility enhancement and improving access to the town centre. There is no problem accessing the town centre. We access it every day of the week. Putting in barriers will slow traffic, cause traffic congestion, gridlock, more pollution and result in overflow parking in the neighbouring estates, which happens at peak times, at Christmas and so on. The most despicable aspect of this is that Fingal County Council has given planning permission and worked hand-in-glove with the vulture fund, Strategic Value Partners. The previous one was Goldman Sachs. It is trying to use national, Government transport guidelines to get this through. It bought a site and now it wants to milk it for profit. It has no connection to the community that fought for this centre. I marched to get that town centre built, as did many other people in the area, and to make sure it had community facilities in it.

What has this got to do with the national Government? It has a lot to do with it. It is being cited that this fits in with the national strategy of getting people out of cars and getting them using public transport. We do not have public transport in Dublin West. We do not have a Luas or a metro. We are completely reliant on cars and buses. This is one of the biggest and fastest-growing areas in the country, with 100,000 people. There are no new bus routes. A reply to a parliamentary question posed by a Government Deputy in June, and not to me, stated that since 2020, €1.6 million has been invested in Dublin West in bus enhancements. In 2020, it was €1.25 million. In 2022, it was €97. In 2023, it was nothing. In 2024, €407,000 was the rest. BusConnects, therefore, is a pipe dream. It has not even started. Is the Government seriously going to suggest that people should be able to get out of their cars and onto the creaking bus system? It is forcing people out of cars and onto a public transport system that does not exist. One area, Tyrrelstown, has one of these Go-Ahead ghost buses that frequently does not show. We all know that is what they are. This is the only access for people to the town centre. Are people seriously meant to go in, do their shopping and carry bag loads of shopping onto a bus? The Government should be clamping down on this. There should be no parking charges to access community facilities and vital shopping facilities.

Deputy Seán Canney: I thank the Deputy very much for raising this matter. I will give her the reply that I have been given, but, basically, my understanding is that in the context of the

role of the Minister, this is a planning issue. I believe there is planning going on at the moment. I do not know the exact detail. While there is a planning application in the system, the role of the Minister is primarily to provide a policy and legislative framework under which the planning authorities, An Coimisiún Pleanála and the Office of the Planning Regulator, OPR, perform their statutory planning functions.

I understand there is a live planning case and therefore, as provided under section 30 of the Act of 2000, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage shall not exercise any power or control in relation to any particular case with which a planning authority or An Coimisiún Pleanála is or may be concerned. This means that the Minister is explicitly prevented from interfering in such cases, which is of utmost importance to maintain the independence of the planning authority or the commission. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to comment on any individual case that may be subject to appeal or judicial review. All development proposals require planning permission unless they are specifically exempted under the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, or the supplementary Planning and Development Regulations 2001, as amended.

Where any person is unsure if planning permission is required, under section 5 of the 2000 Act they may seek a declaration from the relevant planning authority as to whether any particular case is or is not a development, or is or is not exempted development, within the meaning of the 2000 Act. When a person submits a planning application, irrespective of whether the proposed development is located in an urban or rural area, the relevant planning authority in making its decision shall have regard to the proper planning and sustainable development of the area. It is a matter for the relevant planning authority to consider each application on a case-by-case basis and to decide whether to grant the permission, subject to or without conditions, or to refuse permission. Where an individual who has participated in the planning process, or is directly affected by a planning decision of a planning authority, they may lodge an appeal to the commission in accordance with section 37 of the 2000 Act. Furthermore, any person who has participated in the appeals process, or shows they have sufficient interest, may seek a judicial review.

Public participation is a long established and key element in the substantive decision-making process under the planning Acts. It is open to any person to make a submission or observation. In addition, a person who made a submission or observation on a planning application that a planning authority has decided to grant or refuse may subsequently appeal this decision to An Coimisiún Pleanála or may make a further submission in relation to an appeal of that decision.

I do not know the exact detail of this case, but I understand there is a planning process going on. While that planning process is going on, the Minister cannot interfere in it. It has to go through its course. If that is the correct position, I will accept the Deputy's response.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I am just wondering why I stayed until 12.15 a.m. to hear that explanation of what a planning application is. I do understand that the Minister of State has to be careful. I do get that. I thought we might be able to have a general discussion about whether people should pay car parking charges to access community and shopping facilities. What does the Minister of State think? Does he think this is right? Does he think it is good to use the guise that it is all being done for the environment? Does he seriously think that a vulture fund

that bought this centre cares about the environment? It is there to make a profit, to get the rents and now, it seems, to generate car parking charges.

With regard to Liffey Valley centre, there is kind of an element here of, "Sure, all the other areas have them". There was a battle in Liffey Valley and a campaign. The workers there, though, are paying €2.50 daily. If they park their car there five days a week, that is €600 a year. They have to earn €800 or €1,000 to have €600 cash in their hands. That is well over a week's wages for people.

I also want to raise a point about social isolation. Many older people and disabled people use Blanchardstown centre to meet their friends. We are cutting across that. People will now be wary about doing that and we are adding to the epidemic of mental health issues and loneliness that exists. Does the Minister of State know we have these drones? I am sure he does know about it because we have raised this issue here. We will all be sitting at home ordering our coffee by drone rather than actually going out and meeting friends.

We will appeal this decision to An Coimisiún Pleanála but we know it is a David-and-Goliath battle. We are up against a vulture fund with massive resources. There was a traffic survey with 115 pages. How are ordinary residents to compete with this? I am absolutely disgusted with Fingal County Council. It is just ignoring the community and facilitating big corporations. On 6 December, we will march into that town centre. We will disrupt its custom that day to send a message to the company that it will not get away with this lying down and that people have a stake in this town centre. We have nitrates derogations and data centres using our water, so please do not pretend this is about the environment.

Deputy Seán Canney: I cannot comment on the particular situation. Now that I understand what has happened, planning permission has been given for this and it is still in the planning process. I cannot comment on that-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Yes, but on a general discussion.

Deputy Seán Canney: I have it in my own constituency with wind farms. These wind farms are being imposed on communities in their own backyards. They are very imposing. Again, we do not know who owns them. Investors own them. Communities are preparing submissions to go into the local authority to make their cases. They are meeting in community halls to see how they will do this when they should be at home enjoying themselves with their families. That is the context of the overall issue.

More public transport is definitely needed. The questions I have been answering, including from the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, in the past couple of weeks highlight that the public transport systems we have are not fulfilling the function they are supposed to be doing. We had it from another Deputy in Cork here tonight. We have deficiencies in the system. That is a different conversation from getting public transport up and running, but I cannot comment on a live planning application. As the Deputy said, it will be appealed it or whatever, but I do not know. I cannot comment on that particular thing and the question is about parking charges. I wondered what the background was to it but now I understand it. I sympathise with the community and I presume that justice will prevail.

Wastewater Treatment

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Marie Sherlock): We move to the final Topical Issue tonight and it gives me great pleasure to be in the Chair as an issue relating to my home village is being discussed.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I was going to reference that at the start. I know it is an issue close to the Chair's heart and her father's heart. It is an issue I have raised here on five or six occasions, primarily through Topical Issues. I thank the Minister of State for being here. Unfortunately, to my mind, nothing has changed after those attempts to raise this issue here in the past. For people at home who are not familiar with Carrignavar, it is a village to the north of Cork city. It is probably a ten-minute drive to the city centre. It has an awful lot going for it. A brand new special school is currently under construction. A new school replaced the old Scoil an Athar Tadhg recently and it is a phenomenal building. The secondary school is also going out for an extension and the community is also getting together to build a brand new purpose-built multisport facility under what it is hoped will be a future round of large-scale sport infrastructure fund, LSSIF, funding. It is a village that has an awful lot going for it. Its potential to grow is phenomenal. It is hoped that BusConnects will, for the first time, connect the village with a two-hour service, so it really is an up-and-coming place.

Unfortunately, because of the lack of a wastewater treatment plant - a functioning one, anyway - this village has really been stifled over the last decade or so, to the point that land zoned for housing has been dezoned in the not-so-distant past. That aspiration for the village to grow and to populate those schools and facilities is now being restricted because of Irish Water's inability to fund a much needed wastewater treatment plant. To give the Minister of State an idea, as he has served in multiple roles in this House over the years and will be well familiar with the issues in relation to Irish Water, if you take a stroll down the river at any stage to Glashaboy, you will see evidence that the wastewater treatment plant that is there is not just at capacity but is three times overloaded from its original capacity. Yet, Irish Water and the county council before, to be fair, have done nothing to upgrade the system there.

I know the plant was previously considered for funding under the small towns and villages scheme. I think it is No. 11 on a list devised by Irish Water in agreement with Cork County Council. The council previously received funding for the first five or six projects on that list. Unfortunately, Carrignavar, as I said, is No. 11. My issue is funding was received for those first five projects about two years ago at this stage. To my knowledge, none of those projects has actually turned a sod, had a new building opened, a new pump house installed or whatever the issues pertaining to those wastewater treatment plants are. At this stage, I am pleading with the State and Irish Water. I know there is going to be a capital plan review early in quarter 1 of next year. I am pleading because the State has finally stepped up. We have provided additional buildings to Irish Water and I need to see this wastewater infrastructure upgraded.

The difficulty I have, if I can be frank, is that I am not sure that I have faith in Irish Water to deliver that infrastructure. I am glad that, in recent times, the Minister has now opened the door to developer-led infrastructure once more and that is probably where the solution to this problem lies. I know the county council is currently in the middle of its development plan review and I hope development land is identified, that a suitable developer will be found and that development might be what is required to instigate growth in the village once more and

provide that much-needed infrastructure. The capacity of Irish Water to deliver it has been proven. I do not think it is capable of it, so I hope the Minister of State might have an update. As I said, it is my fifth or sixth time raising it so he might surprise me with an update.

Deputy Seán Canney: I thank the Deputy for the question. In County Galway, we have 30 villages without any treatment plant, so I empathise with him.

Uisce Éireann has statutory responsibility for all aspects of water services planning, delivery and operation. Neither I, nor the Minister, Deputy Browne, who offers his apologies as he cannot be here this evening for this question, have an operational function in the matter to which the Deputy refers. However, we have asked Uisce Éireann for an update on the Deputy's behalf.

Uisce Éireann has made significant investments in upgrading wastewater treatment infrastructure across Cork since 2014. However, it is important to note that it is dealing with a legacy of underinvestment in water services and infrastructure across Ireland. The scale of the remedial work necessary in our water and wastewater systems will take a number years and investment cycles to fully resolve.

The upgrade of the Carrignavar wastewater treatment plant will come under Uisce Éireann's small towns and villages growth programme, which is a national programme to cater for growth in smaller towns and villages within existing Uisce Éireann infrastructure. This programme is delivered in partnership with local authorities and is aligned with the county development plans. Each local authority is responsible for prioritising candidate settlements for investment under the programme. Carrignavar was not included in Cork County Council's list of prioritised sites for upgrade under the scheme for the 2020 to 2024 capital investment plan. Local authorities were asked to review the ranking of candidate settlements in their area in 2023. Cork County Council has Carrignavar currently ranked at no.13 in the list of candidate settlements. Schemes ranked 1 to 7 in Cork are currently progressing under the programme.

Due to the scale of projects already confirmed in Cork and nationally and Carrignavar's relative position on the priority list, a project to expand capacity at the local treatment plant has not been included in the 2025 to 2029 plan. However, €2 billion has been set aside under the national development plan to support housing delivery, which includes €300 million for the enhancement of that small towns and villages growth programme. Uisce Éireann will continue to engage with Cork County Council under the scheme and there may be opportunities for the council to reprioritise the scheme relative to other sites on this list under the capital investment plan for 2025 to 2029. Additional money of €2 billion has been ring-fenced for new infrastructure and it is important that Cork County Council re-engages with Uisce Éireann at this stage to see how it can bring this project forward, following on from what the Deputy has described to me.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: Unfortunately, not much has changed in the response. As I said in my own piece, I firmly believe the solution to this is probably, unfortunately, going to be the private route through developer-led infrastructure. It is not ideal. Irish Water itself has resisted that process for a long time now. I hope that the Minister will make a fair fist of that and bring this to a head and not just for Carrignavar. I could probably list six or seven other

villages in my own constituency. The Minister of State himself referenced in the order of 20-odd villages in his own area. This is, across the country, one of the major issues we are facing.

We are going to be the ones who will pay for it, let us be straight about it - us sitting on these benches - because the issue of the day is housing. The Minister of State does not need me to say it here. Unfortunately, we have been hamstrung for the past five years sitting over here in government. We have been complicit in this ineptitude, if I can be frank. It is very frustrating for us people on the ground who attend the community meetings and make the excuses - let us be honest about it - for Cork County Council and Irish Water, and have done for quite a while now. The solution has always been there, and after five years of lobbying, we finally have a solution. As I said, I hope the Minister actually sees it through and allows developer-led infrastructure to be delivered again in tandem with Irish Water and under its supervision. It is the only solution I can see working, such is my lack of faith in Irish Water to deliver.

In his supplementary, the Minister of State might have this information but that additional money he referenced is going to lead to a capital plan review, I understand, in the first quarter of next year. Has he any idea when that review will be completed? If he does, I would appreciate it.

On Carrignavar, as I have said, the treatment plant itself is three times overloaded. Just north of Carrignavar, we recently had one of the largest fish kills in the country. Again, the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach will be familiar with that. How the EPA has not come down heavy on Irish Water and previously Cork County Council about the problems in Carrignavar I do not know. It is blatantly obvious to anybody. The pollution can be seen visibly seeping into the river there on a daily basis. Something has to be done urgently. This nonsense of waiting for capital plans needs to stop.

Deputy Seán Canney: I can feel the Deputy's frustration with this particular issue. As I said, for the first time ever we have put money into Uisce Éireann, which is ring-fenced money, for it to develop new infrastructure. Since its inception, Uisce Éireann has spent a lot of its time trying to firefight existing infrastructure which was not functioning properly. In fairness, it did not get the proper money to do the job it was set up to do. That is an inherent problem and a legacy we have.

With the agreement of Uisce Éireann, we also have allowed developer-led infrastructure to be used. The developer can build a treatment plant to the specifications of Uisce Éireann, which will take it over and manage it thereafter. That is another option that is coming up.

I do not have timelines for when the reviews will happen from the Minister. I will bring the Deputy's situation and this question back to him to see what can be done. I agree that a small sum of money for towns and villages creates opportunities to build houses for people who can live in their own areas, enhance their villages and parishes and keep the community alive. It allows developers to make houses available for young people who want to live in their own areas. It is a question of getting money to develop the treatment plants that are needed. There is no mystery about them; we just need to get them done. I concur with the Deputy's feelings and will bring them back to the Minister.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 12.32 a.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 26 Samhain 2025.

The Dáil adjourned at 12.32 a.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 26 November 2025.

